

The Angels' Harp

A Christmas Western
In Two Installments
By Cecil Willis

Some said that it was the coldest night ever known in that part of the country, with the cold knifing through clothes and skin and tendon to saw at the bone, as if it were made of Damascus steel.

The sheep huddled in little groups upon the hillsides, which lay shivering and clutching at the thin blankets of snow that covered their bony frames. The shepherds, dressed in coats made of the skins of their animals, huddled deeply among the flocks, trying to catch some warmth from the bodies of their better clad friends.

On other hillsides and in the valleys, the tenders of the cattle hunched themselves helplessly over their small fires and listened impassively to the moanings and lowings which came from the herds, upon thin streams of frozen vapor and then were soon lost in the sparkling, shimmering cold of the starlit night.

No moon shown down.

It would have been pale in comparison with the shimmering galaxy of diamonds, which winked down in derision upon the sufferings of the mortals below. One star, seeming to care for these sufferers, vented its glow to the earth and hung like a huge glittering sun over the small adobe stable in the little town of Bethlehem.

At least, it used to be a stable. However, that was before the days of the automobile and jeep — and now that there were no horses to care for, it was the town jail.

Squat and lonely looking, it sat day after day staring with envious windows upon the gaily painted front of the Golden Pleasures Saloon, which stared back at the little jail, and with its red painted front, seemed to be sticking its tongue out at its poor neighbor across the way.

Tonight, however, even the fiery red of the Saloon's front could not keep it gay and warm against the intense cold, and it looked almost as miserable as the poor little jail across the way.

Inside, though, the cold had been forgotten by the cowpokes and farmhands, who were busily celebrating Christmas Eve and the birth of the Christ with good, strong Rye whiskey and a stolen kias from the "house" girls, who encouraged them to spend their wages upon the delights to be offered over the long walnut wall, from behind which flowed hope and courage and peace.

As the jukebox blared forth a swingey and squeaky Western band's version of the "Christmas Polka" they hadn't a thought for the cold world outside and those lost in the misery of the night. One or two, in a moment of drunken melancholy, gave a fleeting thought to Jim or "Red," left out upon the range tending the stock, but the gay laughter and warmth flushed all such unpleasant thoughts away in a gay, bubbling swirl of amber liquid.

Tonight was Christmas Eve and the world was a wonderful place again—filled with joy and happiness!

Across the street, no sounds of music emerged from the forgotten little jail. No sound came from its square, bare shape and the only sign of life was the glimmer of an oil lamp that shone feebly through the mud-spattered remains of a broken window. It was a timid light, afraid to venture out into the dark world of cold and still. Even within it seemed to be afraid to venture too far from its supply of life-giving oil and the corners of the room were dark and dreary.

The little light shouldn't have been so afraid, for it had a companion, who sat on the cold earthen floor, hunched close to his friend, in mutual fear and loneliness.

For a long time now, the lamp and its friend had sat in silent companionship, neither speaking to the other—each lost in his own thoughts. The figure seemed almost to be immobile, as if sat thinking and hating, yet loving and worshipping the life that he was to lose as soon as the morning's sun had risen from his warm bed and come forth to kill his little friend.

"If they'd only believe me — if for once some man on the face of the globe would listen and be my friend — no one ever has — might be able to live to get out of this — You stupid fool, the law says you're guilty — you murdered a man — you killed him — But I didn't — I don't even know who they're talking about — ain't never killed — never — — Why worry? Ain't this the United States and don't some book in Washington say so? — You'll get a fair hearing and they'll listen to you — to the truth. They don't hang innocent people — No, not if they get to trial! — But you'll never get a trial — Why kid yourself? — You've been beat to a pulp before, kicked, slugged — people didn't have time those other times to wait for the truth — and they won't wait now — they respected this gentleman — maybe even loved him — and mobs don't wait — tomorrow — Hell, they ain't gonna be no tomorrow! This is it, Kid — you've had it! — Right now behind all that music over there, they are talking about you, getting armed with courage — picking out the tree — planning how they can torture you — Why kid yourself? — Men don't think about other men — you never did —"

Suddenly there was a burst of loud laughter from the other side of the dirt street, and the stranger, jumping up, with a short intake of breath ran to the window and looked out through the broken pane.

"Laugh — go on and laugh — you're laughing at me — planning what a nice time you'll give me — God, how I hate humans — they all stink — they —"

Time stood still, holding its breath along with the young man's, as he stood staring across the darkened street. For the swinging doors, gaily lit by the neon sign, were opening —

"Now they're coming — You'd better pray — you'd better —"

But, only one lone figure emerged silhouetted by the stream of vivid light that

rushed past him into the dark!

Slowly and drunkenly the figure started walking across the hard packed earth towards the jail. He was a short man and hobbled along singing a tune under his breath as he crossed the street.

"A lousy drunk — Boy, you're really losing your nerve — Wouldn't the boys laugh at you now — Scared to death over a door opening — over a lousey drunk — The old bird looks like he's coming over here — Most likely wants to get a look at a murderer — the lousey —"

The figure had reached the small pool of light that showed its way through the dirt of the window outside. The stranger looked at him for a moment, as he stood staring back with pale, blue eyes, that seemed to look through you and beyond you. He was an old man, about seventy he'd guess, with a face that was weather-beaten and hardened by the mere life of trying to scratch out an existence upon this unloving world that he had been born into. His face was covered with a stubby white beard, and his uncut hair hung in uneven blobs like corn shucks from under his tattered old ten-gallon hat.

Quietly he spoke, and his voice seemed to float from behind him somewhere, not to issue from his mouth at all. It was soft — soft like Nan's hair used to be — Funny, he should think of her — It was years ago she had been his high-school steady and they dreamed of spending their lives together serving out a serfdom to the finance companies — What was the old boozey saying —

"Yep, I guess this is the coldest night around here since '89. Now, that was really cold! Why, I remember it as plain as if it were only yesterday — I was punching cows then for Mr. Tom out at the Bar Q —"

"You got a cigarette?"

"No Sonny, I ain't," he replied, while he reached into his tattered jumper pocket. "But I got some pipe tobacco, and if you got a piece of paper, you could roll yourself one."

The old man held up a small grimy cotton sack to the jagged hole in the window.

"Now, that's O. K. Skip it!"

"Go on. Take it. You're welcome to it!"

"It wouldn't do me any good — I don't know how to roll those things," the stranger replied, with a touch of his old arrogance coming back to his voice.

"Well, that's alright — Look, maybe I got some paper — if'n I have, I'll roll it for you." He took the sack and holding it between his teeth, by the bit of string that protruded from it top, he began to search through his pockets.

"Don't go to any trouble, Pop. I didn't mean to start you to any trouble. Just thought you might have a butt hand."

Sticking his hands in his pockets, he turned from the window and started back to his seat on the floor. He didn't feel like making any conversation about the weather or anything else. He'd just like to be alone and sit and think things out. Maybe he'd be able to figure out some way to beat this rap — but, he really didn't see why he should bother. Why beat your brains out to try and stay alive in a world where your couldn't even get a lousey cigarette from a drunk bum.

"Looks like you're in luck, Sonny. I found a piece — and won't be no time at all for I'll have you one made up that'll beat them tailor-mades all to heck."

Slowly the young man turned and sauntered the short distance across the cell, back to the window. After all a cigarette sure would taste awful good right now.

He saw a grizzled hand, gnarled with age and hard work, the skin killed by the winds of many winters peeling away from it in dead flakes, poke a completely round and well-packed cigarette through the hold through the hold in the pane.

As he reached to take it, he muttered a simple "Thanks," and then lit the long dreamed of butt and leaning against the ice-cold mud wall he blew the smoke out in a contented puff. He looked at the thin piece of dirty paper and a slow smile held for a moment on his face. One thing you had to give the old rum-dum, he could really roll a mean fag.

"Ain't nothin' like a little taste of tobacco to help a body along, when the world seems agin' ya, is there?"

"You're right there, Pop. This sure tastes mighty swell."

"Me, I like a pipe," the old man replied, while he filled a smoke-blackened corn pipe with the golden grains that poured silently in a stream from the bag. He quietly laughed, a warm laughter that seemed somehow to extend the short area of light for a great distance out into the dark.

"But, I guess we all ain't like the same things," he continued, "if'n we don't do it, guess there'd be enough for all of us, and some folks would have to go lackin'." Pears that's about the trouble with the world today. Nobody ain't satisfied with what they got. They got to get what belongs to the other feller — come Hell or high water. Jes' ain't happy with there own lot. Mos of the time they manage one way or tother, to get what they're a-bankerin' fer — even if'n it means murders and wars and unhappiness — and then when they done got

it, they jes' plain don't want it no longer, and they're 'bout as unhappy, as they was to start with."

"Say, you know you talk right good sense for a Wino."

"Ain't drunk, Sonny — it's my crippled leg what makes me walk hobbly like. Don't drink — ain't touched a drop for years."

Almost automatically the other man licked his cold-parched lips, pausing for a second over the festered fever sore in the corner of his bottom lip.

"Brother, what I wouldn't give for a drink right now! It might even make me take a better view of things, and God knows I could use a better one."

Slowly blowing smoke out of his nostrils, quickly upon the cold frosty air, shaking his head.

"Liker ain't never fixed nothin' up for nobody, Son. It jes' fools us into believin' it does. Then the next day we wake up and find out that things ain't change a mite. They're the same as they was before — cause we ain't use the right approach to change them. No, sreee, ain't nothin' changes things, 'ceptun Faith."

"You take your faith, I'll settle for a pint," the young man replied, his mouth twisted up towards the fever blister in a sneer. "I'll put my trust in what can make me forget how dirty and stinking the world is — even if it is just for a night. I got no use for all that faith manure."

"Pears to me like you need a lot of faith right now, Boy."

"Look, Pop, thanks for the smoke — and thanks for the kind words but I ain't in no mood to be preached to about love and faith and that kind of mess!"

The Old Man sighed as he answered, "Ain't nothin' to fret about, I guess it's just cause you ain't never had no faith, that you can't see what it kin do."

"How the Hell do you know so much about what I had or ain't had?"

The Young Man watched as the Old Man moved his face closer to the hole in the pane, and looked at him with a look filled with wrath and kindness. "I know lots of things about you, Boy. Things you don't think nobody knows. I know jes' how lost and lonely you feel, caged up in there, wondering if you'll even git to see the sun arisin' in the morning. I know all about all the hatred you got stored up inside of ya for everybody else — an' all the hatred they got stored up inside of themselves fer you. You know how I know?"

The other man slowly shook his head, looking into the kind eyes, which somehow held something in their glance that he had never seen before.

"I know about all them things, because I been through 'em. That's how. I done suffered all the things that you're a sufferin' right now, and I know how it feels." A soft smile lit up his face as he tenderly continued, "But that was all a long time ago. That was when I was dead."

With a quick jerk, the Young Man began to laugh, at first in chuckles, but then the laughter grew until it filled the tiny cell, bounding away from the walls and fleeing to ring loud and clear upon the quiet stillness of the night.

"Come on, Pop, come on! Tell me where you got that bottle hidden. Don't try and kid me no more — You don't drink! Oh, Boy, are you a lulu!"

"See, you can still laugh. Though it's only at something you don't understand nothin' about."

"Look, you think I'm crazy? I ain't gone buggy in this clink, so try and make me think I have."

"I ain't tryin' to make you think nothin', Sonny," the Old Man said, still in his quiet, even voice.

"Well, don't try it. 'Cause you won't get no place doing it! I been in stir before — lots of times. Even in solitary at Lorton and Joliet, but I ain't never gone off my rocker. If there's anybody nutty here, it's you. And if you ask me, you're nuttier than a fruit cake. All that about you was once dead!"

Flipping the butt of his cigarette thru the window, the prisoner turned and walked into the dark shadows at the other end of the cell.

"I know it sounds crazy to you right now, Son, but it won't after a while. It's the truth, and the truth ain't never crazy."

"Go on, Pop, and peddle your sea-stories someplace else. I ain't buyin'."

From the darkness the old cowhand's voice answered, quietly and gently, "I ain't telling you no lies, Boy. I'm tryin' to help you. Help you when you need a friend."

"Scream, will ya! go on back over to that gin-mill, you'll find somebody over there to believe you. There it won't be so hard to get somebody to listen to your troubles. Just buy some gey some drinks, and he'll listen all night. I done it plenty of times, when some broad give me the air and I had to have somebody to talk to."

"You can talk to me, without buyin' me any drinks."

Half-facing the window the Young Man yelled back, "Scream! I don't wanta talk to you! Let me alone will ya? I ain't botherin' you!"

He stood still in the middle of the cell, waiting for the other man to go away, but

he could see that we was still there, still gently smiling.

Quickly he crossed the cell, and poking his fist through the hole in the glass, hit the Old Man in his face.

The blow knocked the Old Man backwards into the shadows, but he stepped back into the pool of light, still wearing the patient smile upon his face.

Seeing him, the convict angrily said, "Look, if you don't want another poke on the chin, beat it."

"It didn't hurt me none. I been hurt lots in my time, Son. And most of the time, I deserved it. 'Sides, I know you ain't yerself, what with waitin' for death to come to you and snuff out you life."

"But, they ain't gonna kill me. They just put me in here for tonight. Tomorrow they're goin' to take me away and give me a trial, fair and square, you see. And you'll see — I'll beat this rap, 'cause I didn't do it! This is one time I'm innocent."

"I know that. But they don't. And right now, they gettin' all het up thinkin' about Mister Morris being murdered, and t'woun't be long 'fore some feller all drunked up'll suggest they string you up and then it'll be too late for that trial you're talking about. It won't matter, when you're dead."

The words struck the Young Man in the face, with a force much greater than the blow he had given the old man. Suddenly he knew the truth, that tomorrow would never come for him. It seemed as if all his blood was drained from his veins, and he raised his hands to clutch the jagged glass for support.

A long time passed before he spoke again, all the while he stood staring into the pity-filled eyes of the Old Man.

Finally, when he spoke, his voice came out in a soft, slow stream, so silent that he was hardly aware he had uttered any words.

"Look, Pop, help me! Help me!"

He felt the touch of the rough palm of the other's hand upon his. But it was not the brittle and hard touch of a work-worn hand, but a touch that left him with a feeling of having been touched by some strange quieting power, a power combined with love, as that of Mother comforting her frightened child.

"I've already helped you. Ever since the day I was reborn, I been helping you. Ain't never a prayer uttered that don't go clean 'round the world, and help somebody somewhere. Maybe that sounds like it's crazy, too. Like what I said about being dead before, but it ain't. It's the only sure thing in the world. It's faith."

With a sob, the Young Man started to jerk his hands away from those of the Old Man, but he couldn't seem to pull them away from the soft, yet vise-like strength of the others.

"Listen, I don't want preachin'. I need help!"

"And I am helpin' you?"

"How? With all this religion guff? That ain't gettin' me out of here."

Tenderly the Old Man answered, "It's the only thing in the world that can get you out. You gotta have faith, Sonny, that it will. Have faith!"

"I tell you, I ain't got no —"

"Yes, you have, Boy. Everybody's got some faith. They jes' don't use it, that's all. They'd rather spend their days awor-ryin' and frettin' and tryin' to change the world to their own way, rather than just have a mite of faith." The Old Man passionately replied, "It's faith that kin unlock the door of this here jail and set you free. It's done it before. It's made the blind to see, and the lame to walk. And more than that, it's raised the dead to life. Not jest in the Bible, but everyday. It did it for me!"

A loud burst of laughter from the Saloon shattered the night's stillness, like the stead staccato belching of a machine gun. The Young Man, quickly jerking to look across the street, turned to the Old Man with a look of haunted fear in his eyes and asked "How?"

"By raising me from the dead and letting me live again. You see, I was born in this town, grew up here — and like most of the bucks around, roamed over the county-side, working as a cowpuncher, first one place and another. I thought life was created fer me. I never had no thought fer nothin' or nobody — took what I wanted, whenever I wanted it. I sure won't no church goin' man, an' faith meant no more to me than it does to you. But then one Christmas Eve, I went to a church preachin' with my gal — guess she was the real reason fer my goin'. She'd been a pesterin' me fer weeks to go, and finally said she won't agoin' to see me no more, if'n I didn't go with her. She sure was a pretty little filly — and, well, you know how it is. I finally got myself all dolled up in my best clothes and I went to that preachin' with her. And it was there that I was born agin'. It was a real pretty service. The preacher, he won't no Sin-killer, but a man what jest talked natural like, and then after he'd talk fer a while, he'd pull out his harmonica and started to play one on them Christmas songs. It was then that it happened. It was then that I knew I won't really me. That I'd been born a long time ago in another town named jest like this one, 'cept it won't even in the United States. 'Course, I don't mean I was really born there, but the spirit what is really me was! At first, I didn't know quite what I meant, but after a while thinkin' on it a heap, I knew sure as I knewed I was a breathin' that I was born there then. That that little baby in that manger was areally me in spirit. That's why tomorrow is really my birthday!"

"Your birthday?"

(To Be Continued)