

By Ernest Haycox

Where life ended for some, and began for others. The cleaning of the slate by the man known as Malpais Bill, and some new and more enduring writing upon it by the same gentleman



ILLUSTRATED BY
RONALD McLEOD

STAGE TO LORDSBURG

THIS was one of those years in the Territory when Apache smoke signals spiraled up from the stony mountain summits and many a ranch house lay as a square of blackened ashes on the ground and the departure of a stage from Tonto was the beginning of an adventure that had no certain happy ending. . . .

The stage and its six horses waited in front of Weilner's store on the north side of Tonto's square. Happy Stuart was on the box, the ribbons between his fingers and one foot teetering on the brake; and John Strang rode shotgun guard, and an escort of ten cavalymen waited behind the coach, half asleep in their saddles.

At four-thirty in the morning this high air was quite cold, though the sun had begun to flush the sky eastward. A small crowd stood in the square, presenting their final messages to the passengers now entering the coach. There was a girl going down to marry an infantry officer, a whisky drummer from Kansas City, an Englishman all length and bony corners and bearing with him an enormous sporting rifle, a gambler, a solid-shouldered cattleman on his way to New Mexico and a slim blond man upon whom both Happy Stuart and the shotgun guard placed a narrow-eyed interest.

This seemed all until the blond man drew back from the coach door; and then a girl known commonly throughout the Territory as Henriette came quietly from the crowd. She was small and quiet, with a touch of paleness in her cheeks, and her dark eyes lifted at the blond man's unexpected courtesy, showing him a faint surprise. There was this small moment of delay and then the girl caught up her dress and stepped into the coach.

Men in the crowd were smiling but the blond one turned, his motion like the swift cut of a knife, and his sharp attention covered that group until the smiling quit. He was tall, lean-flanked, and definitely stamped by the guns slung low on his hips. But it wasn't the guns alone; something in his face, so watchful and so smooth, showed his trade.

Afterward he got into the coach and slammed the door.

Happy Stuart kicked off the brakes and yelled, "Hi!" Tonto's people were calling out their last farewells and the six horses broke into a trot and the stage lunged on its fore-and-aft springs and rolled from town with dust dripping off its wheels like water, the cavalymen trotting briskly behind. So they tipped down the long grade, bound on a journey no stage had attempted during the last forty-five days. Out below in the desert's distance stood the relay stations they hoped to reach and pass. Between lay a country swept empty by the quick raids of Geronimo's men.

The Englishman, the gambler and the blond man sat jammed together in the forward seat, riding backward to the course of the stage. The drummer and the cattleman occupied the uncomfortable middle bench; the two women shared the rear seat. The cattleman faced Henriette, his knees almost touching her. He had one arm hooked over the door's window sill to steady himself. A huge gold nugget slid gently back and forth along the watch chain slung across his wide chest, and a chunk of black hair lay below his hat. His eyes considered Henriette, reading something in the girl that caused him to show her a deliberate smile. Henriette dropped her glance to the gloved tips of her fingers, cheeks unstirred.

THEY were all strangers packed closely together, with nothing in common save a destination. Yet the cattleman's smile and the boldness of his eyes were something as audible as speech, noted by everyone except the Englishman, who sat bolt upright in his corner, covered by a stony indifference. The army girl, tall and calmly pretty, threw a quick side glance at Henriette and afterward looked away with a touch of color. The gambler saw this interchange of glances and showed the cattleman an irritated attention. The whisky drummer's eyes narrowed a little and some inward cynicism made a faint change on his lips. He removed his hat to show a bald head already beginning to sweat; his cigar

smoke turned the coach cloudy and ashes kept dropping on his vest.

The blond man had observed Henriette's glance drop from the cattleman, and something bright disturbed his observant eyes; he tipped his hat well over his face and watched her—not boldly, but as though he were puzzled. Once her glance lifted and touched him. But he had been on guard against that, and was quick to look away.

The army girl coughed gently behind her hand, whereupon the gambler tapped the whisky drummer on the shoulder. "Get rid of that." The drummer appeared startled. He grumbled, "Beg pardon," and tossed the cigar through the window.

All this while the coach went tearing down the ceaseless turns of the mountain road, its heavy wheels slamming through the road ruts, whining at the turns, rocking interminably on its fore-and-aft springs. Occasionally the strident yell of Happy Stuart washed back: "Hi, Nellie! Hi, yi!" The whisky drummer braced himself against the door and closed his eyes.

Three hours from Tonto the road, making a last round sweep, let them down into the flat desert. Here the stage stopped and the men got out to stretch. The gambler spoke to the army girl, gently: "Perhaps you would find my seat more comfortable." The army girl said, "Thank you," and changed over. The cavalry sergeant rode up to the stage, speaking to Happy Stuart.

"We'll be goin' back now—and good luck to ye."

The men piled in, the gambler taking the place beside Henriette. The blond man drew his long legs together to give the army girl more room, and watched Henriette's face. A hard sun beat fully on the coach and dust began to whip up like fire smoke. Without escort they rolled across a flat earth broken only by cacti standing against a dazzling light. In the far distance, behind a blue heat haze, lay the faint suggestion of mountains.

The cattleman reached up and tugged at the ends of his mustache and smiled again at Henriette. The army girl spoke to the blond man: "How far is it to the noon station?" The blond man said courteously: "Twenty miles." The gambler watched the army girl, something somber on his thin face, as though the run of her voice reminded him of things long forgotten.

THE miles fell behind and the smell of alkali dust got thicker. Henriette rested against the corner of the coach, her eyes dropped to the tips of her gloves. She made an enigmatic, disinterested shape there; she seemed past stirring, beyond laughter. She was young, yet she had a knowledge that placed the cattleman and the gambler and the drummer and the army girl in their exact places; and she knew why the gambler had offered the army girl his seat. The army girl was in one world and she was in another, as everyone in the coach understood. It had no effect on her, for this was a distinction she had learned long ago. Only the blond man broke through her indifference. His name was Malpais Bill, and she could see the wildness in the corners of his eyes and in the long crease of his lips; it was a stamp that would never come off. Yet something flowed out of him toward her that was different than the predatory curiosity of other men; something gallant, something gentle.

Up on the box Happy Stuart pointed to the hazy outline two miles away. "Injuns ain't burned that anyhow." The sun was directly overhead, turning the

light of the world a cruel brass-yellow. The crooked crack of a dry wash opened across the two deep ruts that made this road. Johnny Strang shifted the gun in his lap. "What's Malpais Bill ridin' with us for?"

"I guess I wouldn't ask him," returned Happy Stuart and studied the wash with a quick eye. The road fell into it roughly and he got a tighter grip on the reins and yelled: "Hang on! Hi, Nelly! Hi!" The six horses plunged down the rough side of the wash and for a moment the coach stood alone, high and lonely on the break, and then went reeling over the rim. It struck the gravel with a roar, the front wheels bouncing and the back wheels skewing around. The horses faltered but Happy Stuart cursed at his leaders and got them into a run again. The horses lunged up the far side of the wash two and two, their muscles bunching and the soft dirt flying in yellow clouds. The front wheels struck solidly and something cracked like a pistol shot as the stage rose out of the wash, teetered crosswise and then fell ponderously on its side, splintering the coach panels.

Johnny Strang jumped clear. Happy Stuart hung to the handrail with one hand and hauled on the reins with the other, and stood up while the passengers crawled through the upper door. All the men, except the whisky drummer, put their shoulders to the coach and heaved it upright again. The whisky drummer stood strangely in the bright sunlight, shaking his head dumbly while the others climbed back in. Happy Stuart said, "All right, brother, git aboard."

THE drummer climbed in slowly and the stage ran on. There was a low, gray 'dobe relay station squatted on the desert dead ahead with a scatter of corals about it and a flag hanging limp on a crooked pole. Men came out of the 'dobe's dark interior and stood in the shade of the porch gallery. Happy Stuart rolled up and stopped. He said to a lanky man: "Hi, Mack. Where's the Injuns?"

The passengers were filing into the 'dobe's dining room. The lanky one drawled: "You'll see 'em before tomorrow night." Hostlers came up to change horses.

The little dining room was cool after the coach, cool and still. A fat Mexican woman ran in and out with the food platters. Happy Stuart said, "Ten minutes," and brushed the alkali dust from his mouth and fell to eating.

The long-jawed Mack said: "Catlin's ranch burned last night. Was a troop of cavalry around here yesterday. Came and went. You'll git to the Gap tonight, all right, but I don't know about the mountains beyond. A little trouble?"

"A little," said Happy briefly, and rose. This was the end of rest. The passengers followed, with the whisky drummer straggling at the rear, reaching deeply for wind. The coach rolled away again, Mack's voice pursuing them: "Hit it a lick, Happy, if you see any dust rollin' out of the east."

Heat had condensed in the coach and the little wind fanned up by the run of the horses was stifling to the lungs; the desert floor projected its white glitter endlessly away until lost in the smoky haze. The cattleman's knees bumped Henriette gently and he kept watching her, a celluloid toothpick drooped between his lips. Happy Stuart's voice ran back, profane and urgent, keeping the speed of the coach constant through the ruts. The whisky drummer's eyes were round and strained and his mouth was open and all the color had gone out of his face. The gambler observed this without expression and without care; and once the cattleman, feeling the sag of the whisky drummer's shoulder, shoved him away. The Englishman sat



"No," she said. "I am known all through the Territory. But I can remember that you asked me"

bolt upright, staring at the passing desert unemotionally. The army girl spoke to Malpais Bill: "What is the next stop?"

"Gap Creek."
"Will we meet soldiers there?"

He said: "I expect we'll have an escort over the hills into Lordsburg."

And at four o'clock of this furnace-hot afternoon the whisky drummer made a feeble gesture with one hand and fell forward into the gambler's lap. The cattleman shrugged his shoulders and put a head through the window, calling up to Happy Stuart: "Wait a minute." When the stage stopped everybody climbed out and the blond man helped the gambler lay the whisky drummer in the sweltering patch of shade created by the coach. Neither Happy Stuart nor the shotgun guard bothered to get down. The whisky drummer's lips moved a little but nobody said anything and nobody knew what to do—until Henriette stepped forward.

SHE dropped to the ground, lifting the whisky drummer's shoulders and head against her breast. He opened his eyes and there was something in them that they all could see, like relief and ease, like gratefulness. She murmured: "You are all right," gently, and her smile was soft and pleasant, turning her lips maternal. There was this wisdom in her, this knowledge of the fears that men concealed behind their manners, the deep hungers that rode them so savagely, and the loneliness that drove them to women of her kind. She repeated, "You are all right," and watched this whisky drummer's eyes lose the wildness of what he knew.

The army girl's face showed shock. The gambler and the cattleman looked down at the whisky drummer quite impersonally. The blond man watched Henriette through lids half closed, but the bright flare of a powerful interest broke the severe lines of his cheeks. He held a cigarette between his fingers; he had forgotten it.

Happy Stuart said: "We can't stay here."

The gambler bent down to catch the whisky drummer under the arms. Henriette rose and said, "Bring him to me," and got into the coach. The blond man and the gambler lifted the drummer through the door so that he was lying down along the back seat, cushioned on Henriette's lap. They all got in and the coach rolled on. The drummer groaned a little, whispering: "Thanks—thanks." And the blond man, searching Henriette's face for every shred of expression, drew a gusty breath.

They went on like this, the big wheels pounding the ruts of the road while a lowering sun blazed through the coach windows. The mountain bulwarks began to march nearer, more definite in the blue fog. The cattleman's eyes were small and brilliant and touched Henriette personally, but the gambler bent toward Henriette to say: "If you are tired—"

"No," she said. "No. He's dead."
The army girl stifled a small cry. The gambler bent nearer the whisky drummer, and then they were all looking at Henriette; even the Englishman stared at her for a moment, faint curiosity in his eyes. She was remotely smiling, her lips broad and soft. She held the drum-

mer's head with both her hands and continued to hold him like that until, at the swift fall of dusk, they rolled across the last of the desert floor and drew up before Gap Station.

The cattleman kicked open the door and stepped out, grunting as his stiff legs touched the ground. The gambler pulled the drummer up so that Henriette could leave. They all came out, their bones tired from the shaking. Happy Stuart climbed from the box, his face a gray mask of alkali and his eyes bloodshot. He said, "Who's dead?" and looked into the coach. People sauntered from the station yard, walking with the indolence of twilight. Happy Stuart said, "Well, he won't worry about tomorrow," and turned away.

A SHORT man with a tremendous stomach shuffled through the dusk. He said: "Wasn't sure you'd try to git through yet, Happy."

"Where's the soldiers for tomorrow?"
"Other side of the mountains. Everybody's chased out. What ain't forted up here was sent into Lordsburg. You men will bunk in the barn. I'll make out for the ladies somehow." He looked at the army girl and appraised Henriette instantly. His eyes slid on to Malpais Bill standing in the background and recognition stirred him then and made his voice careful: "Hello, Bill. Whut brings you this way?"

Malpais Bill's cigarette glowed in the gathering dusk and Henriette caught the brief image of his face, serene and watchful. Malpais Bill's tone was easy; it was soft: "Just the trip."

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Bringing Up Baby

BY HAGAR WILDE

With a great deal of pleasure we give you *Baby*, the only panther in the history of music with a critical ear

Baby, stretching luxuriously, hesitated only a moment between love and duty. He followed the dog, disappearing into the woods



DAVID was surprised when Suzan's call was announced. They'd had a row the night before and it was Suzan's custom to punish the people who quarreled with her by making them call first, thereby placing them at a disadvantage. David reflected that Suzan must want something. For a brief moment he considered having Ching tell her that he had gone out with a "velly plitty lady" but Suzan was smart and she'd know that he was skulking there listening to every word. No, the thing to do was take this call and make Suzan feel that she'd been something of a weakling to ring him up.

He said, "Hello, Suzan." In brighter moments she was Suzy.

Suzan's voice was vague and far away as though she were lighting a cigarette, which she was. "Do you want a panther?"

"Do I want a panther?" David said. He untwisted the telephone cord, a futile gesture, but instinctive. "I can't hear you very well. Come closer to the transmitter."

Her voice came, cupped and resounding, even scratching a little along the sides of the wires. "I said, do you want a panther?"

"No," David said. "Why should I?"

"Well, for that matter," Suzan said peevishly, "why should I? But I've got one."

"Where would you get a panther?"

"Mark."

Mark was her brother. He'd been away for two months, nobody knew quite where except that he was below the equator. An important point presented itself to David. "How big?" he said.

"Big," said Suzan. "He just fits into the bathroom. Aunt Elizabeth is coming and I have to farm the beast out somewhere."

"Suzan Vance, you get right out of that apartment."

"Nonsense," said Suzan. "I have a lease. Maybe Tommy—"

"Tommy's out of town."

"Rats," Suzan said.

SUZAN'S maid had taken her stand in the corridor but she had retained a key. This she delivered to David, who arrived breathless, with an oration. "It's not me that's putting any wild beast into any bathroom. If she wants it in the bathroom she can put it in the bathroom and I wish her good luck."

At this point, Suzan, a bit disheveled, popped her head out at them. "You can come in now, lionheart. I've stowed him away. Oh, hello, David."