

'Under The Winter Star' - Part Five

(The story: Alden Wallace has been swept over a cliff by an avalanche while searching for the huge vein of mica he feels lies on the Winter Star. In the meantime, Verba Williams has discovered the truth of her birth from her dying mother and is trying to assuage the shock with "nerve medicine").

BY W. L. (CUSS) RATHBURN

It was sheer velocity that saved Wallace from going to his death. For, had he been coming down the mountain with less momentum he couldn't have spanned the distance between the shelf of the cliff and the leafy hammock of interlocking vines, briars and laurel branches where he landed like a trapeze actor in a net, and which was equally buoyant.

Wedge as he was between the branches, and pinned down by

briars, it took Wallace some time to extricate himself. But, luckily, he still had his jackknife, and when he had cut some of the larger vines, the laurel branches slowly split, lowering him to a plush carpet of rotting leaves.

When he had regained his wits, and taken inventory of damage done to his person, Wallace was ready to proceed despite some rather painful bruises. Something seemed to tell him that he had no time to spare, that he must proceed at once to the summit of a nameless pinnacle. But, for some reason, it had never occurred to Wallace why he wanted to scale that pinnacle.

A distance of about 200 yards from where he had landed Wallace found a logging road and followed it to where it faded out, near the gap that lay just back of the pinnacle.

With no more effort than the

climbing of a slanting ladder Wallace scaled the pinnacle, wondering why he had been so silly as to try it from the other side.

The summit was a miniature desert of sand and shale in the midst of which was a huge boulder. Sitting atop this, Wallace was confronted with the question: Why am I here, and that same question repeated itself several times.

As Wallace gazed into the distances, searching for some landmark that he might identify, and seeing none except the Winter Star, he became interested in an area of dark green that contrasted sharply with the background of lighter green. He knew this was Rhododendron, and that, the lighter green was blackberry briars and Peruvian Cherry. And as he looked, it occurred to him that the laureled area approximated a fair map of the State of Texas. While thinking thus, the question of why he was there again obtruded, and, as if in answer, a blinding light hit him squarely in the eyes, temporarily blinding him.

The first thought that occurred to the young mountaineer was that someone was throwing the sun in his eyes by means of a mirror, a trick he had pulled many a time at school, but reasoned that such could not be the case, because the distance was too great for anyone to see him, even if they knew he was there.

And then it dawned on Wallace that what he had just seen was exactly what he had been looking for all his life—a mica vein.

There was only one brilliant flash, but it had been enough to assure Wallace that a large piece of mica was exposed to the sun.

With reference to the Texas map, the shining object was somewhere near the northeast corner of the panhandle. And Wallace's knowledge of the wilderness caused him to start looking for some landmark, and one as near as possible to the spot where he had seen what he felt sure was a mica out-cropping. But all he could find was a tall spruce which he judged to be somewhere in the vicinity of "Whita Falls."

Wallace felt sure that once he reached the tall spruce, it would be only a matter of searching out the area before he found some signs of an outcropping.

It is of no interest how Wallace negotiated the intervening wilder-

ness, but two hours had elapsed before Wallace reached the tall spruce.

A few feet from the foot of the tree, Wallace saw signs of an outcropping, and this led him to a cluster of boulders partially draped with moss which contrasted sharply with the lighter color of yellowish white quartz.

Among this moss-covered heap of boulders mica varying from the size of a man's hand to that of a washboard were sticking everywhere. The young man could scarcely refrain from shouting, "Uncle Wall, I've found it!"

Within two weeks Wallace had erected a crude cabin on the side of his prospect near where a cold spring gushed forth.

In the meantime, Wallace had told no one except Gordon Bates about his find. Bates was already getting legal matters in shape to file a claim for Wallace, and had already advanced sufficient funds for ammunition, food supplies and tools.

Wallace was just coming out of the Burnstown Hardware where he had purchased some shells for his 30-30 rifle, for groundhogs are plentiful in the Appalachians, as well as delicious.

"Looks like you're in a real jam," said Sheriff Batten as he accosted Wallace, "Let's talk about it at the office." It was at the office that Wallace learned that Aaron Williams was dead, and that he was under arrest for his murder.

When Wallace protested, saying he knew nothing about any murder, Sheriff Batten said, "This 30-30 Savage is a fine gun, but hardly capable of killing a man

all by itself." And, as he said this, reached under the desk, and came up with Wallace's rifle. It had only been fired once, and the empty shell was in the chamber.

Although Wallace had many friends, none were sufficiently influential to do him much good. But Gordon Bates did employ a lawyer to defend Wallace, but all he did was plead the boy guilty to second degree murder in order, as he put it, to save him from the gas chamber, and Wallace drew a sentence of 20 years which, as the judge explained, was only because he was young and had a clear record.

While in jail, Wallace's only visitors were the Meadows family, Sarah Renfro and Mr. Bates. Some people are loathe to show kindness to a man charged with the murder of a wealthy man.

Dan Stovall, who was jailer now, was exceptionally nice to Wallace, and secretly did many favors for him, but he had his orders, and wouldn't let Lola go near the cage.

The time had come for Wallace to be taken to the capital to begin his sentence, and Wallace was in the Sheriff's office.

Dan Stovall was looking at a road map while the sheriff looked over some papers lying on his desk. Finally, the sheriff looked at Wallace, and said, "Well, Wallace, my advice is to make a model prisoner, and always make it a point to be sorry of what you've done." At this, Wallace

said, under his breath, "Aw, go drop dead," but little did he think that Sheriff Batten would do just that, and within the next few minutes.

Sheriff Batten had started to say something when a commotion in Hank Murphy's Blacksmith Shop caused him to leave the office by the back door. When about five minutes had passed, Slick Peebles rushed into the office saying, "Come quick, I think Sheriff Batten's cashed in."

Stovall, with Wallace, in tow, hurried out to the blacksmith shop just in time to hear Dr. Grayson say, "I had known for a long time that he had a bad heart."

Back in the office, Peebles, who was the town marshal, said, "You're not going to try to delude that one by yourself, are you?"

"He's worth more dead than alive," Stovall said, hitching up his gun.

They rode for miles in silence, before Stovall said, "Don't take it so hard. It might not be true."

"There's none of it true," Wallace said glumly. Several minutes elapsed before Stovall said, "You know, Wallace, I think you're about as guilty of Aaron Williams' murder as I am of killing Sheriff Batten."

"But you're taking me to the pen just the same." "Now what ever gave you a silly idea like that?"

"I don't follow you. Why talk in parables, or whatever you call it?"

"Well, I know what you mean, so I'll be a little more to the point when I get to a place where I can get those bracelets off."

"You mean you're turning me loose?"

"Now if I wasn't I sure wouldn't let you get those arms free, 'cause I hear you've got more power than gumption."

The car swerved off to the right through a cottonfield, and headed toward a woodland a mile distant from the highway.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

CROSSWORD

- ACROSS**
- Son of Noah
 - Fence opening
 - River of Venezuela
 - Aside
 - Dark blue
 - Zodiac sign
 - Composition for 8 parts
 - Little island
 - Chinese mile
 - Salt
 - Man's nickname (poss.)
 - Cripple
 - Born
 - Overcorrective
 - Sailor
 - Self
 - Curved line
 - Cereal grain
 - Argent (abbr.)
 - Bellow
 - A prize
 - Photograph book
 - Move sideways
 - Reigning beauty
 - Corned
 - Obscure
 - Dispute

DOWN

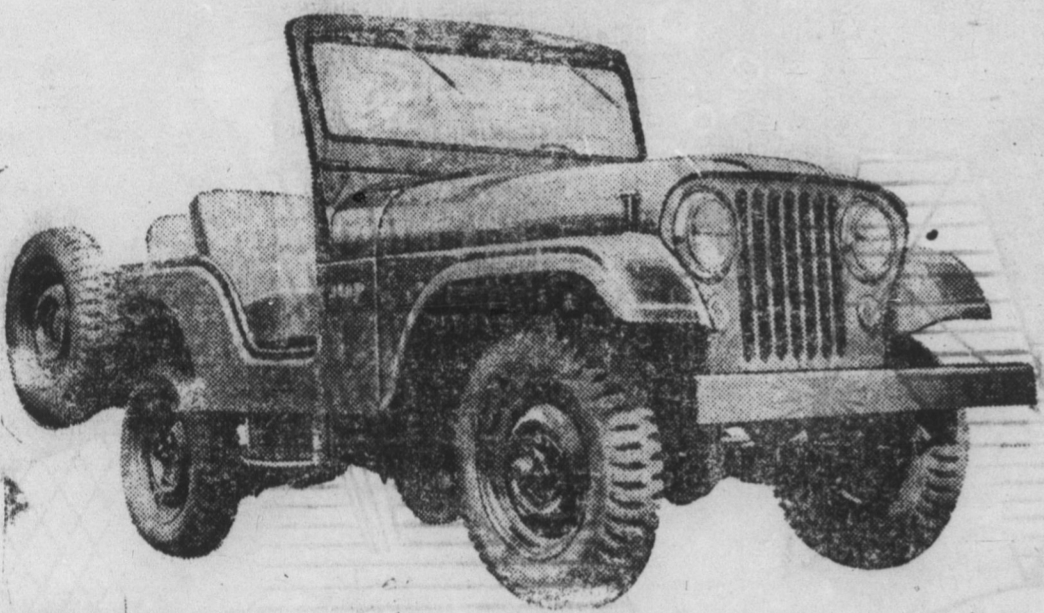
- Noteworthy
- Injure
- Gashe
- Encounters
- Biblical sea
- Sacred hill
- Articles of furniture
- Went astray
- God's youth and beauty
- Soviet news agency
- Wrathful
- Doctor's degree
- Newt
- Look at
- Rowers
- Exists
- Tangled
- Lead, as cattle
- Native
- Arabia
- Play part
- A bridge support
- Orient's
- Govern
- Telegraph
- Protectorate
- (S. Arab.)



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