

Renbolt aimed the rifle  
carefully and fired



# RANGER SANTA CLAUS

By JOHNSTON McCULLY

*Christmas finds Ranger Renbolt following the tricky trail  
of a tricky killer, in order to rescue young Harry Burley!*

**I**N THE middle of the afternoon, Ranger Jim Renbolt stopped his tired, lathered pony in a strip of shade cast by a ledge of rock. He got down out of his saddle and stretched to rid himself of saddle fatigue.

The air was stagnant. Black heat waves danced across the arid land. Renbolt's shirt was drenched with perspiration and his neckcloth was a sodden mass. He got

some cold food out of a saddlebag, and uncorked his canteen and took a swallow of warm water, then poured almost all the rest into his hat and let the pony have it. He knew he would come to a waterhole within an hour and refill his canteen.

Ranger Jim Renbolt had been following the trail for two days since leaving the little Border village of Gray Mesa. It was a tricky trail made by a tricky

man, a man who knew this section of country as the rattlers and prairie dogs and ground owls knew it.

The trail had led into the wastelands, where a man had to know the locations of the waterholes to survive. Renbolt knew where they were. He had been born and reared in this part of the country, and since becoming a Ranger had been stationed where his knowledge of the district would be of great value.

He was following a man and a boy. The man was "Bully" Hague, notorious renegade and outlaw, killer and thief. The boy was 20-year-old Harry Burley, son of the Gray Mesa blacksmith. To capture or kill Bully Hague and return Harry Burley to his home before he did something that would make him an outlaw also—that was Renbolt's task.

It was a tough job. Many efforts had been made to capture or kill Bully Hague, but none had been successful. The outlaw, running with a price on his head, was as elusive as a shadow. He emerged from the wastelands at some spot where his appearance was unexpected, committed an act of violence, and darted into hiding again.

Bully Hague had thumbed his nose at the Rangers. That made those in the service narrow their eyes, set their jaws and increase their determination to make a capture. "Get Bully Hague!" was a general order often repeated.

Nobody could guess where the outlaw would appear next. But, all along the Border, the Rangers kept their eyes and ears open, trying to find a clue that would lead them to Bully Hague's hideout, trying to think of some trap into which he might be lured.

**R**ENBOLT had been the fortunate one to cross Bully Hague's trail. He thought of it now as he walked back and

forth in the strip of shade and munched cold food while his pony rested.

He had been only a few hours too late to come face to face with Bully Hague. That close to a showdown with the outlaw. But he had taken the trail immediately, and this time there had been a real trail to follow.

Riding his regular patrol, Renbolt had loped into the little village of Gray Mesa late in the afternoon. He had ridden directly to the blacksmith shop. He wanted his pony's shoes examined—and there was another reason.

Beside the smithy was a small adobe house in which lived the blacksmith, stern William Burley, his son Harry and his daughter Anita. Renbolt's keen interest was in Anita. In his saddlebag was a package intended for her. It held a necklace and bracelet, his Christmas presents. Christmas was only a few days away.

Renbolt and Anita had known each other from childhood. They were much in love and intended to be married the coming spring. His term of service in the Rangers would expire then, and he intended to leave the service and go into some business. Being a Ranger in that part of the country was considered a hazardous occupation for a married man. A Ranger rode with Death sharing his saddle.

As he dismounted in front of the smithy, he heard the stern voice of William Burley and the tear-charged words of Anita. He knew something was wrong. Anita did not cry easily. He ground-hitched his pony, blinked to get the sun glare out of his eyes, and strode through the open door and into the semidark interior of the blacksmith shop.

"Oh, Jim, Jim!" Anita cried at him. She rushed toward him, threw her arms around him, and sobbed as she spoke. "I'm so glad you've come! You must help us!"

“He came a mite too late,” her father’s gruff voice announced, bitterly.

“What’s the trouble?” Renbolt asked. He accepted Anita’s moist kiss, tightened an arm around her, and looked over her head at her father questioningly.

“Well, Jim, yuh missed Bully Hague by about three hours,” Burley replied.

“Are yuh meanin’ that Bully Hague has been here in Gray Mesa?” Renbolt asked.

“He has. Rode into town as bold as yuh please. He helped himself to a sack of groceries at the store, got some gun shells and took all the money in the till. And when he rode out of town, another outlaw was ridin’ beside him—my son!”

“Harry’s not an outlaw,” Anita sobbed. “He’s only a foolish boy who doesn’t know what he’s doing. He thinks Bully Hague is a hero because he dodges the Law and lives what Harry thinks is a life of adventure. Jim, you must save him! Go after Bully Hague and get him, and bring Harry back to us.”

Renbolt knew how Anita loved her younger brother. At once, he was eager to bring Harry back home before it was too late. He wanted to spare Anita the suffering she would undergo if she had a brother who was an outlaw on the run. And he was a little selfish about it, too—he didn’t want to be married to an outlaw’s sister.

Everybody in the Rangers knew he intended to marry Anita Burley. This event would soon become public. If he did not go after Bully Hague and Harry, get Hague and return Harry to his home, it might be suspected that he had been lenient or remiss in duty because of his connection with Anita.

“Check my pony’s shoes,” he ordered Burley. “I’ll hurry to the store and get some stuff. I’ll be hittin’ the trail inside an hour.”

Anita went with him to the store, compelling herself to cease her sobbing. Renbolt handed her the package he had taken from his saddlebag.

“Not to be opened until Christmas,” he said, trying to grin at her.

“Oh, Jim! Save Harry and keep him from making a dreadful mistake, and that’ll be the greatest Christmas present of all.”

“Tell me about it,” he urged.

“Harry has been restless and dissatisfied. He had a ranch job and quit. He’s bewildered, doesn’t know what to do. He’s ambitious.”

**T**HIS brought a nod from the Ranger.

“A dangerous state of mind at his age,” he said.

“He thinks Bully Hague is a great hero and wants to be like him. He’s met Hague before, though I don’t know where. I think Bully Hague has been trying to get Harry to ride with him, though I don’t know why he would want a raw boy like him. If he wanted a companion, he could get some other outlaw. I had one idea—”

“What?” Renbolt asked, as she hesitated.

“Bully Hague hates you, naturally. You almost caught him once a couple of years ago. And he knows that you and I plan to be married. If he could corrupt Harry, a Ranger’s brother-in-law—”

“That may be it,” Renbolt said. “Who knows about it?”

“Everybody in town. Harry joined him openly and they rode away together.”

“After Hague robbed the store, or before?”

“Afterward.”

“Good! There’s nothin’ against Harry to date, then. If I can get him before he helps Bully Hague commit a crime, he’ll be saved.”

At the store, Renbolt got a supply of

cold food and shells for both six-gun and rifle. He went with Anita back to the adobe house and ate a hot meal she prepared. Burley had fixed one of the pony's shoes. Renbolt swung up into his saddle and took the trail.

That had been two days before, Renbolt thought now as he walked in the shade beside the ledge of rock. He had kept moving during those two days, following his quarry deeper and deeper into the wastelands, always watching for trail signs and finding them. He thought he knew just where Bully Hague was going.

He had slept but little, but possibly the men ahead had slept but little also, and he had not gained on them. Now he mounted again and rode along the ledge of rock. At the end of the ledge he saw signs that riders had passed recently.

He searched the terrain with his eyes, shading them against the glare of the sun. No moving black dots in the far distance told him where the quarry rode. If they were watching the back trail, they would see him crossing the hot sandy floor of the arid stretch which led to the range of hills in the distance. They would be waiting in ambush, possibly. That was a chance he must take. He did not doubt that Bully Hague would shoot on sight if he found a Ranger before him.

Renbolt did some quick thinking. If he waited for the moonlit night, Bully Hague would gain on him and might disappear as he had often before and the trail be lost.

If he struck out across the burning waste now, he would at least hold his own, and even possibly gain on the pair ahead. Even if they saw him following, he would not encounter them until after nightfall, and he could be watchful and on constant guard against an ambush.

He pulled his sombrero down lower to shade his eyes, and rode on.

About an hour later, he stopped beside

a waterhole in the midst of a jumble of rocks.

The water was warm and stagnant, but Renbolt knew it was pure. He filled his canteen, made and smoked a cigarette, and scouted around the place while his pony drank and rested.

There was sign enough around the waterhole. Riders had been here within the past few hours, Renbolt knew. He had gained some on the pair ahead. He looked toward the range of hills, to where a narrow pass cut through to a valley on the opposite side. Bully Hague's hideout was somewhere in the hills on one side of that pass, Renbolt felt sure. The range was honeycombed with caves, and there were several places where water could be obtained.

It was time to mount and ride again, he judged. He turned back toward his pony. A glitter in the sandy dirt caught his eye. He hurried forward and found an opened knife half buried in the sand.

Renbolt knew that knife instantly. He had given it to Harry Burley for a Christmas present two years before. The initials H. B. had been burned into the handle.

That settled it. He knew now that he was on the right trail. Bully Hague and Harry had stopped at this waterhole only a short time before. And from here there was only one direction they would follow—to the narrow pass.

**H**E COULD mount and ride as swiftly as he pleased to the mouth of the pass without fear of losing the trail, and gain on the quarry again. He was eager to have a finish of this thing. He wanted to grapple with Bully Hague and have an end of it.

Renbolt mounted the rested pony and urged him forward. In places where the wind had not swept, he saw hoofprints that

had been made recently. As the sun declined toward the western horizon, he urged the pony to added speed.

Sunset was burning in the western sky as he reached the mouth of the narrow pass. He loosened his rifle in the saddle scabbard and shifted his holster around so he could get at his six-gun quickly. He wiped the dust from his eyes with a corner of his neckcloth, blinked rapidly to clear his sight. His every sense was keenly alive. Danger would ride beside him every moment now. If Bully Hague knew he was following, the outlaw would go into ambush and shoot him from the saddle with no more compunction than he would shoot a rattlesnake.

With his pony at a walk, Renbolt entered the pass. Where the pass narrowed, he watched the frowning rocks on either side. The dusk came, and it grew dark in the pass. It would be some time before the moonlight would penetrate here.

Frequently he stopped the pony and listened. The wind was coming down the pass, carrying sounds of the night. The rocky walls were like sounding boards. And, after about an hour of riding, Renbolt heard distant voices, and pulled the pony to an abrupt stop.

On a gust of wind, he heard:

“Why don’t we ride on, Bully?”

“We’re waitin’ right here, Harry, till I ‘tend to that pesky ranger. I’ll shoot his badge clean through his body.”

“Why do that? If we can dodge him, ain’t that enough?”

“When yuh’re ridin’ like we ride, kid, yuh finish any law officer yuh can. If yuh don’t, he might get you some day.”

“But Jim Renbolt—he’s pretty much all right. ‘Course he’d chase us and catch us if he could. If anything happened to him, my sister—”

“Gettin’ soft already?” Bully Hague asked, with a sneer in his voice. “Maybe I made a mistake bringin’ yuh along. Maybe I should have jest finished yuh soon as we got away from town.”

“I’ll do as I said, Bully. I made a deal, and I’ll stick to it.”

“Yuh’d better, kid! If yuh don’t, I’ll do as I threatened. I’ll slip into Gray Mesa some night and shoot down yore father. And jest to make it good, I’ll shoot yore sister, too.”

“Yuh told me yuh’d let ‘em alone if I’d ride with yuh.”

Renbolt heard Bully Hague laugh.

“Yuh might as well know now, kid, that I played yuh for a sucker. Shore, I got hold of yuh and told yuh that if yuh didn’t ride with me I’d kill yore Dad and sister. I set yuh to talkin’, braggin’ that I was the right kind of man and that yuh’d like to side me. That was so folks wouldn’t think it too funny when yuh joined up with me.”

“But—why?”

“I knew when that ranger was due at Gray Mesa on patrol. That’s why I got there when I did and made yuh ride away with, me. I know how yore sister is in love with the ranger, and how she thinks yuh’re mighty fine. So, I knew that ranger would come trailin’ after us, to try to get me, and to take yuh back home ‘fore yuh did any real outlawin’.”

“So it was all a trick to get Renbolt to follow?”

“That’s right. Think I’d want a greenhorn like you to side me? Bully Hague rides alone! That’s the safest way for a man. I’m jest usin’ yuh for a decoy. That ranger will come ridin’ into this ambush, and I’ll get him. Then—well, maybe I can’t be bothered with you any more.”

“What are yuh meanin’?” There was fright in Harry’s voice. “Yuh’d kill me?”

“Yuh’d be nothin’ but a hindrance to me.”

“Just let me go. I’ll ride back—”

“I’ve told yuh too much. Had to do that so yuh’d believe I was trustin’ yuh and wantin’ yuh for a pard.”

There was silence for a moment, and then on the wind that swept through the pass came Bully Hague’s raucous laugh.

“I was waitin’ for that move, kid,” Bully said. “Reachin’ for yore gun, huh? Think yuh could shoot Bully Hague and maybe get a reward for doin’ it? Now, I’ll show yuh why I wouldn’t ever let a greenhorn like yuh side me. When we were sleepin’ last night for a couple of hours, I took the shells out of yore gun. And yuh ain’t even looked at it since, or yuh’d have noticed they were gone. In a game like the one I’m playin’, kid, yuh don’t forget things like that, if yuh want to live.”

“Don’t kill me, Bully!”

“Not right now. I don’t want the sound of gunfire to give that ranger any warnin’. I’ll ‘tend to him first.”

**L**ISTENING down the pass, Jim Renbolt felt a glow pass through him. Harry hadn’t really tried to turn outlaw, then. He had gone with the outlaw to save his father and sister. And the conversation, sweeping down the pass on the wind and echoing against the rocks, had warned Renbolt of many things—of what was behind all this, and of what he could expect unless he went ahead cautiously from here on.

He tried to estimate from the strength of the sounds he had heard the approximate position of Bully Hague and the boy. He urged his pony on, going at a walk, keeping to the deep dust in the middle of the uncertain trail, and praying that the pony’s hoof would not strike a

rock and the sound possibly be carried to Bully Hague’s ears.

After he had gone for some distance, he stopped the pony again, and listened. Once more, the wind carried their voices to him.

“The moonlight’s commencin’ to get down into the pass, kid—see? That ranger’ll be a good target. Right there where the trail curves, where that high ledge of rock is beside it—see? He’ll get it as he passes that ledge of rock. He’ll be ridin’ slow and fearful—”

“Please don’t shoot him, Bully,” Harry Burley begged. “He ain’t ever done yuh a harm.”

“That’s ‘cause he ain’t ever been able to put hands on me. He’s tried. All the other rangers have tried. He’d shoot me like a dog, or try to catch me and take me to prison, if he could. Anyhow, he’s wearin’ a ranger’s badge, and that’s enough for me.”

Renbolt went on cautiously. That speech about the high ledge of rock had warned him. And from the sounds he had estimated that the speakers were not far ahead. From what Bully Hague had said, he was within shooting distance of the ledge of rock.

The moonlight was commencing to appear in the narrow pass. As the moon rose, the light came down the rocky sides swiftly. Renbolt rode on, and now he got his six-gun out of its holster and held it ready, keeping the reins in his left hand, guiding his pony with his knees, eyes and ears strained to catch sights and sounds that might presage peril.

The pass narrowed again and started to curve to the left. Now it was flooded with the bright light of the full moon. And, a short distance ahead, Renbolt saw what he took to be the ledge of rock Bully Hague had mentioned.

So Bully expected him to ride slowly through the moonlight and be a target, did he? A quick dash past the ledge and to a section of the trail where the light of the moon did not penetrate—that would be the thing.

He turned his pony and rode back for a short distance, so he would have time to get up speed before passing the ledge. And then he gripped with his knees, grasped the reins firmly in his left hand, and used his spurs.

The startled pony sprang forward and began running. Beneath his flying hoofs the ground was sandy and soft, and the hoofbeats made little noise. What sounds they did make were blown down the pass by the brisk wind.

Renbolt rode furiously around the curve, bending low in his saddle, gun held ready. He heard a startled exclamation. Up in the rocks, a gun flamed, and a bullet sang past Renbolt's head. He fired at the flash he had seen.

Other shots came rapidly, but all went wild as the pony raced along the face of the moonlit ledge. Renbolt did not fire again, but he noticed where the gun flashes came from. And then he was through the danger zone and in the deep shadows beyond the ledge.

He stopped his pony behind a huge boulder in a patch of inky blackness, dismounted and trailed the reins. The pony's sides were heaving. He would stand there until Renbolt returned.

Renbolt holstered his six-gun and took the rifle from the saddle boot. Keeping to the shadows, he got to the other side of the narrow pass. He knew from where the shots had been fired. It was a spot where horses could not be taken. Undoubtedly, Bully Hague and Harry had left their mounts down near the trail somewhere and had gone up among the rocks.

They would be coming back to their

horses now. Bully Hague would be cautious, wary. He was used to being hunted. He knew how to estimate sounds, knew the feel of peril. He would not be caught off guard easily.

**R**ENBOLT crouched behind a rock and waited and listened. For quite a time he heard nothing except the usual night noises. Then he heard a boot scrape against a rock, a smothered exclamation of rage. Harry probably had made the sound and Bully was berating him for it.

Renbolt held his rifle ready and waited tensely. And then, a short distance off to the right, where the light of the moon was cut off by the side of the pass, he heard a horse snort. The two mounts, then, were there.

It told him in which direction Bully Hague and Harry would travel to get to their horses. He knew Bully was as tense as himself, watching the shadows, ready to shoot in the direction of any suspicious sound. Renbolt felt the cold perspiration break out on his face. The tension was beginning to grip him.

He took several deep breaths to make himself relax. He watched a thin streak of moonlight between his position and the place where the horses were waiting. Again, a boot scraped against a rock, again came a muttered imprecation.

Then, Renbolt saw two shadows cross the streak of moonlight.

"Stay away from the horses, Hague!" he shouted.

His voice roared and echoed among the rocks, seemed to come from every direction. Bully Hague shouted something and dodged out of the moonlight, and the second shadow followed. A gun-flamed and cracked, and two bullets sang and struck rocks and whined away in spiteful ricochet. But neither came near Renbolt.

He knew Hague was confused by the

sounds among the rocks. He did not expose his position by firing. Moving cautiously, he kept to the shadows and advanced toward the pair. A horse snorted again, and hoofs struck rocks as the frightened animal moved.

Renbolt listened. Hague, he supposed, was motionless, silent, listening also. Each was waiting for the other to break under the strain and make the first move, which would be one of exposure. Bully Hague broke first.

“Renbolt! Let’s fight it out! Let’s have an end of it. Out into the moonlight with me, if yuh’ve got the sand.”

Renbolt remained silent. His position was still a secret to Hague, and that would make the latter nervous. Hague was in the position of a man with enemies all around him, not knowing from which side an attack would come. Human nerves could not stand a thing like that long.

Renbolt was wearing down his foe, but that was bringing him no nearer the end he desired. He wanted to capture Bully Hague if possible, kill him if necessary. A wound and capture would be the best.

Billy’s voice came from another spot:

“Come out, Renbolt, and fight, or yuh’re a coward. Get me, if yuh can! Come out into the moonlight with me now, or I’ll shoot down this young pup I’ve got with me. He’s yore sweetheart’s brother—”

“Jim! Don’t let him—” Harry Burley’s frightened yell came from a position a distance from where Hague had spoken. Renbolt would not put such a thing past Bully Hague. He got behind a rock, cupped his hands to his lips, so, when he spoke, his voice would ring among the rocks and seem to come from a dozen places at once.

“Bully! I can’t trust yuh. If I step out into the moonlight first, yuh’ll let me have it from the dark.”

“I’ll give yuh a chance at me, Ranger!”

As the voices roared and echoed, Renbolt made a quick move. Keeping in the streaks of darkness, he worked his way swiftly toward where he knew the horses must be. He heard one snort again, and the sound directed him.

As Bully Hague shouted another challenge, Renbolt hurried on. He finally made out the horses standing near the base of a rocky ledge. Renbolt went prone beside a rock. Beyond the horses was a streak of faint moonlight through which a man would have to pass to get to the mounts.

Silently, he waited. The sounds among the rocks had died down. Hague did not shout again. Once more, Renbolt heard a boot strike a rock. He had guessed that Hague would try to get to his horse and make a ride to get out of the vicinity, knowing that Renbolt must be dismounted, expecting to wait until daylight and catch Renbolt at a disadvantage.

**A** SHADOW appeared in the streak of moonlight, another close behind the first. Renbolt made out Bully Hague’s squat body, bent slightly forward as he advanced. Harry was behind him.

“Harry—drop flat!” Renbolt shouted.

Bully Hague whirled and fired at the sound of his voice, and the bullet sang over Renbolt’s head. The ranger saw Harry drop as ordered. As Hague’s second wild shot came, Renbolt aimed the rifle carefully and fired. The slug tore through Bully Hague’s right shoulder, and he dropped his gun and reeled.

Renbolt jumped to his feet, holding the rifle ready. He could see Hague in the faint moonlight, groping with his left hand for the gun he had dropped.

“Steady or I’ll blast yuh!” Renbolt shouted.

Hague roared a curse at him and went



on crawling to where he had dropped the gun. Renbolt sprang forward, dashed in. He was in time to step heavily on Bully Hague's left wrist when the gun was only inches beyond the outlaw's grasp.

Bully Hague had great strength in his body. He writhed and twisted and gave a kick that landed on Renbolt's thigh and caused instant pain. Renbolt swung the rifle around and struck the outlaw on the head with the butt of the gun. Hague sank back and groaned and was still.

"Harry, get up! Get a lariat from one of yore saddles," Renbolt ordered.

He pulled the unconscious Bully Hague out into the bright moonlight and tore away the right side of his shirt. The rifle bullet had made a clean wound. Bully Hague would live to swing for his crimes, if Renbolt could deliver him to the nearest jail.

That in itself would be quite a task. The Ranger was tired and had gone without much sleep for three days. It would take at least two days of riding to get back to the nearest town. And he would have to be on guard every minute. Bully Hague, knowing what was in store for him, would try in every way to escape. Caught off guard for an instant, Renbolt might find himself the vanquished in the end instead of the victor.

He cut away a part of Hague's shirt and bound the wounded shoulder roughly. Then, Harry Burley returned with a rope he had taken from Hague's saddle.

"Jim!" he said, as he handed the rope to the ranger. He was almost sobbing. "I—I ain't what yuh think. I ain't done anything wrong."

"Don't worry about that," Renbolt broke in. "When yuh were talkin' with Hague, yore voices rolled down the canyon and I heard everything yuh both said. Yuh just help me get this skunk to a jail, then get home in time for Christmas."

"Christmas! I'd forgotten about that. Seems funny—"

"Yeah. I've read and heard tell about places where they have snow and cold on Christmas, and sleds and horses with jingle bells on 'em. Reckon folks livin' there wouldn't think we had Christmas at all, with sweat runnin' down our faces and a hot desert breeze blowin'. But I reckon it's pretty much the same anywhere. 'Tain't the weather as counts. We always have lots of fun—fireworks when we can get 'em, and good dinners, and present-givin'."

He was working swiftly as he spoke. He bound Bully Hague's wrists in front of him, then ran the rope around the outlaw's body. As he finished, Bully groaned and twisted his body a little. At Renbolt's order, Harry ran to one of the horses and returned with a canteen taken from a saddle. Renbolt poured water on Hague's face.

Hague groaned again and opened his eyes. He saw Renbolt's face, and tried to spring up. Then he realized that his wrists had been bound. Renbolt helped him to sit up.

"Well, Bully, I've finally got yuh," Renbolt said. "Yuh're under arrest for murder and robbery. Anything yuh say can be used against yuh."

"Yuh ain't got me to jail yet, Ranger!"

"Yeah, I know. But that's only a matter of a couple of days. I'll get yuh on yore feet now, and we'll get into our saddles and start."

"Suppose I refuse to climb into a saddle? Yuh'd have a hard time gettin' me in one. Yuh can't watch the kid and me both."

"I'm not worryin' about Harry. I know how things stand, Bully. I heard yuh and Harry talkin', heard yuh explainin' how come he's with yuh now. I'm right down surprised at yuh, Bully. Thought maybe

yuh knew yore way around. Let me give yuh a bit of advice—though yuh'll never get a chance to use it. Never talk down wind, Bully, if yuh've got an enemy in that direction. And, if yuh do, don't tell everything."

The outlaw's voice was angry when he answered. "Yuh won't put me in any saddle to cart me to jail!"

"Yuh'll get up into yore saddle yoreself, Bully, with me givin' yuh a boost. Then I'll tie yore ankles together under yore horse's belly. If yuh don't, I'll ride away with Harry and just leave yuh here, bound as yuh are, and with yore legs tied together also. Thirst and the sun will finish yuh tomorrow, and the buzzards will have a feast."

**W**HEN the sun came up, they were far on the back trail. They had ridden through the cool of the night under a bright moon, making good speed. Bully Hague had scarcely spoken during the night, but his attitude was not that of a man who had given up the fight.

They had stopped at a waterhole during the night, and Jim Renbolt had filled all their canteens. So they were riding on, slowly when necessary because of the ground, faster where the going was good, when the sun began turning the wasteland into an earthly furnace.

At midday, Renbolt called a halt at a waterhole where there was some shade. He helped Bully Hague out of his saddle and propped him up against a rock. Hague was complaining about his wounded shoulder.

"Yeah, I expect it does hurt yuh some," Renbolt told him. "Should be gettin' mighty sore by this time. I'll soak it with water. Don't yuh worry any, Bully. Yuh'll live to get to jail."

Ignoring Bully's curses and howls, Renbolt brought water from the pool and drenched the bandage on the outlaw's

shoulder.

"We'll stop here till evenin'," the ranger said. "Get a little sleep if yuh can, Bully, 'cause we're goin' to ride on through tonight."

Renbolt took Harry aside.

"I've got to get a little sleep," he whispered. "I reckon I can trust yuh?"

"Yuh know yuh can, Jim!"

"I'm goin' to fill yore gun with shells, and I want yuh to guard that human snake while I'm gettin' me a little shut-eye. Don't let him catch yuh off guard. He knows what'll happen to him if we get him to jail, and he'll try anything. Don't let him wheedle yuh into doin' anything. Don't get near enough for him to get a kick at yuh. If he got his arms around yore neck, even with his wrists bound, he'd strangle yuh just for meanness."

"I'll be careful, Jim."

"All right. After I have a snooze, yuh can have one yoreself."

"I wish we had somethin' to eat."

"We'll eat plenty after we hand this skunk over."

He gave Harry shells for his gun, then went to a spot of shade and stretched out beside a rock beneath which there was no crevice where a rattler might be lurking. Harry sat down in the shade a few feet in front of Bully Hague, holding his six-gun ready. Hague seemed to be half asleep himself.

Renbolt was sleeping inside a minute.

Almost exhausted, he was the prey of dreams, some fantastic, dreams in which he saw Anita in bridal finery, and Bully Hague as some evil monster. He had been sleeping about an hour when he came awake suddenly with Harry's wild yell ringing in his ears:

"Jim! Jim! Help!"

Renbolt was wide awake instantly and springing to his feet. A short distance from him, he saw Harry sprawled on the ground

with bulky Bully Hague astride him. Hague's hands were grasping Harry's long thick hair, and Hague was trying to batter the boy's head against a rock.

Renbolt jumped forward and struck once with the barrel of his heavy six-gun, and Hague toppled to one side. Harry, groaning, struggled to sit up, and Renbolt helped him.

"What happened?" the ranger demanded.

"I—I can't tell exactly. I must have dozed a little. Couldn't help it—so sleepy. Bully must've crept upon me. Anyhow he sprang at me and was on me almost before I knew what was happenin'. Knocked me over and grabbed my hair. I just had time to yell. I'm sorry, Jim."

"Can't blame yuh much. Yuh ain't used to goin' 'thout sleep like I am. I should have tied up Bully's legs, too. Mostly my fault. Wait till I 'tend to the skunk, then yuh get a good sleep until evenin'."

He poured water on Bully Hague's head, and Bully groaned and opened his eyes.

"I'm tired of smashin' yuh on the head," Renbolt told him. "Now, yuh get back to that rock and brace yoreself against it and stay there, or stretch out on the ground if yuh want to sleep. Any more of this nonsense, and I'll send a couple of slugs into yuh. Yuh're under arrest, remember, and it's my legal right to fire if yuh resist or try to attack me."

**A**T SUNSET, they mounted and rode on after Renbolt had tied Bully's ankles together beneath the belly of his horse, wary of a kick as he did so. When it grew cooler, they put on speed. The bright moon came up to give them aid. They struck a wastelands trail, and at a place where it forked Renbolt turned to the right.

"That ain't the way to Gray Mesa,"

Harry protested.

Renbolt grinned.

"Are yuh tryin' to tell me somethin' about these trails?" he asked. "I've been over 'em a lot of times. We ain't goin' to Gray Mesa first off. We're headin' for the county seat, where there's a right good jail, and where I can make my report."

Through the night they rode, and at noon the next day came to the little county seat and dismounted in front of the jail. A burly sheriff came out to greet them. He knew Renbolt.

"Bully Hague, huh?" the sheriff said. "He's one guest I'll be glad to have. I'll treat him fine—till he's claimed for trial and hangin'."

Renbolt and Harry stabled their tired mounts and went to the town's one hotel, where they had a real sleep. They were up by dusk and eating an enormous meal. Then Renbolt went up to the jail to see his prisoner while Harry saw the sights of the town, which weren't much. They met at the hotel again an hour later. Renbolt had a pleasant smile.

"We won't pull out tonight," he said. "I want to buy some stuff in the mornin' soon as the store is open. We'll hit for Gray Mesa soon as I get the stuff, and we can make it by evenin'. And that'll be Christmas Eve."

His purchases were many and varied, and Harry began grinning when he realized their import. His eyes brightened when Renbolt told him a few things, too, especially about telegrams which had been exchanged between the sheriff and authorities at the state capital.

They made good speed through the day on their rested ponies. It was dusk again when they saw the lights of Gray Mesa twinkling in the distance. They could hear a bell ringing, and knew the padre was calling his flock to the little adobe chapel for the celebration of

Christmas Eve.

Anita and her father were just leaving the house to go to the chapel when they rode up, dust-covered and happy. While Anita embraced her brother and showered questions, Renbolt explained the situation quickly to her father.

“Bully got his clutches on Harry, and Harry did what he did to save you and Anita,” he reported. “Bully’s safe in jail.”

Anita came running over to him to kiss him again and clutch his arm.

“I’m just in time to play Santa Claus,” Renbolt said. “It’s like this: there’s been a standin’ reward for the capture of Bully Hague, or for killin’ him—one of them dead-or-alive things. I didn’t kill him, but

caught him, so it ain’t blood money. I bought a lot of candy and toys and stuff for the poor Mexican kids. Didn’t cost much and the reward is three thousand. The sheriff confirmed my work and got word to tell me I’d get the reward.”

“Oh, Jim!” Anita cried.

“It’ll mean somethin’ to add to our nest-egg, honey. But we won’t keep it all. We’ll give the old padre some to spend on his chapel and help the poor of his flock. ‘Tain’t any more’n right. Let’s go to the chapel and make the kids happy. Harry, you and yore father walk ahead and tell the folks everything. Me and Anita, we want a few minutes alone.”