

"THREE

YOUNG

TEXANS"

• A jamboree was under way at Piper's barn near Maverick on the Rio Grande, that night the Western Flyer was robbed of a big army payroll.

Sheriff Dan Carter, soft-spoken yet relentless when it came to duty, turned up at the dance not far behind his young nephew, Johnny Colt. Johnny had just cut in on rancher Jeff Blair's daughter, Rusty, retiring her previous partner, Tony Ballew, to the sidelines. Then in walked his Uncle Dan with the dramatic news, halting the rollicking folk music.

Dan quickly sketched in his story for the crowd. "I'm forming a posse to scout this area. Those men who came on horseback hold up their hands."

Johnny had to take his arm from around Rusty's slim waist to oblige. As he did so, he couldn't help a quick side glance at Tony. For Tony had driven Rusty's buckboard over from the Blair ranch, and thus was exempt.

The warm rivalry between them had begun years back, when they were all growing up—two tall boys and a winsome girl—three inseparable young Texans. If Rusty had a choice between them, she never let either boy know it. Tonight, although concerned at Johnny's late arrival, she'd been satisfied with his explanation that he had been rounding up a few stray calves out at his father's place.

But this was no time for him to be thinking of Rusty. Dan Carter was speaking.

"We've received no reports of strangers. See if every man can give a satisfactory account of where he was

Catur, the crook Johnny'd seen in his father's barn, whipped his gun out of its holster before he could even reach for it.

At Jim's orders, Sheriff Carter unlocked the handcuffs he'd put on Johnny's wrists. "Snap them on him. Son," Jim said.





While Johnny was pursuing the bandit, the others stayed with Tony, and he told them the truth about the payroll robbery.



Two stalwart boys and one
slender girl, as children,
shared their joys and their
sorrows. Now, as adults, they
took a grievous gamble—with
Death holding the stakes!

"THREE YOUNG TEXANS"

Adapted from the PANORAMIC
Production—Released through 20TH
CENTURY-FOX FILM CORP.—Pro-
duced by LEONARD GOLDSTEIN—
Directed by HENRY LEVIN—Screen-
play by GERALD DRAYSON ADAMS
—Based on a Story by WILLIAM
MACLEOD RAINE—Color by TECH-
NICOLOR—Fictionized by DAVID
FRASER

Rusty Blair Mitzi Gaynor
Tony Ballew.....Keefe Brasselle
Johnny Colt..... Jeffrey Hunter
Jim Colt..... Harvey Stephens
Sheriff Carter.....Dan Riss
Apache Joe.....Michael Ansara
Catur.....Aaron Spelling
Jeff Blair..... Morris Aakram
Bill McAdoo..... Frank Wilcox
Mrs. Colt Helen Wallace
Thorpe.....John Harmon

'round seven-thirty this evening." Firm purpose underlay the Sheriff's tone. "All right, boys! Hit leather!"

With the others chosen for the posse, Johnny hurried from the barn to spur a waiting pony. But his rugged face was tense. It was a strange feeling, after all, to be racing through the night in search of a bandit—when it was you, yourself, who had held up the *Western Flyer*!

He didn't ride in to his father's place till early morning, so he'd had several hours to ponder many recent happenings.

Scant six months ago, his father, Jim Colt, had been a prosperous cattleman, running fifteen thousand head of long-horns. Then the dread "black leg" had hit his herds, decimating them. Now Jim worked for wages as telegraph dispatcher in the railroad depot at Twin Buttes—and wasted his money feverishly at poker tables below the border in Del Norte. Young Johnny, born to a saddle, rode for pay as a hand at Jeff Blair's Bar-B—and hoarded wages to buy new stock for the once-great Colt spread.

The long, tough struggle ahead had not dismayed him, so far as his hopes about Rusty were concerned. But something that had happened only this afternoon had all but shattered his universe.

He had been out by the barn with his dad when tough-looking strangers had come to talk to the elder Colt. Jim had sent Johnny back to the house. But, sensing trouble, Johnny had circled back and listened.

What he'd heard had made his blood run cold. Unmistakably, his father was in with the two strangers on a deal to rob the *Flyer* of its payroll. Jim's part was to persuade the mail clerk to open up his locked door when the crack train halted at Twin Buttes to take on water. After that—

The once proud Jim Colt mixed up with bandits? All through the following hours, Johnny had tried not to believe it. Yet he knew it was true. And that was why a lone masked figure had taken over the moneybags before the *Flyer* ever pulled into Twin Buttes. That was why the train stopped, with Thorpe, the mail clerk, and the rest of the crew excitedly telling a stunned Jim Colt about the holdup.

Later, four canvas sacks had been dumped into a hole in the clay up Red Canyon—together with a fifth smaller sack. It was Johnny's own, the money in that fifth sack. Down at Eagle Pass, after the last Bar-B cattle drive, Jeff Blair had paid off his hands early. After gambling away his entire pay, Tony Ballew had coaxed Johnny into taking a single spin on the roulette wheel at the Lady Luck Saloon. And the long chance had paid off handsomely. Seven hundred dollars.

Johnny's partner in everything, all their grown lives, Tony had tried to wheedle a cut of the winnings. But Johnny had refused him. That money could buy a lot of calves. Half the calves would be Tony's, but not half the cash to squander. These winnings must be kept safe.

At the corral, in the early dawn, Johnny found his father watering calves. Asking how the search had fared, Jim never quite met his son's eyes.

"Uncle Dan and his deputies are still checking," Johnny answered unhappily. "They've an idea the bandit might be a local man."

• It was past breakfast time before Sheriff Dan Carter showed up at his sister's place. He had Jeff Blair and Rusty and Tony in tow.

Johnny had a feeling that his uncle was suspecting something; he asked Jim Colt too casually if any of his calves had strayed the afternoon before. Instantly, upon Jim's denial, Carter's gaze fixed on Johnny.

As if to prepare him, Rusty said, hastily, "Someone told him you didn't get to the jamboree until almost ten-thirty last night."

Tony grinned. "I explained that you'd been rounding up stray calves."

But Dan Carter was not grinning as he spoke. "Where were you, Johnny?"

"Just riding around," Johnny muttered. "You'll have to be more specific."

"Just riding around. Uncle Dan," he repeated doggedly. He could see his uncle's suspicion crystallize to certainty.

Then Tony laughed. "I know where he was. We won seven hundred bucks at the Lady Luck in Eagle Pass. I wanted my half, but Johnny said we'd put it into calves. When Johnny and I were kids, we found an old adobe shack in Red Canyon, and had a secret hiding place where we kept our treasure. That's where Johnny was."

Johnny felt his blood running cold as Tony beamed at him. "You should have wiped your boots clean before you got to the jamboree, pardner! Red Canyon's the only place there's red clay that's wet." He turned to Carter. "If you don't believe us, Sheriff, why not ride out and see for yourself?"

To Johnny's horror, his uncle accepted the blithe suggestion. He said, slowly, "Get your horse, Johnny."

Almost in silence, the party rode out to Red Canyon. There, near the tumbling adobe shack where he and Tony had once played, they dismounted. Smiling as he thrust aside the brush, Tony led them straight to the hole.

In mute anguish, Johnny gauged the distance back to the horses. When the instant came, he must make his desperate getaway. He thought that Rusty was watching him secretly, but he could not be sure.

"There you are, Sheriff!" said Tony, with a flourish.

Johnny gaped. For Tony had lifted out only one small sack. Behind it, the hole obviously was empty. Stunned, Johnny watched his old friend.

Dan turned slowly. "Better find a new hiding place for it, Johnny."

"Don't worry." Johnny moistened his lips. "I will." He reached for the sack of money, then turned to Rusty and thrust it into her hands. He said, grimly, "Keep it for us till I'm ready to buy those calves."

• It wasn't until later in the day that, knowing Tony would be forking hay in the Bar-B barn loft, Johnny got to see him alone. As he climbed the ladder, Tony turned to grin at him.

"Made you sweat plenty, didn't I, pardner?" He laughed. "Boy, was I surprised when I found all that loot!"

"Where is it?" demanded Johnny.

"Not far from where it was. Why? Figure on bucking the wheel again?"

"I have other plans for it," answered Johnny. "I'm turning the whole fifty thousand back to the railroad."

Outraged, Tony slammed down his fork. "Give it back? You crazy? Look, Johnny, we're partners. Nobody suspects us. Wait a month or so, then head for California and buy us a big spread! It's the chance of a lifetime!"

"Where is it? Or do I have to whale it out of you?"

Lunging for him, Tony snarled, "I'm taking that money to California!"

Bodies locked, toe to toe, they began slugging it out. The hay trap on which they were standing gave, at last, before the violence of their battle. Down into piled hay below they plummeted, still fighting.

The first intimation either had of Rusty's presence was a deluge as a bucket of cold water sluiced over them. Spluttering, they fell apart.

"Now!" she demanded. "Will someone tell me what this is all about?"

Neither boy answered. Tony muttered sourly that she'd better ask Johnny, then stalked from the barn.

Rusty turned back to Johnny gravely. "I think I know why you two were fighting," she said. "The Sheriff this morning—you were afraid he'd find something else in that cache. I figure Tony swiped that something to protect you, and wants to return it."

Johnny stared at her miserably. "Better tell it to the Sheriff."

"Why did you do it?" Her pretty eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

It was agony to know what she was thinking. But what about his father—and what about Tony—if he gave a straight answer? Johnny spoke gruffly, knowing how his evasion would hurt her. "I had my reason!" (Continued on Page 80)

Three Young Texans

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• If Tony had not swaggered into Hobb's Emporium that same afternoon to buy a fancy shirt—and if Dan Carter had not been there at the time, to witness the suspicious extravagance of a cowpoke who had gone broke at the Lady Luck last payday—things might have stalemated there.

But Tony was too cocksure to be prudent. And Dan was too shrewd to be put off by his glib tale that Rusty had given him part of Johnny's cache. Consequently, on toward sundown, Dan Carter was on his way to the Bar-B, with Tony as prisoner, to corroborate—or disprove—the unlikely story.

"A man's got a right to have money in his pockets," was all that a now-sullen Tony would say.

Halfway to the Bar-B, a rattlesnake spooked Dan's horse in the canyon, and Tony snatched the chance to make a bolt for liberty.

Meanwhile, an uneasy Jim Colt was receiving a surprise caller down at his barn. Catur, one of his recent card companions, had sought him out.

"Joe wants a little talk with you," Johnny heard a strange voice say, as he himself followed his father to the barn. "He's waiting across the river. Thinks you tipped off your boy and he grabbed that payroll."

The two men, emerging from the barn, met Johnny face to face. He saw the alarm in his father's eyes. But it was the other face—hard, evil—on which Johnny concentrated. "Pa's through with you. Start traveling!"

"Ever hear of the Apache gang?" The stranger sneered coldly. "If you want your Pa alive, let him go. The name of my boss is Apache Joe."

It was a notorious name. Yet Johnny did not flinch. "Pa's through."

He hit the dirt just as Catur tilted his holster and fired without drawing. The bullet whined away. Johnny, too, had fired as he went down. A red furrow plowed across Catur's gun hand. Then Jim Colt grabbed the man.

Together, father and son marched their unwelcome guest to his horse and saw him on his way—gunless now. Catur's eyes were dead.

Turning back toward the barn, Johnny flung his arm over Jim's sagging shoulders. "Nice friends you pick, Pa," he said, trying to speak lightly.

Jim looked at him sadly. "How much do you know, Son?"

"Enough. How'd you happen to tie in with those buzzards?"

"Shot an American in a poker game across the line. He drew first—but Apache Joe and Catur were the only witnesses."

"So they blackmailed you into agreeing to help them?"

"That's right." Jim sighed deeply. "That lone bandit sure saved my bacon."

"From now on," Johnny said, "they've got two Colts to deal with, Pa."

• It was Rusty, spurring over from the Bar-B, who first warned Johnny that Tony was in trouble with Sheriff Carter. Recalling the habits of their childhood, the two of them reasoned that Tony would likely head for Red Canyon to hide out. Galloping across country, they were waiting in the brush when a lone horseman began to draw near the adobe shack.

Tony had lost little of his cockiness in the day's misadventure. But Rusty was really worried. "The Sheriff stopped by the ranch to ask if I'd given you any of Johnny's money. I was in my bedroom when I heard him telling Dad—and lit out through the window." From her jeans pockets, she produced two handfuls of silver dollars. "That's so I can truthfully say I gave you some. Just pray

he doesn't ask me *when!* Now you can turn over that payroll, like you were going to."

Touched, Tony glanced swiftly toward Johnny; but Johnny, still trying to protect him in Rusty's eyes, said nothing.

"I've a better idea," Tony told her. "Let's take the money and go to California."

Rusty frowned. "This is no time to be funny, Tony."

"It was Johnny, who wanted to give it back to the railroad. But me, I'm buying a ranch. That's why we were fighting."

Stunned, Rusty gave Johnny an apologetic glance. But Johnny's cool, determined gaze was fixed upon Tony. "Where'd you hide it?"

"Around here. I'll remember where when I'm alone. I'm hightailing it across the Rio Grande until they get tired hunting me. Then I duck back here, grab the payroll, and light out." Tony chuckled impudently.

"That's where you're wrong," Johnny's eyes narrowed. "From now on, I'm sticking to you like a saddle burr. And I've got a gun—you haven't! If I have to, I'll use it before I let you take that payroll to California."

"You'll have to sleep sometime."

"I'll hog-tie you before I do."

There were tears in Rusty's eyes again. "If I were to tell the Sheriff I found the payroll *accidentally*, we could all go back to punching cows."

"If it meant your life or Johnny's, I would, Rusty." Slowly, Tony shook his handsome head. "But it doesn't. Fifty thousand bucks—"

"You'll never get away with it, with me for a shadow!" Johnny said grimly.

Tony swung back into his saddle. "Come on, pardner. But you're going to get awful tired of chili beans and tortillas."

• Chili beans and tortillas were indeed, just about the only diet that the pair, staked out in the ramshackle hotel at Del Norte, across the border, could afford. But it would have taken a lot more than unappetizing food to shake Johnny Colt's determination. In their upstairs room he kept a tireless watch over Tony. When he had to sleep he roped Tony to one of the two iron cots.

Rumors drifted south across the river that the railroad was offering five thousand dollars reward for the return of the payroll. But the rumors changed nothing in the stalemate between the two old friends. Their world consisted chiefly of the iron cots, a washstand, a broken chair, and four walls from which the aged plaster crumbled. About sunset each day, Johnny untied his prisoner and they went down to the cantina for more chili.

The evening when trouble caught up with them had started no differently from its predecessors. They were seated at their table, eating, while Johnny tried to talk sense to Tony.

"Try thinking back a few days," he argued. "We had seven hundred bucks to start a herd—and no trouble with the law. Everything was fine. It was a good life, Tony. Like Rusty said, we can still go back to it—"

The gun was jammed into his spine so suddenly, it was his first warning that anyone stood behind him. Catur had whipped Johnny's own weapon out of its holster before its startled owner could reach for it. With the crook he had seen in his father's barn stood two others—Apache Joe himself, and an unsavory American he called McAdoo.

Watching the intruders, Tony grinned. "Thanks for taking his hardware."

"That's Apache Joe," Johnny said quietly. "Wanted Stateside for murder. That's Catur. Watch him. He can fire without drawing."

"Outside." Apache Joe gestured, his eyes glittering. "Quietly!"

In the alley behind the cantina, they were backed to the wall. Catur's hand covered them, holding Johnny's gun. But Apache Joe did the talking.

"Your Pa tipped you off to grab that payroll, kid. Now you're going to write him a note. Tell him to hand over that payroll or—" "Pa never tipped me off," Johnny cut in

evenly. "I overheard you planning in the barn. So I took the payroll to prevent him from getting mixed up."

Tony was obviously startled at this first hint of Johnny's true purpose in the robbery. But Apache Joe, livid with rage, could hold back no longer. He backhanded Johnny viciously across the mouth, drawing blood. Johnny lunged, but Catur grabbed his arms.

Tony spoke sharply. "You're working on the wrong hombre. Johnny wanted to give it back, so I hid it on him." He flipped a new silver dollar from his pocket toward Apache Joe. "It came from the payroll. I made the mistake of spending some in Maverick. Now the Sheriff's got posess out looking for me."

The bandit leader's eyes had narrowed greedily. "Take us to it!"

"The posess'll get tired hunting, in a week or so," Tony stalled.

Apache Joe smiled thinly. "Meantime, you trail with us."

"That way, I'll get rid of Johnny here." Tony's grin was still cocky. "And it'll give us a chance to argue about your cut."

"You're crazy, Tony!" Johnny cried. "The only thing Apache Joe'll let you have is a belly full of lead!"

Tony only smiled the more surely. "That's where you're wrong. I'm the only one who knows where to find that payroll." He glanced at the bandit. "Just one thing, Johnny and me; he's my pardner. If any harm comes to him, the deal's off."

Johnny, watching Tony ride off with the bandit, knew that his boyhood crony was well aware the crooks had no intention of going shares. But Tony was figuring he'd ditch Johnny now and outsmart Apache Joe later.

Before they departed, in the wake of Tony and their leader, Catur and McAdoo pinioned Johnny's arms behind him, then beat him senseless with the butt of his gun. Sagging to the alley paving, Johnny saw the world recede into spinning blackness. With it vanished all hope of stopping Tony.

• Late that night, Johnny's pony swam him back across the Rio Grande. To his surprise, Rusty came spurring from the cottonwoods up the bank as he walked his mount onto dry land. Evidently, she had been out hunting for him—to fetch him the news of the reward, hoping it might change Tony's mind.

Alarmed by the gash on his temple, she cried, "Johnny! You're hurt!"

"Ran afoul of some sidewinders in the cantina," he explained. "They were led by a bandit named Apache Joe." Swiftly, he told her about Tony's departure. "He figures he's smart enough to outwit Apache Joe. He'll never—"

"The Sheriff!" Rusty gasped, in sudden panic. The sound of an approaching rider drew closer through the trees. "Hurry—"

But Johnny made no move to turn and flee. "I've got to get Tony away before they kill him. I can't do it by running."

Dan Carter reined in beside them wearily. "Saw you riding out kind of late, Rusty. So I followed along. Found Tony yet?"

Johnny shook his head. "Lost his trail in Del Norte." Deliberately, he bared his forehead wound to his uncle's eyes. "Some hombres had a notion I might know where to lay my hands on that missing payroll."

Dan Carter spoke very quietly. "Any idea why?"

"Maybe they'd found out I was the lone bandit who held up the Flyer."

Carter stared at him. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

Johnny nodded, handing over his six-gun.

"I've been hunting bandits a long time, Johnny. I've yet to have one walk up and voluntarily confess."

"I've got reasons. The railroad's offering five thousand reward."

Carter sighed. "But you can't collect it." "Tony could," said Johnny. "If you want that payroll back, you'd better get busy and find him. Because he's the only one I'll tell where it is." He heard Rusty's soft sob, as she

realized the sacrifice he was making to get his friend back alive. But he dared not glance at her now.

• Moonlight bathed the town of Maverick. A few lights still glowed in the stores and saloons; a few horses still waited at the hitching posts. It was a night like any other night. But Apache Joe put an end to its quietness.

Johnny had been right in his estimate of Apache Joe. The bandit had no intention either of sharing the hidden loot or of waiting to take possession of it. A scant mile out of Del Norte, he had forced Tony at the points of Catur's and McAdoo's guns to admit the sacks were hidden near Red Canyon. Then, with Tony lashed to his saddle, he headed across the border. It made small difference to Apache Joe that posses were searching for Tony Ballew.

The four riders had circled into Maverick under cover of darkness. Now Joe aimed to fire the town. The glow of flames, visible for twenty miles, should quickly draw the searchers homeward. There would be no one watching Red Canyon.

Tony was helpless, his horse's lead line pulled by Joe himself, as the sudden turmoil broke out. Having saturated the livery stable hay with coal oil, McAdoo fired it. The gang's guns began blazing as they galloped wildly up and down the street, yelling in simulation of an outlaw raid.

Dazed with terror, people spilled from the buildings. Frightened horses snapped their tethers and bolted. Windows crashed. Guns exploded. By the time the four horsemen—one of them trussed and helpless—headed on a gallop for the dark hills, Maverick was in seething turmoil.

Certain the fire would pull in the posses fast, Apache Joe gave orders to circle northward so as to ride into Red Canyon just before dawn. The bandit was grinning coldly. Now that his prisoner knew he had been recognized as one of the gang by plenty of citizens in his home town, there should be no trouble. Joe even permitted Tony to be untied, although McAdoo was instructed to keep a close watch over him.

Back in town, bucket lines formed swiftly to battle the flames. When Dan Carter rode in, accompanied by Johnny and Rusty and a few of the posse, the fight against the fire was already gaining headway. People were jabbering that Tony Ballew had been one of the raiders.

Johnny had sat quietly listening. Suddenly, he put spurs to his pony and raced off down the smoke-hazed street, past the blazing livery stable. Dan Carter, grim in the line of duty, whipped out his gun. But a frightened Rusty spurred between the two, deflecting his aim, and then took off at full speed in the wake of the vanishing fugitive.

"You men stay and help with the fire!" Dan bellowed to his uncertain deputies. "I'll take care of this!" He, too, dug in his spurs.

It was deep among the cottonwoods outside town that Rusty caught up with Johnny. He yelled at her, "Stay out of this, Rusty!"

"I'm in it already!" she shrilled back, keeping pace with him.

They thundered into the Colt ranchyard at a gallop, to find Jim Colt aroused and in his kitchen doorway, demanding, "What's happened, Son?"

Dismounting, Johnny hurried into the kitchen, Rusty at his heels. He spoke swiftly, and his bewildered but courageous mother began at once, with Rusty's help, to get ready the guns, blankets, and food her son had requested. Rusty was grimly determined to stick with him, no matter what.

"I started this thing," Johnny told his unhappy mother. "I've got to see it through all the way." He was turning to the door, when it burst open, and his uncle came in, gun already covering him.

Slowly, Johnny held out his hands. Carter moved toward him, dangling handcuffs. "I'm sorry, Johnny, but I've no choice." He

glanced toward Rusty. "And you're under arrest, too, young lady, for aiding—"

"Don't move, Dan!" said Jim Colt, quietly. He had edged unnoticed to Carter's shoulder, and his gun commanded the scene. "Unlock those handcuffs."

Carter grimly obeyed.

"Snap them on him, Son," said Jim.

Carter spoke sternly. "Johnny has confessed to holding up the Western Flyer, Jim."

But Jim was not heeding his brother-in-law. "Where we heading, Son?"

"To try to rescue Tony," Johnny answered tightly. "Before Apache Joe and his gang kill him and get away with that payroll."

• The opaque white mist eddied in swirls over Red Canyon while they waited in hiding near the adobe shack. Only the yipping of coyotes broke the eerie stillness which filled the ravine as dawn crept closer.

The horses of the four riders from the Colt spread had been tethered among the manzanita. Afoot, Johnny and his father were listening for the first hint of other men approaching in the fog. In a small hollow, Rusty guarded Dan Carter. She tried to reason with him, attempting to explain what she herself did not comprehend about Johnny's having robbed the Flyer.

At last, Jim Colt eased down beside them. "I can tell you why Johnny did it. I shot an American named McAdoo in a poker game across the line. He died later. Apache Joe and a man named Catur were the only witnesses that McAdoo drew first. They were willing to clear me, *providing* I helped them rob the Western Flyer. Johnny overheard us making plans in the barn. To save my fool neck, *he* grabbed the payroll first."

Rusty's big eyes softened in relief and gratitude. But Sheriff Carter was less easy to convince. "I'd accept that, Jim, but for one thing. When an American gets shot across the line, the Mexican Rurales notify us at once. I've no report on McAdoo."

"You've got to believe me, Dan—" Jim was beginning, when they heard the sound of horses moving slowly along the trail. They all stiffened.

Johnny appeared beside them. "They're heading down canyon—"

He and his father started forward, moving slowly, careful not to dislodge the smallest rock. The sound of walking horses in the white mist grew louder. Presently there came a blur of muffled voices. The new arrivals seemed to be dismounting and proceeding afoot.

Suddenly, the mist eddied. Briefly, they saw four figures moving among boulders and brush on the hill. Jim Colt gasped. "I'll be—! One of them is McAdoo, the skunk I'm supposed to have killed across the line!"

"Looks like you get another chance at him!" Johnny whispered grimly.

They eased stealthily forward. They heard voices again—and then a grinding sound, as if someone was prying up a rock.

"There she is!" said Tony's taut voice. Evidently, Tony was no longer so certain he would live to see the sunrise. "Fifty thousand bucks!"

A branch snapped sharply under Jim's boot. Instantly, they could hear their invisible quarry—now alerted—scrambling for cover. Anywhere among those rocks in the mist ahead, death might be waiting in a drawn gun. But they couldn't turn back. Tony was up ahead. And the payroll sacks.

The sound of a sudden scuffle froze them again. Hoarsely, Tony yelled out of the mist. "*Johnny! Watch out! There's three of them here, Johnny!*"

Guns began to fire back and forth blindly in the enveloping mist. A choking scream—it sounded like Tony's voice—followed by another gun blast.

The sound of his friend's cry in his ears, Johnny dove into action. He grabbed up a rock and hurled it among the brush. An instant rain of gunfire was pumped toward the

crackling sound. Johnny screamed as if he had been hit, then crouched, waiting while the gang crawled in for the kill.

They came out of the mist like blurred phantoms, crouching low.

He waited until they were close, then leaped upon them with gun blazing. Jim was beside him, shooting with grim efficiency. The gang's guns blistered back. McAdoo went down before a bullet from the elder Colt's six-shooter. A bullet from Johnny's plowed through Catur's chest.

Apache Joe, more cautious than his henchmen, turned and sped away among the boulders. Johnny and Jim could hear him pause to grab up the moneybags as he pounded past the cache from which Tony had produced them. The fugitive was firing back as he fled. Jim stumbled and grabbed his shoulder, and went down on one knee beside Tony's limp figure sprawled in the murk.

Johnny knelt swiftly beside them, sure his father's wound was superficial, but shocked at the whiteness of Tony's face.

"Guess I won't be seeing you in California," Tony whispered.

"That dirty sidewinder!" Johnny straightened. "Stay with him, Pa." He loped forward into the mist, eyes grim, on the trail of Apache Joe.

If Rusty and Sheriff Carter reached Tony soon afterward; if Tony muttered the true tale of the payroll to Dan Carter; if Rusty unlocked Carter's handcuffs so that he, too, might follow the fleeing bandit—Johnny had no way of knowing any of this. He only knew that the man who had shot Tony was getting away.

It was up a blind side canyon, into which Apache Joe had turned in a desperate effort to elude pursuit, that they came to grips at last. The bandit had concealed himself on a narrow rock shelf over the trail, gun ready. But trickling dirt warned Johnny in time. Just as the rock ledge gave way, dropping the crafty killer back into the trail, the younger Colt launched himself into the side canyon with gun already blasting.

Slits of orange flame flickered briefly amid the layers of shifting fog. Gunfire slammed crazily, echoing and re-echoing from the rock walls. The silence which followed it seemed endless to three figures crouched by Tony's lifeless body. Dan Carter and Jim were just starting forward, shoulder to shoulder, when Johnny's tall figure emerged from the blankness.

"Johnny!" His name on Rusty's lips was a wild, glad cry. "*Johnny!*"

Carrying the four payroll sacks, Johnny moved wearily forward. His shirt was torn, a bullet burn creased one cheek, but otherwise he seemed unharmed. He tossed down the sacks at his uncle's feet. "There's the payroll, Uncle Dan."

"Apache Joe?" The name was a taut question.

"He's all through crossing the Rio Grande. Got those handcuffs?"

Dan Carter smiled slowly. "I was mighty confused. But now I've got it figured. Apache Joe *could've* held up the Flyer, *could've* stashed the payroll in Red Canyon. When he came to pick it up, he ran into you and your Pa. In the fight, Tony switched to your side. Far as I'm concerned, the real criminals in this deal were Apache Joe, Catur, and McAdoo. Now they're dead. About that five thousand reward for return of the payroll—"

"That ought to go to the town," said Johnny slowly. "To help repair some of the fire damage Apache Joe did."

Listening, his uncle beamed. "Good boy! But there's ten thousand dollars reward for Apache Joe, dead or alive. It'd buy a lot of calves, Johnny. Now you'd better take Rusty home. Her dad'll be worrying about her."

The mist seemed to be brightening, with morning coming on, as Johnny put his arm about his girl's shoulders and led her out of the Canyon.