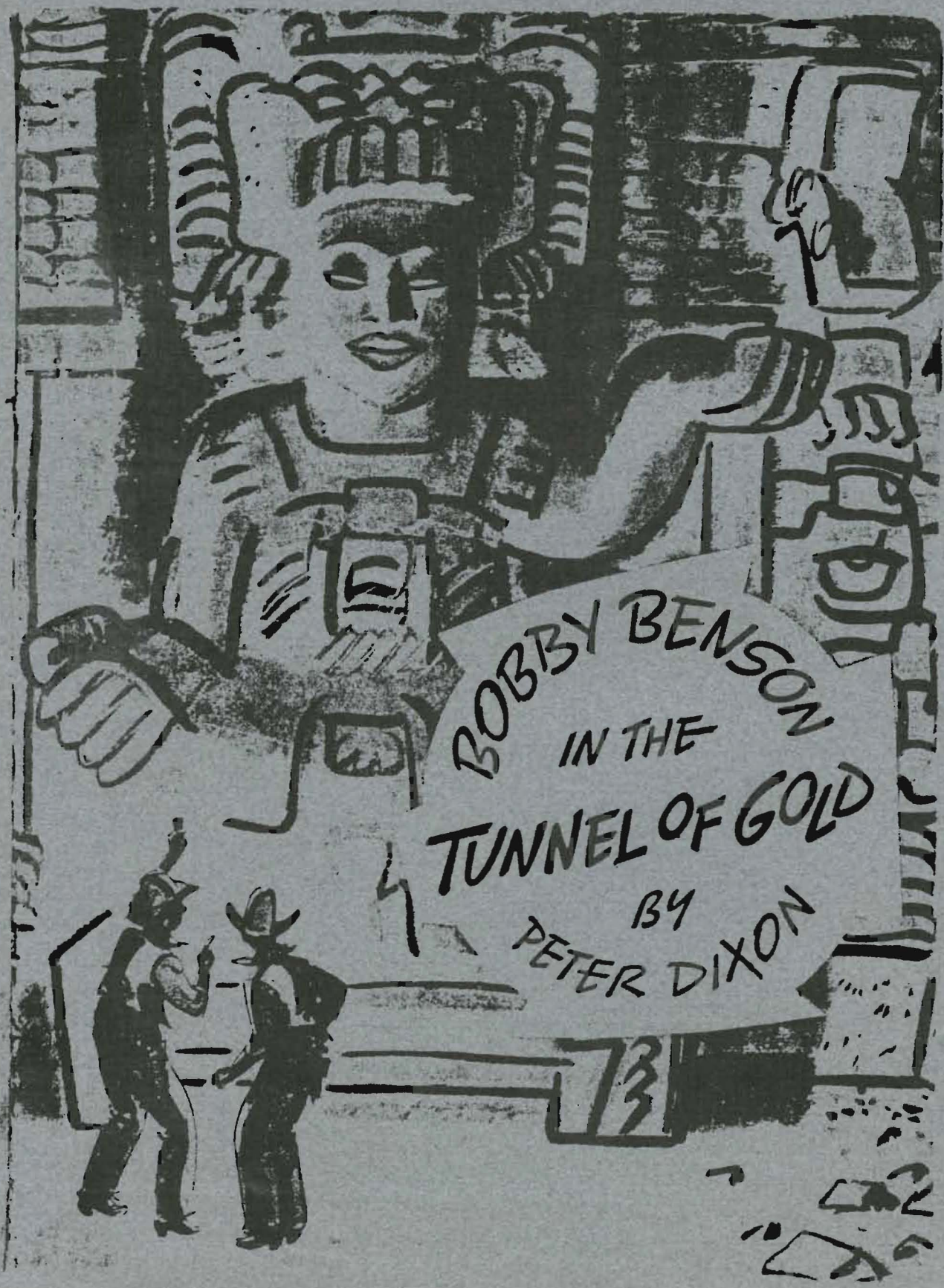


MEMORIES

1991

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BOBBY BENSON  
IN THE  
TUNNEL OF GOLD  
BY  
PETER DIXON

73

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# EDITORIAL

Here we are again, if only for 1 issue. When Frank Boncore relinquished his duties as editor of MEMORIES last spring, Arlene and I agreed to do the 1991 issue while the search for a new editor continues. We are interested in an editor from outside the Buffalo area so as to get a different perspective in future publications. If you are interested, please write to me at 100 Harvey Drive, Lancaster, NY 14086. The deadline for 1992 MEMORIES IS September 1, 1992. All that would be required is preparing 20-26 pages (8-1/2 x 11) of material that is camera ready (material must be clear & sharp) plus a cover. Insertion of ads and printing will be completed on this end. The choice of OTR related articles would be your responsibility.

Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders was one of my favorite programs in the late forties and early fifties which is why they are featured in this issue of MEMORIES. As we were working on this issue, the May-June issue of Old Time Radio Digest arrived featuring Bobby Benson on the cover. I will not attempt to outdo Jack French's article in that issue. Instead, I will refer you to that issue which is available for \$3.00 from Royal Promotions, 4114 Montgomery Road, Cincinnati OH 45212. Tell them that the Old Time Radio Club referred you to them.

If you enjoyed this issue of MEMORIES, please send comments to us at the above address. If you did not enjoy this issue, please see offer in paragraph one!

Richard and Arlene Olday



## OLSEN & JOHNSON

BOBBY BENSON  
in  
THE TUNNEL OF GOLD

or  
The Secret of Nugget Creek

BY: Peter Dixon

## CHAPTER ONE BOBBY GET WET!

The Big Bend country of West Texas is not a land of lakes and streams, but a few tiny rivers and creeks wind from the big hills down to the Rio Grande. In the dry season many of these streams disappear entirely. A cloudburst in the mountains will make them into raging rapids in a few hours.

One of the strangest streams in the Big Bend country is Nugget creek. The creek starts as a gushing spring in the Turtle Hills and wanders down-through the H-Bar-0 ranch to the Rio Grande. The stream is called Nugget creek because each year for more than fifteen years, two or three small nuggets of gold have been found in the stream bed. Gold hunters by the score have prospected and mined along the creek but no gold deposits have ever been found. All that happened years before Bobby Benson located his H-Bar-0 ranch in the border country. For five years, not a single nugget was washed from the creek.

His head shielded from the hot afternoon sun by his tall-crowned Stetson, Bobby Benson rode slowly through the sagebrush. He rode alone, for Tex Mason, his foreman, and all the cowboys were busy with the cattle. A light shotgun was thrust in the carbine boot on his saddle and he watched the brush carefully. Harka, the Indian had reported seeing the tracks of wild turkey in this part of the ranch and Bobby hoped to bag one of the big game birds.

The boy who today rode so well that he seemed to be a part of his horse bore hardly any resemblance to the thin, pale-faced boy from the East who had inherited the H-Bar-0 brand. Bobby was brown and broad chested. He could handle a lariat as well as any of his cowboys and only Tex Mason was a better shot with a pistol or rifle.

The H-Bar-0, with its thousands of acres along the Rio Grande and its more than two thousand head of fine cattle, was now one of the best known ranches in the Big Bend. Bobby treated his cowhands as friends. As a result he had surrounded himself with one of the most capable bands of hard-riding cowboys in the entire west. Though they grumbled, argued and joked continually among themselves, they did their work well and at the big rodeos in the west and in New York, the H-Bar-0 riders and ropers took a large share of the prizes.

When Bobby first came into the Big Bend country, old timers lifted their eyebrows in surprise. No kid could run a ranch, they said. Bobby proved they were wrong. With capable Tex beside him, Bobby managed the cattle and the men wisely. Now he was liked and respected by everyone. Only in the dense brush on the Mexican side of the border there were certain evil-faced men who muttered threats against the boy rancher. Their previous attempts to steal his cattle and raid his ranch had not been successful. They hesitated to attempt further raids.

Though Bobby knew he had enemies he rode alone and fearlessly. So far he had seen no wild turkeys. Then there was the sudden whirr of some feathered creature in the brush....In an instant, Bobby had his shotgun in his hands. A queer looking bird with a long tail and as big as a chicken

burst out of the brush in frantic pursuit of a tiny horned toad. It was a road-runner and no one shot road-runners in the Big Bend for the long-tailed birds were snake-killers and therefore friends of man. Bobby watched the chase, smiling to himself. The horned toad dived into a hole and the road-runner disappeared into the brush, clucking with disappointment.

Silver Spot snorted softly and pulled gently against the reins in Bobby's hand.

"What's the matter, old boy?" Bobby asked his horse. "Getting bored with this hunting?"

The horse threw up his head and then moved slowly, but determinedly in a different direction from the one in which they had been riding. Bobby was puzzled. Then he understood and chuckled.

"Too bad you can't really talk," he said, "but you almost do. Sure. You're thirsty and Nugget creek is just over there. Well, I'd like a drink myself. Let's go, boy!" He gave the horse his head and Silver Spot swung into an easy lope, picking his way sure-footedly through the brush. In a few moments the horse had his nose buried in the clear, cool water of Nugget creek. Bobby swung from the saddle and stretched himself at full length on the rocky bank to drink.

The day had been hot and Bobby plunged his face into the crystal water. Without thinking, he opened his eyes under water and looked curiously at the pebble covered bottom of the stream. Things had a magic look. A shiny yellow pebble reflected the sun's rays through the water. Unconsciously he reached for it. He had leaned far out from the bank to drink, supporting himself with one hand in the shallow water. In reaching he lost his balance and in an instant, sputtering and laughing at his own carelessness, he was floundering in the swift stream.

Silver Spot snorted in sudden alarm. Though a good swimmer, Bobby was having some difficulty in getting on his feet in the swift water. The intelligent horse decided it was time to help. Quickly he waded into the stream and his strong yellow teeth fastened in Bobby's heavy leather belt. Bobby shouted protests but the horse dragged him carefully ashore.

Laughing, Bobby rubbed the water out of his eyes and then surveyed himself. Silver Spot regarded his young boss in mild amazement. Bobby addressed his horse, he often talked to the animal as if it were a human companion.

"Silver Spot," he said in mock solemnity, "I thank you for pulling me out of the creek even if your teeth did tickle. All of the crazy things for a cowboy to do--to fall in a creek!" He was soaked and quickly he began to strip off his sodden clothes. Then he realized he still had that shiny pebble clutched in his hand. He looked at it curiously. It was heavy and a coppery yellow in color. Bobby stared at it. His hand went into his pocket and he pulled out a gold coin that he had carried as a luck piece for years. He compared the coin with the pebble.

"Silver Spot," he said, "believe it or not, but it's gold!"

Silver Spot would have been more interested in oats.

## CHAPTER TWO Pebbles of Gold

On a convenient bush hung the water-soaked clothes of Bobby. Clad only in his shorts, Bobby sat on a flat rock and waited for his clothes to dry.

The stream here was swift and shallow. Thirty feet upstream was a broad deep pool. Bobby suddenly got up and after a short run, dived into the big pool. For five minutes he swam about the big pool. Then, face under water but with his eyes open, he let the stream's current take him into the racing waters. Bobby was gold hunting.

He peered through the clear water at the shinning pebbles on the creek bed. His body drifted for a hundred feet and then he crawled onto the bank and trotted back to the big pool. Three times he drifted down the swift stream, his eyes raking the bottom. On the third trip he saw another yellow pebble and his hand shot out to grab it.

For another hour Bobby dived and splashed about the stream but he found no more nuggets. The hot sun had dried his clothes and it was getting late. Slowly, thoughtfully, he dressed. He had heard about gold being found in Nugget creek and now he had found two nuggets in one afternoon. Did the creek contain more gold? Or were these two nuggets all it would yield for another year?

The boy let Silver Spot set his own pace for the three-mile ride back to the ranch.

That night Bobby sought out Tex Mason. He had not mentioned the gold nuggets.

"Tex, I want to show you something," he said.

"Huh?"

"Just a a couple of little souvenirs I picked up when I went swimming in Nugget creek this afternoon," Bobby said, trying to sound calm, "come in where the light is good!"

In the big living room of the ranch, Bobby tossed the two nuggets on the large oak table.

Tex stared at them. Then he picked them up, examined them closely and weighed them in his hand.

"Bobby. It's gold! Where did you get these nuggets?" There was excitement in Tex's voice.

Bobby told of his fall into the stream and his discovery of the nugget and how he had searched the stream body for an hour and found one more golden pebble.

Again Tex examined the nuggets closely and this time he exclaimed under his breath. Bobby looked at him questioningly.

"Somethin' funny about this," Tex exclaimed. "I'd say other human hands had touched this gold before you found it, Bobby!" He handed the gold pebble to the boy. Bobby looked at it closely. On one side of the nugget was the fragment of a design. It looked like the head of some strange bird. Perhaps it had been accidentally carved by nature but that seemed hardly believable.

"Looks like the designs you see on the Indian rugs," Bobby commented.

At that moment, Harka slipped quietly in the door of the big room.

Though Harka could ride and rope as well as any white cowboy and while he did the same work they did, he scorned to wear the conventional cowboy costume. Instead of the usual leather chaps, he wore baggy trousers of a deep purple corduroy, strapped about his lean waist with a gaily designed horse hair belt. His feet were in soft deerskin moccasins and his straight black hair was held out of his eyes with a beaded leather thong. Tonight, for it was hot, the upper part of his deep bronze body was bare. His face was lean and thoughtful but could break out into a curious smile when something amused him.

"How, Harka," Tex said quietly.

Harka grunted a "how" and slipped into a big leather padded chair.

"Tonight big wind come," he said. "Big, bad wind!"

"Oh, you can feel there's storm in the air," Bobby said. "But look at these Harka!" and Bobby put the two gold nuggets in front of the Indian.

"Tonight wind be worse than ever before," Harka persisted. "It bring trouble. Maybe death. Bad wind coming. Me know!"

Had Bobby not been excited by the gold nuggets he would have paid more attention to the Indian's warning. Harka had an uncanny ability of predicting weather changes.

"Sure," Bobby said, "when the wind blows down here it really blows. But look at these, Harka. I found them in Nugget creek this afternoon. Aren't those Indian drawings on that nugget? What do they mean?"

Realizing Bobby wasn't interested in the coming storm, Harka picked up one of the nuggets. He examined it casually at first and then suddenly became interested.

"Where you get these?" he asked suddenly.

Bobby told him.

"This very strange," the Indian said slowly. "This picture on gold was made by very old Indian tribe. Maybe two thousand years old. Long time ago, a strange tribe live in this country. They have much gold from somewhere and story is that inside of mountain they have temple and the floor of tunnel that go to temple is made of gold!"

Tex looked astonished. Bobby was unbelieving.

"I not know whether it true or not. When I little papoose I hear story from old men of tribe."

Bobby was silent. He took the nugget from Harka and stared at it intently.

"Gosh, Tex," he said quietly, "suppose that tunnel of gold was around here?" Bobby brushed his hand across his forehead; he realized he was dripping with perspiration. Tex, too, looked hot and uncomfortable and even the half-naked Indian seemed warm.

"Say, it's hot and close," Bobby said. "We're going to have a storm all right."

No one spoke but each realized it was deathly still outside. No soft chirp of birds in the bushes growing close to the ranch house. There was no low hoot of an owl. Even the coyotes who usually howled were silent. Then they heard a low, ominous wail.

"Wind come!" Harka said, softly.



### CHAPTER THREE The Big Wind

The wind came snorting and howling across the range like a mad, wild horse. One minute it seemed as distant and remote as the far blue hills. Then, with almost the speed of the lightning that flashed jaggedly over the horizon, it was on the ranch.

The first gentle puff fluttered the curtains at the wide open windows. But Tex knew Big Bend storms. He jumped to the windows and was jerking them closed. Bobby, without a question, leaped to help him. Before they had pulled down the last window, a blast of air had blown into the big room, sending papers whirling.

Thunder roared like a battery of heavy siege guns. The constant flash of lightning paled the yellow cluster of lights in the ranch house. Finally, after a despairing flicker, the lights went out.

"Lightning got our power plant," Tex shouted above the thunder's heavy roar.

Flashes of lightning, scarcely a second apart, kept the room illuminated. Clap after clap of thunder pounded against Bobby's ears until he felt someone was hitting him over the head with a sledge hammer of sound.

Above the beating waves of the thunder's roar rose the steady howl of the wind. Caught in the grip of the gale, the ranch house shook.

"Who's riding herd?" Bobby shouted, during a brief lull in the racket.

"Tad and Irish," Tex shouted back, "but they're over near Magic Mountain and they can get shelter under the cliffs."

Bobby wondered how the head would react to the flash and roar of the electrical storm and the breathtaking attack of the wind.

Something crashed against the side of the ranch house with a smashing, splintering bang.

"Old wind is pickin' up things and throwin' them around," Tex shouted.

In the next flash of lightning Bobby saw a door opening slowly. It was Hulda, the little Dutch cook, frightened from her back room by the storm.

"It's o.k., Hulda," Bobby yelled encouragingly. "Just a storm!"

"Whatever it is, I don't like it," Hulda wailed and crawled into a big chair. She curled up into a small heap, hiding her yellow head in her arms.

For a full quarter of an hour the wind gripped the sturdy ranch house and shook it viciously. Looking through a window, Bobby saw a tall tree splintered by a blue streak of lightning. Outside in the constant electrical flash he could see things flying through the air. Something scratched against a door and impulsively Bobby opened it. Tex and Harka jumped to force the door closed against the drive of the wind but before they got it closed a bedraggled jack rabbit, frightened, more of the elements than of the human beings, hopped thankfully into the shelter of the room.

"Worst blow we've ever had!" Bobby shouted above the storm's howl.

Hulda had the frightened rabbit in her arms. Grateful for warmth, he snuggled close to her.

Harka moved across the room close to Tex and Bobby.

"Worst yet to come!" he said seriously.

"Huh?" Tex looked more worried.

"Wind of death come," Harka said. "You call him tornado. Soon he come!"

"What do you mean?" Bobby asked.

"Harka knows, son," Tex's voice was raised above the noise. "It isn't often you get a tornado in this country but when they come they're bad. A twisting, tearing destroying column of wind that tears everything to pieces. We'll just have to hope it doesn't hit the ranch house!"

Bobby thought quickly. The ranch house was built of heavy adobe bricks, large blocks of gray clay. But the bunk house where the cowboys were quartered was a smaller, lighter structure. Outside the wind had quieted noticeably. Even as Bobby listened, it seemed to get calm.

"Tornado come quick now," Harka said.

"It always gets quiet for a few minutes before the Big Wind," Tex said.

"The boys," Bobby shouted. "They'll be safe here!"

Before Tex or Harka could stop him he had flung open the big oak door of the ranch house and was running through the darkness. Ahead he could see a faint yellow gleam. The cowboys had found a lantern and had lighted it in the bunk house. Three times he fell headlong over limbs of trees that had been thrown across the path by the wind. Plastered with mud from head to foot he burst in the door of the bunk house.

The cowboys, sitting quietly on the edges of their bunks, locked up in astonishment.

"Come on," Bobby shouted, "up to the main house and quick. More storm coming!"

"Listen, Bobby," Diogenes Dodwaddle began, "the worst of the storm is over and----"

"Don't argue. Come on!" Bobby almost screamed at him.

The H-Bar-O cowboys knew how to obey orders. Stopping only to pull on their boots, they followed Bobby out into the night. Lightning flickered in Mexico now. It was calm around the ranch. It seemed silly to leave the bunk house. Then a particularly brilliant flash of lightning illuminated the whole sky. There, hardly a mile north of the ranch was an inky black funnel-shaped cloud. Every man recognized it for what it was! A tornado! The dreaded cyclone and it was headed straight for the ranch.

Stumbling through the mud and wind litter, the cowboys dashed for the safety of the ranch house. Already the terrifying moan of the whirling, deadly wind could be heard.

Bobby, running, tripped over a branch and fell heavily in the mud. He tried to rise and his ankle twisted under him. The cowboys ran past him but halted as they saw he could not get up.

"Go on. Go on!" Bobby yelled at them, "I'm all right."

Without a word, stocky Waco bent over and swept the boy into his arms. In an instant John and Bill had made a seat with their hands and after a few staggering steps Waco swung the boy into the seat.

Only fifty yards to go now but the tornado was roaring at their heels. There was another brilliant flash of light and they saw the funnel-shaped cloud curled directly above their heads. The base of the twister dragged behind and as they looked, they saw it sweep across the bunk house, tug madly at the structure and then the place where the cowboys had been a few minutes before seemed to fall into a thousand pieces and the pieces were whirled through the air.

Tex and Harka were braced against the door of the ranch house. The cowboys attempted to sprint but the muddy ground dragged at their feet. They halted at the door, all waiting until John and Bill with Bobby on their interlaced hands had reached safety. Then they tumbled in as Tex

and Harka slammed the big door in the face of the hungry, snarling whirlwind.

The door, securely fastened, shook as the wind threw its full weight against it. Like a giant club, the storm pounded and pounded against the ranch house.

"You all right, Bobby?" Tex shouted anxiously.

Bobby felt his ankle, rose unsteadily to his feet and walked a few steps.

"O.K.," he nodded. "Just twisted my ankle, I guess. Anyway, it's getting better."

Crash and slash came the twisting wind against the sturdy 'dobe house. Through invisible cracks under the door and down the big, wide chimney it forced its way. Hulda, who had been attempting to start a blaze in the big fireplace to make coffee for the boys, had to give up.

Tensely but quietly, some of them smoking, the cowboys huddled about the big room while the tornado raged and howled outside. Thick glassed windows and heavy oak doors held against the vicious onslaught of crazy air. There as a sudden rattling crash on the roof.

"There goes the chimney," Tex said quietly.

A few minutes later something hit the ranch house with a crash that shook the whole structure. Tex peered out into the storm.

"I reckon the smoke house just moved in on us," he commented.

Still the wind tugged and thrust. It howled now in a high pitched shriek. Was the world coming to an end? Bobby wondered. He wondered too, about Tad and Irish out with the herd. Were they safe from the murderous wind? He wondered, too, about the cattle and the horses. And then he stopped wondering because he was afraid to think of what daylight would reveal.

#### CHAPTER FOUR Dawn on Desolation

Midnight came and still the wind howled outside the ranch house. It was different now. For a while, the wind had seemed crazy mad. Now it had settled down to a steady, determined attack. No longer did the air sing a song ranging from deep bass to a high falsetto scream. Instead, it held to one steady low note.

"Tornado has gone on its way," Tex said. "But from the sound of it outside I'd say we had a hurricane."

"I thought you only got hurricanes close the the ocean!" Bobby said.

"We got something that looks like one right here," Tex said. "we're a long way from salt water but you can't never tell about weather in Texas!"

One by one, curled up on the hard floor, the cowboys went to sleep in spite of the harsh lullaby of the gale. Worried though he was, Bobby felt his eyes closing. Curled up in a big chair, he finally went to sleep.

The smell of coffee and the happy sizzle of bacon awakened him. Crouched over a little fire in the big fireplace, Hulda was preparing some sort of breakfast. Outside was a soft gray light. Cowboys were sitting in awkward positions, rubbing their cramped muscles. Brushing his sleep-tumbled hair out of his eyes, Bobby went to a window to look.

Tex was close behind him and Tex's hand gripped his shoulder.

"I wouldn't try to see what has happened yet, Bobby," he said quietly. "Wait'll you get some coffee and some food in you. Then we'll decide what to do!"

Bobby forced himself to eat some of the crisp bacon Hulda had prepared and to gulp a cup of steaming, black coffee. There was no more wind. But there was no sunshine outside, though Bobby knew the sun should have been up an hour before. Finally, breakfast finished, Tex opened the big door and Bobby and the cowboys trooped outside.

At first they could hardly believe what they saw. The only structure left standing on the H-Bar-0 ranch was the adobe ranch house. The bunk house was gone. So were the two big barns where winter food for the horses and cattle had been stored. Scarcely a splintered plank remained of any of the buildings. Where the corral with its thirty horse had stood, there was only a bare patch of ground.

"Silver Spot--" Bobby groaned.

"Steady, feller, I'm thinking of Dash, too. But we don't know yet!" Tex spoke quietly.

Harka ran swiftly toward where the corral had been and then examined the ground closely. Then he headed for the river at a steady trot.

"Where's Harka going? Bobby asked.

"I've got an idea, but let's follow him and find out!" and Tex broke into an easy run after Harka. Bobby and the cowboys swung in behind him.

Over the three hundred yards between the ranch house and the river, Harka ran. As Bobby followed and topped a small hill a few hundred feet from the river, he shouted happily. There on the river bank were horses. At least twenty of them. His eyes quickly picked out Silver Spot and he noticed, too, that Tex's beloved horse, Dash, was among the beasts on the river bank.

Harka had stopped and Tex and Bobby ran up to him.

"Horse no fool," Harka said. "When they feel big wind they run to river and cover up in water. Wind no get them there!"

And that apparently was what had happened, for almost all the mounts of the H-Bar-0 riders were alive and unscratched. A few saddles were picked up but most of the riding gear had been carried away by the big wind.

"We've all got to ride and ride plenty," Bobby declared. "But we can ride bareback if we have to." He let Waco have one of the saddles and a tough western pony and sent him off to Marfa for supplies. Mounted, with and without saddles, the other cowboys scattered over the range to find out what had happened to the herd during the storm.

Diogenes was the first to return to the ranch. With him were Tad and Irish, scratched, water-soaked and sleepless, but alive. They had crept into a shallow cave for shelter and had managed to live through the storm. Bobby sent them off to sleep and then conferred with Diogenes.

"It don't lock so good," that lanky cowpuncher said.

"The herd is scattered all over creation. I reckon they stampeded when the storm hit. I saw a lot of dead cows, Bobby. An awful lot of dead cows!"

Other riders returned from time to time and the news they brought was bad. The range was dotted with dead cattle, some killed by lightning, some drowned and others apparently trampled to death in mad stampedes.

Bobby kept his chin up and jotted down reports on a slip of paper. Tex, who had ridden off to see what had happened, didn't return until late in the afternoon. Slipping wearily from his horse, he motioned to Bobby to join him in the ranch house.

"Son," he said quietly, "I won't fool you. We've been hard hit!"

"All right, Tex. Let's have facts!"

Tex drew a long breath; his news was very bad.

"Half the herd has been wiped out by this storm. Every where you go, there's dead cattle. Nothin' to do but to bury 'em. The rest of the critters is scattered all over the range and it'll take us a month to round 'em up. All our winter food has been destroyed. The only building left is this ranch house. We got to build new barns, a new horse corral, new dipping vats and a new bunk house. All we got left is a badly scattered small herd and one building".

"And the of the ten best cowboys in the west and our horses. Don't forget that, Tex!"

"I'm not forgetting, Little Boss. You've got some insurance but not enough. The cattle ain't covered by tornado insurance because we never figured that a big wind would wipe out half the herd. Bobby, it's going to take forty thousand dollars to replace the cattle that have been killed and rebuild the ranch. That's a lot of money! And you'll only get fifteen thousand back in insurance!"

Bobby gasped. He was hard it! He had hardly realized that so much money was tied up in a ranch. Forty thousand dollars lost. Fifteen thousand coming back. That meant the tornado had cost him twenty-five thousand. It was the first time he had thought of his ranch in terms of money. Where would he get the twenty-five thousand to put the ranch back on its former basis?

"Tex," he asked solemnly, "we won't have to take to sheep herding?"

"No, son, it ain't that bad I hope. But we're in a bad way!"

Bobby was silent for a long time.

"You don't need me around here for a few hours do you?"

"No, Bobby. What you got on your mind?"

"I just thought I'd ride over to Nugget creek and take a swim. I want to think."

Tex looked at the boy curiously. With the most difficult problem in his entire life to solve, Bobby had decided to go swimming. But Tex knew that Bobby had not overlooked his responsibilities.

"Go ahead, son," he said. "Nothing like a swim to make you feel better."

Bobby grinned at him and went off to saddle Silver Spot.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### More Nuggets

Silver Spot seemed eager to go places. Bobby saddled him quickly and then swung across the horse. A gentle tug on the reins headed the horse toward Nugget creek three miles away. Silver Spot seemed to know that the boy wanted to go back to the creek where the day before he had had such fun splashing about in the water. At an easy gait, he headed for the stream.

Swaying easily in his saddle, Bobby did some thinking. He did not glance back at the ruins of his ranch, yet he knew that in less than twenty-four hours he had lost almost everything he had worked so hard to obtain. He needed money to reestablish the H-Bar-O ranch. Money to buy more stock and money to pay his loyal cowboys. Bobby knew they would be willing to work without pay to put the ranch back into shape but he

knew that would not be fair to them. He needed money and gold was money. The day before, Nugget creek had yielded two substantial chunks of gold. More than fifty dollars' worth, Tex had said. Perhaps there was more gold in the creek. It was the only place Bobby could think of where he could quickly find the thing he needed most.

He recalled the stories he had heard of Nugget creek. For fifteen years gold had been found in the creek. Not much, but some. Where did it come from? What was the secret of the swift stream? If gold was found there, there must be some place where the gold came from. Could he find it? At least he could try.

Gold was worth thirty-five dollars an ounce, Tex had told him. That was--and Bobby multiplied in his mind--that was more than five hundred dollars a pound. No, that wasn't right because gold was weighed by Troy weight with only twelve ounces to a pound. That was why a pound of feathers weighed more than a pound of gold. Twelve times thirty-five was..was.. was \$420. Why fifty pounds of gold would be worth almost \$25,000 and fifty pounds of anything is just a good load for a pair of saddle bags!

Silver Spot jogged contentedly on. Bobby continued to figure. It didn't matter whether a pound of gold weighed twelve ounces or sixteen ounces. Ounces at thirty-five dollars an ounce were what counted. He realized that he himself could lift a bag of gold worth twenty-five thousand dollars. It wouldn't be any additional load at all for Silver Spot. Was there that much gold in Nugget creek? Or where did the gold come from? Harka had talked about a tunnel paved with gold. Just a crazy Indian story but some of those crazy Indian stories were based on facts. If he could find that tunnel paved with gold, he'd have enough money to rebuild the ranch and pay all his cowboys. That was what was important. Those cowboys were his friends. He didn't want to lose them and if he couldn't pay them they would have to look for jobs somewhere else.

Silver Spot shook his head and broke into an easy lope. Bobby suddenly realized they were near Nugget creek. In a few more minutes the horse was pawing at the bank of the creek.

Bobby swung from his saddle and walked to the bank of the stream. What he saw discouraged him. The storm had muddied the waters of the creek. No use diving with eyes open in those murky waters. Bobby decided to follow the stream up into the hills. He jumped back into his saddle.

Mile after mile Silver Spot followed the twisting stream, Bobby studied it carefully as he rode. Ahead of him he saw the rugged Turtle Mountains. He knew that it was in the mountains the stream began but he had never followed it to its source.

Silver Spot, not questioning the will of his boss, picked his way carefully among the rocks as he rode steadily upward beside the creek.

As he rode into the hills along the bank of the little stream, the water grew clearer. Bobby's eyes caught a yellow shimmer in the water and he pulled Silver Spot to a quick stop. His eyes on the yellow gleam, he leaned out over the water and his hand groped for the pebble. It came out clutching a heavy, shiny nugget. It was a large piece of gold, larger than either of the two nuggets he had found the day before.

He slipped the nugget in his pocket and before he got back on his horse, he studied the pebble-strewn stream bed carefully. No more golden stones could be seen. Bobby mounted and rode on. Within the next hour he twice dismounted to fish little pieces of gold from the stream. He jiggled the three nuggets in his hand. Easily two ounces there. More than \$70 for an afternoon's search.

Bobby and his horse were deep in the hills by now and it was getting late. In another hour the sun would go down. But still he pushed on. The creek was smaller but more noisy as it leaped down its steep path. Suddenly Bobby came to the source of the stream.

Out of a small but seep cliff the stream gushed. Bobby rode up, climbed out of his saddle and went over to inspect it. This was the beginning of Nugget creek; a spring that gushed out of rock.

Below the spring was a deep pool, so deep that Bobby could scarcely see the bottom. He stuck his hand in the water. It was icy cold. But the boy had an idea.

Slowly he slipped out of his clothes. In a few minutes he stood on the brink of the deep pool. Then, taking a deep breath, he dived. The icy water was like a slap. He gasped as he hit the water and came quickly to the surface to swim around. Silver Spot watched him anxiously.

The shock of the cold water sent warm blood pumping through his veins and in a few moments Bobby didn't mind the icy plunge. He crawled out on the bank, breathed heavily for a few minutes and then dived again into the pool.

This time he went straight down through the clear, green water. The bottom of the pool hadn't seemed so far away but his lungs were tortured when he finally reached the subterranean floor of the pool. Only time for a quick look around and he shot to the surface. But he had seen something.

Bobby rested for a few minutes on the bank of the pool, drawing great breaths of the crisp mountain air into his heaving lungs. Then he looked around him. There was a little rocky ledge. If he dived from there, he would slide swiftly down to the depths of the pool. He crawled to the ledge, breathed deeply three times and then plunged into the pool.

Down he shot through the icy, green water. Before he knew it his wide-open eyes were a few inches above the bottom of the pool. Frantically he reached for the shiny pebble he had seen when he had made his first dive. A pounding in his ears made him realize it was time to ascend. Gasping he came out of the water of the pool, three small golden nuggets clutched in his hand.

Time after time he dived until he was satisfied that there were no more shiny pebbles to recover.

As Bobby slowly slipped into his clothes he looked at a dozen golden nuggets that he had put down on a rock in front of him. He slipped his shirt over his head, shrugged it into place and then reached for the nuggets. He weighed them in his hand.

The bottom of the pool had yielded at least a pound of gold.

## CHAPTER SIX

### A Daring Plan

Bobby, Tex and Harka sat huddled over the big table in the ranch house living room. At the other end of the room, the cowboys had spread their bed rolls. The huge room had become the temporary bunk house of the H-Bar-0.

Bobby reached in his pocket and pulled out the dozen nuggets he had picked up in the bottom of the deep pool. From another pocket he produced the three slugs of gold he had found further down the stream.

Tex shoved some scales across the table and the nuggets were heaped on the weighing machine. They watched the slender black needle quiver on the face of the scales. Nineteen ounces of gold! Tex figured rapidly.

"Six hundred and sixty-five dollars if those scales are right," he said. "You did all right this afternoon, Bobby. That's enough to start rebuilding the bunk house."

"It's not nearly as much as we need," Bobby said. "We need twenty-five thousand! We need fifty more pounds of gold. And we've got to find it!"

"Maybe there's more on the bottom of that pool!" Tex suggested.

Bobby shook his head.

"Maybe, but that isn't where the gold comes from!" Tex looked at the boy.

"Tex!" Bobby declared, "My hunch is the gold comes from that spring. And all we've got to do is find where that spring comes from!"

Harka had been studying the nuggets carefully. Without a word he pointed to three of them. All of them bore strange markings, perhaps Indian pictures.

"Me, I think these come from old tunnel of gold," he said.

Bobby looked at Harka in astonishment.

Harka juggled the three strangely-marked nuggets in one hand.

"Me ro fool you," he said, smiling a little. "Maybe Bobby Boy has found out secret of old tribe. Maybe we go look. Story say nobody find tunnel of gold until time come they need gold to help others."

Tex considered the remark.

"If we don't get hold of some cash," he said slowly, "there will be at least twelve fellers lookin' for jobs. Yeah, I reckon that gold will help others all right!"

"Swell," Bobby said, "then you won't think the plan I've got is so crazy!"

Tex looked at him quizzically.

"We need a lot of money and we need it quick," Bobby declared. "Where are we going to get it? It doesn't grow on trees. But we do know there is gold in Nugget creek. All right, let's find where it comes from. Maybe it comes from that tunnel of gold Harka has been telling us about. Maybe it comes from somewhere else. But wherever it comes from, there's sure to be more and lots of it."

Bobby's eyes sparkled in his excitement. His enthusiasm was contagious. Tex grinned at the excited boy.

"Then what do we do, son?" he asked.

"First," Bobby said slowly, "we've got to find out about the herd. The boys tell me we've got a lot of injured cattle on our hands. We've got to fix them up. We've got to bury the dead cattle. We've got fences to repair and there are hundreds of jobs that must be done. But, we can clean up all those jobs in a week. Then, I want to take you and Harka and three or four of the boys to help us and we're going after that gold! Furthermore, we're going to get it!" Bobby paused, looked at Tex. "Aren't we?" he concluded.

"Son, I'd bet money that we do and I'm with you!" Tex almost shouted.

They shook hands on it.

For the next seven days Bobby didn't ever mention the gold in Nugget creek. From dawn until sunset he rode far and hard. Side by side with the cowboys he worked to help injured stock. It was not until the end of the week that Bobby and Tex knew exactly how much damage had been done



by the big wind. Almost half of their stock was gone. More than seven hundred head of cattle had been killed. Almost another three hundred head had disappeared. Tex believed some of them would show up in time.

The cowboys gathered up what scattered timber had been left by the wind. There was enough to build another corral, and to lay the foundations for a new bunk house. In the meantime everyone lived at the big ranch house.

Tex noticed Bobby drawing lines on a sheet of paper one night.

"Now what, Little Boss?"

"Just some ideas I have for the new bunk house when we build it," Bobby said. "Lock, shower baths here. And a big room where we can put a billiard table for the boys."

"First thing you know you'll have them cowboys playing ping-pong," Tex said, laughing.

"That's not a bad idea, either," Bobby said and returned to his drawing.

"You're gonna make sissies out of those boys," Tex warned.

"I'll take a chance on that," Bobby said, and went ahead with his sketches.

Finally Tex told Bobby that the worst of the work was over.

"You mean," Bobby said anxiously, "You mean we can start for Nugget creek?"

Tex nodded.

"Who do you want to take with you, Bobby?"

"You and Harka, of course, Diogenes and Waco, I reckon. And maybe we could take John and Bill, too. All right?"

Tex nodded his approval.

"Only I wouldn't tell them too much about what you aim to do. The idea of hunting gold is liable to get those cowboys so excited they won't do any work," Tex cautioned.

Bobby agreed to that. Quietly they discussed their plans. The gushing spring where the creek started seemed the logical place to establish a permanent camp.

"I've got a hunch about that spring," Bobby said. "I think the gold comes from there!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Gold Hunt Begins

Three small tents were pitched beside a crystal spring in the Turtle hills. In the tents lived Bobby, Tex, Diogenes, Waco, John and Bill. Harka had built his own shelter of brush. He distrusted man-made canvas. Bobby had said nothing about gold-hunting to the cowboys and the first afternoon was spent in making the camp comfortable.

That night, before the campfire, Bobby mentioned gold for the first time. He told of his first discovery of nuggets and then of his return to the creek and the recovery of the dozen lumps of gold from the deep pool. Diogenes wanted to go swimming right away.

Bobby persuaded him to wait and continued:

"As you fellows probably know, we need money to save the ranch. We've got to rebuild and restock. However, I'm dividing any gold we find

two ways. Half of it will go to the the H-Bar-0. The other half you can divide equally among yourselves."

The cowboys looked at each other. They didn't speak but they reached a quick understanding. Waco spoke for them.

"Little Boss," he said slowly, "as far as I am concerned and I know the other fellers feel the same way, all the gold we find, if any, can go to the ranch. We got good jobs and we're doin' all right. Isn't that right, fellers?"

There were quick exclamations of agreement.

"We're gonna be more than paid in the fun we're gonna have looking for it," Diogenes explained. "Anyway, I always did like to go swimmin' and you're mighty lucky that in Diogenes Dodwaddle you got the champion cowboy swimmer of the world. I can swim plumb across a bathtub and back without takin' more'n two breaths, which is a dern sight better than most cowboys can do!" He glared at the others expecting them to challenge his claim! But they didn't, for like most cowboys, none of them could swim a stroke!

An hour after sunrise the next morning, Bobby stripped down to a pair of swimming trunks. On the edge of the deep pool below the spring, he stuck his hand into the water. Tex and the cowboys watched him. Hastily Bobby withdrew his hand. The water was even colder than when he had plunged in a week before.

"What's the matter, Bobby? Kind of cold?" Diogenes asked. That settled it for Bobby. He wasn't going to let them think he was afraid of cold water. Drawing a long breath he plunged straight into the pool. The water was icy. The shock of it drove his breath out of his body and the chill gripped at him with freezing fingers as he swam down through the clear, green water.

The night before, the boy and Tex had dropped a line into the pool to measure its depth. It was a good twenty feet to the bottom, a long dive for an inexperienced underwater swimmer. Though much of the air had been forced out of his lungs at the first contact with the chilly water, Bobby forced his way down. The pressure of the water increased against his ears. The pebble covered bottom seemed long yards below him. With one strong lunge, Bobby reached the pool's floor. He clutched a handful of small pebbles, not taking time to look for shiny yellow ones, and then shot up to the surface.

The cowboys shouted with relief as he crawled out of the cold water. Tex looked up from his watch.

"You were under a full minute that time, Bobby," he said. "Better take it easy, son!"

Bobby tossed the handful of small pebbles on the bank and looked at them. They were worthless.

"No gold?" Tex asked.

Bobby shook his head.

"It's a long way down and I didn't have much time to look around," he explained.

Diogenes had been studying the spring which shot out of a small hole in the cliff into the deep pool.

"Was anybody to ask me, and whether they ask me or not, I'd say we're going about this job the wrong way," Diogenes observed.

Bobby looked at him curiously.

"Now was I in charge of this here mining operation wouldn't try to bring up all them little rocks a handful at a time. I'd plug up that spring and then get the water out of this here pool and then it would be an easy job!"

Bobby whcoped!

"That's a great idea, Diog," he shouted. "Let's do it!"

"But how you goin' to plug up the spring?" Tex questioned.

"Ought not to be so hard," Diog said, studying the gush of water carefully. "You'll notice that water comes out of a round hole not much bigger'n a man's head. All we got to do is to get a tapered log, which will be like a giant cork, and stick it in there. It'll take a little doin' but I figger it can be did!"

It was Tex who supervised the details of the job. He sent John back to the ranch house to bring large tin pails. The others scattered in search of the right size log. They soon found one but it was noon before the log had been cut and trimmed.

"We'll have to brace it once we get it in there," Diogenes said. "Else it'll come poppin' out again. As it is, some water will leak through but not such an awful lot."

They ate a hasty lunch and then went to work again. It wasn't easy to force the big log into the hole against the powerful thrust of the spouting water. Finally they succeeded and then managed to brace the improvised cork with boulders.

"That ought to hold," Bobby said, panting. He noticed a small amount of water still trickled into the pool but he knew that would be easy to control.

The cowboys went to work with the big pails John had brought back from the ranch. Working steadily, they had the deep pool almost empty of water in an hour. John and Bill were kept busy bailing out the water that trickled from the plugged spring while Bobby, Tex and the others searched among the wet stones.

Waco yipped excitedly. He held up a shiny yellow nugget.

"Gold!" he shouted. It was a large nugget, weighing almost two ounces. Until it was too dark to see, they dragged pebbles out of the bottom of the drained pool, examining every one carefully. In all they found four nuggets. With their hands, they felt through the wet sand below the layer of pebbles but found nothing.

"About four ounces," Tex said, tossing the yellow metal in his hands. "Not bad for a day's work but I think we've about cleaned out this pool!"

Bobby agreed.

Tired, they sat about and discussed the possibilities of finding more nuggets farther down the creek.

"Gee, if there was only some way of finding where that spring comes from", Bobby said. "I'm almost certain the nuggets come right out of that mountain."

"Let's do some sleepin'," Tex suggested. "Tomorrow maybe, we'll have a bright idea?"

They rolled into their blankets. Bobby was asleep in three minutes. It must have been six hours later that a solid stream of water hit him squarely in the face. Gasping and choking he rolled out of his blankets. Their camp was at the bottom of a waterfall!

## CHAPTER EIGHT The Waterfall

Bobby floundered through water that came almost to his knees. In the darkness, the suddenly awakened cowboys were splashing and choking in the deluge.

"This way, this way!" Tex shouted. "I don't know what's happened but we got to get to higher ground!" The cowboys, dragging their soaked bed rolls, splashed toward the sound of his voice.

"Everybody all right?" Tex yelled. He called their names one by one and they all answered.

"What's happened, Tex? Gosh, I thought someone had turned a fire hose on me!" It was cold and Bobby shivered in his drenched clothes.

"Can't quite figure it out, Bobby, except that water started spillin' over that ledge up there and we were right under it. Maybe a cloud burst back in the hills."

"But there isn't a cloud in the sky. Look at those stars!"

"That's right, too. Reckon we'll have to wait until daylight to find out what has happened." Tex scowled really mystified.

"Boy, it's cold. Let's get a fire going!" Bobby chattered.

But no one had any dry matches.

"Me fix um," said Harka.

"Now we'll see an Indian make a fire by rubbing two sticks together," Tex commented. Harka merely grunted. In the dim light Bobby saw him gather some small sticks and prepare his fire. Then he reached in his pocket for something and a tiny light flared. The fire caught quickly and soon there was a cheerful, warming blaze.

"Rubbing sticks old stuff," Harka commented. "This work more better," and he showed them a very modern cigarette lighter!

"You can't beat the Indians," Tex chuckled. "They ever have cigarette lighters that work!"

Crouched close to the fire while their clothes dried, the cowboys could see the flames light up the waterfall. The big column of water came cascading down from a ledge forty feet up the cliff.

"Look, Tex, it's filling our pool again," Bobby said. The stream from the waterfall was flowing into the deep basin where they had found the nuggets. "But where do you suppose it comes from? And what made it start like that in the middle of the night?"

Tex was silent for a few moments and then jumped to his feet.

"I think I got it!" he shouted.

"I hope it ain't catchin'," Diogenes remarked dryly.

"Come on a couple of you fellers. Help me pull the plug out of the spring!"

"Say, Tex ---"

"If I'm wrong, we'll soon find out!"

Working in the fire light, they soon had the big wooden pole pulled clear of the spring. The water gushed out, almost knocking them into the deep pool and soaking them for the second time that night.

"We might as well make up our minds to learn to swim," Waco said. "I ain't seen so much water since Saturday night in the orphan asylum!"

Tex stared at the place where the waterfall had been. Only a trickle of water fell from the ledge. The cascade had disappeared as quickly as it had come.

"Well, I reckon that proves it," Tex said.

"Proves what?" Bobby was still amazed by what had happened.

"Proves that waterfall was caused by us pluggin' up the spring down here. The water couldn't get out so it kept backin' up underground. Then it found a new way out of the mountain which means there is a crack in the cliff or a cave or something up on that ledge!"

Bobby's eye shone in the fire light.

"Tex! That means that maybe we can find a tunnel into the mountain. Maybe we can follow that spring back to where it picks up the gold nuggets."

"Don't get excited too quick," the tall foreman counseled. "We don't know yet what we'll find up on that ledge. And anyway, we got to get up there first and that's goin' to be quite some climb."

"As you all may perhaps remember, I used to be a acrobat with a circus," Diogenes reminded them. "I have yet to see a cliff I couldn't climb if I just set my mind to it."

"In the morning, mister, you can sure set your mind to it because the answer to all the questions may be up on that ledge," Tex said, turning to him.

Diogenes nodded his head and stared at the steep cliff.

"I forget about the bard," he said.

"What band?"

"The circus band. When I de-fied death as an acrobat, the bard always played swell music. With the bard a-playin' people goin' 'ocoh', I can do most anything. They got a pretty good bard at the army post at Marfa," he added hopefully.

Tex snorted.

"Listen, Diog," Bobby said. "We can't borrow the cavalry bard and bring it away down here just to play for you while you climb. It just can't be done."

"Mebbe not," Diogenes said, disappointed. "Well, mebbe if you all get together and whistled a tune while I climb, it would work just as good."

"If we have to do it, we have to do it, I suppose," Bobby said. "But it's goin' to look awfully silly."

"Too bad we ain't got a sack of peanuts to feed him before he starts his climbings," Waco observed.

"I was a acrobat with a circus, not a elephant," Diogenes protested.

Before their blankets had dried, the east was gray and soon the sun came quickly up over the eastern hills.

Excitement kept Bobby from roticing the sleep he had missed. He wanted to start the climb to the ledge as soon as it was light enough to see. Tex insisted on a good breakfast for the entire band, however.

"I gct a feelin' we've got plenty of work ahead of us," he said. "And after all the trouble we had last night, a good hot breakfast is what we need."

Bobby walked to the spot where the cascade had soaked them. He looked around carefully to see if any valuables had been dropped in the mad scramble out of the downpouring water. His eyes opened wide at what he saw!

"Hey!" he shouted, "Come here. Come here quick!"

The others came running.

His hand almost trembling with excitement, Bobby pointed.

There was a lump of gold as big as a man's fist, right where they had spread their bed rolls the night before.

"It must have been washed down by the waterfall," Bobby exclaimed. Now we know we're on the right track!"

"Locks like it just rains gold around these parts," Tex said quietly, stooping to pick the the big nugget.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Into the Mountain

"Think you can make it, Diogenes?" Bobby asked anxiously.

The cowboys were grouped at the base of the cliff under the ledge. Diogenes had discarded his heavy chaps and was pulling off his boots. The lanky cowpuncher looked up at the cliff.

"I can make it all right but it's goin' to be a real climb," he said. "And I'm shore goin' to miss the music. I reckon I'll be better off barefooted," he added and pulled off his heavy socks. Then, standing on his toes, he bounced up and down several times, flexing his muscles.

"Now he's goin' into his dance," John said.

Diogenes suddenly took a short run, sprang into the air and his fingers closed over a jutting piece of granite. With one arm he pulled himself slowly up the sheer face of the cliff until his wriggling toes felt a small crack in the rock. His body flat against the rock, he seemed to be holding on with his toes, one hand and his chin. Unable to lift his head to look above him, his fingers crept over the granite seeking another hand hold. He found one and again pulled himself up by main strength. His muscles stood out like knotted steel cords.

Scarcely daring to breathe, Bobby watched the cowboy work himself up foot by foot. Once a piece of rock crumbled as he grasped it and he slid down for three feet before he could stop himself. Then he turned his head and grinned down at his anxious audience.

"That feller is just as good as he claims to be," Bill said admiringly.

Diogenes was now within six feet of the ledge where the waterfall had started. He had been climbing for more than an hour. The sun was high and hot now. His toes wedged in a small crack and holding himself to the cliff with his strong fingers, Diogenes stopped and rested. The watchers could see his chest heave and his bare back glistened in the sunlight. Perspiration streamed from him.

"Not so good," Tex muttered. "Sweat will make his hand slippery."

But Diogenes had anticipated that. Cautiously he reached around to the pocket of his blue jeans. His hand came out, dripping sand. Carefully he dropped sand on the hand that still clutched a rock. The rock dust sifted down the cliff. The fine sand kept his perspiration soaked hands from slipping.

"Gosh" Bobby said, "He sure knows his business!"

After a few minutes rest, Diogenes resumed climbing. He must have heard the long, noisy sigh of relief that went up from the six watchers as he finally pulled himself over the ledge.

They couldn't see him for a moment. He stretched out flat on the rocky ledge, breathing heavily. Only Diogenes knew what a dangerous climb he had just completed. He rested for a few minutes and then from a pocket produced a small ball of twine. Weighing one end of the twine with a small rock, he lowered it down.

The ascent of the cliff had been carefully worked out. Tex was ready with a strong, knotted rope and tied it to the string Diogenes had lowered. Quickly the former acrobat hauled up the line and then looked for a place to fasten it. He couldn't find one. Then he examined a narrow crack in the cliff, a crack that seem to be an entrance to a tunnel. The water had probably poured out of that crack. Diogenes wasn't concerned with that but he saw a solution of the problem.

"Get me a strong chunk of wood about five feet long," he bellowed down. In a few minutes, the length of wood had been found and Diogenes hauled it up on his rope. He wedged it inside the crevice and then tied the rope to it. Several times he tugged at it to make sure it would hold. It held. He peered over the ledge.

"O.K. Come ahead," he yelled.

First Tex, then Bobby and then John, Bill, Waco and Harka came hand over hand up the knotted rope. The little ledge was crowded when they had all completed the climb. Bobby stared with wide eyes at the crack in the cliff. He could see that a narrow tunnel bored deep into the mountain.

"Let's go!" Bobby said enthusiastically, preparing to move into the dark tunnel.

"Wait a minute, young feller," said cautious Tex. "No tellin' what is ahead of us. Let's check up first. John, you and Bill got the canteens full of water?"

The two cowboys nodded.

"Waco you got that sack filled with grub?"

Waco had it.

Quickly Tex checked over the necessities. Harka had dried out matches and still had his trick cigarette lighter. All the cowboys had their pistols and Tex had brought along Diogenes' gun belt and six shooter. Harka was busy hauling up the knotted rope. On the end of it was a bundle of greasewood. Tex had decided it might be useful for torches.

Before they plunged into the mountain, they worked the knots out of the long rope. Harka was busy making torches. Bobby waited impatiently. Finally all was ready. They squeezed into the narrow crack in the mountain and after a dozen steps found themselves in a low, rocky tunnel. The rocky floor and walls glistened in the torch Harka had lighted. A few hours before, a torrent of water had poured through here.

Harka examined the tunnel walls carefully. Then he shook his head. The long cave was a natural formation.

"Indian not make this," he said briefly. With Harka swinging the greasewood torch, the little party moved slowly ahead, treading carefully for the water had made the rock slippery.

"Bill, count the paces," Tex had instructed the usually silent cowboy as they had entered the cave. Tex knew that Bill would keep a careful count of the steps they took into the tunnel. Tex glanced occasionally at a small pocket compass he carried, calling out changes in direction to Bill as the passage twisted. Tex believed in knowing where he was going.

Necessarily, the little band moved slowly. Once Bobby stooped over and with a short, joyous exclamation showed what he had picked up. It was another small gold nugget. Tex made rapid calculations in his mind. In the two days they had been gold hunting, they had picked up more than

thirty ounces of the precious stuff. More than a thousand dollars in two days. Not bad, Tex thought, but remembered many more thousands would be needed to repair the damage done the ranch by the big storm.

Harka, who was ahead with the torch, came to a sudden stop.

"Not so good," he said in his deep voice.

It wasn't so good. Five steps in front of Harka was a deep chasm. Curiously, Bobby picked up a small stone and tossed it into the yawning pit. It seemed a full minute later that a tiny sound came up. That chasm was hundred and hundreds of feet deep. The explorers stopped and studied the situation. The chasm was a good twenty feet wide and they could see the tunnel continued on the other side.

How could they cross the dangerous hazard?

## CHAPTER TEN

### The Underground Lake

"Not so good is right!" exclaimed Tex as he surveyed the deep gulch just ahead of them.

"We've got to go ahead! The tunnel of gold is ahead of us!" Bobby cried. "What are we going to do?"

"Take it easy, son. There may be a way across. And while we're studyin' it out, let's sort of rest ourselves." Tex said quietly.

The cowboys stretched themselves out on the hard floor of the tunnel. They were sleepy and tired for they had had little rest the night before. Tex asked Harka to light a second torch. In the increased light, he and Diogenes studied the chasm and the surrounding rock. It was Diogenes who figured out a possible solution of the problem.

"Lock!" he said, and pointed upwards to where a blunt finger of rock projected from the wall of the cave. "If we could drop a rope over that, we might be able to swing across this hole!"

Tex studied the problem. A carefully tossed rope might fall over the nubbin of rock and it would be possible to swing across the deep hole. It was worth a chance.

Carefully Tex coiled the rope. There was little room in which to swing the lariat. He picked up the rope, swung it carefully and it arched out but fell an inch short. Again he tried. The loop settled over the rock but as he pulled it tight it slipped off. Twice more he tried and still missed. It was a difficult target for the roper. Finally the noose settled over the rock. Tex gently shook it into place and then jerked it tight. Would the rope hold? There was only one way to find out. Grasping the line securely he stepped off into space. Across the black pit he swung and his feet reached out for the trail's rim on the other side. His toes hooked over the rock and he hung there for a long moment. Finally with a convulsive jerk of his body, he threw himself forward to safety. The black pit has been crossed!

Tex flipped the rope back to Diogenes who waited with outstretched hands. Gracefully Diogenes sailed over the deep chasm. Bobby followed and then the others came. Then Tex tried to flip his rope off the rocky hook but failed.

"We'll have to leave it there," he said finally, "but we'll have a way to get out!"

"Let me try it," John said, grasping the rope. He jerked it heavily.



Without any warning the rope came free and John tumbled backwards, rolling perilously close to the deep hole. His hands scratched at rock as he tried to stop himself. Bobby grabbed his leg and hauled him to safety. The rope slipped out of his hands and tumbled down into the deep pit! John turned white, not as his narrow escape but at the instant realization that there was now no way back across the black hole. What was ahead of them? Unless there was another way out of the mountain, their plight would be desperate indeed.

"Well, that's that," Tex said quietly. "Tough luck John, but it might have happened to any of us. Let's get goin'. No use standing around here worryin' about what may happen to us. Plenty likely is!"

Harka's greasewood torches smoked and flickered but gave sufficient light. The rock passageway continued on for another five hundred paces and then broadened out.

"Now what? Bobby asked. Before Tex had a chance to answer a strange hollow voice in the faraway darkness said "Now what?" Bobby was startled.

"Tex. There's someone here!"

"Tex. There's someone here!" the voice repeated.

Tex laughed and there was deep echoing laughter.

"Just your echo in a big cave, Bobby! It fooled me for a minute," he said.

Every spoken word was echoed back across the vast cavern until the explorers feared to speak except in whispers. It was a scary, uncanny place. Harka whirled his torches to make them burn more brightly and then they saw them reflected in what seemed to be a black looking glass!

"A lake," someone whispered. It was an underground lake, the water so still and glassy that it looked like a sheet of smooth, black glass. They followed the lake's edge until they came to a rock wall. Retracing their steps, they went in the other direction along the water's edge only to come to another blank wall.

"Again, not so good," Tex commented. There was no trail around the lake.

Bobby peered across the black water. The light of the torches reached less than fifty feet. How far was it across? Was the water shallow? Without a word Bobby slipped out of his clothes and calling to Harka to hold the torches high, he slid into the black water. The water was warmer than he expected; pleasantly warm. For thirty or forty feet he was able to wade, then the bottom dropped away from under his feet. He started swimming quietly. Over his shoulder he could see the torches burning brightly and Tex and the cowboys peering anxiously after him. How far was the other shore? Bobby knew he could swim more than half a mile. That meant he could risk going well out into the lake before turning back. He swam unhurriedly, turning on his back every now and then to rest and call back to the men on the bank. By now he was invisible to Tex and the others though he could see them plainly in the torch light. He almost bumped his head against the other bank for he had been swimming with an effortless crawl stroke that kept his head down. The rock rose abruptly from the water and there was no hand hold. Bobby looked back over his shoulder. Unless he could find a place to climb up the bank, he had a long swim back. An almost sleepless night had taxed his strength but he decided to risk looking for a place to climb up the dark bank. He swam slowly, feeling with his hands for some low ledge. Then his fingers found one and he pulled himself up.

He rested a moment, after sending a reassuring yell across the black lake. The torch light helped him little at this distance and Bobby had to depend on his fingers to tell him what was ahead. He explored cautiously. There was another little ledge and still another above that. His fingers raced ahead. Still another and higher ledge. He crawled up. They were steps, eight of them, leading up from the water. Bobby could not believe they were carved by nature for they were to evenly spaced. Someone had built those steps down to the dark lake. Who? And when?

Satisfied that the lake could be crossed, Bobby rested for a few moments and then plunged into the dark water for the swim back. Panting, he crawled out of the lake's edge where the cowboys had been anxiously waiting for him. He gasped air into his lungs and then told them what he had discovered.

"We can't go back, so we might as well go ahead," he said. "It isn't much of a swim and we can tie the greasewood and matches on our heads so we'll have torches when we get across!"

"That's all right, Little Boss," Tex said. "You and Harka and me can get across, but what about John and Bill and Waco? They can't swim ten feet!"

Bobby had forgotten that.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### The Secret Temple

They crossed the lake.

It took time, a lot of time. First Harka, a strong swimmer, went across with the material for torches tied to his head. He found the steps and quickly made a light. Then he swam back to help Bobby and Tex, who were supporting Waco between them and swimming slowly. One by one they took the three cowboys across the deep water. Waco, John and Bill didn't like the experience but they had no choice.

Tex had managed to keep his watch dry and he glanced at it as they rested on the far side of the lake.

"One o'clock," he said. "Noon time. We've been underground a long while."

Harka, swinging a torch, prowled about curiously. He came back, his face alight.

"Plenty Indian signs here," he said. "One time long ago, tribe use this place. There is old path. It go that way," and he pointed off in the darkness.

"Let's get a good rest and then start out," Bobby suggested.

"No time to rest," Harka objected. "Only enough greasewood left for two more torches. Got to get somewhere quick before light is gone."

Bobby jumped to his feet.

"Then let's get moving. We'd be in a bad way if we got caught in here without any lights!"

With Harka in the lead, they moved steadily forward. The path led into another small tunnel, barely high enough for Tex to walk erect. From time to time the light of the torch revealed crude carvings in the tunnel wall. Bobby sensed that they were climbing slowly upward.

For a full twenty minutes, they plodded along. Tex was worried. The torch Harka carried wouldn't last more than another five minutes and they had only enough greasewood for one more torch. Thirty minutes more of light? Would that be enough to see them out of the maze of caves?

Unexpectedly they emerged from the narrow tunnel into a low rock chamber. Anxiously they looked around for a continuation of the passageway but there was none. It was a dead end.

Then Bobby happened to glance overhead. There was a small black hole in the roof of the cave, large enough for a man to crawl through. Was that the only exit? He pointed at it.

"Looks like a job for old Diogenes Dodwaddle," Diogenes said calmly. "Stand steady, Harka, and I'll use you as a ladder!"

Harka moved to stand directly under the black hole and Diogenes sprang lightly to his shoulders. His arms disappeared into the hole in the roof and a moment later he pulled his body up. Then he peered down through the hole.

"Toss me a torch," he requested. Harka flipped the blazing sticks up to him and he caught them skillfully. He disappeared leaving the others in darkness except for the faint glimmer that came through the hole above.

"Something funny up here," he called down finally. "I can't figure it. Only room for one more person up here, but I could use some ideas about now!"

"Let me go, Tex," Bobby pleaded. Tex nodded and Bobby was hoisted on to Harka's shoulders. Diogenes' long arms reached down to pull him through the hole.

The boy blinked. They were in a perfectly square room, almost a cell. Bobby unconsciously estimated that it was not more than five feet square and about as high. The walls were of smooth, hewn rock.

"Why, why it's like being inside a stone box!" Bobby exclaimed.

"That's just what it's like but where do we go from here?" Diogenes queried.

Bobby wondered about that, too. Was the trail to end in this strange stone box? How would they ever find their way back out of the caves? The smoke from the torch made his eyes smart but he examined the walls of the little cell carefully. He noticed a place where the stone had been worn almost as smooth as glass. He looked closely at the smooth spot. What did it mean? He ran his finger over it as Diogenes watched him interestedly. Then he put his palm flat against the smooth patch and pushed. Nothing happened. He pushed hard again and felt the huge stone block move slightly.

"Help me, Diog!" he cried. "Shove! It's moving!"

Diogenes threw his weight against the stone and it continued to move. One entire side of the little cell was swinging slowly back. Soon the opening was more than wide enough for them to squeeze through. Swinging the shortened torch that had almost gone out, Diogenes straightened up as he slipped through the stone doorway. Bobby was right behind him.

What they saw kept them silent with astonishment. It was a long, large room with a high ceiling. The walls were covered with curious carvings and on low stone platforms were weird stone figures, twice lifesize. The stone box from which they had escaped was in the exact center of the room. Outside, the rock was ornately carved and studded with some blue substance that gleamed softly in the torch light.

"Bobby! What sort of a place is this?" Diogenes whispered.

"It must be the temple of some ancient Indian tribe!" Bobby whispered back.

"It's plenty spooky. I wonder how you get out of here?" Diogenes speculated.

"Harka said that there was a temple hidden in a mountain approached by a tunnel paved with gold," Bobby said half to himself.

"What's that?" Diogenes asked. He took a few steps and bumped his toe. He muttered an "ouch" and then looked down.

"Owww!" he yelped, scared. He had kicked his foot against a human skull.

## CHAPTER TWELVE The Whispering Wall

Bobby looked down at the grinning skull. Perhaps it was two thousand years old.

"It won't hurt you," he said softly. "Let's get the others up here. I think we're getting near the tunnel of gold." He turned back to the stone door through which they had come, then made a frightened, choking sound. The stone had swung back into place!

Frantically Diogenes and Bobby clawed at the carved stone. It wouldn't move. Bobby realized the torch could not last much longer. It flickered fitfully. In its feeble light Bobby looked for some finger hold or handle to move the big stone. He found nothing. Then the torch went out.

"Diog!" said Bobby as calmly as he could "We're in a jam!"

"Little Boss, truer words were never spoken," Diogenes answered. "But let's just sit here and take it easy and maybe we'll get an idea."

"We can't see but we can feel," Bobby said. "Let's feel our way around this place. Maybe we can find a way out!" Action suited Diogenes and, holding on to each other, they groped their way through the blackness. Their hands felt over the curious stone idols, but they could find no passageway out of the temple. Once Bobby paused and put his ear to the stone wall of the temple.

"Shh. Listen!" he commanded. The wall seemed to whisper, softly.

They listened and heard what sounded like the soft gurgle of water.

"Whatever it is, it's on the other side of the rock," Bobby commented. They moved on.

Diogenes gripped Bobby's arm fiercely.

"Look. A light!" he whispered.

There was a light. A thin pencil of light that broadened slowly. Then the light revealed a stolid Indian face!

Bobby let out a shrill yip and Diogenes shouted happily!

"Harka!" Bobby yelled.

"Ho! You all right? Harka called.

Swinging his torch, Harka stepped into the temple. Behind him came Tex.

"Don't let that slab swing back or you'll be locked in here too!" Bobby warned. Tex stood bracing it and called back to Waco, John and Bill in the cavern below. In a few moments the whole party was reunited in the old temple. A block of stone kept the slab from closing on their only exit.

Harka looked around the temple curiously.

"This hidden temple of ancient tribe like in legend," he said. "It look just like place where story say is tunnel of gold! That place where we come out is alter of sacrifice. Old priest make secret way in to fool people. Make'em think it magic," thus Harka explained the queer entrance to the temple.

"We still haven't found the gold," Tex said. "And we better find it in a hurry. And more important, we got to find a way out of here. That torch isn't good for many more minutes!"

It was their last torch.

His hand uncomfortably hot, Harka still held on to a few flaming splinter. With a muffled exclamation of pain he dropped what was left of the torch. In the last flicker of light, his eyes saw something heaped at the foot of one of the stone idols.

"Don't go wasting your matches," Tex called coolly through the dark. "We may need 'em!"

"Not worry. Think everything all right soon!" Harka reassured them. They heard him fumbling with something in the dark. Then he scratched a match and they could see him holding the flaming splinter to what appeared to be a small yellow rock. In a moment, the rock sputtered and burst into flame and then the whole cavern was light as it burned steadily.

"Tree sap," Harka explained briefly. "Very old but still burn good." He had spotted the hunks of resin. Bobby led Tex to the wall where he had heard the gurgle of water.

"What do you make of it, Tex? he asked.

"Puttin' two and two together, Bobby, I'd say that water is runnin' through the tunnel of gold," Tex said.

"Huh?"

"Else how come nuggets come out of that spring unless the water flows through a golden tunnel?"

"How can we get there?"

"That's somethin' else again," Tex replied.

Harka had lighted three more of the lumps of resin and the whole temple was brightly lighted. He stood staring up at a huge stone idol at the end of the long room. It was a figure with an up-raised arm. The Indian jumped onto the low stone platform and then into the lap of the image. Reaching up he grasped the stone arm and swung his whole weight on it. Slowly the arm moved down and as it did, a section of the wall back of the idol swung slowly open.

Bobby heard the gurgle of water and looked to see water spreading over the floor of the temple. He shouted a warning. Tex looked into the darkness beyond the slowly opening slab and shouted:

"It's all right. The water won't get any higher."

He grabbed a piece of the flaming resin and stuck it in a niche in the rock where it would send its light through the now open passageway.

"Hiyuh!" he shouted. "We found it. It's the tunnel of gold!"

Harka still swung from the stone arm of the huge idol.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN The Tunnel of Gold!

Bobby splashed across the temple floor. The water was now six inches deep. Looking over Tex's shoulder he peered into the darkness beyond the big stone door. At first all he could see was a rippling stream. Then he caught the gleam of yellow metal beneath the shallow stream. It reflected the flickering beams of the flaming resin. A tunnel paved with gold! This must be it!

"Block door! Block door!" Harka barked from where he hung on the idol's arm. Diogenes and Waco jumped into action. Tearing loose stone

blocks from one of the small platforms, they piled them so they would hold the huge stone slab partly open. Harka dropped with a splash from the idol's arm.

"Remembered story about arm of idol opening secret door to old tunnel," he explained briefly. Then he waded through the shallow water to look into the tunnel.

Tex had opened his pocket knife and with his hands under water, was hacking at the submerged paving of the tunnel.

"It's gold all right. So soft I can cut into it with my knife!" he exclaimed.

"Tex!" Bobby said in a awed voice. "There must be thousands and thousands of pounds of it. Millions and millions of dollars' worth of gold!"

"You're right, son. But how are we goin' to move it out of here? Those big gold blocks must weigh hundreds of pounds each and they're wedged together so tight you can't budge them!"

A fortune gleamed through the shallow stream at him but how was he to touch it. Bobby wondered.

"Waco!" Tex said sharply. "You still got that hammer and chisel I gave you to carry?"

Waco fumbled at his belt.

"Yeah, I go 'em," and he handed them to Tex.

"Now we'll see," Tex said excitedly. He thrust the chisel into the water and while Harka held a piece of flaming resin at the end of a sliver of rock, he hammered at the submerged chisel. It was slow work, but after a minute he reached down and brought up and handed Bobby a jagged hunk of yellow metal.

Bobby was surprised at the weight of it.

Tex was busy with the chisel.

"We'll cut loose what we can carry away," he said. "We can't be too sure of finding our way back here." In another few minutes he had chiseled out another jagged chunk. He worked steadily for half an hour and then called Diogenes to relieve him. By this time, Bobby had fully ten pounds of golden chunks in his various pockets. Other pieces went into the pockets of Waco, Bill and John.

Only Harka had noticed the low rumble that seemed to shake the cavern.

"Big storm outside," he said presently.

Tensely watching Diogenes chisel at the golden blocks, Bobby scarcely heard him.

A little while later Harka spoke again.

"More water come," he said briefly.

Bobby looked down. A little while before the water had swirled just above his ankles. Now it crept almost to his knees. Tex, too, noticed that the water was higher.

"What do you make of it?" he asked Harka.

"Big storm outside. Much rain. Rain feed this stream. Stream flood soon me think. Better get out?"

Tex splashed over to the alter and peered into the big stone cell through which they had come into the temple. Water was pouring into the cell and down through the hole in its floor. No chance of getting out that way.

Diogenes was busy chiseling out lumps of gold.

"We got to get out of here," Tex shouted, "or we'll be drowned like rats. We can't go back the way we came and the only way is to follow the stream!"

Hastily the cowboys stuffed their pockets with the gold chunks. Harka filled his pockets with additional lumps of resin. They conferred hurriedly. The water was rising rapidly and was now above their knees.

"Our only chance is to follow the tunnel of gold," Tex said. "We know where the stream comes out of the mountain. Maybe we'll find a way out, too."

Down the no longer shallow stream they splashed. Harka and Tex carried lumps of flaming resin in long splinters of rock. The tunnel was broad and high. For a hundred feet, they could see the yellow gleaming gold under their feet. Then the golden pavement ended and they followed the stream into a cavern that had not been carved out by man.

Tex was leading. Suddenly his feet slipped out from under him and he splashed into the swift stream. Harka reached for him but missed and before the tall cowboy could regain his feet the swift waters swept him on into the dark.

Bobby stopped, horror stricken! Harka turned to Bobby and handed him the improvised torch.

"Me go after him," he said quietly.

Just then from out of the darkness ahead, Tex yelled that he was all right.

"The stream goes down fast," he warned, "but just take it easy!"

For the next hundred feet they fought their way through swift rapids. At the foot of the rapids they found Tex waiting for them.

"There's a little glimmer of light ahead," Tex said. "Look!"

They saw it.

"Maybe that's the way out." They plunged on.

The stream broadened out in a wide cave. They were in an underground pond and they floundered on toward the dim light.

"Careful!" Tex warned.

The quiet waters of the pond were swifter now and clutched at their legs. The gleam of light seemed to come from under the water. As they moved cautiously closer, they saw that the light did come from under water. It streamed through a small round hole. They realized they were inside the mountain at the exact point where the spring gushed into Nugget creek!

They stopped and peered down at the tiny patch of light.

"That hole isn't big enough to dive through," Bobby said. "Even if it was, there wouldn't be a chance. That water would slam you against the rocks so hard you'd never live!"

Tex nodded.

"How are we going to get out, Tex? We can't go back the way we came."

"I don't know, son. Let me think!?"

Diogenes was muttering to himself and fumbling in his pockets.

"I knew I had some somewhere," he muttered. "I thought it might come in handy. Now what did I do with it?"

Tex looked at him in the flickering light.

"What have you lost, mister?" He asked.

"Just a stick of dynamite," Diogenes said calmly. "Old Dynamite Dodwaddle they used to call me because dynamite is my friend and I never go anywhere without it. Now what did I do with it?" Again he searched his pockets.

Bobby looked at him in astonishment. Had Diogenes been carrying dynamite all through the dangerous caves?

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN Daylight Again!

Diogenes fumbled once again through his pockets and then reached up and shoved his hat back on his head. As his hand touched his hat he chuckled happily. He swept the hat off and reaching inside, tore loose a small package he had fastened inside the tall crown.

"Here it is," he said happily. "I knew I'd put it in a safe place." He unwrapped the package and there was an oily stick of dynamite, a short length of fuse and a glistening copper cap.

The others shrank back.

"Tex," said Diogenes. "Since we can't get through that little hole down there, the thing is to make it bigger. And dynamite will do it. With your kind permission, I will just blow a hole in the side of this here mountain you could drive a team through!"

Tex questioned him. Finally Diogenes convinced the foreman he knew what he was doing.

"If you will all just move back up stream about a couple of hundred feet you won't be in no danger," Diogenes said. They moved back while he, using the chisel and hammer that Waco had remembered to bring, hammered out a hole in the rock for the dynamite charge.

As they waited anxiously for Diogenes to finish his dangerous chore, they noticed that the water was creeping higher and higher.

"Sure hope this stunt works," Tex muttered. "If it don't, I don't know what we'll do next!"

They saw a match flare and then saw a tiny sputtering red glow. A half minute later Diogenes came splashing through the water.

"She'll let go any time now," he said. "I only had about a minute of fuse."

With an ear smashing roar, the dynamite let go! There was a brilliant flash and then a rush of air that swept everyone off their feet. Soaked to the skin, the cowboys struggled to their feet. The water that had been still a moment before, tugged at their legs. Ahead of them they saw a wide arch of daylight. Diogenes' blast had blown a hole in the side of the mountain!

"Take it easy. This water is goin' out of that hole in a hurry," Tex yelled. They struggled against the pull of the rushing water. Slowly, feeling carefully for footholds, they made their way toward the daylight. The water poured in a wide flat cascade through the big hole. Carefully they climbed down over the jagged rocks--again outside the mountain. The golden lumps in their pockets clinked musically as they swung into their saddles.

Tex and Bobby sat around the big oak table in the ranch house.

"Here's the report from the feller who bought the gold," Tex said, tossing a letter to Bobby. The boy read it eagerly.

"Forty-four thousand dollars," he said. "Tex. It isn't possible."

"That's twenty-two thousand to rebuild and restock the ranch and the other twenty-two to be divided among the boys," Tex said.

"Gosh. It's hard to believe there really was a tunnel of gold!"

"But we'll never see it again, Bobby. I was up there the other day. That dynamite blast Diogenes set off must have opened up some new springs because no human being could get back into that tunnel today!"

Bobby was silent. It didn't matter. He had what he needed to rebuild the H-Bar-0!

--THE END--



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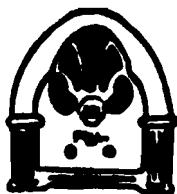
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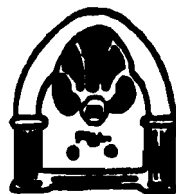
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