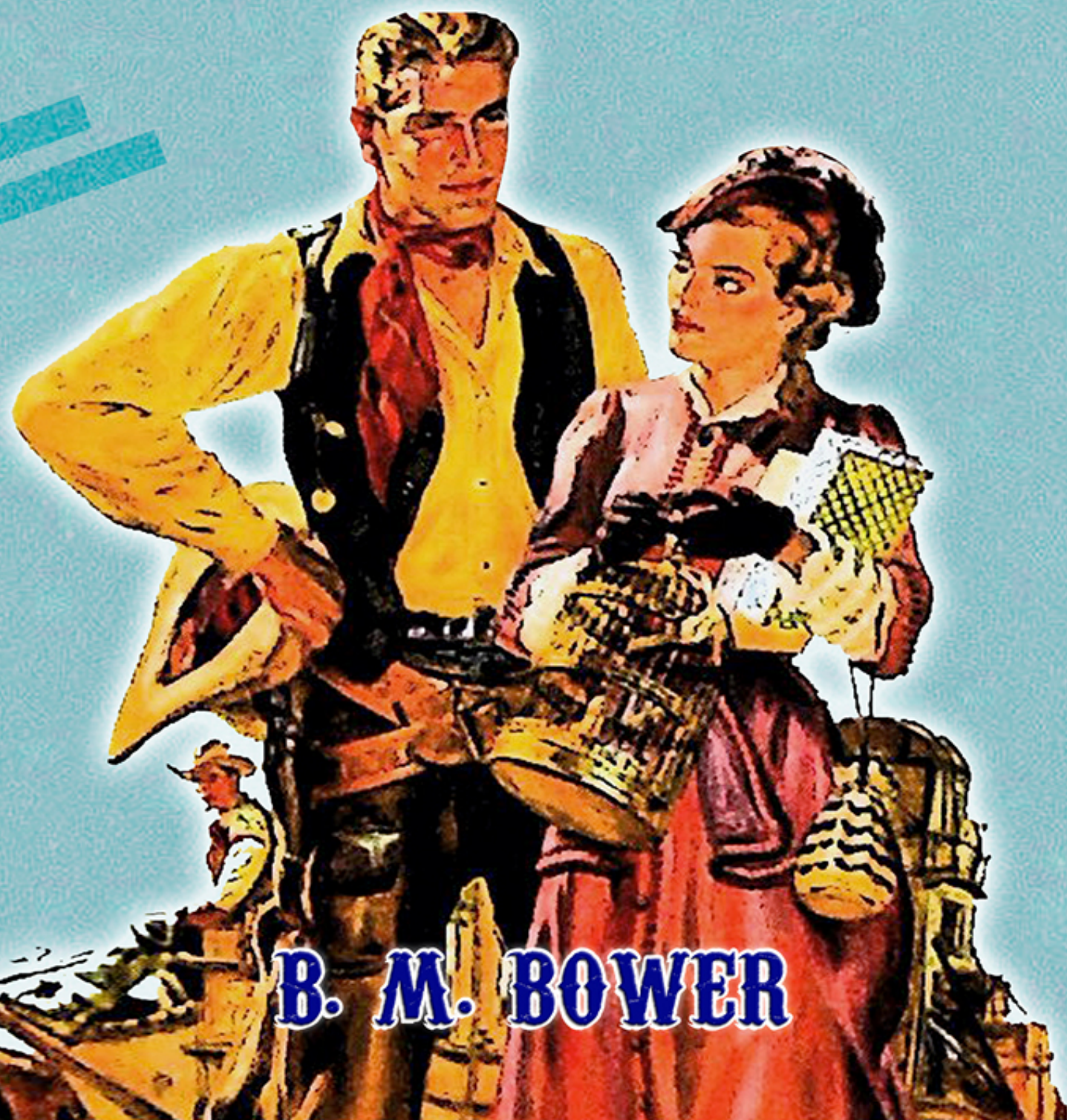


**CLASSICS TO GO**  
**THE TRAIL OF  
THE WHITE MULE**



**B. M. BOWER**



# **THE TRAIL OF THE WHITE MULE**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Casey Ryan, hunched behind the wheel of a large, dark blue touring car with a kinked front fender and the glass gone from the left headlight, slid out from the halted traffic, shied sharply away from a hysterically clanging street car, crossed the path of a huge red truck coming in from his right, missed it with two inches to spare and was halfway down the block before the traffic officer overtook him.

The traffic officer was Irish too, and bigger than Casey, and madder. For all that, Casey offered to lick the livin' tar outa him before accepting a pale, expensive ticket which he crumbled and put into his pocket without looking at it.

"What I know about these here fancy city rules ain't sufficient to give a horn-toad a headache—but it's a darn sight more'n I care," Casey declaimed hotly. "I never was asked what I thought of them tin signs you stick up on the end of a telegraft pole, to tell folks when to go an' when to quit goin'. Mebby it's all right fer these here city drivers—"

"This'll mean thirty days for you," spluttered the officer. "I ought to call the patrol right now—"

"Get the undertaker on the line first!" Casey advised him ominously.

Traffic was piling up behind them, and horns were honking a blatant chorus that extended two blocks up the street. The traffic officer glanced into the troubled gray eyes of the Little Woman beside Casey and took his foot off the running board.

"Better go put up your bail and then forfeit it," he advised in a milder tone. "The judge will probably remember you; I do, and my memory ain't the best in the world. Twice you've been hooked for speeding through traffic; and parking by fire-plugs and in front of the No Park signs and after four, seems to be your big outdoor sport. Forfeit your bail, old boy—or it's thirty days for you, sure."

Casey Ryan made bitter retort, but the traffic cop had gone to untangle two furious Fords from a horse-drawn mail wagon, so he did not hear. Which was good luck for Casey.

"Why do you persist in making trouble for yourself?" the Little Woman beside him exclaimed. "It can't be so hard to obey the rules; other drivers do. I know that I have driven this car all over town without any trouble whatever."

Casey hogged the next safety-zone line to the deep disgust of a young movie star in a cream-and-silver racer, and pulled in to the curb just where he could not be passed.

"All right, ma'am. You can drive, then." He slid out of the driver's seat to the pavement, his face a deeper shade of red than usual.

"For pity's sake, Casey! Don't be silly," his wife cried sharply, a bit of panic in her voice.

"You was in a hurry to git home," Casey pointed out to her with that mildness of manner which is not mild. "I was hurryin', wasn't I?"

"You aren't hurrying now—you're delaying the traffic again. Do be reasonable! You know it costs money to argue with the police."

"Police be damned! I'm tryin' to please a woman, an' I'm up agin a hard proposition. You can ask anybody if I'm the unreasonable one. You hustled me out of the show soon as the huggin' commenced. You wouldn't even let me stay to see the first of Mutt and Jeff. You said you was in a hurry. I leaves the show without seein' the best part, gits the car an' drills through the traffic tryin' to git yuh home quick. Now you're kickin' because I did hurry."

"Hey! Whadda yuh mean, blockin' the traffic?" a domineering voice behind him bellowed. "This ain't any reception hall, and it ain't no free auto park neither."

Another traffic officer with another pencil and another pad of tickets such as drivers dread to see began to write down the number of Casey's car. This man did not argue. He finished his work briskly, presented another notice which advised Casey Ryan to report immediately to police headquarters, waved Casey peremptorily to proceed, and returned to his little square platform to the chorus of blatting automobile horns.

"The cops in this town hands out tickets like they was Free Excursion peddlers!" snorted Casey, his eyes a pale glitter behind his half-closed lids. "They can go around me, or they can honk and be darned to 'em. Git behind the wheel, ma'am—Casey Ryan's drove the last inch he'll ever drive in this darned town. If they pinch me again, it'll have to be fer walkin'."

The Little Woman looked at him, pressed her lips together and moved behind the wheel. She did not say a word all the way out to the white apartment house on Vermont which held the four rooms they called home. She parked the car dexterously in front and led the way to their apartment (ground floor, front) before she looked at me.

"It's coming to a show-down, Jack," she said then with a faint smile. "He's on probation already for disobeying traffic rules of one sort and other, and his fines cost more than the entire upkeep of the car. I think he really will have to go to jail this time. It just isn't in Casey Ryan to take orders from any one, especially when his own personal habits of driving a car are concerned."

"Town life is getting on his nerves," I tried to defend Casey, and at the same time to comfort the Little Woman. "I didn't think it would work, his coming here to live, with nothing to do but spend money. This is the inevitable result of too much money and too much leisure."

"It sounds much better, putting it that way," murmured Mrs. Casey. "I think you're right—though he did behave back there as if it were too much matrimony. Jack, he's been looking forward to your visit. I'm sorry this has happened to spoil it."

"It isn't spoiled," I grinned. "Casey Ryan is, always and ever shall be Casey Ryan. He's running true to form, though tamer than one would expect. When do you think he'll show up?"

Mrs. Casey did not know. She ventured a guess or two, but there was no conviction in her tone. With two nominal arrests in five minutes chalked against him, and with his first rebellion against the Little Woman to rankle in his conscience and memory, she owned herself at a loss.

With a cheerfulness that was only conversation deep, we waited for Casey and finally ate supper without him. The evening was enlivened somewhat by Babe's chatter of kindergarten doings; and was punctuated by certain pauses while steps on the sidewalk passed on or ended with the

closing of another door than the Ryans'. I fought the impulse to call up the police station, and I caught the eyes of the Little Woman straying unconsciously to the telephone in the hall while she talked of things remote from our inner thoughts. Margaret Ryan is game, I'll say that. We played cribbage for an hour or two, and the Little Woman beat me until finally I threw up my hands and quit.

"I can't stand it any longer, Mrs. Casey. Do you think he's in jail, or just sulking at a movie somewhere?" I blurted. "Forgive my butting in, but I wish you'd talk about it. You know you can, to me. Casey Ryan is a friend and more than a friend: he's a pet theory of mine—a fad, if you prefer to call him that.

"I consider him a perfect example of human nature in its unhampered, unbiased state, going straight through life without deviating a hair's breadth from the viewpoint of youth. A fighter and a castle builder; a sort of rough-edged Peter Pan. Till he gums soft food and hobbles with a stick because the years have warped his back and his legs, Casey Ryan will keep that indefinable, bubbling optimism of spiritual youth. So tell me all about him. I want to know who has licked, so far; luxury or Casey Ryan."

The Little Woman laughed and picked up the cards, evening their edges with sensitive fingers that had not been manicured so beautifully when first I saw them.

"Well-sir," she drawled, making one word of the two and failing to keep a little twitching from her lips, "I think it's been about a tie, so far. As a husband—Casey's a darned good bachelor." Her chuckle robbed that statement of anything approaching criticism. "Aside from his insisting on cooking breakfast every morning and feeding me in bed, forcing me to eat fried eggs and sour-dough hotcakes

swimming in butter and honey—when I crave grapefruit and thin toast and one French lamb chop with a white paper frill on the handle and garnished with fresh parsley—he's the soul of consideration. He wants four kinds of jam on the table every meal, when fresh fruit is going to waste. He's bullied the laundryman until the poor fellow's reached the point where he won't stop if the car's parked in front and Casey's liable to be home; but aside from that, Casey's all right.

"After serving time in the desert and rustling my own wood and living on bacon and beans and sour-dough bread, I'm perfectly willing to spend the rest of my life doing painless housekeeping with all the modern built-in features ever invented; and buying my bread and cakes and salads from the delicatessen around the corner. I never want to see a sagebush again as long as I live, or feel the crunch of gravel under my feet. I expect to die in French-heeled pumps and embroidered silk stockings and the finest, silliest silk things ever put in a show window to tempt the soul of a woman. But it took just two weeks and three days to drive Casey back to his sour-dough can."

"He craved luxury more than you seemed to do," I remembered aloud.

"He did, yes. But his idea of luxury is sitting down in the kitchen to a real meal of beans and biscuits and all the known varieties of jam and those horrible whitewashed store cookies and having the noise of the phonograph drowned every five minutes by a passing street car. Casey wants four movies a day, and he wants them all funny. He brings home silk shirts with the stripes fairly shrieking when he unwraps them—and he has to be thrown and tied to get a collar on him.



"He will get up at any hour of the night to chase after a fire engine, and every whipstitch he gets pinched for doing something which is perfectly lawful and right in the desert and perfectly awful in the city. You saw him," said the Little Woman, "to-day." And she added wistfully, "It's the first time since we were married that he has ever talked back—to me.

"And you know," she went on, shuffling the cards and stopping to regard the joker attentively (though I am sure she didn't know what card she was looking at), "just chasing around town and doing nothing but square yourself for not playing according to the rules costs money without getting you anywhere. Fifty-five thousand dollars isn't so much just to play with, in this town. Casey's highest ambition now seems to be nickel disk wheels on a new racing car that can make the speed cops go some to catch him. His idea of economy is to put six or seven thousand dollars into a car that will enable him to outrun a twenty-dollar fine!

"We have some money invested," she went on. "We own this apartment house—and fortunately it's in my name. So long as the housing problem continues critical, I think I can keep Casey going without spending our last cent."

"He did one good stroke of business," I ventured, "when he bought this place. Apartment houses are good as gold mines these days."

The Little Woman laughed. "Well-sir, it wasn't so much a stroke as it was a wallop. Casey bought it just to show who was boss, he or the landlord. The first thing he did when we moved in was to take down the nicely framed rules that said we must not cook cabbage nor onions nor fish, nor

play music after ten o'clock at night, nor do any loud talking in the halls.

"Every day for a week Casey cooked cabbage, onions and fish. He sat up nights to play the graphophone. He stayed home to talk loudly and play bucking bronk with Babe all up and down the stairs and in the halls. Our rent was paid for a month in advance, and the landlord was too little and old to fight. So he sold out cheap—and it really was a good stroke of business for us, though not deliberate.

"Well-sir, at first we lost tenants who didn't enjoy the freedom of their neighbors' homes. But really, Jack, you'd be surprised to know how many people in this city just LOVE cabbage and onions and fish, and to have children they needn't disown whenever they go house-hunting. I had ventilator hoods put over every gas range in the house, and turned the back yard into a playground with plenty of sand piles and swings. I raised the price, too, and made the place look very select, with a roof garden for the grown-ups. We have the house filled now with really nice families—avoiding the garlic brand—and as an investment I wouldn't ask for anything better.

"Casey enjoyed himself hugely while he was whipping things into shape, but the last month he's been going stale. The tenants are all so thankful to do as they please that they're excruciatingly polite to him, no matter what he does or says. He's tired of the beaches and he has begun to cuss the long, smooth roads that are signed so that he couldn't get lost if he tried. It does seem as if there's no interest left in anything, unless he can get a kick out of going to jail. And, Jack, I do believe he's gone there."

The telephone rang and the Little Woman excused herself and went into the hall, closing the door softly

behind her.

I'm not greatly given to reminiscence, but while I sat and watched the flames of civilization licking tamely at the impregnable iron bark of the gas logs, the eyes of my memory looked upon a picture:

Desert, empty and with the mountains standing back against the sky, the great dipper uptilted over a peak and the stars bending close for very friendliness. The licking flames of dry greasewood burning, with a pungent odor in my nostrils when the wind blew the smoke my way. The far-off hooting of an owl, perched somewhere on a juniper branch watching for mice; and Casey Ryan sitting cross-legged in the sand, squinting humorously at me across the fire while he talked.

I saw him, too, bolting a hurried breakfast under a mesquite tree in the chill before sunrise, his mind intent upon the trail; facing the desert and its hardships as a matter of course, with never a thought that other men would shrink from the ordeal.

I saw him kneeling before a solid face of rock in a shallow cut in the hillside, swinging his "single-jack" with tireless rhythm; a tap and a turn of the steel, a tap and a turn—chewing tobacco industriously and stopping now and then to pry off a fresh bit from the plug in his hip pocket before he reached for the "spoon" to muck out the hole he was drilling.

I saw him larruping in his Ford along a sandy, winding trail it would break a snake's back to follow, hot on the heels of his next adventure, dreaming of the fortune that finally came. . . .

The Little Woman came in looking as if she had been talking with Destiny and was still dazed and unsteady from the meeting.

"Well-sir, he's gone!" she announced, and stopped and tried to smile. But her eyes looked hurt and sorry. "He has bought a Ford and a tent and outfit since he left us down on Seventh and Broadway, and he just called me up on long-distance from San Bernardino. He's going out on a prospecting trip, he says. I'll say he's been going some! A speed cop overhauled him just the other side of Claremont, he told me, and he was delayed for a few minutes while he licked the cop and kicked him and his motorcycle into a ditch. He says he's sorry he sassed me, and if I can drive a car in this darned town and not spend all my loose change paying fines, I'm a better man than he is. He doesn't know when he'll be back—and there you are."

She sat down wearily on the arm of an over-stuffed armchair and looked up at the gilt-and-onyx clock which I suspected Casey of having bought. "If he isn't lynched before morning," she sighed whimsically, "he'll probably make it to the Nevada line all right."

I rose, also glancing at the clock. But the Little Woman put up a hand to forbid the plan she read in my mind.

"Let him alone, Jack," she advised. "Let him go and be just as wild and devilish as he wants to be. I'm only thankful he can take it out on a Ford and a pick and shovel. There really isn't any trouble between us two. Casey knows I can look out for myself for awhile. He's got to have a vacation from loafing and matrimony. I'm so thankful he isn't taking it in jail!"

I told her somewhat bluntly that she was a brick, and that if I could get in touch with Casey I'd try to keep an eye on him. It would probably be a good thing, I told her, if he did stay away long enough to let this collection of complaints against him be forgotten at the police station.

I went away, hoping fervently that Casey would break even his own records that night. I really intended to find him and keep an eye on him. But keeping an eye on Casey Ryan is a more complicated affair than it sounds.

Wherefore, much of this story must be built upon my knowledge of Casey and a more or less complete report of events in which I took no part, welded together with a bit of healthy imagination.



## CHAPTER TWO

Casey Ryan knew his desert. Also, from long and not so happy experience, he knew Fords, or thought he did. He made the mistake, however, of buying a nearly new one and asking it to accomplish the work of a twin six from the moment he got behind the wheel.

He was fortunate in buying a demonstrator's car with a hundred miles or so to its credit. He arrived in Barstow before the proprietor of a supply store had gone to bed—for which he was grateful to the Ford. He loaded up there with such necessities for desert prospecting as he had not waited to buy in Los Angeles, turned short off the main highway where traffic officers might be summoned by telephone to lie in wait for him, and took the steeper and less used trail north. He was still mad and talking bitterly to himself in an undertone while he drove—telling the new Ford what he thought of city rules and city ways, and driving it as no Ford was ever meant by its maker to be driven.

The country north of Barstow is not to be taken casually in the middle of a dark night, even by Casey Ryan and a Ford. The roads, once you are well away from help, are all pretty much alike, and all bad. And although the white, diamond-shaped signs of a beneficent automobile club are posted here and there, where wrong turnings are most likely to prove disastrous to travelers, Casey Ryan was in the mood to lick any man who pointed out a sign to him. He did see one or two in spite of himself and gave a grunt of contempt. So, where he should have turned to the east (his intention being to reach Nevada by way of Silver Lake) he continued traveling north and didn't know it.

Driving across the desert on a dark night is confusing to the most observant wayfarer. On either side, beyond the light of the car, illusory forest stands for mile upon mile. Up hill or down or across the level it is the same—a narrow, winding trail through dimly seen woods. The most familiar road grows strange; the miles are longer; you drive through mystery and silence and the world around you is a formless void.

Dawn and a gorgeous sunrise painted out the woods and revealed barren hilltops which Casey did not know. Because he did not know them, he guessed shrewdly that he was on his way to the wilderness of mountains and sand which lies west of Death Valley. Small chance he had of hearing the shop whistles blow in Las Vegas at noon, as he had expected.

He was telling himself that he didn't care where he went, when the car, laboring more and more reluctantly up a long, sandy hill, suddenly stopped. In Casey's heart was a thrill at the sheer luxury of stopping in the middle of the road without having some thick-necked cop stride toward him bawling insults. That he was obliged to stop, and that a hill uptilted before him, and the sand was a foot deep outside the ruts failed to impress him with foreboding. He gloried in his freedom and thought not at all of the Ford.

He climbed stiffly out, squinted at the sky line, which was jagged, and at his immediate surroundings, which were barren and lonely and soothing to his soul that hungered for these things. Great, gaunt "Joshua" trees stood in grotesque groups all up and down the narrow valley, hiding the way he had come from the way he would go. It was as if the desert had purposely dropped a curtain before his past and would show him none of his future.

Whereat Casey Ryan grinned, took a chew of tobacco and was himself again.

"If they wanta come pinch me here, I'll meet 'em man to man. Back in town no man's got a show. They pile in four deep and gang a feller. Out here it's lick er git licked. They can all go t' thunder. Tahell with town!"

The odor of coffee boiling in a new pot which the sagebrush fire was fast blackening; the salty, smoky smell of bacon frying in a new frying pan that turned bluish with the heat; the sizzle of bannock batter poured into hot grease—these things made the smiling mouth of Casey Ryan water with desire.

"Hell!" said Casey, breathing deep when, stomach full and resentment toward the past blurred by satisfaction with his present, he filled his pipe and fingered his vest pocket for a match. "Gas stoves can't cook nothin' so there's any taste to it. That there's the first real meal I've et in six months. Light a match and turn on the gas and call that a fire! Hunh! Good old sage er greasewood fer Casey Ryan, from here on!"

He laid back against the sandy sidehill, tilted his hat over his eyes and crossed his legs luxuriously. He was in no hurry to continue his journey. Now that he and the desert were alone together, haste and Casey Ryan held nothing in common. For awhile he watched a Joshua palm that looked oddly like a giant man with one arm hanging loose at its side and another pointing fixedly at a distant, black-capped butte standing aloof from its fellows. Casey was tired after his night on the trail. Easy living in town had softened his muscles and slowed a little that untiring energy which had balked at no hardship. He was drowsy, and his brain

stopped thinking logically and slipped into half-waking fancy.

The Joshua seemed to move, to lift its arm and point more imperatively toward the peak. Its ungainly head seemed to turn and nod at Casey. What did the darned thing want? Casey would go when he, got good and ready. Perhaps he would go that way, and perhaps he would not. Right here was good enough for Casey Ryan at present; and you could ask anybody if he were the man to follow another man's pointing, much less a Joshua tree.

Battering rain woke Casey some hours later and drove him to the shelter of the Ford. Thunder and lightning came with the rain, and a bellowing wind that rocked the car and threatened once or twice to overturn it. With some trouble Casey managed to button down the curtains and sat huddled on the front seat, watching through a streaming windshield the buffeted wilderness. He was glad he had not unloaded his outfit; gladder still that the storm had not struck which he was traveling. Down the trail toward him a small river galloped, washing deep gullies where the wheels of his car offered obstruction to its boisterousness.

"She's a tough one," grinned Casey, in spite of the chattering of his teeth. "Looks like all the water in the world is bein' poured down this pass. Keeps on, I'll have to gouge out a couple of Joshuays an' turn the old Ford into a boat—but Casey'll keep agoin'!"

Until inky dark it rained like the deluge. Casey remained perched in his one-man ark and tried hard to enjoy himself and his hard-won freedom. He stabbed open a can of condensed milk, poured it into a cup, and drank it and ate what was left of his breakfast bannock, which he had

fortunately put away in the car out of the reach of a hill of industrious red ants.

He thought vaguely of cranking the car and going on, but gave up the notion. One sidehill, he decided, was as good as another sidehill for the present.

That night Casey slept fitfully in the car and discovered that even a wall bed in a despised apartment house may be more comfortable than the front seat of a Ford. His bones ached by morning, and he was hungry enough to eat raw bacon and relish it. But the sun was fighting through the piled clouds and shone cheerfully upon the draggled pass, and Casey boiled coffee and fried bacon and bannock beside the trail, and for a little while was happy again.

From breakfast until noon he was busy as a beaver repairing the washout beneath the car and on to the top of the hill. She was going to have to get down and dig in her toes to make it, he told the Ford, when at last he heaved pick and shovel into the tonneau, packed in his cooking outfit and made ready to crank up.

From then until supper time he wore a trail around the car, looking to see what was wrong and why he could not crank. He removed hootin'-annies and dingbats (using Casey's mechanical terms) looked them over dissatisfiedly, and put them back without having done them ny good whatever. Sometimes they were returned to a different place, I imagine, since I know too well how impartial Casey is with the mechanical parts of a Ford.

He made camp there that night, pitching his little tent in the trail for pure cussedness, and defying aloud a traveling world to make him move until he got good and ready. He might have saved his vocabulary, for the road was



impassable before him and behind; and had Casey managed to start the car, he could not have driven a mile in either direction.

Since he did not know that, the next day he painstakingly cleaned the spark plugs and tried again to crank the Ford; couldn't, and removed more hootin'-annies and dingbats than he had touched the day before. That night he once more pitched his tent in the trail, hoping in his heart that some one would drive along and dispute his right to camp there; when he would lick the doggone cuss.

On the fourth day, after a long, fatiguing session with the vitals of a Ford that refused to be cranked, Casey was busy gathering brush, for his supper fire when Fate came walking up' the trail. Fate appears in many forms. In this instance it assumed the shape of a packed burro that poked its nose around a group of Joshuas, stopped abruptly and backed precipitately into another burro which swung out of the trail and went careening awkwardly down the slope. The stampeding burro had not seen the Ford at all, but accepted the testimony of its leader that something was radically wrong with the trail ahead. His pack bumped against the yuccas as he went; after him lurched a large man, heavy to the point of fatness, yelling hoarse threats and incoherent objurgations.

Casey threw down his armful of dead brush and went after the lead burro which was blazing itself a trail in an entirely different direction. The lead burro had four large canteens strapped outside its pack, and Casey was growing so short of water that he had begun to debate seriously the question of draining the radiator on the morrow.

I don't suppose many of you would believe the innate cussedness of a burro when it wants to be that way. Casey