

PART TWO

The Old Man laughed a warm laugh that held all the warmth of the human spirit. "Yep, tomorrow is really my birthday now! Folks all over the world celebrate it." "Happy Birthday."

The convict found himself saying the words, without really meaning too, for he knew now that the Old Man was a harmless idiot. He felt a sudden and unfamiliar impulse to touch him, to pity him and to let him know that someone cared for him. Reaching out he gently clasped the weather-beaten hands in his and then started to turn away.

"You still don't believe me, do you?" Smiling, the Young Man lied as he said, "Sure I do, Pop. Sure I believe it's your birthday."

"No need to lie, Sonny. 'Cause I kin see you don't. But I see that you also pity me. That for the first time in your life, you really feel somethin' inside of you fer a feller creature. Here, I want you should have this to remember me by."

He held out a small harmonica that had long since lost all its shine, and was battered and wrinkled like his face.

"Now, you keep it. I don't want it, Pop." "Take it, it's about all I got in the world now. It belonged to that preacher I told you about. He give it to me after he saw I was really re-born. I ain't never been without it through all these years — it talks to me when I begin to back-slide. Take it! It's my birthday present to you!"

Reaching out and taking it, the young man was touched by the love of the old man who would give away the thing he loved best in the world. It was the first thing that he could remember anyone's giving him without wanting something in return.

"Thanks, Pop, but I ought to be giving you a present. It's your birthday."

"You'll learn someday that the joy of birthdays, or any kinda days, is in yer givin' somethin' to somebody — not in the gettin'."

He started to say something to the old man, but the words refused to come, and so the young stranger bowed his head not knowing what else to do. He'd never been given anything before and he didn't know what to think of it.

Finally, he raised his head, because he wished to return the poor little harmonica to the old cowboy, but when he looked at the window, the smiling and peaceful face wasn't there — only the yawning hole that led out into the starlit night.

He quickly crossed and spitting upon his hand, wiped a place through the grime and filth and looked up the street, but could not see any trace of the old man.

He stood for a long time at the window, thinking about the things that the old man told him. Thinking about his life and how he had seemed to always turn the wrong corner. And for the first time, he saw that it had been his doing, this turning of corners, and not that of someone else. He had hated many men for many things, had lied and cheated, stolen and lived just for himself ever since the day when he ran away from his home in a steaming, stench-filled Chicago tenement, "back of the yards."

From off in the darkness of the other side of the cell he heard a sudden click and he turned to see if it might be the Sheriff returning from the Saloon, where he had been helping the boys celebrate Christmas.

He crossed over to the bars of his cell and looked out, but all was black darkness beyond.

"Hey, who's that?" he called, and leaned against the cell door to try and peer out into the dark. As he leaned, he felt the door give under the pressure of his body, and he quickly stepped back and then after a moment he gave it a push, and it began to swing open.



"Look, it's unlocked. — Say, Boy, this may be your chance to beat it out of here — Wait a minute! This might be a trap — Sure, that's it! They unlocked the cell so's I'd try and get out and then they'll let me have it in the guts — Attempting to break jail — They must have decided that hanging was too costly, might spoil their Christmas fun. — But, Hell, I gotta get out of here —"

Then a thought suddenly came to him, and he quickly threw himself prone upon the floor and began to slowly open the door, listening to the creak of its rusty hinges, and expecting to see a burst of flame from a gun at any minute. But, no shots came, and after waiting for a long time, he quickly ran out to the outer door, and turning the handle found that it was open. He didn't try to understand, how or when it was unlocked, but he ran freely into the dark past the Golden Pleasurers and out into the open lands.

On and on through the night he ran, slipping and sliding and sometimes falling into small ditches. He had no idea where he was going, the only thing was to get away, to run where they couldn't touch him. Often he thought of the Old Man, and he reached into his pocket and touched the harmonica from time to time. The Old Man sure had been a funny old coddler, crazy as they come — but he'd told him that Faith could open the doors of the jail, and hadn't he suddenly found the doors that had been carefully locked by the Sheriff, unlocked? What the Hell, doors don't unlock themselves — faith or no faith. All that had happened had been that the Sheriff was so boozed up that he had left the

The Angels' Harp

A Christmas Western
In Two Installments
By Cecil Willis

doors unlocked himself.

Skirting the fires of the cowpunchers, which were gleaming in short fitful bursts upon the hillsides, he walked steadily on and finally came to what looked like a road to him. He had no idea where it might lead him, but as it led away from Bethlehem he wearily trudged on into the cold night.

The cold closed in upon him, whipping him and smashing him with its ice-pick sharp fingers until he almost longed for the comfort of the feeble little lamp back in the cell. He shook his head and looking up saw the thousands of stars shining down in gay Christmas decoration, and he knew that there was nothing like being free. Free to walk where he pleased, free to be out in this cold, but warmly beautiful night.

And so on and on he went. Cold, stars and memories of the Old Man swirling and twirling round him and through him.

Suddenly from behind him came twin shafts of light, shooting through the night like earth-bound stars, trying to rival those of the heavens above. Quickly he turned and halted the lights, which were fast hurtling through the night toward him.

When it pulled up beside him, in the hard packed snow of the country road, he saw that it was a jeep with three "well-oiled" cowboys inside.



"Hop in," came from the interior of the jeep.

Followed by, "Merry Christmas," as he crawled into the vacant seat next to the driver.

He murmured thanks through his chattering teeth, and the jeep was off, with a sudden jump, which sent small jewels of snow scudding for safety to the side of the road, from beneath the wheels.

He sat silently, while the other three talked and joked, with thier friendly digs at each other provoking great gales of laughter. The bottle of whiskey was reluctantly passed and when it was offered to him, he took it desperately and drank deeply, feeling the warmth of its body enter into his own. The fever blister on his lip began to smart and sting and he began to feel alive again.

Still, he did not feel the same joy inside himself, whenever he took a drink from their bottle, that he had received from the Old Man's gift of his beloved harmonica. However, as the jeep whizzed and bounced gaily and noisily across the road, he began to think less and less of the Old Man. He thought that if you were to be reborn, this was the way. With joy and laughter and good liquor. This was really living again!

The conversation turned to the subject of the murder of the old cattleman and then he learned that his escape had been discovered.

For his new friends had been to Bethlehem to enjoy the pleasures of the Saloon, and knew all about his escaping from the jail.

The driver was a big fellow, with bushy black eyebrows which seemed to spring from under the front of his large hat, as he had it pulled rakishly down over his eyes. He had been only able to catch a glimpse of two of the cowboys in the back seat, so all that he knew about them were their voices.

The big fellow turned to him and said, "Where you headed, fellow?"

"Oh — I'm going to California."

"With his banjo on his knee," one of the voices from the backseat sang.

The big fellow raucously laughed, "California? Hell, Boy, you ain't even going in the general direction."

"I got lost."

"I say you did. What you doin', walkin' all the way?"

"Yes."

"That's what I'd call a nice little stroll," the second voice from the back roared.

"Stop talking so much, and give me that bottle," the first angrily said.

"Where you comin' from?"

"Back there."

"You mean Bethlehem?"

The convict licked the fever blister, which was stinging his lip, and answered casually, "I didn't notice the name of the place. I passed right through."

He could hear the tires gripping and slipping in the snow, making a strange hard thumping sound, as he continued to answer their questions.

Thump-thump-thump went the tires.

Thump-thump-thump came the questions. They sped on together, tires and questions, carrying on and on into nothingness. On and on around that corner again!

With a hard jam of his foot, the big fellow put on brakes and then turned and stared at the Young Man for a long while. "Get out," he finally said, in a voice hard with hate and whiskey.

The light voice from the back asked, "What's up Frank? Why you stopped? Let's go."

Yeah, let's go! When I get licked up I wanna hit the bunk if there ain't no fun going on," the deeper voice from the rear sleepily said.

"We ain't gonna to go right now, boys. I think we got some work to attend to. This here's that bastard that shot old man Morris."

"What?"

"Yeah?"

"Sure, I'm sure. What's a guy doing walking down a country road at four in the morning, with no coat on. Don't even know where he's been and where he's going."

As calmly as he could, the Young Man said, "I told you I was going to California. I just got lost, that's all."

"Shut up, you. And get out!"

The Young Man looked at the big fellow for a minute, and then his eye followed the other's hand down to his hip, where he saw the starlight shining upon a gleaming black gun.

Without any more words, the Young Man crawled off the rough torn upholstery, dragging some of the ripped cotton out on the floor after him.

He stood silently in the snow. What else could he do? Where could he run? He knew this was it! He knew mobs and he knew that if they didn't kill him they'd beat him to a pulp. Then they'd kick him and stomp his blood-smeared face into the whiteness of the snow. They didn't know anything else but force; they had to do it, he knew, because they were men and men had to beat you when they hated you. That was the way life was!

So silently he stood and waited!

He waited for a long while, because the sleepy one from the backseat sid he didn't "give a damn," all he wanted to do was to go to bed. "Let the law string him up," he said.

He waited patiently to be beaten or shot, while they argued back and forth. The Big Fellow was getting madder and madder and the young man figured he wouldn't have much longer to wait. All that humanness was getting ready to explode into hate and revenge.

Finally the sleepy one, half-pulled, and half-on-his-own, crawled out from the back, still holding his open fifth; he continued to argue that he was sleepy and that he didn't care if it was the guy, he wanted to head for the bunkhouse pronto. Anyway, the guy might not be the same one. Hell, anybody can get lost; besides the guy didn't look so bad, he didn't look like he'd kill a nice old man like old man Morris.

In fact, he'd even bet three months pay that this wasn't the same guy!

The proposition of a chance to make some money, in addition to being a hero, seemed to appeal to the big fellow, and he and the other cowpoke placed bets with the sleepy one. But how were they to know whether he was the one or not?

The Big Fellow said to go back to Bethlehem, the Sheriff could settle the bet for them.

The Sleepy One said he wasn't going to go back to Bethlehem; they'd have to decide for themselves without the Sheriff.



The Other One said that either way it was all right with him, but that the Sheriff was most likely so tight by now that he wouldn't be able to recognize the guy, so it seemed to him to be a waste of time. Besides he was getting sleepy, too.

The Young Man said nothing. He just waited.

The Big Fellow, still itching to explode the metal firecracker held in his hands, argued long and hard; but the other two finally won out.

Then the Sleepy One turned to the Young Man and after taking a long swig from his bottle, he poked his face into the Young Man's exhaling the smell of whiskey mixed with tobacco juice, which he from time to time spit out upon the white snow, spotting it like some old ermine coat, grey and tattered with age.

"What you doin' 'round, Feller?" the Sleepy One asked.

"Going to California."

"What you gonna do when you get there? Go in moonin' pizzers?" he drunkenly queried.

"Get me a job."

"What kinda work you do?"

"Different kinds. Anything I can get."

The Big Fellow crossed over to them and jerked the Sleepy One out of the way. "You see, I told you he was the one. He ain't goin' to no California. He's nothin' but a drifter — and it was a drifter what shot that good old man."

"Yeah, Slim, Frank's right! It was a drifter that murdered Mister Morris. Maybe Frank ain't wrong about this guy. Maybe he did murder the old man. He can't tell you no kinda work he's goin' to do," the Other One suggested, as he crossed and stood at the Young Man's side.

"Frank's crazier than a loon. I tell you, I'm right. This ain't the feller."

He turned, once again and looked closely into the Young Man's face.

"Lookie, Buddy, if'n you don't want my pal here to shoot you full of lead, you'd better tell us what kinda work you do."

"Well, this is it," the Young Man thought; "no matter what I tell 'em they won't believe me. Dishwasher, broker, taxidriver — no matter what I say —"

His spinning thoughts suddenly come to a full stop, for his hand had felt the cold metal of the harmonica in his pocket. He might be able to tell them he was a musician. He had a harmonica to prove it. It was worth a try.

Pulling the battered and tarnished harmonica from his pocket he took a deep breath, and said, "I play the harmonica for a living. You know, in bars and shows and things."

The Sleepy One whirled away from him, and giving the Big Fellow a hard push, triumphantly said to him, "You see, I told ya he wasn't the one! He plays the harmonica. Come on, hand over the bet — I done won one from you, for a chance. Give me that green stuff!"

"His saying' he plays don't make it so," the Big Fellow answered in a sullen voice. "What's a harmonica player doin' 'round here?"

The Other One had started back to the jeep, but he turned and yelled angrily back to the Big Fellow, "He told ya he was on his way to California, didn't he? Come on, it's cold standin' round here. I'm getting sleepy." With this he crawled back into the jeep, and pulling his hat over his eyes, forgot all about life and death, harmonica and drifters and went to sleep dreaming of the big blonde at the Golden Pleasures.

The Sleepy One and the Big Fellow were not sleepy though; they were arguing back and forth, each trying to save his pride and his money.



The Sleepy One said that there had been a harmonica player over in Coker's Junction, playing in a honkey-tonk there, and this guy was most likely him.

The Big Fellow said he didn't give a damn about that, he wanted to hear the coyote play.

"O. K. Frank, if that's what you want, my friend here'll play us a little ole song. Won't you, Friend?", he drunkenly put his arm around the Young Man's shoulders and held on to him, dizzily weaving back and forth.

The Young Man didn't notice him, as time had stopped for him. For all his life he'd never been able to play a harmonica. He remembered once as a kid, he'd traded a pocketful of marbles to the little Wop kid down the block, for his harmonica. But, like all the other things in his life, when he had finally gotten it, he found he couldn't use it.

And now he had to play, as if he had played all his life, or the Big Fellow would play a tune with his gun.

He had to try, because the Big Fellow kept moving in closer with his cocked gun and demanding that he play "a song, Buddy, play a song."

He raised the harmonica to his lips and closed his eyes, for he knew in a minute that the small metal cylinder, now pressed hard into his stomach, would explode and blow him into the nothingness from whence he had come.

With his eyes closed, he blew upon the small object between his hands.

Quickly he opened his eyes and looked up and the stars were dancing across the sky in a gay, rollicking Schottische — wheeling and turning, dipping and gleefully whirling. For from the harmonica was coming the merry music of a dance tune!

His throat closed, and his breath stopped. He had none left to blow upon this small angels' harp held between his lips, and still it played on!

Then the tears flowed free and easy down his cold cheeks, while he played and the stars danced. The Sleepy One cavorted merrily in the snow, sometimes falling, then rising and taking a drink from his bottle he went on with his dance.

The stars, having worn holes in their dancing shoes, finally went home to bed and still he played. Then the Big Fellow and the Sleepy One crawled back into their jeep and it danced away into the dawn, leaving him free in the palely growing light of day.

Now there was no one left, but himself and the one bright star still hanging in the sky, as if reluctant to leave, for it would not appear again until the next Christmas time, when it would come out and proclaim the good news of the reborn to all who would listen.

Looking back to the star as it hung over Bethlehem, the Young Man waved his hand in salute to it — His star. The Star that announced his Birthday!

For today was his Birthday!

Here he stood fresh and clean and newly-born in the snow, and knew that the Old Man had been right. That the living dead do rise again in a new birth! That miracles happen every day and that he, too, was born in a manger in another Bethlehem many years ago.

With a smile upon his face, he turned and started walking down the road still playing upon his harmonica, a song of peace and eternal joy, as he strode happily towards the East and the rising sun of his first day of life.