

BROTHERS THREE

C.W. JAMES



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Also by C.W. James
The Treasure of Peril Island

With thanks to
Ralph Bonehill, Edward Stratemeyer, or the ghost

Chapter 1



The shotgun blasts rent the hot, still June air. A hawk, disturbed by the noise, took to wing, flying low on the thermals from the valley floor, complaining with its eerie cry.

Allen Winthrop reined in his horse and stood in the stirrups, automatically dropping one hand to the handle of his holstered Colt revolver. The empty, broad valley spread out around him, rimmed by mountains and capped by a blue, cloudless sky. He took off his hat and wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

The sound of the shotgun could have been an echo from a distant fire or someone shooting at a rattlesnake. He waited for additional or answering shots. There were none, so perhaps the gunfire was a signal.

“That sounded like it could have come from our ranch,” he said to his mare. He spurred her into a gallop. “Let’s get home.”

As Allen sped toward his spread, the various scenarios that could be awaiting him crowded his brain. It was possible that Paul or Chet had injured themselves in an accident or were sick. At least

the lack of smoke on the horizon indicated that last summer's fire which almost burned down their house wasn't aflame again.

When his father died two years ago, Allen assumed the role of caretaker for his two younger brothers, although he was only fifteen at the time. After their father's death, their uncle, Barnaby, became their guardian and executor.

Another, happier thought came to him: maybe his uncle had returned home.

As there was really little to do at the ranch but look after the cattle, Allen's restless uncle left the place in charge of the three boys while he continued month in and month out to range over the hills and among the mountains in search of precious metal, which lay concealed beneath the surface. One day, Allen's uncle staggered into the house with the news that he'd struck a bonanza. He refused to give more detail about its location, instead announcing his plan to travel to San Francisco to organize a company to work the claim. He set out on his trip a couple of months ago, apparently healthy, but the brothers hadn't seen him or heard from him since. They were used to Uncle Barnaby being out of contact for weeks at a time while prospecting, but never this long.

That must be it, Allen thought. Uncle Barnaby returned from Frisco with a bang, a gunshot in celebration. Allen shook his head and broke into a rare grin. Boy, was he going to give Uncle Barnaby hell for not writing to the family while he was in Frisco.

The distinctive neigh of his horse alerted Allen that he was nearly home. He crested the last hill, and the ranch came into view. The home sat on one of the numerous branches of the winding Salmon River, a site chosen by his father many years before. The house was a rough but comfortable dwelling, with barns and other

outbuildings within close walking distance. Middle brother Paul stood waiting there in front, a shotgun in his hand.

Paul was tall, well-built, and like Allen, had a tanned complexion from working on the ranch as he grew up. He shared the raven-black hair of his brothers, and it squirted on this forehead from under the brim of his hat as though trying to escape. Even after 15 years, though, Allen still couldn't quite figure out his younger sibling. He reminded Allen of the old saying he learned during his short stint in formal schooling: "still waters run deep." On the surface, Paul appeared calm and quiet, but Allen sensed he churned with turbulent emotions underneath.

"Hi, Allen! This way, quick!" Paul said, raising his voice.

"All right, Paul!" Allen called back as he dashed up on his faithful mare. He dismounted and gestured toward the shotgun. Paul returned a wry grin.

"Shooting this off was Chet's idea. He wanted to signal you if you were nearby." The smile disappeared and his brown eyes turned serious. "Allen, we've—"

Chet burst out of the barn, his blue shirt whipping behind him as if it had a mind of its own and his collar length hair bouncing. The fourteen year-old boy was the shortest and smallest of the three. Muscles rippled under his skin showed his surprising strength for his size. "Allen! Allen!" he shouted as he ran up. "Somebody stole our horses!"

Allen gave a low whistle and tilted back his hat, his eyes searching the ground, his hands on his hips. So much for hoping for good news. "Stolen! When? What happened?"

"We were—" Chet blurted out.

Paul turned to Chet and put one hand on his shoulder to calm him. “We just got back from the river,” he continued in his deliberate way. “We spent the morning fishing at our favorite deep hole.”

Allen nodded, shifting his lean frame from one foot to the other and back again.

“You know, the one near the roots of that clump of cottonwood trees,” Chet put in.

“We were coming back,” Paul went on in his slow, measured speech. “When Chet pointed toward the barn, and asked if I left the door unlocked. I didn’t, so I thought maybe you had come back.”

“We started for the barn,” Chet excitedly took up the story. “When we got inside, it was enough... it told everything... Jasper and Rush were gone.”

“Any idea when this happened?” Allen asked.

“There’s really no telling,” responded Paul. “We just got back from the river a few minutes ago and found the barn door broken open and both horses gone. If I remember—we went off about eight o’clock this morning, didn’t we, Chet?”

“Yes, around then.”

“It’s about noon now,” said Paul. “So the thieves had four hours to do their dirty work. They were alone and unmolested.”

Allen grunted a response, turned and walked to the barn. Paul and Chet followed. The broken lock’s brackets bent back and it held no longer than a rag. Allen looked toward his brothers for answers.

“See how the lock and hasp is busted open,” Chet pointed to the wrecked padlock.

Allen nodded and stepped into the barn, stopping just inside the door and waiting for his eyes to adjust to the light. Despite the situation, he welcomed the cool darkness of the interior.

“Thieves, as sure as fate!” Allen said, gazing around at every corner. “And they took all the extra harnesses as well.”

“As sure as fate,” repeated Chet, his black eyes flashing angrily. He waved a hand at the empty wall where the equipment was usually stored.

Allen shook his head in disgust. He paced around a little in front of it, thinking. “And no clues? Did either of you find anything?”

“No,” Paul admitted. “We haven’t had time to look.”

“Let’s search,” Allen ordered. “We need more light in here.”

Paul reached into his pocket and pulled out a waterproof box containing matches. He fished one out and struck it against a flint, lighting a kerosene lamp. He handed it to Allen. The three began searching.

“Here is a strap that isn’t part of our outfit.” Chet snatched it up, but quickly threw it back down. “But it’s only a common affair that might belong to anyone. No help to us.”

The trio continued to scour the barn.

“Well, hasn’t anybody found something yet?” Allen demanded irritably.

“Wait! Here’s a metal cross!” Chet announced as he picked it up out of a pile of dirt on the floor.

The article was in an ‘X’ shape, with a round hole drilled directly in the center. Each of the four comers contained one letter: DAFG.

“It could be made of silver, but so unpolished you can’t tell.” Paul bent over to examine the cross as it lay in his brother’s hand. “What do you make of it?”

Chet shrugged. “Nothing more than a metal cross with letters on it. I’ve never seen one like it before.”

“Is there no name on that thing?” Paul touched the cross.

Chet quickly flipped the cross over, and moved to the open door for more light. Some letters were carved in the metal crudely, as if with a knife. “S. M.,” read Chet, slowly. “I wonder who they stand for?”

“Sam somebody, I suppose.” Paul shrugged.

“Whoever they are, they must be mean enough to turn a horse thief,” Chet growled.

Allen grabbed the silver cross out of Chet’s hand. “Let me see it.”

“Hey!” protested Chet.

Allen turned the item over in his hands once. He looked like he was about to speak, but stopped short and muttered something under his breath.

“You know what that is?” Paul asked Allen. “Do you recognize it?”

“No, but Pa told me about it once,” said Allen. “It’s an old Sol Davids gang cross they wore. DAFG: Dare All For Gold! That was their old motto.”

“So it follows the horse thieves might be some left-overs from the old outfit,” noted Paul.

“Yes they are most likely of the same bad crowd, a remnant of the outlaw band from Jordan Creek. I figured they would spring up again, sooner or later,” said Allen. “The hanging of old Sol didn’t drive them out of this district as folks had hoped.”

“But what of the initials S. M.?” wondered Chet. “I never heard of any horse thief those would fit.”

“We’ll find out about that when we run the thieves down,” said Allen. “Let’s take a look around, and see if we can’t find some other clue to their identity.”

The brothers resumed their careful search.

“You say you discovered the robbery but a short while since?” Allen clarified after a few minutes.

“Not more than a quarter of an hour ago,” replied Chet.

“Either of you been up to the house?”

“I went for my gun, so we could signal you,” began Chet. “We figured if you were near enough—” he started, and then meeting his older brother’s eyes, he stopped short.

Not one of the three said a word for a moment. They all tore out of the barn, with Chet leading the way. In record time they burst through the front door of the house, and stood there, panting.

“Looks like everything is all right ... ” began Paul.

“No it is not!” yelled Chet, leaping forward. “The side window has been forced open.”

Allen glanced at it but said nothing. He continued to his sleeping room, which used to be his parents’ room, and opened the door. It was a shambles: the bedclothes on the floor; drawers pulled out of the dresser; his clothes thrown about everywhere. He began to dig through the mess, into a closet and two trunks. He let out an angry curse and slammed his fist against the wall. His brothers crowded into the doorway, looking at him anxiously.

“What’s going on?” they asked in unison.

“Everything’s gone,” said Allen in a hoarse voice.

“Gone?” gasped Chet.

“Yes,” said Allen, “all our savings for years! Seven hundred dollars, plus three bags of silver and gold! We’ve been cleaned out.”

Paul and Chet groaned.

“They must have started in your room,” Paul said, “and when they found the stash, they figured they got it all and left. It looks like they didn’t bother to search the rest of the house at all.”

“The mean, contemptible scoundrels!” Allen swore. “We must get after them somehow!”

Chet frowned. “How? We’re tied fast here. We can’t follow on foot—they knew that when they came to rob us and took the horses.”

“You are not going to sit down and suck your thumb again, are you, Chet?” Allen spat out.

“What do you mean by that remark? We can’t do anything! We must go for the sheriff!” Chet fired back.

Allen shook his head. “It would take at least a day to travel to town and bring back the law. The thieves’ trail would be cold by then, and they would be scattered to the four winds—with your horses and the money.”

“Now who’s sitting down and sucking his thumb, Allen?” Chet challenged.

“Allen’s right, Chet,” said Paul. He addressed his big brother. “What do you have in mind?”

“I’ll go after them,” decided Allen with swift determination. “I have my horse. I’ll get my rifle. I already have my pistol.”

“You are not going alone, are you?” asked Paul, concerned.

“There is no choice. There is only my mare to be had—mine.”

“That can be foolhardy, Allen,” cautioned Paul. “What could one fellow do against two or more? They would knock you over at the first opportunity.”

“I won’t give them the chance,” countered Allen grimly. “As they used to say when Pa was young, I’ll shoot first and talk afterward.”

“If you’re going, I’m going with you,” Chet asserted.

Allen shook his head. “No.”

“Two of us can ride on Lily. I don’t weigh much, certainly less than Paul,” Chet argued.

Allen shook his head again. “No, it can’t be done, Chet; not with her all tired out after her morning’s trip.”

“But Allen—” Chet started.

“I’m going alone. You are to stay here,” Allen declared.

“You can’t—” Chet tried again.

“No, Chet, that’s final. I gave you an order,” Allen commanded.

“Order? An order! Who do you think you are to give orders?” Chet bristled. “You don’t inherit your share of the ranch until you turn 18. Until then, Uncle Barnaby is our guardian.”

“In case you didn’t notice, our uncle isn’t here now, so you will do as I say!” Allen shot back. “I’m still the eldest and still in charge.”

“Just because you’re the oldest you think that gives you the right—” Chet shouted.

“That’s enough, both of you,” Paul interjected sharply, but still in his usual soft-spoken tone. The effect was as instant as dumping water on two fighting cats. Allen and Chet fell silent for a moment.

“Maybe the trail will pass by another ranch, and then I’ll call on the neighbors for help,” Allen offered after a pause. “I promise I won’t tackle the thieves on my own.”

“Can you follow their tracks?” questioned Paul.

“I think so. At least, I’ll try. They won’t get far if they leave the river, but it doesn’t seem like they’ll do that,” Allen answered.

Allen slipped into the main room of the house, went to the gun cabinet and retrieved his Winchester. He headed out the front door, Chet and Paul behind. With a curt nod towards them, Allen mounted his horse. A few minutes later he was off in the pursuit of the thieves. The dust clouds kicked up by Lily rose up in his wake like smoke from a growing fire.

Allen moved down the trail until the buildings of the ranch were far behind. He knew this way well, and it was easy to find the tracks—the new ones made by the hoofs of four horses.

“As long as they remain as fresh as they are now, it will be simple enough to follow them,” he said to Lily, patting her on the side. He urged her forward over the rough terrain in a way that displayed his affection for the animal, while also revealing his reluctance to make her work more than she could reasonably bear.

After moving through the belt of cottonwood trees, Allen reached a small stream that flowed into the river a little farther on. He looked around at his surroundings and paused to examine the signs on the wet bank.

The thieves probably came quite a distance to reach the ranch, he reasoned, so they must have needed to water their horses. That means they would most likely go back a long way before they’d settle down for the night.

“Heigh-ho!” he said aloud as he got off the ground, “I’m afraid a long and difficult search stretches before us, Lily.”

The tracks on the far side suggested that the robbers forded the brook upstream, so Allen crossed over likewise, and five minutes later reached a bit of rolling land dotted with sagebrush and other bushes. He wondered if this was where the trail would lead; per-

haps to Gold Fork, a little mining town located at the base of the mountains.

“I should have no problem getting help there to find them,” the young man thought to himself. “I could get Ike Watson and Matt Prigley, who would gladly go to lend a hand, and there is no better man to take hold of this sort of thing than Ike Watson.”

For mile after mile, the horse thieves’ tracks remained simple to follow. The trail was so plain to see, the young ranchman soon realized that they had not believed they would be followed. He quickly found himself wrong, however. The tracks suddenly disappeared when he came around a rocky spur of land.

Allen halted in dismay and let out a curse. He looked to the right and the left and ahead, but to no use.

“Here’s a pretty state of things,” he complained as he gazed around. “Where could their tracks have gone? They couldn’t grow wings and fly away.”

He dismounted and walked around the edge of the stony ledge for a half-hour, squatting down, trying to spot any clues they might have left. Then on a hunch he moved forward over the bare rock, feeling pretty certain that it was the only way they could have gone. The barren, rocky way stretched ahead to gentle dirt slope at the end. Grass grew over it, and bushes dotted it here and there. Several sets of horse tracks marked its surface.

“Hurrah!” he cried, punching his fist into the air. “I see the trail again!”

He hustled back to Lily. He calculated that he had traveled around ten miles so far. His mare showed appearances of being tired, and he spoke to her more kindly than ever.

“Come on, old girl,” he said, patting her soft neck. “You can do it. We’ll get it all done, and then you can rest for a stretch.”

The faithful horse lay back her ears and appeared to understand Allen’s every word as he climbed into the saddle. She was a most knowing creature. Allen would have gone wild had she been one of the stolen horses.

“On, Lily,” he said, “we’ll return Jasper and Rush back before nightfall, or know the reason why.”

The horse took off over the plain that stretched before her for several miles, the foothills at last in sight. Beyond them were the mountains, covered with a purplish haze. The mare slowed to a walk as she struck the first upward slope. Hardly had she done so than Allen saw something on the trail ahead that made his heart jump.

A man was riding Chet’s horse.

Chapter 2



Chet and Paul watched Allen disappear on the back of his mare up the trail leading to the southwest. Paul shook his head.

“Allen has taken on a dangerous job, this chasing horse thieves. A fellow is apt to get shot, killed maybe, unless he is careful,” Paul worried. After a moment, he shrugged and sighed. “But it’s no use arguing with Allen once his mind is made up.”

“So we let him play a lone hand again,” Chet said with a huff. “As always.”

“He was right about Lily being tired,” Paul pointed out.

“Whose side are you on?” Chet grumbled.

“Allen carries a lot of weight on his shoulders since Pa died,” Paul soothed.

“Yes, I know he does,” Chet retorted, kicking at the dirt as he always did when upset, “but he doesn’t need to haul it around all by himself. We can help if he’d let us.”

“You’re right,” Paul agreed calmly. “We could if he would let us.”

Chet kicked at the dirt again. “It’s too bad we couldn’t go with him. I’d give anything for a good horse now.”

“Well, anything you own isn’t much at the moment,” Paul added, underscoring his words with his quiet sense of humor. “But I agree with you; I wish I had a mount and could go along, too.”

“I’m telling you Paul, if something doesn’t turn up right in a couple of hours, I’m going off with my rifle, on foot,” proclaimed Chet. “Order or no order. I may not discover anything, but at least trying to do something will ease my mind.”

“Perhaps we both ought to stay on the ranch instead,” advised Paul. “More unprofitable visitors might pay us a visit.”

“I don’t think the gang will dare to show up in this vicinity again in a hurry,” dismissed Chet. “Like as not they’ll steer for Deadwood, sell our horses, and spend their ill-gotten gains at the gambling saloons. That’s their usual style. They can’t hang around in mountains or on the plains as long as there is money burning a hole in their pockets, no matter whose it was originally. Well, I reckon we can’t stand around here all day.”

The two boys locked up the barn as well as they could, using a wooden pin they found instead of the broken hasp and padlock. Paul ambled inside the house. Chet went to get the string of fish they had caught in the morning, which they had hastily hung on a bush when they discovered the robbery. Chet fetched them, brought them in, and tossed them into a large tin basin on the table.

“I suppose I might as well fry a couple of these,” Chet thought out loud, “though, to tell the truth, I am off my feed.”

“I don’t have much of an appetite either,” said Paul, “but we need to eat, and dinner will help pass away the time. I reckon there is no telling when Allen will be back.”

“True.”

Chet took the string of fish and chose several of them to clean. He was used to such tasks and did it with a dexterity and quickness that could not have been excelled.

He enjoyed working with his hands. Paul was the reader in the family; he'd be content reading paragraphs on the back of a railway ticket. Chet, though, was happiest when he was busy with his hands, doing anything: making something, building something or repairing something.

While Chet cleaned the fish, Paul checked the shotguns to make sure they were clean and oiled. He loaded them and put them back in their rack. When the fish was finished cooking, Chet set their plates on the table. He set out a third plate automatically, then realized Allen wouldn't be there. He knew Allen wouldn't come back in time to eat, but he decided he might as well leave setting on the table as a little good luck charm.

"That looks delicious as always, Chet," Paul smiled, once he sat down.

"You and Allen should be grateful that I took over the cooking duties after Ma died," Chet bragged, dishing out their food. "Everyone else only knew how to open cans of beans."

"You're a great pot rustler!" Paul said.

After Chet took his seat, Paul said grace. Both ate heartily, even though they claimed they were not hungry.

"It's strange," said Chet during the meal, "Allen didn't say anything about his morning trip."

"He was too excited over the theft of the horses to think of anything else, I suppose," Paul replied. "It was enough to upset anyone's mind."

“Perhaps, but at least he might have said if he had any news from Uncle Barnaby,” said Chet.

“I imagine if he had heard something he would have said so or left us a letter, if one came, Chet. Allen understands as well as you or I how anxious we really are.”

“The way Uncle Barnaby seemed to simply disappear is odd,” mused Chet, as he plastered mashed potatoes on his plate with a fork. “One would think a man couldn’t go to San Francisco and just vanish off the face of the earth.”

Apparently, it was Chet’s turn to start today. Like actors in a play, they went through the same dialog but with the brothers taking different parts. It was as if talking about the strange occurrence over and over and over would somehow change the facts, or illuminate a missed clue, or in some way provide the elusive answer. It never did.

“San Francisco is a big city. He might have been sandbagged or something like that,” Paul suggested.

“Oh, you don’t actually think such a thing would happen?” Chet always had that thought in mind as a possibility and was honestly hoping Paul could persuade him differently. He didn’t.

“Uncle was,” Paul corrected himself, “*is* a great hand to see the sights and also to show off any money he has. Many of the people in that city are a bloodthirsty lot, so I hear.”

“Do you really believe his claim of having found a rich gold mine?” Chet asked.

“Well, he discovered something worthwhile. He must have, or he wouldn’t travel to Frisco to start a company to develop it.”

“We could use the cash now. Especially after...” Chet trailed off in mid-sentence, although they both understood what he referred to.

They continued their meal in silence for a few minutes, the only sounds coming from their forks clinking against the plates. After a second, Chet went on. “They say things come in threes. All we need now is for Captain Grady to show up.”

“There’s a gloomy thought.”

“Well, maybe getting your horse hooked puts you in a gloomy frame of mind,” Chet rejoined.

“Pa left matters in a very unsettled condition, unfortunately,” Paul said, “and what has become of Uncle Barnaby the world only knows.”

“Now who’s being gloomy?” chided Chet. “What I’m complaining of is the uncertainty of how things are going to turn out. For all we know, we may be cast adrift, as the saying goes, any day. Grady could throw us off our land.”

“Grady will have to fish or cut bait eventually. He’s claimed for years that our title to the ranch is defective, or not good at all. I imagine our claim to the ranch is proper and legal. If those title documents hadn’t been burned when one end of the house took fire, I wouldn’t worry a bit. Without them though, Grady still could make a lot of trouble for us.”

“I wouldn’t be concerned either if we had those, but Captain Grady is the meanest man that ever drew the breath of life, and if he learns that we don’t have them, he’ll be down on us quicker than a grizzly bear in the spring.” Chet stabbed the last of his food with his fork. He continued quietly. “I like it here on the ranch,

Paul. I like to hunt and fish and round up the cattle and the rest ... I don't mind the chores. I don't want to leave."

"Well, we won't let him find out that the papers are destroyed," Paul stated as a simple matter of fact. "We'll continue to fob him off."

"We can't fool him forever. Even Grady. He may just wear us down," Chet said.

"In that case, we'll need to hire an attorney."

"And pay him with what?"

"We'll need to cross that bridge when we get to it," Paul said after a pause.

Chet glanced up at Paul. He was always amazed, and a little jealous, by how unflappable Paul was. Sometimes it was also more than a little irritating. Chet pushed himself away from the table and stood.

"Wash or dry?" he asked as he gathered up the plates and forks.

Paul got up as well. "Dry. You never like how I wash."

Chet grinned as the two moved toward the sink. "For good reason."

Shortly after cleaning up the dishes, Chet and Paul went out to care for the cattle about the place, for quite a few of the herd had already been penned up ready for the early fall drive. The ranch did not boast of many head, and such as there was the brothers desired to keep in the best possible condition so they could receive top dollar. When they had finished their chores, the two leaned on the fence and gazed at their small herd.

"I'm glad they're in the corral," Paul remarked. "I don't want to repeat other month. Ten hard days of hunting over the long range to find the ones that went astray."

Chet nodded. “We couldn’t do that now anyway, with no mounts.”

“We’re up a tree until he returns with Jasper and Rush,” Paul shrugged.

Chet worried about Allen again and thought that the best news would be his safe return with all the horses. Even if he wasn’t sure Allen would succeed, he wished to know at least if he would be safe.

Thoughts on the theft and Captain Grady seized Chet again. He needed to do something. He turned to Paul. “We need some more firewood. I’ll split the logs and you can stack them.”

Chet knew they didn’t need anymore, but he also knew that Paul would go along with anything he said to help him. Chet walked over to the shed and grabbed the ax with one hand and assisted Paul with the two-man saw. They went a few yards to where a section of a cottonwood trunk lay on the ground.

The three brothers discovered this downed tree on their property a couple of months ago. Allen decided to drag it back to the ranch instead of cutting it up on the prairie and carting the pieces back a few at a time. Chet thought the idea was dumb, and said so at the time, leading to another argument which required Paul to quell. Bringing the trunk back to the house turned out to be more work than any of them believed, but Allen refused to give up. He treated the whole operation with the seriousness of a general controlling a battle, barking out commands to Chet and Paul. Any obstacle he encountered just seemed to increase his determination to complete the job. Chet finally admitted—to himself—that in the end, Allen’s idea was a good one.

Chet and Paul stripped to the waist as they toiled in the hot sun and sawed off a chunk of cottonwood trunk. With skilled hands and a practiced eye, Chet placed one piece of log on the stump, and expertly brought down the ax. It split the wood partway, then Chet worked the blade to divide it into halves. He repeated the action on the smaller pieces. Paul toted the logs to the wood shed, returned to the trunk and they cut off another section.

As he continued, Chet concentrated on the heft of the ax, the pull of his muscles, the feeling of the warm sun on his bare back, and the rhythm of his chopping, even the sweat running down his torso. Soon, his thoughts turned away from Allen's possible danger.

Paul waited patiently to gather the firewood. When he couldn't fit another stick into the shed, he shuttled it to a growing pile beside the house. Their task absorbed them for over an hour when they heard a cheerful voice hail them. They looked out and saw Ike Watson riding up their trail. He reined up by the brothers.

"Whoop! Hullo there!" greeted the old fellow. He was a big and strong as a bear, and under his long unkempt hair and beard, strongly resembled one. "What's the meanin' of two healthy boys workin' around the ranch on such an all-fired fine day as this?"

"Ike, I'm so glad you happened along!" Chet embedded the ax into the stump and ran to greet him. "We were hoping some friend would come."

"That so?" Ike's face grew sober on the instant. "What's the trouble?"

"Somebody stole our horses!" Chet cried.

"Gee, shoo! Horse thieves again! Well, I'll be eternally blowed!" bellowed Ike, in a rage. "Who be they?"

“We don’t know,” Paul shrugged. “We think they may be leftovers from the Sol Davids gang.”

“Horse thieves is worse than poison,” growled Ike. “There ought to be a law to hang every one o’ ’em, say I! How many animals did they get?”

“Only the two that were here: Chet’s and mine,” Paul reported.

“Allen went off after them earlier this afternoon,” Chet put in.

“By hisself?” Ike said.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” Paul answered.

“Well, Allen for sure takes after his pa, all righty,” Ike said.

“We’re worried,” said Chet. “We would have gone along, but we haven’t a single beast left in the barn.”

Ike nodded his shaggy head. “I see. Which way did the varmints go?”

“Allen took the trail over the brook.” Paul jerked his head in the direction he took.

“Humph!” Ike scratched his head for a moment. “What’s to prevent me goin’ after him, boys?”

“Will you?” asked Chet eagerly.

“Certain. I ain’t got nuthin’ to do, an’ if I had, I reckon I could drop it pretty quick to do a favor for my old pardner’s orphans,” declared Ike. “Why, Granville Winthrop and Ike Watson rode together for years ’til he up and married yer ma.”

“Are you well armed?” Paul gestured toward the house. “We have some—”

“Armed? Well, I should say so.” Ike produced an old 1849 horse pistol nearly two feet long from his belt. “That is my best friend, barrin’ the rifle. Now tell me the particulars.”

Paul reviewed the day's events. When he finished, Ike Watson nodded, then started off.

"You'll hear from me before another sun smiles on ye!" he called back over his shoulder. "An' don't ye worry too much in the between time!"

"Thank you, Ike!" the brothers shouted after him. And with a wave, Ike then disappeared down the trail.

"A rather odd fish, truly," chuckled Paul.

"Yes, but with a heart of steel and gold," said Chet. "This state doesn't contain a braver or better hunter than old Ike Watson."

"You speak the truth," Paul said.

"At least I feel more comfortable now that Ike is starting off to hunt up Allen. He'll do everything to help, no matter in what difficulty he might find him. Let's get back to the wood." Chet headed toward the downed tree. He glanced over his shoulder at Paul. "Although I seem to be doing all the work."

Paul crossed his arms and cocked his head to one side. "Says you. To my mind, checking to see if you chop properly is harder than chopping itself. Not only more difficult, but ... also much more entertaining."

Chet understood what Paul was trying to do, and was grateful for the diversion. He grinned as he strode up to him and gave his brother a light shove. "What's that? Listen to him! Why, I oughta clean your plow for that remark!"

Paul sneered at Chet. "Are *you* going to clean *my* plow? Ha! Too much mustard!" Paul spat, then pushed up imaginary shirt sleeves. He slapped Chet lightly on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "You have to try it, juniper. Loser washes *and* dries the supper dishes tonight."

“I’ll be right there. I’m gonna rip your arm off and beat you over your head with it,” Chet taunted. “Then, I’ll be nice again!”

The two crouched, arms held wide while they circled each other, throwing insults and increasingly outlandish threats. Chet at last broke the stalemate by charging. The brothers grappled, laughing, each trying to trip the other, with Chet’s strength an equal match for Paul’s bigger size. They tumbled to the ground, rolling around in the dirt until Paul pinned Chet.

“Brains over brawn!” Paul crowed as he jumped up, fists raised in the air, then he crouched back down into a defensive stance. “I’m looking forward to making a huge mess at supper tonight!”

“How is that any different from any other night?” Chet laughed.

Paul held out his hand and helped Chet to his feet. Chet resumed chopping wood for a few minutes before Paul at last persuaded him that they had plenty. The light of the late afternoon started to fade as they began the round of evening work. They fed the chickens and pigs and made sure that everything was secure for the night. There were also a couple of cows to milk and a dozen or more of eggs to gather.

Chet finished his jobs at his usual express train speed, while Paul worked more methodically. Chet still had some energy to burn and wanted something else to do. He spotted the knot hole in one wall of the tool shed and remembered how much he hated chasing mice out of the small building. Running to the trash pile, he tugged the lid off a can. Holding the jagged edge carefully to avoid cutting himself, he went inside the small building. He placed the round piece of tin over the hole, and secured it with a couple of nails.

“There!” Chet admired his work, “that’ll keep the critters out.”

He headed toward the house to start dinner. The sun was just beginning to slip behind the mountains. Chet stood in the doorway waiting for Paul. He usually enjoyed watching the slow transition from day into night, but tonight the brilliant red sky reminded him of a wildfire burning his way.