

**L. RON  
HUBBARD**



**DEVIL'S  
MANHUNT**

**GALAXY**  
P R E S E N T S

## CHAPTER ONE

DESPERATION PEAK rises green out of six thousand square miles of parched Arizona desert, a deceptive and deadly lure. It has game, streams and gold—but it also has an entire barricade around it, an unbroken ring of white alkali deserts, burning and acrid, waterless and uncrossable at any but the coolest season of the year.

Thus protected, Desperation Peak long retained its treasure; like an emerald set in the center of hell, the price was high for its taking.

Tim Beckdolt had nearly died braving the pitiless wastes, but his adventure had been rewarded. Once across the alkali sinks he had reached the tumbled canyons, clear springs and wooded slopes of the peak. He had lived on venison until his cartridges had all been used. Then he had kept his soul encased with body by snaring rabbits and birds. He had worked and wandered alone in this virgin desert-isolated fastness for eight months before he had found the rich placer. He had no salt and no flour. His clothing was a ruin of faded ribbons and he needed many things to work a claim. But to undertake another trip across the sinks, and return, particularly at this season of the year, was unthinkable; even his jenny had died of the privations endured in coming here.

Tim Beckdolt did not ask questions of himself as to how he would get it out. From the moment he struck it, all his attention was for the gold. In two or three months it would rain, then he would leave. Until then he was a castaway, clinging to an island upon a scorching sea. He would cache his wealth and leave it to await his return, would bring back a mule train to take it outside.

The discovery of this ancient creek bed was such that three months of labor had netted him slightly in excess of a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. A few more weeks of work would exhaust the placer; then he would rest and wait for the November rains so that he could leave.

At fourteen, Tim had gone wandering across the West as a boy of all work, under the most indifferent masters, a runaway from a home that wouldn't have him. He had learned prospecting in two heartbreaking years under the absolute tyranny of old Scotty O'Rourke—who had outlived three partners and had tried to outlive Tim. The world-weary youngster now saw himself as a successful young man; he wanted a ranch of his own, fine horses to ride, and the wherewithal to influence the unkind.

At twenty-three he had it all within his grasp. Now and then he would straighten up, limber his back and gaze ahead of him. But he was not seeing red rocks and pines; he was seeing ranch houses, thousands of cattle grazing, white horse fences and himself in fine clothes. It was an innocent dream.

At four o'clock on the afternoon of July 13, it was shattered entirely and utterly.

A shadow fell across his sluice and Tim stopped, not looking

back, but staring at the reflection in the cold blue gleam of a Winchester barrel.

The first words he heard bit deep. They were indifferently, even wearily, spoken. "Wait a minute, Sven, don't kill him."

Tim held on to the sluice box to keep his hands from shaking. He turned carefully until he stood leaning against the rough, hard slabs, water curling around his ankles, sweat growing cold on his face. The man called Sven was rendered even more huge by his standing on the bank two feet higher than the water.

He was shaggy, with matted hair; his clothes were nondescript and slovenly. His face was big, with small eyes.

The other man was seated on a rock. He was young, handsome, about twenty-eight and dressed in neat corduroy.

"I don't know how you feel about it, Sven," he said, "but I've no taste for the muck and moil in the July sun. There are a few thousands yet in the gravel pile and our friend here appears to be a willing worker. Aren't you, son?"

Sven grunted and lowered the end of the Winchester to the ground. It looked like a small stick in his hand, and the big pistol which girded him was a toy against the hugeness of his thigh.

"Don't let us interrupt your work, my friend," said the young man.

"How did you make it across the sinks?" said Tim.

"Why, as to that, there are two men who didn't—two men and a mule." He laughed quietly and looked at his gun.

Tim saw the extra canteen which was slung about Sven, and knew with an abrupt insight why the two were not here.

“A pleasant place,” said the young man. “I dare say that you have had all this peak with its foothills to yourself. Looks like there is game. I told you there would be game, Sven. Something to eat. Something to kill.”

“You vant Aye should shoot some meat, Mr. Bonnet? Or you vant to hunt it again?”

“Seen any mountain lion or bear up here, my young friend?”

Tim looked from Bonnet to Sven. Something of the terror of his situation was coming clear to him, turning his stomach like ground glass.

“Our young friend here doesn’t seem to be of much help as a hunting guide. Supposing you step out there, Sven, and take a bead on a potential banquet. If you see any bear or puma, or anything worthwhile, let me know.”

Bonnet did not bother to aim a weapon. He had already possessed himself of the rifle that had been in Tim’s camp and had loaded it. He let it lie unnoticed at his feet.

Tim looked at the rifle and at the far bank. A crooked, almost hopeful smile appeared faintly on Bonnet’s face. He hitched himself back a few feet from the rifle. His tongue caressed his parched lips. Tim was cold inside. Bonnet hitched himself further away from the weapon, and his smile grew, showing even, perfect teeth.

Bonnet reached inside his coat and brought out a short gun which he tossed down the bank so that it lay only a little further from Tim than the rifle was from Bonnet.

Tim’s fingernails were sinking into the sluice. He could envision himself lunging forward and grabbing the gun,

could see Bonnet snatching at the rifle. He tried desperately to anticipate the outcome, crouched a little lower.

Suddenly Tim sprang up the bank, sweeping the Smith and Wesson into his grasp and leveling it. With some astonishment he saw that Bonnet had not moved but stood looking with bright eyes upon Tim. The Smith and Wesson's hammer fell on an empty chamber, then another—another, another, another and another.

Bonnet picked up the rifle, jacked the shell into its chamber and laid the weapon across his knees. "Throw the gun here, young man. In a few days, when you have all the gold out of that gravel and neatly sacked, you and I may yet entertain ourselves with a little sport." He laughed quietly.

Tim worked methodically after that, worked day after day, through days beyond his counting. The water swirled about his knees, the heavy gumbo moved to the riffles; he cleaned out the rocks, cleared the tailings, all in the mechanical fashion of a sleep-walker. His hands bled, his limbs ached; and as he worked hopelessness gripped him.

He had not realized until now the part his stepfather had played in the joy of his discovery. The idea of sending his mother beautiful clothes, hiring help for her, seeing to it that his younger sister received an education and escaped the miseries of a farm drudge had occupied, unbeknownst to him, the highest position in his plans. Now his stepfather could go on saying, "That no-good young pup. Knowed he'd never amount to nothin'. Skinned out and never bothered to

write you a letter. Told you he was no good, Samantha. I done plumb right, tryin' to beat him into line." And his mother would have no answer, not now; she wouldn't be able to call his stepfather's attention to the beautiful ranch her son owned, to the fine horses he rode, to the high and influential friends he had. She could think, maybe, that something terrible had happened to him which prevented him from ever writing, but she would not know.

His captors paid very little attention to him. By day, one or the other of them would sit with rifle nearby and lazily watch Tim's labors, prodding him on when he slowed. At meal times they would toss him chunks of meat; at night they would lash his hands and feet together and tie him to a stump to save themselves the tedium of watching him. At dawn he would awaken, his extremities blackened by choked circulation; he would lie waiting to be loosened while Sven snored swinishly, close by his side.

Tim did not realize how little he regarded Sven as a man. It was like being in captivity with a wild animal. Sven's body odor, the matted hair, the bestial bluntness of his face, the grunts with which he spoke, all added into a likeness to a wild brute. The illusion was strongest when Sven ate. He tore the joints of venison apart with his bare hands and, thrusting his face into the half-cooked flesh, would snuffle and tear and grind with a whining satisfaction which, Tim thought, would have been more complete if the meat had been alive.

Bonnet did the hunting. Sven did all the work with slavish deference, even bringing in what Bonnet had shot. The game was usually a doe or a fawn. It always had been wounded once

and then shot between the eyes. Always wounded. The meat was sometimes rank with the fear taste which comes when an animal, not instantly killed, lies in terror and agony before dying. The wounding holes were always in painful places.

On one such hunt Bonnet was gone all morning. About eleven o'clock, before the sun fell across the sluice and lighted the gold in the riffles, a series of six shots was heard. Sven started up alarmed. After a long interval there was a seventh. When Bonnet returned, his shoulder was scratched and his coat torn. He was not bored then; he was excited. There was something like honesty in his laugh when he turned Sven back.

"No, no game," he said. "It was a bear. A big one. Had an eight-foot scratch mark. I tracked him for two hours before I found him, and he had my wind before I came up. Oho, he was mad. He reared and charged and I barely had time to shoot. Hit him five times and the brute was *still* alive when he came up to me. Oh, he was mad, let me tell you. I caught him six times all in the throat and chest. He was spitting and roaring like a drunk in a barroom. This blood's all his; I wrestled him for a minute or more before I could get my gun away. I let him have the last one right in the roof of the mouth. Oh, he was a rough one, he was.

"Ah," and Bonnet stretched. "I haven't enjoyed myself so much since my dear old mother's funeral."

All the remainder of the day Bonnet was in extra good humor; he even told Tim to knock off for a while and rest himself, offered Tim some tobacco. Once in a while Bonnet chuckled in a satisfied way. He would poke Sven playfully and laugh.

“You should have seen him,” he told Sven late in the afternoon. “An eight-foot scratch mark. I saw them on the trees. Big as you, almost, and all fight.” He paused and looked speculatively at Sven. “Too bad you’re so valuable to me.” He slapped Sven resoundingly on the shoulder, playfully cuffed his ear. “What a game you’d make, my Swedish friend. And what a trophy! I’d mount your head on a silver board up above the fireplace. That I would!”

Sven turned quickly away and began to stir up the fire; there was a gray look under his beard.

After the incident of the bear, his own approaching fate seemed all the more terrible to Tim. Night after night he would struggle with his bonds until his wrists and ankles bled, but never once could he slack those ropes.

Daily, the pile of gravel grew less. Tim saw, with something like a shock one morning, that only a few hours of labor would be left. He took his pick and went savagely into the gravel vein. But there was only red clay there, all the blue was gone. He thought of breaking the sluice but he realized that the three or four hundred dollars remaining to be washed would be of no account to Bonnet. He could do nothing else but dawdle over his work now, buying a few hours of life with a few pounds of muck. It never occurred to him otherwise than that Bonnet would kill him as soon as the work was finished, kill him, cave a bank in on him and take the gold away.

Tim worked as slowly as he could and was only occasionally prodded on by the watchful young man. At noon Sven roasted a haunch of venison and they ate, Tim seated by the sluice.

Two or three times Tim glanced up and surprised Bonnet looking at him. He was amazed to be given an extra slab of meat.

“Eat hearty,” said Bonnet. “In the name of the ancestral halls of Virginia which raised me, I never permit a guest to go hungry.” He laughed, and his strange eyes flickered at Sven. “You never knew, I suppose, what a hope of the house I was. Yes sir, my old mammy was sure her Stede would be a great man someday, and the governor and the old lady built a mighty high castle of hopes. The world was mine—fast horses and faster women. A hunt before breakfast and a duel before dark. Ah yes, that was the life—all bows, poetry, soft music, tradition, silver and old lace. They thought it was enough to hold me. Their idea of a great man was the overlord of a few dozen slaves. Hah!” He looked fixedly at the slice of dripping meat in his hand.

Suddenly his face changed. He pitched the meat violently into the dirt. “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Damn you!” He stabbed the meat with his hunting knife, stabbed again and again until the knife flew from his grasp. His face was livid with rage. Sven cowered.

Bonnet stood suddenly and grasped his rifle. For a minute Tim was certain that he was going to be shot. Mr. Bonnet strode off and was soon vanished from sight.

Sven huddled beside the fire, shivering. Tim sat where he was, looking wonderingly at the piece of meat in the dust. As time progressed, Sven became more and more nervous.

He looked now and then accusingly at Tim as though Tim had done something to offend his master. At last Sven rose,

undecided, but determined to do something about it. He picked up the revolver and fired it three times into the air. There was no answer from Bonnet.

The trees and the grass of Desperation Peak whispered in the afternoon wind. Sven's agitation increased, he would raise his nose to the wind and, with a sudden surge of hope, sniff worriedly. Finally he beckoned Tim to come up to the camp spot. Tim went. He found himself seized and trussed to a log, and he carefully did not resist. Sven hastily picked up a rifle then and disappeared.

A strange exultation shook Tim. All the time that Sven had been lashing him he had carefully tensed his muscles and held his arms out a small distance from his body. By relaxing now, his bonds were loosed; the exultation was mingled with terror lest Bonnet should return before he could get entirely free.