
VI

In the streets – Brassteeth – Los heréticos – A veteran of the late war – Mier – Doniphan – The Lipan burial – Goldseekers – The scalphunters – The judge – Freed from the prison – Et de ceo se mettent en le pays.

With daylight men rose from the hay and crouched on their haunches and regarded the new arrivals without curiosity. They were half naked and they sucked their teeth and snuffled and stirred and picked at themselves like apes. A chary light had washed a high small window from the dark and an early streetvendor'd begun to cry his wares.

Their morning feed was bowls of cold piñole and they were fitted with chains and routed out into the streets clanking and stinking. Overseen all day by a goldtoothed pervert who carried a plaited rawhide quirt and harried them down the gutters on their knees gathering up the filth. Under the wheels of vending-carts, the legs of beggars, dragging behind them their sacks of refuse. In the afternoon they sat in the shade of a wall and ate their dinner and watched two dogs hung together in the street sidle and step.

How do you like city life? said Toadvine.

I dont like it worth a damn so far.

I keep waitin for it to take with me but it aint done it.

They watched the overseer covertly as he passed, his hands clasped behind his back, his cap cocked over one eye. The kid spat.

I seen him first, said Toadvine.

Seen who first.

You know who. Old Brassteeth yonder.

The kid looked after the sauntering figure.

My biggest worry is that somethin will happen to him. I pray daily for the Lord to watch over him.

How you think you goin to get out of this jackpot that you're in?

We'll get out. It aint like the cárcel.

What's the cárcel?

State penitentiary. There's old pilgrims in there come down the trail back in the twenties.

The kid watched the dogs.

After a while the guard came back along the wall kicking the feet of any who were sleeping. The younger guard carried his escopeta at the ready as if there might be some fabled uprising among these chained and tattered felons. Vamonos, vamonos, he called. The prisoners rose and shuffled out into the sun. A small bell was ringing and a coach was coming up the street. They stood along the curb and took off their hats. The guidon passed ringing the bell and then the coach. It had an eye painted on the side and four mules to draw it, taking the host to some soul. A fat priest tottered after carrying an image. The guards were going among the prisoners snatching the hats from the heads of the newcomers and pressing them into their infidel hands.

When the coach had passed they donned their hats again and moved on. The dogs stood tail to tail. Two other dogs sat a little apart, squatting loosely in their skins, just frames of dogs in napless hides watching the coupled dogs and then watching the prisoners clanking away up the street. All lightly shimmering in the heat, these lifeforms, like wonders much reduced. Rough likenesses thrown up at hearsay after the things themselves had faded in men's minds.

He'd taken up a pallet between Toadvine and another Kentuckian, a veteran of the war. This man had returned to claim some darkeyed love he'd left behind two years before when Doniphan's command pulled east for Saltillo and the officers had had to drive back hundreds of young girls dressed as boys that took the road behind the army. Now he would stand in the street solitary in his chains and strangely unassuming, gazing out across the tops of the heads of the townspeople, and at night he'd tell them of his years in the west, an amiable warrior, a reticent man. He'd been at Mier where they fought until the drain tiles and the gutters and the spouts from the azoteas ran with blood by the gallon and he told them how the brittle old spanish bells would explode when hit and how he sat against a wall with his shattered leg stretched out on the cobbles before him listening to a lull in the firing that grew into a strange silence and in this silence there grew a low rumbling that he took for thunder until a cannonball came around the corner trundling over the stones like a wayward bowl and went past and down the street and disappeared from sight. He told how they'd taken the city of Chihuahua, an army of irregulars that fought in rags and underwear and how the cannonballs were solid copper and came loping through the grass like runaway suns and even the horses learned to sidestep or straddle them and how the dames of the city rode up into the hills in buggies and picnicked and watched the battle and how at night as they sat by the fires they could hear the moans of the dying out on the plain and see by its lantern the deadcart moving among them like a hearse from limbo.

They had gravel enough, said the veteran, but they didnt know how to fight. They'd stick. You heard stories about how they found em chained to the trailspades of their pieces, limber-teams and all, but if they was I never seen it. We picked powder in the locks yonder. Blowed them gates open. People in here looked like skinned rats. Whitest Mexicans you'll ever see. Thowed theirselves down and commenced kissin our feet and such. Old Bill, he just turned em all loose. Hell, he didnt know what they'd done. Just told em not to steal nothin. Of course they stole everthing they could get their hands on. Whipped two of em and they both died of it and the very next day another bunch run off with some mules and Bill just flat out hung

them fools. Which they did likewise perish of. But I never reckoned I'd be in here my own self.

They were squatting crosslegged by candlelight eating from clay bowls with their fingers. The kid looked up. He poked at the bowl.

What is this? he said.

That's prime bullmeat, son. From the corrida. You'll get it of a Sunday night.

You best keep chewin. Dont let it feel ye to weaken.

He chewed. He chewed and he told them of the encounter with the Comanche and they chewed and listened and nodded.

I'm proud I missed that dance, said the veteran. Them is some cruel sons of bitches. I know of one old boy up on the Llano near the dutch settlements, they caught him, took his horse and all. Left him to walk it. He come crawlin into Fredericksburg on his hands and knees buck naked about six days later and you know what they'd done? Cut the bottoms of his feet off.

Toadvine shook his head. He gestured toward the veteran. Grannyrat here knows em, he told the kid. Fought em. Aint ye, Granny?

The veteran waved his hand. Shot some stealin horses is all. Down towards Saltillo. Wasnt nothin to it. There was a cave down there had been a Lipan burial. Must of been a thousand indians in there all settin around. Had on their best robes and blankets and all. Had their bows and their knives, whatever. Beads. The Mexicans carried everthing off. Stripped em naked. Took it all. They carried off whole indians to their homes and set em in the corner all dressed up but they begun to come apart when they got out of that cave air and they had to be thowed out. Towards the last of it they was some Americans went in there and scalped what was left of em and tried to sell the scalps in Durango. I dont know if they had any luck about it or not. I expect some of them injins had been dead a hundred year.

Toadvine was toweling up grease from his bowl with a folded tortilla. He squinted at the kid in the candlelight. What do you reckon we could get for old Brassteeth's teeth? he said.

They saw patched argonauts from the states driving mules through the streets on their way south through the mountains to the coast. Goldseekers. Itinerant degenerates bleeding westward like some heliotropic plague. They nodded or spoke to the prisoners and dropped tobacco and coins in the street beside them.

They saw blackeyed young girls with painted faces smoking little cigars, going arm in arm and eyeing them brazenly. They saw the governor himself erect and formal within his silkmullioned sulky clatter forth from the double doors of the palace courtyard and they saw one day a pack of viciouslooking humans mounted on unshod indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description, revolvers of enormous weight and bowieknives the size of claymores and short twobarreled rifles with bores you could stick your thumbs in and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears and the horses rawlooking and wild in the eye and their teeth bared like feral dogs and riding also in the company a number of halfnaked savages reeling in the saddle, dangerous, filthy, brutal, the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh.

Foremost among them, outsized and childlike with his naked face, rode the judge. His cheeks were ruddy and he was smiling and bowing to the ladies and doffing his filthy hat. The enormous dome of his head when he bared it was blinding white and perfectly circumscribed about so that it looked to have been painted. He and the reeking horde of rabble with him passed on through the stunned streets and hove up before the governor's palace where their leader, a small blackhaired man, clapped for entrance by kicking at the oaken doors with his boot. The doors were opened forthwith and they rode in, rode in all, and the doors were closed again.

Gentlemens, said Toadvine, I'll guarangoddamnee ye I know what that there is about.

The following day the judge in the company of others stood in the street smoking a cigar and rocking back on his heels. He wore a pair of good

kidskin boots and he was studying the prisoners where they knelt in the gutter clutching up the filth with their bare hands. The kid was watching the judge. When the judge's eyes fell upon him he took the cigar from between his teeth and smiled. Or he seemed to smile. Then he put the cigar between his teeth again.

That night Toadvine called them together and they crouched by the wall and spoke in whispers.

His name is Glanton, said Toadvine. He's got a contract with Trias. They're to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gómez's head. I told him there was three of us. Gentlemens, we're gettin out of this shithole.

We aint got no outfits.

He knows that. He said he'd find anybody that was a guaranteed hand and take it out of their shares. So dont let on like you aint no seasoned indiankiller cause I claimed we was three of the best.

Three days later they rode out single file through the streets with the governor and his party, the governor on a pale gray stallion and the killers on their small warponies, smiling and bowing and the lovely darkskinned girls throwing flowers from the windows and some blowing kisses and small boys running alongside and old men waving their hats and crying out huzzahs and Toadvine and the kid and the veteran bringing up the rear, the veteran's feet tucked into tapaderos slung nearly to the ground, so long were his legs, so short the horse's. Out to the edge of the city by the old stone aqueduct where the governor gave them his blessing and drank their health and their fortune in a simple ceremonial and they took the road up country.