

The scalphunters

Cormac McCarthy



For the next two weeks they would ride by night, they would make no fire. They had struck the shoes from their horses and filled the nailholes in with clay and those who still had tobacco used their pouches to spit in and they slept in caves and on bare stone. They rode their horses through the tracks of their dismounting and they buried their stool like cats and they hardly spoke at all. Crossing those barren gravel reefs in the night among such unknown coordinates they seemed remote and without substance, like a patrol condemned to ride out some ancient curse. A thing surmised from the blackness by the creak of leather and the chink of metal. Something passing that may have been the wind. They cut the throats of the pack animals and jerked and divided the meat and they traveled under the cape of the wild mountains upon a broad soda plain with dry thunder to the south and rumors of light. Under the gibbous moon horse and rider spanceled to their lean and flickering shadows on the snowblue ground. In the intervals their lunar castings kept

Drawing courtesy the Historical Pictures Service, Inc., Chicago

another quarter and these riders seemed invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, legatees of some order both imperative and remote. Something separate that was yet a blood component.

They crossed the Del Norte and rode south into a land more hostile yet. All day they crouched like owls under the niggard acacia shade and peered out upon that cooking world. Dustdevils stood on the horizon like the smoke of distant fires but of living thing there was none. They eyed the sun in its circus and they rode out upon the cooling plain where the western sky was the color of blood. At a desert well they dismounted and drank jaw to jaw with their horses and remounted and rode on. The little desert wolves yapped in the dusk and Glanton's dog trotted beneath the horse's belly, its footfalls stitched precisely among the hooves.

That night they were visited with a plague of hail out of a faultless sky and the horses shied and moaned and the men dismounted and sat upon the ground with their saddles over their heads while the hail leaped in the sand like small lucent eggs concocted alchemically out of the desert darkness and when they resaddled and rode on they went for miles through cobbled ice while a polar moon rose like a blind cat's eye up over the rim of the world. In the night they passed the lights of a village on the plain but they did not turn.

Toward the morning they saw fires on the horizon. Glanton sent the Delawares. Already the dawnstar burned pale in the east. When they returned they squatted with Glanton and the judge and the Brown brothers and spoke and gestured and then all remounted and all rode on.

Five wagons smoldered on the desert floor and the riders dismounted and moved among the bodies of the dead argonauts in silence, those right pilgrims nameless among the stones with their terrible wounds, the viscera spilled from their sides and the naked torsos bristling with arrowshafts. Some by their beards were men but yet bore strange menstrual wounds between their legs and no man's parts for these had been cut away and hung dark and strange from out their grinning mouths. In their wigs of drying blood they lay gazing with ape's eyes up at brother sun now rising in the east.

The wagons were no more than embers armatured with the

blackened shapes of hoopiron and tires, the redhot axles quaking deep within the coals. The riders squatted at the fires and boiled water and drank coffee and roasted meat and they lay down to sleep among the dead.

When the company set forth in the evening they continued south as before. The tracks of the murderers bore on to the west but they were white men who preyed on travelers in that wilderness and disguised their work in this way. The trail of the argonauts of course went no further than the ashes they left behind and the intersection of these vectors seemed the work of a cynical god, the traces converging blindly in that whited void and the one going on bearing away the souls of the others with them.

The Delawares moved on ahead in the dusk and the Mexican John McGill led the column, dropping from time to time from his horse to lie flat on his belly and skylight the outriders on the desert before them and then remount again without halting his pony or the company which followed. They moved like migrants under a drifting star and their track across the land reflected in its faint arcature the movements of the earth itself. To the west cloudbanks stood above the mountains like the dark warp of the firmament and the starsprent reaches of the galaxies hung in a vast aura above the riders' heads.

Two mornings later the Delawares returned from their dawn reconaissance and reported the Gileños camped along the shore of a shallow lake less than four hours to the south. They had with them their women and children and dogs and they were many. Glanton when he rose from this council walked out on the desert alone and stood for a long time looking out upon the darkness downcountry.

They saw to their arms, drawing the charges from their pieces and reloading them. They spoke in low voices among themselves although the desert round lay like a great barren plate gently quaking in the heat. In the afternoon a detachment led the horses out to water and led them back again and with dark Glanton and his lieutenants followed the Delawares out to scout the enemy's position.

They had driven a stick into the ground on a rise north of the camp and when the angle of the dipper had swung about to this inclination Toadvine and the Van Diemanlander set the com-

pany in motion and they rode forth south after the others trammed to chords of rawest destiny, like migratory birds that beat their way by night among the pale or copper stars.

They reached the north end of the lake in the cool hours before dawn and turned along the shore. The water was very black and along the beach there lay a wrack of soapy foam and they could hear ducks talking far out on the lake. The embers of the encampment's fires lay below them in a gentle curve like the lights of a distant port. Before them on that lonely strand a solitary rider sat his horse. It was one of the Delawares and he turned his horse without speaking and they followed him up through the brush into the desert.

The party was crouched in a stand of willow a half mile from the fires of the enemy. They had muffled the heads of the horses and the hooded beasts stood rigid and ceremonial behind them. The new riders dismounted and bound their own horses and they sat upon the ground while Glanton addressed them.

We got a hour, maybe more. When we ride in it's ever man to his own. Dont leave a dog alive if you can help it.

How many is there, John?

Did you learn to whisper in a sawmill?

They's enough to go round, said the judge.

Dont waste powder and ball on anything that caint shoot back. If we dont kill ever nigger here we need to be whipped and sent home.

This was the extent of their council. The hour that followed was a long hour. They lead the blindfold horses down and stood looking out upon the encampment but they were watching the horizon to the east for the first pale reaches of light. A bird called. Glanton turned to his horse and unhooded it like a falconer at morning. A wind had risen and the horse lifted its head and sniffed the air. The other men followed. The blankets lay where they had fallen. They mounted, pistols in hand, saps of rawhide and riverrock looped about their wrists like the implements of some primitive equestrian game. Glanton looked back at them and then nudged forth his horse.

As they trotted out onto the white salt shore an old man rose from the bushes where he'd been squatting and turned to face them. The dogs that had been waiting on to contest his stool

bolted howling. Ducks began to rise by ones and pairs out on the lake. Someone clubbed the old man down and the riders put rowels to their mounts and lined out for the camp behind the dogs with their clubs whirling and the dogs yapping in terror in a tableau of some hellish hunt, the partisans nineteen in number bearing down upon that encampment where there lay sleeping upward of a thousand souls.

Glanton rode his horse completely through the first wickiup trampling the occupants underfoot. Figures were scrambling out of the low doorways. The raiders went through the village at full gallop and turned and came back. A warrior stepped into their path and leveled a lance at them and Glanton shot him dead. Three others ran and he shot the first two with shots so closely executed that they fell together and the third one seemed to be coming apart as he ran, hit by half a dozen pistol balls.

Within that first minute the slaughter had become general. Women were screaming and naked children and one old man tottered forth waving a pair of white pantaloons. The horsemen moved among them and slew them with clubs or knives. Already a number of the huts were afire and a whole enfilade of refugees had begun streaming along the shore wailing crazily, the riders herding them on and clubbing down the laggards.

When Glanton and his chiefs swung back through the village people were running out under the horses' hooves and the horses were plunging and some of the men were moving among the huts with torches and dragging victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy. There were in the camp a number of Mexican slaves and these ran forth calling out in spanish and were brained or shot and someone swung an infant aloft by its feet and bashed it against a stone metate so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives and a woman ran up and embraced the bloodied forefeet of Glanton's warhorse.

By now a small band of warriors had mounted themselves out of the scattered remuda and they advanced upon the village and rattled a drove of arrows among the burning huts. Glanton

drew his rifle from its scabbard and shot the two lead horses and resheathed the rifle and drew his pistol and began to fire between the actual ears of his horse. The mounted indians floundered among the down and kicking horses and they milled and circled and were shot down one by one with rifles until the dozen survivors among them turned and fled up the lake past the groaning column of refugees and disappeared in a drifting wake of soda ash.

Glanton turned his horse. The dead lay awash in the shallows like the victims of some disaster at sea and they were strewn along the salt foreshore in a havoc of blood and entrails. Riders were towing bodies out of the bloody waters of the lake and the froth that rode lightly on the beach was a pale pink in the rising light. They moved among the dead gathering the long black locks with their knives and leaving their victims rawskulled and strange in their bloody cauls. The loosed horses from the remuda came pounding down the reeking strand and disappeared in the smoke and after a while they came pounding back. Men were wading about in the red waters hacking aimlessly at the dead and some lay coupled to the dead or dying bodies of young women. One of the Delawares passed with a collection of heads like some strange vendor bound for market, the hair twisted about his wrist and the heads dangling and turning together. Glanton knew that every moment on this ground must be contested later in the desert and he rode among the men and urged them on.

McGill came out of the crackling fires and stood staring bleakly at the scene about. He had been skewered through with a lance and he held the stock of it before him. It was fashioned from an aloe stalk and the point of an old cavalry sword bound to the haft curved from out the small of his back. Someone waded out of the water and approached him and the Mexican sat down carefully in the sand.

Get away from him, said Glanton.

McGill turned his head and as he did so Glanton leveled his pistol and shot him through the head. He had the empty rifle clasped upright against the saddle with his knee and now he measured powder down the barrels. Someone shouted to him. The bloody horse trembled and stepped and stepped back and

Glanton spoke to it softly and patched two balls and drove them home. He was watching a rise to the north where a band of mounted Apaches were grouped against the sky.

They were perhaps a quarter mile distant, five, six of them, their cries thin and lost. Glanton brought the rifle to the crook of his arm and capped one lock and rotated the barrels and capped the other. He did not take his eyes from the Apaches. Long Webster stepped from his horse and drew his rifle and slid the ramrod from the thimbles and went to one knee, the ramrod upright in the sand, resting the rifle's forestock upon the fist with which he held it. The rifle had set triggers and he cocked the rear one and laid his face against the cheekpiece. He reckoned the drift of the wind and he reckoned against the sun on the side of the silver foresight and he held high and touched off the piece. Glanton sat immobile. The shot was flat and lost in the emptiness and the gray smoke drifted away. The leader of the group on the rise sat his horse. Then he slowly went sideways and pitched to the ground.

Glanton gave a whoop and surged forward. Four men followed. The warriors on the rise had dismounted and were lifting up the fallen man. Glanton turned in the saddle without taking his eyes from the Indians and held out his rifle to the nearest man. This man was Sam Tate and he took the rifle and reined his horse so short he nearly threw it to the ground. Glanton and three rode on and Tate drew the ramrod for a rest and crouched and fired. The horse that carried the wounded chief faltered, ran on. He swiveled the barrels and fired the second charge and it ploughed to the ground. The Apaches reined with shrill cries. Glanton leaned forward and spoke into his horse's ear. The Indians raised up their leader to a new mount and riding double they flailed at their horses and set out again. Glanton had drawn his pistol and he gestured with it to the men behind and one pulled up his horse and leaped to the ground and went flat on his belly and drew and cocked his own pistol and pulled down the loading lever and stuck it in the sand and holding it in both hands with his chin buried in the ground he sighted along the barrel. The horses were two hundred yards out and moving fast. With the second shot the pony that bore the leader bucked and a rider alongside reached and took the

reins. They were attempting to take the leader off the wounded animal in mid stride when the animal collapsed.

Glanton was first to reach the dying man and he knelt with that alien and barbarous head cradled between his thighs like some reeking outland nurse and dared off the savages with his revolver. They circled on the plain and shook their bows and lofted a few arrows at him and then turned and rode on. Blood bubbled from the man's chest and he turned his lost eyes upward, already glazed, the capillaries breaking up. In those pools there sat each a small and perfect sun.

He rode back to the camp at the fore of his small column with the chief's head hanging by its hair from his belt. The men were stringing up the scalps on strips of leather whang and some of the dead lay with broad slices of hide cut from their backs to be used for the making of razorstraps and harness. The dead Mexican McGill had been scalped and the bloody skulls were already blackening in the sun. Most of the wickiups were burned to the ground and because some gold coins had been found a few of the men were kicking through the smoldering ashes. Glanton cursed them on, taking up a lance and mounting the head upon it where it bobbed and leered like a carnival head and riding up and back, calling to them to round up the caballado and move out. When he turned his horse he saw the judge sitting on the ground. The judge had taken off his hat and he was drinking water from a leather bottle. He looked up at Glanton.

That aint him, he said.

What aint.

He nodded. That.

Glanton turned the shaft. The head with its long dark locks swung about to face him.

Who do you think it is if it aint him?

The judge shook his head. I dont know. It aint Gomez. He nodded toward the head. That son of a bitch is sangre puro. Gomez is Mexican.

He aint all Mexican.

You caint be all Mexican. It's like bein all mongrel. But that aint Gomez cause I've seen Gomez and it aint him.

Will it pass for him?

No.

Glanton looked toward the north. He looked down at the judge. You aint seen my dog have ye? he said.

The judge shook his head. You aim to drive that stock?

I do. Until I'm made to quit.

That might be soon.

That might be.

How long do you think it will take those niggers to regroup?

Glanton spat. It wasnt a question and he didnt answer it. Where's your horse? he said.

Gone.

Well if you aim to ride with us you better be for gettin you one. He looked at the head on the pole. You was some kind of a goddamned chief, he said.

Within the hour they were mounted and riding south, leaving behind on the scourged shore of the lake a shambles of blood and salt and ashes and driving before them half a thousand horses and mules. The judge rode at the head of the column bearing on the saddle before him a strange dark child covered with ashes. Part of its hair was burned away and it rode mute and stoic watching the land advance before it with huge black eyes like some changeling. The men of that company as they rode turned black in the sun from the blood on their clothes and their faces, paling slowly again in the rising dust until they had assumed once more the color of the land through which they passed.

They rode all day with Glanton bringing up the rear of the column. Toward noon the dog caught them up. His chest was stiff with dried blood and Glanton carried him on the pommel of the saddle until he could recruit himself. In the long afternoon he trotted in the shadow of the horse and in the twilight he trotted far out on the plain where the tall shape of the horse skating over the chaparral eluded him on spider legs.

By now there was a thin line of dust to the north and they rode on into dark and the Delawares dismounted and lay with their ears to the ground and then they mounted up and all rode on again.

When they halted Glanton ordered fires built and the wounded seen to. One of the mares had foaled in the desert and this frail form soon hung skewered on a paloverde pole over the raked coals. From a slight rise to the west of the camp the fires

of the enemy were visible ten miles to the north. The company squatted in their bloodstiffened hides and counted the scalps and strung them on poles, the blueblack hair dull and stiff with blood. David Brown went among those haggard butchers as they crouched before the flames but he could find him no surgeon. He carried an arrow in his thigh, fletching and all, that none would touch.

Boys, he said, I'd doctorfy it myself but I caint get no straight grip.

The judge looked up at him and smiled.

Will you do her, Holden?

No, Davy, I wont. But I tell you what I will do.

What's that.

I'll write a policy on your life against every mishap save the noose.

Damn you.

The judge chuckled. Brown glared about at them. Will none of ye help a man?

None spoke.

Damn all of ye, he said.

He sat and stretched his leg out on the ground and looked at it, he bloodier than most. He gripped the shaft and bore down on it. The sweat stood on his forehead. He held his leg and swore softly. Some watched, some did not. The boy rose. I'll try her, he said.

Good lad, said Brown.

He fetched his saddle to lean against. He turned his leg to the fire for the light and folded his belt and held it and hissed down at the boy kneeling there. Grip her stout, lad. And drive her straight. Then he gripped the belt in his teeth and lay back.

The boy took hold of the shaft close to the man's thigh and pressed forward with his weight. Brown seized the ground on either side of him and his head flew back and his wet teeth shone in the firelight. The boy took a new grip and bore down again. The veins in the man's neck stood like ropes and he cursed the boy's soul. On the fourth essay the point of the arrow came through the flesh of the man's thigh and blood ran over the ground. The boy sat back on his heels and passed the sleeve of his shirt across his brow.

Brown let the belt fall from his teeth. Is it through? he said.
It is.

The point? Is it the point? Speak up, man.

The boy drew his knife and cut away the bloody point deftly and handed it up. Brown held it to the firelight and smiled. The point was of hammered copper and it was cocked in its blood-soaked bindings on the shaft but it had held.

Stout lad, ye'll make a shadetree sawbones yet. Now draw her.

The boy withdrew the shaft from the man's leg smoothly and the man bowed on the ground in a lurid female motion and wheezed raggedly through his teeth. He lay there a moment and then he sat up and took the shaft from the boy and threw it in the fire and rose and went off to make his bed.

When the boy returned to his own blanket the ex-priest Tobin leaned to him and looked about stealthily and hissed at his ear.

Fool, he said. God will not love ye forever.

The boy turned to look at him.

Dont you know he'd of took you with him? He'd of took you, boy. Like a bride to the altar.

They rose up and moved on some time after midnight. Glanton had ordered the fires built up and they rode out under flames licking ten feet in the air and lighting all the grounds about where the shadowshapes of the desert brush reeled and shivered on the sands and the riders trod their thin and flaring shadows until they had crossed altogether into the darkness which so well became them.

The horses and mules were ranged far out over the desert and they picked them up for miles to the south and drove them on. The sourceless flare of summer lightning marked out of the night dark mountain ranges at the rim of the world and the half-wild horses on the plain before them trotted in those bluish strobes like horses from a dream evoked out of the absolute void and swallowed up again.

In the smoking dawn the party rode ragged and bloody with their baled peltries less like victors than the harried afterguard of some ruined army retreating across the meridians of chaos and old night, the horses stumbling, the men tottering asleep in

the saddles. The broached day discovered the same barren countryside about and the smoke from their fires of the night before stood thin and windless to the north. The pale dust of the enemy who were to hound them to the gates of the city seemed no nearer and they shambled on through the rising heat driving the crazed horses before them.

Midmorning they watered at a stagnant pothole that had already been walked through by three hundred animals, the riders hazing them out of the water and dismounting to drink from their hats and then riding on again down the dry bed of the stream and clattering over the stony ground, dry rocks and boulders and then the desert soil again red and sandy and the constant mountains about them thinly grassed and grown with ocotillo and sotol and the secular aloes blooming like phantasmagoria in a fever land. At dusk they sent riders west to build fires on the prairie and the company lay down in the dark and slept while bats crossed silently overhead among the stars. When they rode on in the morning it was still dark and the horses all but fainting. Day found the heathen much advanced upon them. They fought their first stand the dawn following and they fought them running for eight days and nights on the plain and among the rocks in the mountains and from the walls and azoteas of abandoned haciendas and they lost not a man.

On that third night they crouched in the keep of old walls of melted mud with the fires of the enemy not a mile distant on the desert. The judge sat with the Apache boy before the fire and it watched everything with dark berry eyes and some of the men played with it and made it laugh and they gave it jerky and it sat chewing and watching gravely the figures that passed above it. The judge covered it with a blanket and in the morning he was dandling it on one knee while the men saddled their horses. Toadvine saw him with the child as he passed with his saddle but when he came back ten minutes later the child was dead and the judge had scalped it. Toadvine put the muzzle of his pistol against the great dome of the judge's head.

Goddamn you, Holden.

You either shoot or take that away. Do it now.

Toadvine put the pistol in his belt. The judge smiled and wiped the child's scalp on the leg of his trousers and rose and

turned away. Another ten minutes and they were on the plain again in full flight from the Apaches.

On the afternoon of the fifth day they were crossing a dry pan at a walk, driving the horses before them, the indians behind just out of rifle range calling out to them in spanish. From time to time one of the company would dismount with rifle and wiping stick and the indians would flare like quail, pulling their ponies around and standing behind them. To the east trembling in the heat stood the thin white walls of a hacienda and the trees thin and green and rigid rising from it like a scene viewed in a diorama. An hour later they were driving the horses—perhaps now a hundred head—along these walls and down a worn trail toward a spring. A young man rode out on a good bay horse and welcomed them formally in spanish. No one answered. The young man looked down along the creek where the fields were laid out with acequias and where the workers in their dusty white costumes stood poised with hoes among the new cotton or waist high corn. He looked back to the northwest. The Apaches, seventy, eighty of them, were just coming past the first of a row of jacales and defiling along the path and into the shade of the trees.

The peons in the fields saw them at about the same time. They flung their implements from them and began to run, some shrieking, some with their hands atop their heads like prisoners. The young Don looked at the Americans and he looked at the approaching savages again. He said something in spanish. The Americans drove the horses up out of the spring and on through the grove of cottonwoods. The last they saw of him he had drawn a small pistol from his boot and had turned to face the indians.

That evening they led the Apaches directly through the town of Gallego, the street a mud gutter out of which rose swine and wretched hairless dogs. It seemed deserted. The young corn in the roadside fields had been washed by recent rains and stood white and luminous, bleached almost transparent by the sun. They rode most of the night and the next day the indians were still there.

They fought them again at Encinillas and they fought them in the dry passes going toward El Sauz and beyond in the low

foothills from which they could already see the church spires of the city to the south. On the twenty first of July in the year eighteen forty-nine they rode into the city of Chihuahua to a hero's welcome, driving the harlequin horses before them through the dust of the streets in a pandemonium of teeth and whited eyes. Small boys ran among the hooves and the victors in their gory rags smiled through the filth and dust and the caked blood as they bore on poles the desiccated heads of the enemy through that fantasy of music and flowers.