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Peter B. Kyne**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE THREE GODFATHERS ***

THE THREE GODFATHERS

By Peter B. Kyne

Illustrated By Dean Cornwell

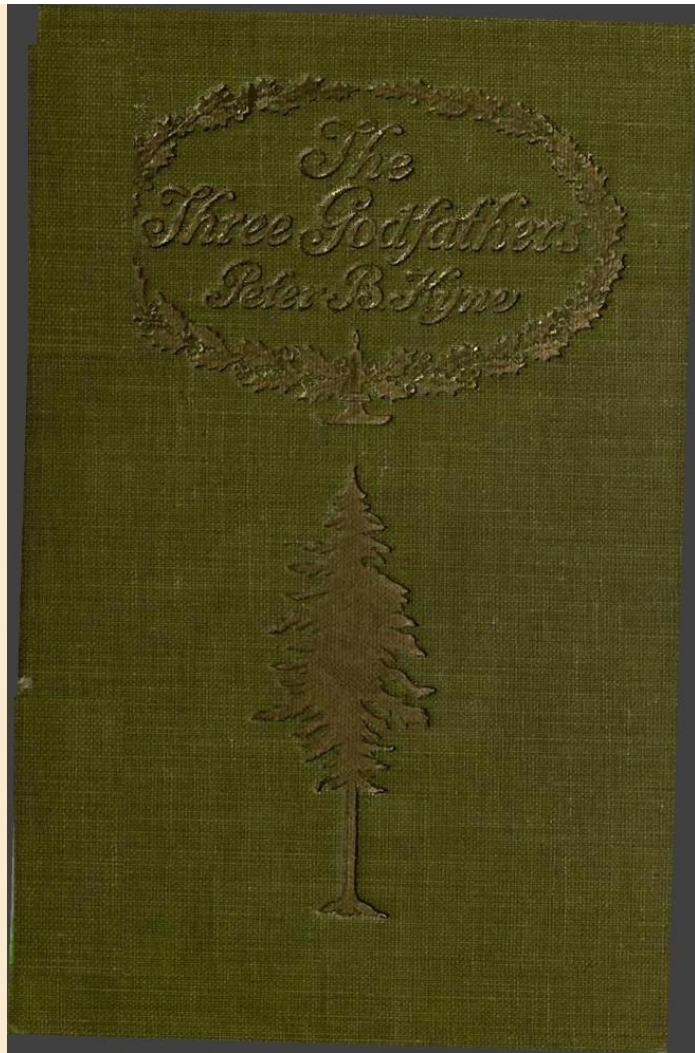
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1913

Is the story of The Three Bad Men—not The Three Wise Men “What’s a godfather, Bill?” The Youngest Bad Man inquired. “What job does he hold down?”

“You’re an awful ignorant young man, Bob,” replied The Wounded Bad Man reproachfully. “A godfather is a sort of reserve parent who promises to renounce the devil with all his works an’ poms.”

The Youngest Bad Man smiled wanly. “Well, Bill, all I got to say is that us three’re a lovely bunch o’ godfathers.”





“It stands to reason,” the Worst Bad Man announced presently, “that this infant’s mother made some provision for his reception into camp.” (Page 37)



The Three Godfathers

By PETER B. KYNE

Author of "Kindred of the Dust," etc.

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR BY
DEAN CORNWELL

THIS is the story of The Three Bad Men—not The Three Wise Men. "What's a godfather, Bill?" The Youngest Bad Man inquired. "What job does he hold down?" "You're an awful ignorant young man, Bob," replied The Wounded Bad Man reproachfully. "A godfather is a sort of reserve parent who promises to renounce the devil with all his works an' poms." The Youngest Bad Man smiled wanly. "Well, Bill, all I got to say is us three're a lovely bunch o' godfathers."

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THE THREE GODFATHERS

[THE daylight raid on the Wickenburg National Bank had not been a success. It had been well planned, boldly and cleverly executed, and the four bandits had gathered unto themselves quite a fortune in paper money; the job had been singularly free from fuss and feathers. Nevertheless, as has already been stated, the raid was not a success. The assistant cashier, returning from luncheon, had, from a distance of half a block, observed two strangers in town. Both strangers were mounted and stood on guard in front of the Wickenburg National. In an alley just back of the bank two saddle horses were standing; and as the assistant cashier paused, irresolute, two men came out of the bank, mounted the two horses waiting in the alley, and, followed by the men who had been standing on watch in front of the bank, rode out of Wickenburg in rather a suspicious hurry. The assistant cashier had an inspiration.

"Thieves! Robbers! Stop 'em!" he yelled.

His hue and cry aroused to action an apparently inoffensive and elderly citizen who was taking his siesta in front of The Three Deuces saloon. Now this man in front of The Three Deuces was not the sheriff. He was not

even the city marshal. Rather he inclined one to the belief that he might be a minister of the gospel—a soul-trapper on guard at the portals of The Three Deuces, within which, judging by the subdued rattle of poker chips, ivory balls and an occasional hoarse shout of “Keno!” one could be reasonably certain of a plethora of brands ripe for the burning. The aged citizen asleep in the chair outside was arrayed in somber black, with a turn-down collar and white lawn tie, a “biled” shirt with a ruby stud in it, and patriarchal white whiskers. But his coat, of a clerical cut, effectually concealed two pieces of artillery of a style and caliber popularized by time and tradition in the fair state of Arizona.

The four galloping horsemen were abreast The Three Deuces when the cry of “Robbers!” aroused all Wickenburg. It awoke the man in the chair; and he came to his feet with the suddenness of a ferocious old dog, filled both hands and cut loose at one of the four horsemen. There was a reason for this. The elderly citizen had a deposit of three dollars and seventeen cents in the Wickenburg National. Also he possessed a fair proportion of civic pride, and the horseman upon whom he trained his hardware was carrying a gunny-sack containing a pro rata of the said elderly citizen's three-seventeen.

Four Bad Men had ridden into Wickenburg that December afternoon, but only three rode out. One of the three had a bullet hole through his left shoulder. The man who stayed lay, thoroughly and effectually defunct, on top of a bulging gunny-sack in front of The Three Deuces. Came presently the paying teller of the Wickenburg National and removed the gunny-sack. Came half an hour later the coroner of Wickenburg and removed the body. As for the elderly citizen of deceptive appearance, he walked uptown to a hardware store, replenished his supply of ammunition and returned to The Three Deuces in a highly cheerful frame of mind. Here let us leave him, for with this story he has nothing further to do. From now on our interest must center on The Three Bad Men who rode out of Wickenburg headed for the California line—which happens to be the Colorado River.

They made their first halt at Granite Tanks, twenty-five miles from Wickenburg. Here they watered their horses and then pressed onward toward the river. At the river they found a boat, thoughtfully provided for just such an emergency as the present.

Darkness had already settled over the land when The Three Bad Men came to the Colorado River. It would have been wise on their part to have waited until the rising of the moon, but our story does not deal with The Three Wise Men. Within the hour a posse might appear, and, moreover, The Three Bad Men were of that breed that prefers to “take a chance.” They rode their jaded horses into the flood until the yellow waters lapped their bellies; then they shot them and shoved the carcasses off into the current.

An hour later The Three Bad Men landed on the California side near Bill Williams Mountain, filled their boat with stones and sank it, and shouldering a supply of food and water sufficient to last them four days, headed up a long box canon that led north to the Colorado Desert. They made fair time after the moon came up. All night long they trudged through the box canon, and at daylight it opened out into the waste.

“Well, boys, I guess we're safe.” remarked The Worst Bad Man, who was the leader of the trio. “It's cooler in the canon, so suppose we camp here. I feel like breakfast and some sleep. How's your shoulder, Bill?”

The Wounded Bad Man shrugged the wounded member disdainfully.

“High up. Missed the bone and don't amount to much, Tom. But I've bled like a stuck pig and it's weakened me a little.”

“I'll heat some water and wash it up, Bill,” said The Youngest Bad Man, much concerned.

They made a very small fire of cat-claw and ironwood, brewed a pot of coffee, breakfasted, washed and dressed The Wounded Bad Man's shoulder and slept until late afternoon. They awoke much refreshed, ate an early supper and struck out across the desert to the north, where in time they would come to the Santa Fe tracks. There were lonely stations out there in the sands—they might be worth investigation. Then on to the new mining camp at Old Woman Mountain—a camp which, following the whimsical and fantastic system of desert nomenclature, which seems to trend toward such names as Mecca, Cadiz, Bagdad, Bengal and Siam, had had bestowed upon it the not inappropriate name of New Jerusalem.

For a number of reasons The Three Bad Men preferred to travel by night. Primarily they were prowlers and preferred it. Secondly, although one may encounter torrid weather by day on the Colorado Desert even in December, the nights, on the contrary, are bitterly cold—and The Three Bad Men had no blankets. Also there was this advantage about traveling at night and sleeping in the shadow of a rock by day: they would not meet other wanderers and there would be no embarrassing questions to answer respecting the hole in The Wounded Bad Man's shoulder.

Consequently The Three Bad Men traveled by night. From Mojave Tanks they swung west to avoid the mining operations there, although more than once they glanced back wistfully at the little cluster of yellow lights shining across the sands. The Wounded Bad Man's shoulder was in a bad way and needed medical attention. Also they needed water; but they were desert-bred and could last until they came to Malapai Springs.

So they turned their backs on Mojave Tanks and tramped onward. Now they were in the ghostly moonlight of the open desert, with the outlines of the mountain ranges on each side looming dim and shadowy fifteen or twenty miles away; now they were picking their way carefully through clusters of murderous catclaw, through tangles of mesquit and ironwood. Up dark, lonely arroyos they went; down long alleys between the outstretched arms of the ocatillas with their pendulous, blood-red blossoms, passing dried, withered Joshua trees twisted into fantastic shapes as if their fearful surroundings had caused them to writhe in horror; through solitude and desolation so vast and profound as to inspire one with the thought that the Creator, appalled at the magnitude of this abortion of Nature, had set it apart as an eternal heritage of the damned.

In the forenoon of the fifth day they came to Malapai Springs. Here The Three Bad Men drank deeply, bathed, filled their canteens and stepped blithely out for Terrapin Tanks, the next water-hole—a little-known and consequently unfrequented spot—where they could rest for a few days before attempting the last desperate leg of their journey to the railroad.

“Don't stint yourself on the water. Bill,” The Worst Bad Man advised as they departed from Malapai

Springs. "There's always water at Terrapin Tanks." Nevertheless, with the instinct of the desert-bred, The Worst Bad Man and The Youngest Bad Man were sparing with the water themselves, although careful to conceal this fact from The Wounded Bad Man. The latter's shoulder was swollen and inflamed, and it was a relief to him if the bandages were kept wet.

The Worst Bad Man, who knew the country better than his companions, had timed their arrival at Terrapin Tanks almost to the hour. The sun was just coming up over the low red hummocks of hematite to the eastward when The Three Bad Men plodded wearily up a long, dry canon, turned a sharp, rocky promontory into an arroyo—and paused.

Borne on the slight desert breeze a sound came to them from up the arroyo. It was a mournful, wailing cry and ended in a sob—a sound that bespoke pain and fear and misery.

The Three Bad Men looked at one another. Each held up an index finger, enjoining silence. A second, a third time the sound was repeated.

"It's a human voice," announced The Worst Bad Man, "an' there's death in it. Wait here. I'm goin' in to see what's up."

When he had gone The Youngest Bad Man, after the restless and inquisitive manner of youth, climbed a tall rock and gazed up the arroyo.

"I see the top of a covered wagon," he announced.

"Then," said The Wounded Bad Man, "It's a tenderfoot outfit, an' that's a woman cryin'. No desert rat'd come here with a wagon. Fools drive in where burros fear to tread. Bob. They're tenderfeet."

"That's right," agreed The Youngest Bad Man. "Some nester come in over the trail from Imperial Valley and bound for New Jerusalem, I'll bet a new hat."

"Whoever's doin' that whimperin' is sure bound for New Jerusalem," The Wounded Bad Man replied with a grim attempt at humor. "An' if I don't let a doctor look at this shoulder o' mine before long I'll head that way myself."

The Worst Bad Man was gone about ten minutes. Presently the others saw him returning. On his hard, sunscorched face deep concern showed plainly, and as he trotted down the arroyo he scratched his unkempt head as if in search of an idea of sufficient magnitude to cope with a grave situation. When he reached his comrades he sat down on a chunk of black lava and fanned himself with his hat.

"There's a line old state of affairs at the Tanks," he said huskily.

"They ain't dry, are they?" Fright showed in the wide blue eyes of The Youngest Bad Man. The Wounded Bad Man sat down very suddenly and gulped. The Worst Bad Man replied to the question.

"Worse'n that."

The Wounded Bad Man sighed. "It can't be," he said.

"There's a wagon at the Tanks," continued The Worst Bad Man, "but no horses. It's a tenderfoot outfit—a man an' his woman—an' they come in from Salton, via Canon Springs and Boulder, headed for New Jerusalem. Some o' their kin has started a boardin' tent in the new camp an' these two misfortunates were aimin' to go in with the rush an' clean up a stake. They make Terrapin Tanks all right, but the water's a little low an' the man ain't got sense enough to dig out the sand an' let the water run in. He's one of these nervous city fellers, I guess, and it just naturally hurts him to set down an' wait till that sump-hole fills up. Besides, he don't take kindly to usin' a shovel, so he sticks in a shot o' dynamite to clean out th' tanks an' start the water runnin'—"

The Wounded Bad Man sprang to his feet, cursing horribly.

"The damned, crazy fool!" he raved. "I'll kill him, I will. I'll kill him just as sure as I'm thirsty."

The Worst Bad Man paid no attention to the other's outburst.

"So he stuck in his stick o' dynamite an' it's only a fool's luck he didn't blow himself up doin' it. I wisht he had; but he didn't. He just put Terrapin Tanks out o' business forever—cracked the granite floor o' that sump-hole an' busted down the sides, an' the water's run out into the sand an' the tanks run dry. They'll stay dry. We can have cloudbursts in this country from now until I get religion, but them tanks'll never hold another drop o' water. That fool tenderfoot's dead, I guess; but he's goin' to keep right on killin' people just the same. Men'll keep comin' here, bankin' on water—an' in five years there'll be a dozen skeletons round that busted tank."

"But all that ain't what's bitin' me half as hard as what he went an' done next. He went an' let his stock nose round an' lick up that alkali slop below the Tanks, an' drove 'em *loco*. They took off up the canon, huntin' water, with Mr. Man after 'em. That was four days ago an' he ain't come back yet; so we don't need to waste no time speculatin' on his case an' feelin' sorry for him. It wouldn't 'a been so bad, but he went an' left his woman alone at th' Tanks. She had a little water left, so she wasn't so bad off until yesterday, when it give out. It's been pretty hard on her all alone there—an' she's a nice little woman too. About twenty, I guess, an' heaps too good for the cuss she married. But still that ain't the worst—not by a long shot. She's goin' to have a papoose."

"What!"

"The Youngest Bad Man and The Wounded Bad Man voiced the horrified exclamation in unison; then The Wounded Bad Man sank back against a rock.

"Yes," The Worst Bad Man affirmed huskily, "there's a baby due right soon, I reckon. She's in a pretty bad fix. I was never married, boys, an' I don't know what to do for her—an' she's cryin', an' prayin', and askin' for help, an'—I—don't know—"

The Worst Bad Man choked and hid his hard face in his hands. He shook like a hooked fish. Silence, while The Worst Bad Man fought for control of himself.

"I'm a tough old bird," he said presently—"I'm an awful tough old bird; but I can't go back there alone. You've got to come with me, lads. We got to do someth'n' for her."

He turned hopefully to The Wounded Bad Man.

"Bill," he said pleadingly, "you ought to know somethin' about such cases. You do, don't you Bill? Wasn't you married to a half-breed girl down on the Rio Colorado somewheres, an' didn't she have kids for you?"

The Wounded Bad Man was on the defensive instantly.

"Yes, that's true," he admitted with some show of reluctance, "but then, Tom, you know as well as me that Injuns is different. They ain't *human*, an' this here's a white woman——"

"That's right." The Youngest Bad Man out of the wisdom of his twenty-two summers hastened to Bill's assistance. "An' child-bearin' with a white woman means doctors an' nurses an' feather beds an' what-all."

The Wounded Bad Man flashed the youth a grateful glance.

"You bet that's right, Bob. An' besides, when that woman o' mine had them two twins I was doin' a five year stretch in Yuma—so you can see I don't know nothin' about it. All I know is what I've heard. She didn't even call a neighbor's woman—just brings them twins into the world one day, an' gets out an' hustles a livin' for 'em the next."

"Well," retorted the bedeviled Worst Bad Man, "I wasn't tryin' to pass the buck. Just a-ruminatin' around for information." He rose wearily. "Come on," he growled, and led the way.

The Three Bad Men walked up the draw to Terrapin Tanks. In reverential awe they stood beside the covered wagon, parted the side curtains and looked in.

On a straw tick, covered with blankets, lay a woman. She was young, with great brown eyes alight with fever and with the luster of approaching motherhood. A long braid of brown hair lay across her white breast; she moaned in her pain and terror and wretchedness.

The Wounded Bad Man found a tin cup and gave her generously of his all too scant supply of water. The Youngest Bad Man got a clean towel out of the tail-box, wet it and washed her burning face and hands. The Worst Bad Man, whose courage, for all his deviltry, had its limitations, went and sat down on the tongue of the wagon and tried to think. But scourged with the horror of this most terrible of human travail, he fled up the arroyo out of hearing. On the top of one of the little black volcanic hills, from which eminence he could look down on the wagon, he stood, active, alert, like a mountain sheep on guard, and beckoned to his friends to join him. The Youngest Bad Man obeyed his frantic signals, but The Wounded Bad Man stayed at the wagon.

"You've got to be easy on me, son, at a time like this," said The Worst Bad Man humbly. "I'm an awful tough old bird, but I can't stand that. It ain't no place for the likes o' me. What's to be done?"

"Nothin' much, I guess." The Youngest Bad Man threw out his hands in desperation. "Bill says she ain't got a chance."

He took his canteen in both hands and shook it gently; seeing which The Worst Bad Man did the same with his.

"How much has Bill got left?" he asked anxiously.

"Nary drop. He's been right feverish along o' that hole in his wing, an' hittin' his canteen heavy, expectin' to find water in the Tanks."

"Well, we got about two gallons left," announced The Worst Bad Man philosophically, "but I see us cuttin' niggerhead cactus before we hit another tank. Once in San Berdoo I heard a sky-pilot preachin', an' he 'lowed that the way o' the transgressor's bound to be hard; but I'm dogged if I looked for anythin' half as hard as this. Bill's callin' you, son. Better lope back to the wagon. I'll—I—guess I'll wait here."

He waited half an hour, watching with anxious and paternal eyes the activities of his fellows at the wagon. Once the sounds of woe drifted up to him and he moved farther up the canon. Here he waited, and presently The Wounded Bad Man joined him.

"What luck, Bill?" he demanded.

"A boy," responded The Wounded Bad Man. "Come on down an' look at him, Tom. He's worth it. He's man size."

"How about that misfortunate girl?"

"She ain't a-goin' to last long, Tom. She's a-goin' fast, an' she wants to see you—all of us—together. She's quiet now."

Thus reassured, The Worst Bad Man returned with The Wounded Bad Man to the Tanks. With uncovered head he approached the wagon, dreading to gaze upon that tragic face, drawn with agony. But lo! as he parted the curtains he gazed upon the miracle of motherhood. Gone were the lines of suffering; the girl's face was transfigured with the light of that joy and peace and pride that God gives to new-made mothers, and for the first time in all his hard life The Worst Bad Man was permitted to glimpse something of the glory of his Creator.

The babe, wrapped in a coarse crash towel, lay in the hollow of the little mother's arm, its red, puckered little face rested on her snowy bosom, the while she gazed downward at her treasure. It came to The Worst Bad Man very suddenly that once upon a time a woman had gazed upon him with that same look of yearning and joy ineffable; and with the thought he reached for the mother's left hand and carried it to his cracked and blistered lips. He spoke no word, but as he bowed his reckless head reverently over that fevered hand he seemed to cry aloud:

"Here is my wasted and worthless life. I offer it in exchange for yours."

The girl mother's calm, benevolent eyes beamed their gratitude. She understood, and like a true mother she accepted his tribute—only the sacrifice could not be for her.

"What is your name?" she asked wearily.

"Tom Gibbons."

"And yours?" turning to The Wounded Bad Man.

"Bill Kearny."

She glanced inquiringly at The Youngest Bad Man.

"Bob Sangster," he replied.

"Will you save my baby?" Slowly, searchingly, the wonderful eyes confronted each Bad Man in turn.

"I'll save him," promised The Youngest Bad Man. With all the rashness, the unthinking, unreasoning confidence and generosity of youth, he passed his word. He recked not of the long trail ahead with death for the pacemaker. He only knew that this woman of sorrow had gazed longest upon him, estimating the strength in his lithe, big body, searching for his manhood in the face where sin had not yet laid its devastating hand. So he passed his word, and passing it in all the regal simplicity of the brave, the mother knew that he would keep it.

"I'll help," croaked The Wounded Bad Man humbly. He glanced at The Worst Bad Man, who bowed his head once more over the little hand.

"I'll help too."

"I want you—all of you—to be my baby's godfathers. Poor little son! He'll be all alone in this big world when his mamma leaves him, and he's going to miss her so. Aren't you, sweetheart? Nobody to tuck you into bed at night, nobody to teach you your prayers, nobody to kiss the little sore spots when you fall and hurt yourself, nobody to tell your little secrets to—"

She closed her eyes. A tear stole through between the long lashes, and The Wounded Bad Man turned away. The Youngest Bad Man went and sat down on the wagon tongue and wept, for he was young. Only The Worst Bad Man stayed, watching, waiting. And presently the mother spoke again.

"Are you all here? It's getting dark—and we must be moving on—to the next waterhole. You—Bob Sangster—take baby. You said you'd save him—didn't you? And Bill Kearny—and—Tom—Gibbons—will you be his godfathers—and—help—Bob—Sangster—on the—trail? Will you?. Promise—me—again—and... his name?... Call him Robert—William—Thomas—Sangster... and when he's—a fine—big—brave man—like his—godfathers—you'll tell—him—about his little mother who—wanted to live—for him so.... Lift him up—godfathers—and let me—kiss my—baby."

The Worst Bad Man waited until the last fluttering little sigh was finished before he removed the infant. The Wounded Bad Man closed the mother's eyes and folded her hands across her pulseless breast. The Youngest Bad Man stood, grasping the brake-rod until his knuckles showed white with the strain of the grip. Long he stood there, gazing at that calm, spiritual face with its halo of glistening brown hair, pondering deeply on the mysteries of birth and life and death. To him it all seemed a monstrous thing; and when The Worst Bad Man came to him with a shovel he wept aloud.

"Death is a terrible thing, Tom," he sobbed.

"Life's worse," said The Wounded Bad Man gently. He was seated apart, with the baby in his arms, shielding it from the sun with his broad sombrero. "Death can only get you once, but Life is a ghost dance. I wonder what it has in store for you, kidlets. I wonder."

The Youngest Bad Man departed down the arroyo with the shovel and The Worst Bad Man, discovering a hammer and nails in the toolbox under the scat, removed the side boards and some strips from the wagon bed and fell briskly to work. When The Wounded Bad Man had satisfied himself that The Youngest Bad Man was nor within hearing, he spoke:

"I say, Tom. Did you notice her when she asked us to save the baby? She picked on Bob. Seems as if she knew."

"I noticed. I guess she knew. They say angels always does know. It's forty-five miles to New Jerusalem, Bill, and you can't make it, and I'm—I'm too old for a long stretch without water."

"That's why I said I'd help."

"Same here."

"We've got to do the first two heats, Tom. We've got to save young Bob's strength for the final dash. I'll carry the baby an' you carry the grub an' things tonight, an' tomorrow night—"

"I'll carry everything tomorrow night; after that it'll be up to Bob. He's young and hard and game. He ought to make it."

Late in the afternoon, with clumsy tenderness they buried the martyred mother there by the Terrapin Tanks, built a cairn over the grave and crowned it with a cross. Then they returned to the dismantled wagon to hold a consultation.

The Wounded Bad Man was the first to broach the subject closest to the hearts of all three.

With characteristic directness he shot his query at them. All his wicked life he had been facing desperate issues; long since he had learned to face them unblinkingly.

"Robert William Thomas's got to have a bath, ain't he?"

The Youngest Bad Man took hold of the brake rod again and steadied himself. The Worst Bad Man looked at the wounded godfather in vague surprise.

"I never figgered on that at all," he said simply. "I was thinkin' about how we're to feed him. I'm for tubbin' him all right, but—"

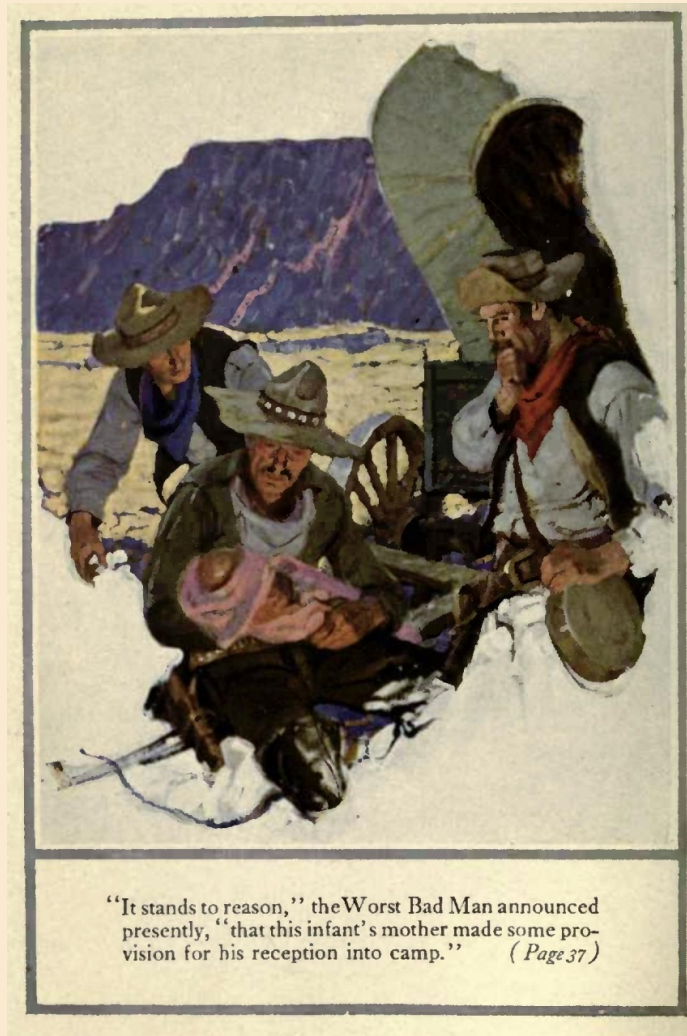
He held up the two canteens. His pause was eloquent.

"But he's such a little feller it won't take much," protested The Wounded Bad Man. "He'll fit nice in a dishpan."

"I wish he was old enough to stagger along a few days without bathin'," mourned The Youngest Bad Man. "Maybe he can. I don't know a thing about infants; but if he must be bathed, why I guess we'd better—"

"I 'lowed to ask his mother a few questions regardin' his up-keep and what-all," interrupted The Wounded Bad Man apologetically, "but I clean forgot."

The Worst Bad Man wagged his head as if to convey the impression that this was a pardonable oversight indeed. He was thinking.



"It stands to reason," he announced presently, "that this infant's mother naturally made some provision for his reception into camp. It's my opinion that gettin' a bath is the least o' the troubles confrontin' our godson. He's just naturally got to eat, an' wear somethin' better'n a towel that'll plum scratch the hide off'n him. There ought to be somethin' for Robert boy in that tail-box."

So they searched the tailbox and discovered many things—condensed milk, a carton of soda crackers, a quart bottle of olive oil, a feeding bottle, two "bluffers" with real ivory rings, and an assortment of baby clothes, many of them hemstitched and worked through long months of loving anticipation. The silence was pregnant of tears as The Worst Bad Man held up a wee woolen undershirt and two little stockings that might have been cut from the index fingers of a pair of woolen mittens. The trio surveyed them wonderingly before returning to the search of the tailbox.

"Ah, here we are, Tom, all fine and dandy," announced The Wounded Bad Man, fishing up a book from the recesses of the tailbox. "'Doctor Meecham on Carin' for the Baby.' Let's see what the doc has to say about it."

"Here's another," said The Worst Bad Man, picking up another book and skimming through the first few pages, "but it don't say nothin' about—It's a Bible!"

He tossed it from him contemptuously, and The Youngest Bad Man, still under the spell of his youth and its resultant curiosity, retrieved the Bible. The Worst Bad Man, in the mean time, peered over the shoulder of The Wounded Bad Man.

"Turn to the part on bathin' the baby, Bill," he commanded.

"Hum! Ah-hem! Let me see. All right, Tom."

"Bathin' the Baby—Too much care cannot be exercised in performin' this most important part of the baby's toilette—"

"What in blazes is a toilette?" demanded The Worst Bad Man. The Wounded

Ban Man thereupon looked into the tailbox as if in search of it.

"I guess our baby ain't got no toilette in his war bags," he replied sadly. "A toilette," he continued, "is a little green tin bathtub about as long as my arm. Cost about *dos pesos* in any hardware store."

"You—Bob. You hear that?" admonished The Worst Bad Man. "When you get to New Jerusalem, you send out to Dan-by first-off an' round up the best toilette money can buy. Remember that, Bob. Crack right along. Bill. What does the doc say next?"

"The First Bath—The first bath should not be administered until the baby is at least three days old—"

"Bill," said The Worst Bad Man, looking solemnly at his companion, "if I had a sick tomcat I wouldn't send for Doc Meecham. Three days without a bath! That's all right when the boy's a grown-up an' ain't supposed to

bathe between waterholes when he's in the desert, or every Saturday night when he's in town, but with new babies I'll lay you my silver spurs tis different. The doc's wrong, Bill. But come again."

Thus encouraged, The Wounded Bad Man read;

"Immediately after birth the nurse should rub the entire body with olive oil, or, if that is not available, with some clean, pure grease or lard."

The Wounded Bad Man closed the book, but kept his finger in to mark the place.

"It don't sound regular, Tom, I'll admit; but there's a bottle of olive oil in the toolbox, so it looks like Robert William Thomas was due for a greasin' up in accordance with the doctor's orders."

The Worst Bad Man pondered. "Well, I ain't convinced nohow," he said presently. "This godson o' ours is startin' life slippery enough with us for his godfathers." He pondered a moment or two longer. "Still, it we follow the book it may save Robert from chafin' an' gettin' saddle galls on him. Hand over the ile, Bob, an' we'll slick the young feller up a mite. It's just the tenderness o' hell we don't have to use axle-grease!"

The Wounded Bad Man held the naked babe in his lap, across which he had spread the towel, and The Worst Bad Man applied the oil.

"Roll him over, Bill."

The Wounded Bad Man rolled him over, and in a few minutes the task was completed. Dressing the infant, however, was infinitely more laborious. The godfathers, knowing something of the biting chill of the desert nights, were grateful for the profusion of woolen clothing and delicate woolen baby blankets which their search of the toolbox had netted, and when in due course The Youngest Bad Man had succeeded in dressing the infant after a nondescript fashion of his own, The Worst Bad Man corked the olive oil bottle, wiped his hands on his trousers, and beamed with the consciousness of a duty well performed.

Next, The Wounded Bad Man ran his horny thumb down the index of Doctor Meecham on Caring for the Baby, until he came to the chapter entitled: "Feeding the Baby." This chapter he read aloud.

"This is comfortin'," he remarked, turning down the leaf to mark the page. "Doctor Meecham says that there's times when a baby won't thrive on nothin' else but condensed milk. We got plenty o' that."

"Yes, an' we can maul up some o' them sody crackers an' make some pap for him," replied The Worst Bad Man; "an' in a pinch we can bile him a pot o' gruel."

"We'll need water for that, Tom," The Wounded Bad Man reminded him; "an' we'll need water to dilute this here condensed milk an' warm it up for the feedin' bottle. I 'low some of the godfathers's goin' to suck niggerhead cactus enough to do 'em quite a spell before they hit New Jerusalem."

"That's right," The Worst Bad Man replied gravely; "Robert William Thomas's got to have the water, an' Jerusalem's the nearest camp, an' it's about forty-five mile as the crow flies. Malapa; Springs is back there thirty-odd mile, though—"

"There ain't no women at Malapai Springs," retorted The Wounded Bad Man pointedly, "and we can't fool no time in the desert with this infant. It's up to us to hike—an' hike lively—to New Jerusalem. We've got six cans o' condensed milk, an' we can't get morn't three shots o' milk from each can. It's going to spoil quick after it's opened. Besides, if we—"

The Youngest Bad Man had just been the recipient of a serious thought. He hastened to get it off his mind. Boylike he interrupted and rose to a question of information.

"What's a godfather, Bill? What job does he hold down?"

"You're an awful ignorant young man, Bob," replied The Wounded Bad Man reproachfully. "You been raised out in the woods somewheres? A godfather, Bob, is a sort of reserve parent. When a kid is baptized there's a godfather an' a godmother present, an' for an' on behalf o' the kid they promise the preacher, just the same as the kid would if he could only talk, to renounce the devil with all his works an' pomps—"

"What's his works and pumps?" demanded The Youngest Bad Man.

"Well—robbin' banks an' shootin' up deputy sheriffs, et cetry, et cetry."

The Youngest Bad Man smiled wanly. "Well, Bill, all I got to say is that us three're a lovely bunch o' godfathers. Best thing we can do is to shunt the job to a godmother."

"But there ain't no godmother," said The Worst Bad Man sadly. "It's up to us. She"—he jerked an oily thumb toward the little mound of sand and rock—"she said somethin' about teachin' him his prayers an' bringin' h'm up a big, brave, strong man—like—like his godfathers."

"Well, that's part of the job, too," The Wounded Bad Man informed them. "I went to a Sunday-school when I was a kid, an' I know what I'm talkin' about. A godfather's got to keep his eye peeled an' see that his godchild gets a rereligious education."

"Then," said The Youngest Bad Man, "I reckon we'd better tote along this here Bible. I just come across somethin' interestin'. It's about Jesus Christ ridin' into Jerusalem. Listen:"

And The Youngest Bad Man proceeded to read from the Gospel according to St. Matthew:

"And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the Mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them."

"Rot!" snapped The Worst Bad Man. "I don't believe a word of it. You try swipin' a man's jacks, with or without a colt, in this country, an' see what happens if you say the Lord hath need of them. The Lord won't save you nohow. But cut out this religious talk, Bob, an' rustle up some sagebrush for a fire. We'll heat some of this airtight milk and feed our godson before we leave."

The fire was lit forthwith, and the condensed milk prepared according to the instructions laid down by Doctor Meecham. The Worst Bad Man poured the water, while the other two godfathers guarded jealously every drop. He heated the mixture to the proper temperature, warmed the feeding bottle in it and then filled the bottle. The Wounded Bad Man sat with the baby in his lap and pressed the feeding bottle to the little

stranger's lips.

It was an anxious moment to the three godfathers. Would he or would he not "take hold?" He did, promptly, with a gusto that brought a howl of delight from The Worst Bad Man.

"I sure do admire to see the way that young feller adapts himself to conditions," said The Wounded Bad Man proudly.

"Hops right to it, like a drunkard to a Fourth of July barbecue," said The Youngest Bad Man. "He'll do." There was all the pride of fatherhood in the boy's tones. "Game little pup, ain't he?"

"His poor little ma was game," remarked The Worst Bad Man "He comes by it natural. I wonder what kind of a coyote his old man was. It'd sure be a sin if this boy grew up to be as big a fool as his father. I'd turn over in my grave."

"Well, that's up to the last of the godfathers," said The Wounded Bad Man. "Mind you learn him hoss-sense, Bob. Don't let him grow up to wear eyeglasses before he's twenty-one years old, an' make him say 'sir' when he speaks to you. Teach him hoss-sense and respect, Bob. Them's the two great requirements to a man's education."

"The way he's downin' his provender," The Worst Bad Man remarked, "he'll be full up in five minutes and want to go to sleep. It's too hot to resk him out just now, an' Doc Meecham says he's go to be fed every four hours. We'll set up the drinks to Robert agin at four o'clock, an' then we'll git out o' this hole a-flyin'. Penden' our departure, Bob, my son, you pull off to one side an' study all that Doctor Meecham has to say about carin' for the baby.

"Knowledge ain't so awful heavy, my son, when you carry it in your head, an' this Doc Meecham book weighs more'n two pounds. Bill'll take a little sleep, an' I'll keep the flies off'n him an' the infant."

It was almost sun-down when the three godfathers left Terrapin Tanks with their godson and struck off through the low black hills toward the northeast. A cold night wind was springing up, and to the thirsty godfathers, not one of whom had tasted water since sun-up that morning, the cool breeze was refreshing.

Up the wild, lonely draws they trudged, the sleeping infant, wrapped in a double blanket, reposing in the hollow of The Wounded Bad Man's sound arm. The man's face was drawn and very haggard, and he staggered slightly from weakness once or twice in spots where the trail was rough. The Youngest Bad Man, following at his heels, was quick to notice this.

"Here, I ain't carryin' an ounce o' weight," he expostulated. "Bill's carryin' th' water an' the airtight milk an' the feedin' bottle an' the camp kettle and our grub, an' you're carryin' the baby an' a bundle of extra clothes. Lemme spell you a few miles, Bill. You're in bad shape with that sore shoulder, an' you're goin' to wear yourself out too soon."

The Wounded Bad Man shook his head. "I'll carry him as far as I can while I got the strength to do it. I ain't carryin' more'n fifteen pounds, but it'll be enough for you before you get to New Jerusalem."

"Why, ain't you comin' with us?" demanded The Youngest Bad Man.

"No," The Wounded Bad Man retorted firmly, "I ain't."

The Worst Bad Man turned in the trail, unscrewed the cap of the canteen and held the canteen toward the Wounded Bad Man.

"I think we can spare just one mouthful, Bill," he said kindly. "You bein' hit through the shoulder that-away, naturally we don't hold you so rigid to the rule."

The Wounded Bad Man had been nuzzling the baby's forehead with the tip of his great sunburnt nose. Now he raised his head quickly and his face was terrible to behold.

"I've done a heap o' ornery things in my day," he growled, "but I ain't stealin' the water that belongs to my godson. Don't you insult me no more, Tom Gibbons."

"That reminds me," remarked The Worst Bad Man affably, "you're carryin' some extra weight."

He reached forward, unbuckled The Wounded Bad Man's belt, with its forty rounds of pistol cartridge and the heavy revolver, and tossed it into the greasewood.

"That helps some!" The Wounded Bad Man growled out the words again.

They walked on in silence hour after hour. Presently as they trudged along The Worst Bad Man began lighting matches.

"Nine o'clock," he announced. "Third drink-time for Robert William Thomas. We'll make a dry camp an' heat some more milk—listen!"

From a draw to the right there came, borne on the night wind, the sound of savage growling and yelping, as of dogs quarreling ever a bone.

"Coyotes," The Youngest Bad Man elucidated. "They got somethin'."

"Move along out o' here," cried The Wounded Bad Man irritably. "I don't want to listen to that. They'll get me soon enough."

They moved farther up the draw and camped for half an hour. Again The Wounded Bad Man fed the baby, and once more they swung away on their sorry road to New Jerusalem. Toward morning the baby awoke and whimpered, and The Wounded Bad Man, who never once during the long night had relinquished his trust, sought to soothe it with song.=

`` Oh, Ella Ree, so kind an' true,

```` In th' little churchyard lies.



`` Her grave is bright with drops o' dew,

```` But brighter were her eyes.=

`` Then carry me back to Tennessee,

```` There let me——=

It was a melody of his childhood. His mother had sung it to him in the old lost days of his youth and innocence, and the plaintive ballad came cracked and quavering through lips swollen with suffering. It was a mournful song, but it seemed appropriate, for The Wounded Bad Man was thinking of the little mother away off there in the silence at Terrapin Tanks. Whether from this or physical inability to proceed farther, his voice broke in the second line of the chorus.

"Dog my cats," he gasped feebly, "I can't sing a lick no more!"

"I'll sing for him," volunteered The Youngest Bad Man; "I'll give him 'The Yeller Rose o' Texas'."

They made fifteen miles that first night, and at sun-up they emerged from the black volcanic hills out on to a great, white, shimmering, dry salt lake. A mile away a little cabin, dazzling white in the glint of the rising sun, flared against the horizon, and far to the northeast the Witch of Old Woman Mountain sat watching them.

"Over there on the southeast spur of Old Woman you'll find New Jerusalem, Bob," The Worst Bad Man explained. "That mountain with the rocky crest that looks like a witch in profile—that's Old Woman Mountain. Watch the Witch, Bob, an' you'll get there."

The Youngest Bad Man nodded. "We can't carry the baby in this heat," he reminded them. "Hand him over, Bill, and I'll just buck-jump along to that little cabin an' hole up with him till you an' Tom catch up."

"I'll carry him," The Wounded Bad Man retorted doggedly.

"You'll not." The Youngest Bad Man was aroused. "You're dyin' on your feet, Bill Kearny, an' I ain't goin' to see you stand by an' fall with my godson an' hurt him maybe. Come across with him."

Reluctantly The Wounded Bad Man surrendered the child to The Youngest Bad Man. The latter was drawn and weary himself, but he had what neither of his comrades possessed—he had glorious Youth. He would still be on his feet and traveling with his godson when the coyotes would be quarreling over the others. He trotted off now, in a hurry to reach the lone cabin before the heat became too oppressive.

The Worst Bad Man looked after him enviously. "What a man!" he muttered. "Lean an' long an' tough. If we strike some niggerhead cactus he'll get through. He can last two days more."

"But I don't see no niggerhead cactus," complained The Wounded Bad Man. "It's ten miles across this salt lake, an'——"

He swayed and fell on his hands and knees. The Worst Bad Man helped him up. They stood for a moment, leaning against each other, resting; then plodded weakly on. The Worst Bad Man was the first to speak. His tongue was dry and swollen but he could still speak plainly.

"D'ye remember, Bill, that yarn that Bob read us outen that Bible last night—about Christ ridin' into Jerusalem an' Him send-in' two men over to the nearest camp for a jinny with a colt? It kinder set me thinkin', an' I been wonderin' all night. Bill, do you believe in God?"

"I dunno," The Wounded Bad Man replied thickly. "I usen't to, but I dunno now'. I seen things yesterday—in that woman's eyes when she talked about the baby not havin' anybody to teach him his prayers an' him growin' up a fine, good man. I been wonderin', too, Tom. You don't suppose, Tom, that the Bible's wrong and that Christ sent three disciples instead o' two?"

"Why?"

"Because,"—The Wounded Bad Man paused and looked at his companion very impressively—"I kinder feel like me an' you an' Bob was disciples—since I seen that girl an' held that little mite of a kid in my arms. I been figgerin' it out, Tom, an' I allow that Bob ought to make Jerusalem with Robert William Thomas some time Christmas mornin'. The thought's comforted me a heap. Somehow I sorter got the notion that there can't no hard luck come to a Christmas baby, an' Christ just naturally can't go back on us if we play the game fair by that kid."

The Worst Bad Man nodded grave approval to these sentiments. The Wounded Bad man continued:

"It sorter sets my mind back thirty-five years. My folks used to take me to church when I was a kid. I wasn't a churchgoer by nature, but there was one picture on the wall of that church of a naked baby lyin' in his mother's lap, an' when the sun'd come streamin' in through them stained-glass windows it used to light up their faces kinder beautiful. An' yesterday mornin' when the sun"—here The Wounded Had Man stumbled and fell once more. He picked himself up and continued wearily—"and when the sun come streakin' over the Terrapin Tanks an' shone into that wagon, I swear to God, Tom, it was the same two faces!"

The Worst Bad Man made no reply. Privately he was of the opinion that his companion was delirious. The latter's next remark, however, precluded this idea.

"We ain't done right by young Bob Sang-ster," he complained. "We're a pair o' hard old skunks, Tom, an' we've kinder influenced that boy. He ain't bad. There ain't nothin' naturally crooked in Bob. He's just young, an' thinks he's havin' adventures an' makin' a big man of himself. That job at Wickenburg was the first trick he ever turned. Before you boys leave me I'm goin' to talk to Bob. I'm going to talk while I got my voice, because by noon my tongue'll be out of kilter——"

"I'll talk to him too," assented The Worst Bad Man eagerly. "I was thinkin' the same thoughts as you, Bill. The last o' the godfathers can't be no crook. Bill. He's got to do his duty by the infant."

An hour later they arrived at the white cabin on the dry salt lake. It was not the kind of house one sees in cities, for it was built entirely of blocks of rock salt, of such crystal clearness that as the two godfathers approached they could discern the vague outlines of Boh Sangster sitting inside with the baby. The roof of the house was of canvas, sun-baked, rotten and filled with holes. Evidently the strange habitation had been the abode of some desert visionary, who planned to file on the salt lake and sell his concession to the Salt Trust.



The Youngest Bad Man gave the baby into the keeping of The Wounded Bad Man once more, while he and The Worst Bad Man busied themselves spreading the double blanket over the ruined canvas roofing to keep out the sun. Next they prepared some condensed milk and set the feeding bottle out in the hot salt gravel until it should be heated to the right temperature. And while they waited, sitting there in silence, The Wounded Bad Man leaned back against the salt wall and closed his tired eyes. The Worst Bad Man stooped and took the baby from him; yet he did not seem to be aware of this action. This was a bad sign. The Youngest Bad Man shook his head dubiously.

Presently The Wounded Bad Man spoke. His speech was very thick and labored, like that of a paralyzed man.

"Bob," he said, "I had somethin' to say to you, but I'm too weak to preach now. Tom'll tell you. Got that Bible yet?"

"Yes, Bill, I got it."

"All right, Bob. I'm just goin' to find out if there's a God, and if there is I guess he'll give me a square deal. I'm goin' to give Him three chances to prove He's on the job, an' I got to win two heats out o' three before I'll believe. Open that Bible, Bob, an' read me the very first thing you see."

The Youngest Bad Man opened the Bible and read from the Gospel according to St. Matthew:

"And Jesus called a little child unto Him, and set him in the midst of them, "And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

"Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

"And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me."

The Youngest Bad Man closed the book.

"Open it again," The Wounded Bad Man commanded.

The Youngest Bad Man opened it at random and read from the Gospel according to St. Luke:

"And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

"But the other answering rebuked him, saying, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?"

"And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

"And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

"And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

"That'll do, Bob," murmured The Wounded Bad Man. "I call upon you an' Tom to witness that I receive that woman's baby—in God's name. If I whimper for water don't give it to me. There's blood poison in my shoulder an' arm an' I'm goin' crazy. I'm burnin' up—but it's comin' to me. Lord, it's comin' to me. I don't complain none, Lord, an' I thank Thee for bringin' me this far—with the little chap—for Thy sake, Lord. Our Father, who art—who art—who art—who art—in Heaven, blessed—I can't remember, Bob. It's a long time.... I'll try another—"

"He's off at last," muttered The Worst Bad Man. "It's the blood poison. He's been dyin' since we left Malapai Springs. Listen at him, Bob. What kind o' stuff is he talkin'?—listen!"

They bent over The Wounded Bad Man and listened intently, for it seemed to them he was wandering far afield in his delirium. He was. Bill Kearny's body was dying, but his soul was wandering adown the wild and checkered path of his career to its dim and distant starting point.=

````"Now I lay me down to sleep,

````I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

````If I should die before I wake,

````I pray the Lord my soul to take."=

"God bless my father and mother and my little sister—and make me a good boy. Amen!"

The Worst Bad Man's face twitched a little "Good Jesus Christ!" he murmured. The words were not a blasphemy. They fell from his blackened lips like a benediction—in his fierce eyes a soft and human light was beaming. "Jesus Christ *is* good. He's slippin' it easy to old Bill. He's made him a child again."

Throughout the long, stifling day they sat and watched him, and when he became delirious The Youngest Bad Man took the baby in hand, in case The Wounded Bad Man should suddenly become violent. Late in the afternoon when the baby had been fed and wrapped again in the blanket, preparatory to taking the trail once more, the dying godfather rolled over and opened his eyes. They bent to hear his last message. It was almost unintelligible.

"It's a Christmas baby—it belongs—in Jerus—alem. Stick it out to—finish—good—boys—don't let—my—godson—die—between—two—thieves—"

They pressed his hand. The Worst Bad Man had the pack ready and slipped it over his weary shoulders. He reached for the baby.

"Gimme the kid," he cried thickly. "I got ten miles left in me yet. I'll see you across the dry lake."

The Youngest Bad Man understood now. He handed over the baby, and together the two godfathers passed out of the shack into the great salt desert... And some time during the night the angels came and led Bill Kearny into paradise.

After leaving the cabin The Worst Bad Man, realizing that the next ten miles of their journey across the salt lake offered free, smooth footing, resolved to make the pace while the "going" was good. They were no longer hampered by being forced to suit their gait to that of Bill Kearny, and The Worst Bad Man was resolved to see his godson safe across the dry lake before surrendering.

He swayed considerably as he walked, but The Youngest Bad Man strode beside him, with a hand on his arm, and helped to hold him steady. And as they proceeded The Worst Bad Man talked to Bob Sangster.

It was a short sermon, evolved, in terse, eloquent sentences, from out the bitterness of The Worst Bad Man's dark past and still darker future.

"Bill Kearny never went back on a pal, son, an' when I quit you I want you to say, 'Well, Tom Gibbons, he never went back on a pal nuther.' An' when you come to cash in, you want to have our godson say, 'An' Bob Sangster, too—he never went back on a pal.' Cut out the crooked work, son. Nobody has anythin' on you yet—start straight an' raise this boy straight, an' if ever you spot him showin' signs o' breakin' away from the reservation, just you remind him that a woman an' two men died to make a man outter him. That's all. I ain't goin' to try to talk no more."

At midnight The Worst Bad Man was very weak. He swayed and staggered and stopped every few hundred yards to rest, but he would not give up the baby.

"I'll last till sun-up," he told himself; "I got to. I ain't the quittin' kind."

About two o'clock in the morning the moon came out; from somewhere in the distance a coyote gave tongue, and The Worst Bad Man shivered a little. At three o'clock they came out of the dry salt lake into the sands again, and The Youngest Bad Man held out his arms for the baby.

"He needs grub mighty bad," was what The Worst Bad Man tried to say, but the words came only as an unintelligible mumble. There had been no sage on the dry lake and they had been unable to make a fire. For two hours the baby had been whimpering with hunger and cold. The Worst Bad Man slipped out of his pack, gathered some dry sagebrush and lit a roaring fire, while his youthful companion ministered to the baby. And when Bob Sangster had finished The Worst Bad Man smoothed a two-foot area in the sand, and by the light of the campfire he wrote with his finger the words that he could not speak:

"You carry baby. I'm good two three miles more with pack. I leave you twelve miles from New Jerusalem. Don't lay up today keep moving put baby half rations savvy."

The Youngest Bad Man nodded. When dawn began to show in the east they resumed the journey. After the first mile, The Worst Bad Man gave signs that the end was coming very soon. He fell more frequently, barking his hands and knees, filling his mouth and eyes with sand, tearing his flesh in the catclaws. Weary, monotonous gasps came from his constricted throat, but still he staggered along, although his strength had been gone for hours. He was traveling on his nerve now.

Slowly the dawnlight crept over the desert, softening with its magic beauty the harsh empire of death. The Worst Bad Man saw the rosy glow lighting up the saturnine face of the witch of Old Woman Mountain, and was content. He had promised himself to last till dawn. He had kept his word.

He sank to his knees in the sand. Bob, Sangster stooped and lifted him to his feet. He staggered along a few yards and fell again, and when Bob Sangster would fain have lifted him once more, The Worst Bad Man motioned him back with an imperious wave of his hand, for he did not want the boy to waste his strength. He tried to protest verbally, but a horrible sound was all that came from his swollen mouth.

The Youngest Bad Man tarried for a moment, irresolute, standing over him. The Worst Bad Man deliberately removed his hat and handed it to the young godfather, who took it, fitted a branch of sagebrush with three forks at one end into the crown of the wide-brimmed hat, and thus constructed a sort of crude parasol wherewith to keep the sun from the baby. The Worst Bad Man nodded his approbation, and Bob Sangster lowered the baby until its soft little face brushed the bloody bristles on The Worst Bad Man's cheek; a handclasp—and the last of the godfathers turned his young face toward New Jerusalem and departed into the eye of the coming day.

The Worst Bad Man watched him until he disappeared into the neutrals of the desert before he turned his head to glance back, along the trail by which they had come. Away off to the southwest, forty miles away, the Cathedral Peaks lifted their castellated spires, and the gaze of the stricken godfather went no farther. The Cathedral Peaks—how like a church they seemed, standing there in the solitude, sublime, indestructible, eternal, gazing down the centuries. The Worst Bad Man was moved to solemn thought—he who had so little time for thought now. His mind harkened back to the scene in the salt house on the dry lake, to Bill Kearny's challenge to the Omnipotent, to the answers that came to that anguished soul crying in the wilderness of doubt and unbelief; and suddenly a great desire came over The Worst Bad Man. He, too, wanted to know. He, too, would ask a sign. And if there was a God—

He stretched forth his arms toward the Cathedral Peaks. "Lord, give me a sign," he gobbled; "let me have The Light"; and, as if in answer to his cry, the sun burst over the crest of the Panimints, a long shaft of light shot across the desert and painted, in colors designed by the Master Artist, the distant spires of the Cathedral Peaks. They flamed in crimson, in gold, in flashes of silver light, fading away into turquoise and deep maroon, and in that light The Worst Bad Man read the answer to his riddle.

"Lord, I believe." The horrid gobbling broke the silence once more. "Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

And then the desert madness smote his brain, and with the sudden, terrible strength of the maniac he scrambled to his feet and started across the waste toward the peaks. Over the long trail to the Great Divide he ran, with arms outstretched; and as he ran the Peaks flamed and flickered in heliograph flashes. Perhaps they carried a message, a message that only The Worst Bad Man could understand—the message of hope eternal sounding down the ages:

"Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

Presently The Worst Bad Man fell. It was the end. He had kept the faith.

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But Bob Sangster could not wait and watch and speculate. Time pressed; at Terrapin Tanks he had passed his word, and he must be moving on if he would save his godson. He had one can of condensed milk and half

a quart of water left. It behooved him to hurry.

When the sun was an hour high and the desolate landscape lay baking and shimmering round him, he crept into the meager shadow of a palo-verde tree, undressed the infant, rubbed him with the last of the olive oil and threw the bottle away. Then with new, fresh garments carried from Terrapin Tanks he dressed the baby. He wet his bandana handkerchief and washed the little red face. He was preparing for the final dash.

He abandoned the supply of mesquit-bean bread and jerked beef, the Bible, and Doctor Meecham's invaluable work on Caring for the Baby. He considered a moment, and decided to abandon also the heavy woolen blanket in which they had been carrying the baby. It mea'nt six pounds less weight, and unless they made New Jerusalem before sundown Robert William Thomas would not need it. With or without blankets, they would both sleep cold under the stars tonight, for Bob Sangster was once more confronted by the primal necessity of his calling. He had to "take a chance."

He was about to discard his six-shooter and belt, but a stealthy crackle in the sagebrush caused him to reconsider. He watched the spot whence the sounds came and presently he made out the form of a coyote. The brute was sitting on his hunkers, his red tongue lolling out of the corner of his mouth, his glance fixed in lazy appraisal upon the last of the godfathers and the bundle that he carried.

The boldness of the beast was an insult in itself. It drove Bob Sangster wild with anger. With marvelous brute intelligence the coyote had sensed the weakness of the man, and patiently he had set himself the task of shadowing him to the finish. He sat there now—waiting. In his contempt for the hereditary enemy the gray skulker did not even trouble to conceal his intentions.

"So you're hangin' round for the pickin's already," snarled Bob Sangster, and fired. The coyote turned a somersault and crawled away through the sage, dragging its hindlegs after it, and two more coyotes sprang up at the sound of the shot and scurried out of range.

"You think I'll drop this boy, don't you?" raved the godfather, blazing away at the fleeing enemy long after it was out of range. He seized Robert William Thomas and, holding his hat parasol over the child, hurried along toward the mouth of a draw. He was getting in among the low, black, volcanic hills and lava beds again, and the reflected heat was terrible. Cautiously he made his way along the shady side of the canon, and for an hour he progressed thus until the sun, having risen higher, sought him out.

Horned toads and lizards scuttled out of his path in fright, chuckwallas blinked their eyes at him, a desert terrapin waddled leisurely by, and once, gazing back over the trail, he saw that the coyotes had recovered from their fright and were following him again. He commenced to see mirages—wonderfully beautiful little lakes, fringed with palms and bright-green rushes. Distinctly he heard the pleasant murmur of water tumbling over rocks. He was tempted to pause and search for this purling brook, but his common-sense warned that it was all a delusion of the heat and his own imagination. He knew that the sun was getting him fast, that he was drying up.

"Cactus," he kept repeating to himself, as if in that one word he held the open sesame of life; "just one niggerhead cactus." But the niggerhead cactus, with its scanty supply of vegetable juices, did not grow in the country through which he was traveling, and as the slow miles slipped behind him and his eager glance revealed the entire absence of the shrub that meant life to him and Robert William Thomas, the terrible uselessness of his struggle, the horrible forlornness of his forlorn hope, became more and more apparent. The baby was whimpering continually now, and faint blue rings had appeared under the little sufferer's eyes. He was sick and tired and hot and itchy, and despite the fact that the godfathers had done their best, Bob Sangster knew that the child could not last a day longer without proper attention. It was a miracle that he had survived thus far—a miracle only accounted for by reason of the fact that he was a healthy, hearty twelve-pounder at birth. The last of the godfathers tried vainly to soothe him with the oft-successful Yeller Rose o' Texas, but he was beyond singing now, and in the knowledge that both were going swiftly he mingled his tears with those of his godson. Yet they were manly tears, and no taint of selfpity brought them forth. Only it broke Bob Sangster's heart to think of his helpless godson and of the gray scavengers skulking behind.

Suddenly the godfather thrilled with a great feeling of relief and joy. He had come to an Indian water sign; he read it at a glance. Five little rock monuments in a circle, with a sixth standing off to the right about thirty feet from the others. In that direction the water lay, and bearing due southwest Bob Sangster saw a draw opening up. The journey would take him a mile or two out of his way, but what mattered a mile or ten miles, provided he found water? The prospect gave him renewed hope and strength. He forged steadily ahead and when the canon narrowed he knew he was coming to a "tank." Up the wash he ran and sank, sobbing, on the edge of the water-hole. It was quite dry.

It was a long time before he could gather his courage together and depart down the canon again. He had traveled two miles for nothing! He wept anew at the thought, marveling the while that there should be so much moisture still in his wretched body.

At the mouth of the canon he halted and prepared the last of his condensed milk and water for the baby. When he proffered it, however, the child screamed and refused the horrid draught, and as he lay on the man's knees with his little mouth open Bob Sangster dropped in the last dregs of his canteen.

"You need water, too, son," he mumbled sadly. "This sweet dope is killin' you."

He replaced the feeding bottle in his pocket, paused long enough to kill another coyote that had ventured too close, and resumed his journey toward New Jerusalem. He had left the dry tank at noon. At one o'clock he was two miles nearer New Jerusalem; at three o'clock he was within five miles of the camp and had fallen for the first time. But even as he fell he had thrust out his left hand, thus fending his weight from the baby, and the child had not been injured. So the godfather merely covered the child's tender head with Tom Gibbons' old hat, and together they lay for a while prone in the sand. The man was not yet done, but he was exhausted and half blind and very weak. He was striving to get his courage in hand once more, and he needed a rest so badly. So he lay there, trying to think, until presently the whimpering of the infant aroused him, and he sat up suddenly.

Seated in a circle, of which Bob Sangster and the baby formed the axis, were half a dozen coyotes. They were closer now—too close for comfort and, cowardly as he knew them to be, there were enough of them

present to fan their courage to the point where a single rush would end it. He fired at them and they scampered away unharmed.

"I can't shoot any more," the man wailed. "I'm goin' blind. Come, son, we must move on or they'll get us to-night."

He picked the child up and plodded on, and once more the coyotes fell into line behind him. The godfather began to feel afraid of them. He was obsessed with a horrible fear that they might sneak up and snap at him from behind, or rush him en masse and tear the baby out of his arms. He kept glancing back and firing at them. But all of his shots went wild and gradually the tracing brutes grew bolder. Whenever he sat down for a few minutes to rest they surrounded him, and it seemed to the godfather that each time they edged in closer. He decided to save his cartridges until the final rush.

He tottered along until four o'clock before he fell again. This time he twisted in time to land on his back, with the baby uppermost, and as he lay there, stunned and shaken, the godfather was almost proud of himself for his forethought. He closed his eyes to rid his vision of the myriads of red, yellow and blue spots that came dancing out of the sand and shooting into the air like skyrocket. The spots still persisted, however—for the skyrockets were in his brain, and as he lay there it came to him that this was to be the end after all. He was too weak to carry the baby further. Sooner or later he would fall upon it and kill it, so why struggle further

The baby was leaving him! He could feel it being slowly dragged from his protecting arm, and with a moan that was intended for a shriek he sat up and reached for his gun. So close to him was the coyote, dragging gingerly at the infant's clothing, that the godfather dared not fire. He merely threw up his arms to frighten the beast away, and reluctantly it trotted back and rejoined its companions of the slaving, red-tongued circle.

The godfather knelt in the sands beside the baby and searched for the marks of teeth, but found none. The horror of their situation was brought forcefully home to him now. He had hoped before, but hope was vanished. New Jerusalem could not be more than three miles away, but it might as well be three hundred, for Bob Sangster could never make it with the baby. He thought no longer of life. He wanted to cheat the coyotes, and in his agony he forgot that he was a Bad Man and cried aloud to a Supreme Being of whom he knew nothing.

"O God, save me, save me! Not for myself, but for this poor little baby. I'm old and tough, Lord, but save the baby. You were a baby yourself once, Lord, if the Bible don't lie. Now save my baby. Don't go back on me, Lord. Help me, help me to keep my word to raise him right—"

He clasped the child in his arms and kissed it passionately for the first time since his assumption of the duties of a godfather. And then, because he was a fighter and could not quit while there was life within him, he reeled onward with dogged persistence. He fixed his fading glance on some unimportant landmark and nerved himself to last until he should reach it. Queer thoughts kept obtruding themselves upon him. Once he thought a chuckwalla addressed him, saying: "Hello, Bob Sang-ster, what are you runnin' away from? You can't dodge them coyotes. They're goin' to get that infant, sure. Better chuck 'em the kid an' see if you can't make it alone to New Jerusalem. That baby's weight is killin' you, boy. After all, what is he to you? He's only a three-day-old baby. Why don't, you drop him an' beat it in to New Jerusalem? You can make it without the baby."

He had cursed the chuckwalla and stamped it into the earth for the insult. But a moment later a horned toad advised him to drink the milk that still remained in the feeding bottle. "Of course it's none o' my business," remarked the horned toad, "but if the baby won't drink it, you should. It's foolish to let it go to waste. It's only a couple of mouthfuls, but it'll give you strength to make that black lava point a mile ahead."

"Horned Toad," replied the godfather, "you're a sensible little critter an' I'll take your advice. It ain't manly to do it, but nothin' matters any more."

He drank the milk that the baby had refused, tossed the bottle aside and nerved himself to last until he should reach the black lava point. That was to be the last goal. If he fell before he reached it he resolved to climb into a palo-verde tree, wedge himself and the baby in between the limbs, kill the baby and himself, and thus dying have the laugh on the coyotes.

He fell. For the third time the child escaped being crushed. The palo-verde tree was only fifty yards away, the black lava point seventy-five yards, but when the godfather could scramble to his feet again he made for the palo-verde tree. Here, to his disgust, he found himself too weak to climb the tree. So he leaned against it and wept, dry-eyed, with rage and horror and disappointment. The horned toad had followed and now offered more advice.

"Sangster, you're a chump. Why climb the tree? The buzzards will get you, so what's the difference?"

"I'll make the lava point," replied the godfather. "They can't come at me in back there, an' I can keep 'em away for a while anyhow."

He lurched away. Foot by foot he approached the black lava point. He resolved to round it; there was shade on the other side. Staggering, reeling, muttering incoherently, he rounded the lava rock and collided with something soft and hairy. He leaned against it for a moment, resting, while something soft and warm and animallike nuzzled him and nickered softly in the joy of the meeting. When Bob Sangster opened his eyes he found himself leaning against a trembling old white burro with a pack on his back.

"Water," thought the godfather, "water. There ought to be a canvas waterbag," and he went clawing along the burro's side, feeling for the waterbag but unable to find it. The little animal was standing patiently in the shadow of the rock, and Bob Sangster stood off and looked at him. The burro's eyes were red and dust-rimmed; evidently he had traveled far. His legs trembled, his tongue, dry and black, protruded from his mouth. The burro, too, was dying of thirst.

"You poor devil," mused Bob Sangster. He gazed at the pitiable little animal, the while his memory strove to recall some other incident in which a burro had figured. There had been some talk of burros recently with Bill Kearny and Tom Gibbons. What was it? Well, never mind. It didn't make any difference. This burro was dying



and useless; there was no water bag—

*And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem... then sent Jesus two disciples, saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied....*

The words of the Gospel according to St. Matthew flamed in letters of fire across the failing vision of the last godfather. He remembered now. He had read a chapter from the Bible to Bill Kearny and Tom Gibbons back there at Terrapin Tanks—and it was all about Christ riding into Jerusalem on an ass. Here, in the shadow of this black lava, he had found a burro waiting!

Bill Kearny had asked for a sign—

The last of the godfathers thought of his frenzied prayer of an hour before. He had asked for help. Could it be possible that here stood the answer?

"There's a chance," he mumbled. "This critter has stampeded from some prospector's pack outfit He's been lookin' for water, and the Lord sent him our way, sonny. He's sure sent him."

With his free hand the godfather clawed desperately at the diamond hitch, swept the load from the packsaddle, ripped it apart and found—a can of tomatoes. He slashed the can open, drank some himself and gave the balance to the burro. Then, lifting his godson into the packsaddle, he lashed him in securely; after which he took his open pocket knife in hand and prodded the jaded burro until it consented to move away across the desert at a crawling, shuffling gait. Bob Sangster walked beside the burro, one hand busy with the point of the knife, the other clinging desperately to the rear cross of the packsaddle. His strength had, in a measure, returned after drinking the canned tomatoes, and he fancied that the burro too seemed rejuvenated. Bob Sangster wished he had another can of tomatoes to offer the little beast, for the lives of himself and his godson depended on the burro. He leaned heavily against the animal, which half led, half dragged him along. Thus an hour passed.

They were ascending the upraise that led to the crest of the southeast spur of Old Woman Mountain now, and through the sunset haze the witch's demoniac face leered down at them from the heights above. Slowly, haltingly, they progressed up the slope. The burro was almost spent, and time and again he balked and groaned a feeble protest He welcomed the occasions when the godfather's weak clasp of the packsaddle was broken and he fell headlong to earth. But if he fell, the godfather rose again, moaning, praying, raving, and still the awful cavalcade pressed on.

The shadows grew' long. The sun disappeared and evening settled over the desert, but still the sorry pilgrimage continued up the slope. Now they were half a mile from it, a quarter, two hundred yards, a hundred from the summit—the burro grunted, shivered and lay down. In the gathering gloom Bob Sangster felt for the ropes which bound the baby to the pack, cut them and stood clear of the dying beast.

"You've pulled me up the slope in the heat, old fellow," he tried to say with lips that were split and parched and cut and bleeding. "I never could have made it. New Jerusalem can't be far away now. I'll get there. But —"

He pressed the muzzle of his gun into the suffering animal's ear and pulled. "I owed you that kindness," he mumbled, and passed on to the crest of the slope.

At the summit he paused, swaying gently with his precious burden, and gazed down the other side of the spur. In a hollow a few hundred yards below him, the lights of New Jerusalem gleamed brightly through the gathering gloom of that lonely Christmas Eve, and the godfather recalled the words of Bill Kearny.

"It's a Christmas baby. God won't go back on it."

Bob Sangster's tongue hung from his mouth, long and black and withered, like the tongue of a dead beef, as he stood there on the outskirts of New Jerusalem and thought of many things. Bill Kearny had been right. It was a Christmas baby. It would pull through all right. He drew the baby to him until their faces were very close, so close that a little hand crept up and closed tightly over the godfather's nose.

This was to be their last supreme moment together, for after tonight some woman must enter into Robert William Thomas' life and Bob Sangster could only be a partner in his godson's love. He recalled that the baby's mother had told The Worst Bad Man they had "kin" in New Jerusalem, and Bob Sangster wondered if she had intended that he should turn the baby over to them. The thought appalled him, and his hot tears fell fast on the little white face as he staggered down the grade into New Jerusalem.

"I won't give you up," he gibbered, "I won't. You're mine. Your mother give you to me to raise like a man, an' I'm a-goin' to do it. You're my kid an' you're named after us three. No, no, I won't. I've died ten thousand deaths for you—I'll work an' I'll hire a woman—"

Fifteen minutes later a battered, bleeding, raving wreck of a man, who hugged a bundle to his great breast, reeled into New Jerusalem and paused in front of a hurdy-gurdy. From within came the plaintive notes of a melodeon, and a woman—a Mary Magdalen—was singing: =

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, lilt up your gates and sing,*

*Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna to your King! =*

Bob Sangster made his uncertain way to the woman at the melodeon and held a bundle toward her.

"What's this?" she demanded. The last of the godfathers gobbled and mumbled, but the words refused to come. How could the woman know what he was trying to say?

She unwrapped the bundle and gazed down at Robert William Thomas Sangster.

Who knows? Perhaps in that moment the woman, too, like The Three Bad Men, beheld The King!

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