

# Sweetwater Doldrums

by Vic Head

The sky will never seem so blue again. Worldwide pollution has seen to that, but back in the mid-twenties—well, the kid thought, that's a real blue blue, and he leaned against a rock with his back to Bell Bluff and his face toward the willows and sycamores of the almost dry Sweetwater. That fleecy white cloud coming from the west was a rabbit. That one was a swan. Another drifting over had to be Big Billygoat Gruff.

The usual big thunderstorm of April had ended the rainy season, but the deep white sand of Deer Creek was so thirsty there was little actual flow. Brother Tate said not to expect another rain until October. The days slowed down. Grass turned to yellow, then brown, then black, with an added red-brown cast of wild buckwheat. He would follow the road north and west to the Sweetwater Bridge, the only road out to any village or town. Alpine was five miles of winding climb to the north, but he was not allowed to cross the bridge. With the thermometer at 105 in the shade, he would sit under the bridge, nibbling on peppery watercress and watching the water striders that skittered across the almost stagnant puddles. Farther downstream near the Indian burial site the water went underground.

A blind man could have told the instant the sun disappeared, so abrupt was the sudden cooling. Nights were downright cold and good sleeping, for hot humid nights were unknown. Evenings he would stand by Sister Mary's rocker showing her an arrowhead that Raymond had turned up while plowing and listening to her true stories by the smoky flame of a coal oil lamp. He learned how after his parents' divorce he and his mother, two older sisters and still older brother had lived here for awhile before they went to Point Loma. She told of the terror with which the mother had watched as Raymond sat on the cast-iron seat of the mowing machine with its seven-foot cutter bar with five-inch teeth cutting the hay with a roaring whirr, all the while filling the valley till North and South Ridges echoed back the bawdy songs he'd learned in His Majesty's Navy, and all the while holding the baby in his right arm just over the cutter bar and controlling the horse with his left. "And how Raymond loved you! He'd have carried you piggyback to the top of the North Ridge if we'd let him." She told of the orphans who had grown up and left, all except Grace, who had died three years ago. "I remember Grace," the kid interrupted. The earliest memory of his life surged forward. "I was in my highchair screaming, "Mama, Mama, Grace is making a face at me." "Oh," she said, "not the nicest way to start a life's worth of memories." It seems that Grace had been one of many children brought from the San Diego Orphanage. She was feeble-minded, a victim of congenital syphilis. She had stayed when others were long gone, cared for by Sister Mary who, in her boundless love, rejoiced when Grace had learned to count, "one, two three, whole lot."

Sister Mary would trim the smoking wick, say good-night prayers with him and send him with a small lamp across the yard to his seven-foot square cabin among the giant prickly pear cactus.

Soon he was dreaming of last Christmas—one of his nicest. A paper bag with a Christmasy pattern to delight the heart, full of peanuts grown up near the greasewood slope, wrapped by Brother Tate who was so old his chin was never far from his knees, but whose eyes sparkled. A six-ounce jar of peppermints from Sister Mary, so special they'd lasted well past Easter. A jackknife on a shiny chain from Brother Ed, who taught him to make whistles from willow twigs which Sister Mary struggled to tolerate. But best of all, Raymond—short-tempered Raymond who sometimes frightened him—carried the kid on his shoulders to the woodworking

shop and presented a beeaauuuutiful redwood scooter which Raymond had been secretly working on for many mornings. Somehow the thrill of balancing and bumping along the pebbly driveway on only two not perfectly round wooden wheels was—what?? Well—next thing to flying. And Raymond, watching, was nearly flying too. But late in the spring on a steep rock incline the kid knocked his breath out, skinned a knee and shattered the scooter beyond repair.

Summer dragged. When September arrived, visits to the Denny Ranch became less frequent. Oh, Mrs. Denny's doughnuts and muffins were nice, but Mary Denny was mostly at school. And she had turned eleven now and growing like a weed. The kid was nine now, gaining strength but little height. One Saturday when she would surely be home, his bare feet raised dust clouds as he ran to the Deer Creek Bridge. Out from the grove of giant live oaks came two black Denny horses, Mary and another girl astride, and the doldrums seemed to lift. He shouted, but they galloped past without so much as a wave. Off to the east, up the ten percent grade on the side of South Ridge, around the spur and they were gone. Steadfastly he turned to follow up the rocky road. On and on, up and up till one bare foot was bleeding. His spirits soared again when at last he saw the riders returning. He stood in the middle of the road so they couldn't miss him, but they only cantered by on either side, seeming not to see him. He gave up and with sinking heart started limping down the long road. At the Kosmon driveway with setting sun behind, he could see Bell Bluff first glowing like a mirror, then—but somehow the red seemed less royal, and he wanted to leave Sacratero Valley and get back to school. Surely no child could be so forlorn as one who has only a single friend and she two years older and unwilling to admit she knows him, let alone ever played with him, when another friend her own age shows up.