WEATHER

CHARLES L. McNICHOLS

NEW YORK, 1944

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

CRAZY WEATHER

PRINTED AND BOUND IN THE U. S. A. BY
KINGSPORT PRESS, INC., KINGSPORT, TENN.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

CRAZY WEATHER

ON A MORNING in late August, in the fourteenth year and seventh month of his life, South Boy awoke and found himself between two beehives under the low fronds of a thrifty young fan palm. He lay still for nearly a minute before he grudgingly stretched his heavy, aching limbs. Then he yawned with a yawn that cracked his jaw hinges. A vague sense of uneasiness added to his discomfort, but for some time he couldn't determine the cause of it.

True, it was late to be just waking up. The slant of a sunbeam laden with dancing dust particles told him the sun was nearly two hours high. But time had never been any concern of South Boy's. So he lay and listened, his heart beating slow and in instinctive apprehension, his eyes rolling, cautiously taking in everything within the narrow limits of his sleeping quarters. They rested at the entrance of one of the hives. There was no traffic to and fro. A small, restless swarm buzzed about the entrance, wings fanning furiously. From within that hive and the other came a deeper, muffled buzzing that was almost like the sound of gourd rattles shaken furiously, far off. The bees were desperately fanning air to their young.

"I know what's the matter," said South Boy, getting up. "It's hot!"

He ducked out into the blinding, stunning glare of the sun and headed for the olla that hung in the grape arbor alongside the summer kitchen.

One gourd of cold water in his stomach and another doused over his head chased away the dim half-dread, and he reached up and snipped off a bunch of brown-ripe, sugar-sweet muscats

and began methodically popping the grapes into his mouth, shivering delightedly as the water that dripped from his rope-colored, half-long hair trickled inside the open collar of his faded blue shirt and ran down his spine. Thus, for several minutes he enjoyed himself—eating, shivering, staring at the damp, burlap-wrapped water jar, wondering about what sort of miracle it wrought in making the water within it so much colder than the air without. Someone had told him "evaporation," but he was still asking himself "Why?"

He glanced over at the big spirit thermometer hanging in the deepest shade against the canvas lower wall of the summer kitchen and shook his head when he saw that the column of red liquid stood at 110. At noon, a temperature of a hundred and ten would have been nothing to remark about, but at seven in the morning—South Boy said "Uh-huh, hot!" He began listening for small noises that should be heard at that time in the morning, but there were none. The world about was already wrapped in the dead, heavy silence brought about by the desert's midday heat.

From inside the kitchen a querulous voice called, "Chico?"

"Hi!" croaked South Boy.

"Vente! Vente!" the voice cracked angrily.

"Vengo, ya," grumbled South Boy; and then he said to himself in English, "I bet a short-bit we're in for a spell of crazy weather!" and tossed away the grape stem.

It was stifling in the screen-and-canvas summer kitchen. South Boy let the screen door slam just to relieve the untimely stillness and sat down at the near end of a long plank table. A huge Mexican woman in a gray wrapper, the sweat streaming down her fat face, flounced angrily over to the stove, dumped tepid, soggy flapjacks and limp bacon from a frying pan onto a chipped enamel plate, and slid it down the length of the table before she slopped a crockery cup full of coffee from a gallon pot.

South Boy reached for the syrup. The cook slumped down

into her old rocker by the stove and glared at him. He knew why she was angry. She was a creature of habit and never left the kitchen until all the men had been fed; so, waiting for him, she'd sat there and stewed when she might have been under the shade of her favorite willow by the main irrigating ditch since sunup if he'd have come to breakfast at the regular time. He knew if she'd been a white woman or a Mojave she'd have hunted him up long ago and given him a jawing for keeping her waiting. But this woman came from some obscure, subjected race down on the Mexican plateau—a people that had been serfs of the Spaniards for four hundred years and serfs of unknown red masters for generations before that. So she didn't speak out, but glowered and sulked and chewed on her grievance after the manner of the downtrodden, and brooded over some devious retaliation in the depth of her mind like a hen owl brooding over her eggs.

It came to South Boy then that he should say something to excuse himself for the inconvenience he had caused her. He would have said it, too, if she had been able to understand English or Mojave; but the heat made his mind too lazy to think up the appropriate Mexican phrases. Instead it slipped easily into making and rejecting plans for his day as he sopped up syrup with sections of flapjack.

He thought of twisting a new hair rope, or cleaning his saddle, or going fishing, or hunting up his old friend the trapper, called the Mormonhater; but he rejected each of these ideas as it came up: Too much work . . . Too much traveling . . . The Mormonhater might be hard to find. His boat hadn't been seen in the near stretches of the river for a couple of months . . .

Just as he wiped up the last of the syrup with the last leathery sop, the cook broke out with a mirthless, cackling giggle. He looked up to see a fat forefinger pointed at his head.

"Bonitos—cabellos—lar-r-rgos," she droned with a slow exaggeration of *dega* dialect of the peon that denoted heavy sar-

casm. South Boy batted his eyes and chewed methodically, trying to figure out what she was up to.

"Un otro Boofalo Beel, como El Bravo!" she continued, staring at South Boy with sullen expectancy. South Boy stared back at her complacently, mumbling over her words. "Pretty long hair. Another Buffalo Bill, like El Bravo," she said in a tone that was deliberately insulting.

He knew El Bravo, the Tough Guy, was her name for her husband, a moody and combative exile from Texas who bossed the ranch when South Boy's father wasn't around to do his own bossing. He knew that El Bravo wore his hair down to his shoulders and that on the wall of his bedroom, where he could see it every morning when he awoke, he had tacked a signed photograph of Colonel Cody. Not that he admired the Colonel so much; in fact he said publicly that he could outshoot, outride, and even outdrink Bill Cody any time. South Boy had heard him make the statement. The Foreman had kept the picture as a symbol of what might have been. For El Bravo was once well on the way to becoming a celebrated Western Character himself.

He'd been a trail driver, a ranger, a valiant fighter against the Apache and the Comanche, and a rare shot with a rifle and pistol. About the time when Colonel Cody was making headlines with the European tour of his Wild West Show, certain men of money decided to put El Bravo on the road with a show of his own. But it so happened that on the eve of the launching of the enterprise, El Bravo had to kill one of the backers of his show, a person of wide family connections and considerable political influence.

So El Bravo rode for Arizona with vengeance on his heels, and instead of becoming the darling of the crowds in the East and in Europe entertained by duchesses and such, he went on a prolonged drunk in Prescott and woke up legally married to this Mexican woman. Now he was working on a little two-by-

four ranch—his own description—married to a hay bag he was shamed to take to Needles, even.

All this South Boy knew very well, because the Foreman had often told him. He didn't know that the Hay Bag had long since discovered that she could avenge herself upon her husband by simply pointing her finger at him and drawling, "Como Boofalo Beel, no?" Sometimes he would brood for days afterwards. South Boy didn't understand that she expected the same reaction from any other long-haired male. So he just blinked at her, puzzled.

"Como Boofalo Beel, no?" she cried, her voice rising.

Then she did what the daughters of the downtrodden never do except in last desperation. She resorted to violence. She seized the pot off the stove and threw it at South Boy.

South Boy, who was through eating, ducked the pot handily and dived out through the door. He paused for a moment under the grape arbor and listened to the turmoil of dish-smashing going on within. He glanced at the red column of the thermometer—114, and rising.

"Yep, crazy weather," he said. "And it's sure got ol' Hay Bag."

He'd discarded all ideas of doing anything interesting that day and decided he would try reading. So he walked over to the ranch house, got down on his belly, and crawled under the back gallery where the space between the floor and the ground was too limited to admit anyone but himself and the house cat. Back about six or eight feet was a small depression where the cat had her semiannual litter of kittens and South Boy kept his personal cache. Thence he took an old copy of Bob Ingersoll's lectures that had remained unread since the Mormonhater had loaned it to him in the spring, and slowly backing out into the sunlight and shading his eyes with the book, he returned to his sleeping place under the palm tree.

There he sat with his back against the rough bole of the tree,

idly turning the pages. The book didn't look very interesting. He had only consented to take it home in the first place because of the divergent opinions the Mormonhater and his mother had expressed about Mr. Ingersoll. His mother said he was the Devil's disciple. The Mormonhater said he was the smartest man ever born.

South Boy had been aiming to find out why for a long time, but until now his days had been too full. Now he tried hard to find out whatever there was great or devilish in the first few lines, but the sweat ran into his eyes and blinded him. The bees, in their desperate attempt to air-condition their breeding chambers, were making too much noise. And without warning South Boy began to be bothered about his hair. It had grown long, or "half-long," as the Mojaves say, simply because since his mother was gone no one had taken the trouble to say, "Cut the boy's hair." As for his part, it was easier to let it grow than to get it cut. He never thought about it until the Mexican woman set the seeds of thinking in the back of his head.

A moment or two of fretful annoyance and he slammed the book down and again ducked out into the glare. I reckon it ain't too hot to go see Havek, he thought, picturing the airy shade under Havek's mother's willow-roof, where he could lie on the dampened, hard-packed adobe floor and gossip and sleep all day with Havek and his various relatives. Maybe by night it would be cool enough to go fishing.

The sun struck him like a ponderous weight and pressed down on him from all sides, but he walked quickly because the hot, white dust burnt through a quarter-inch of callus and stung his feet. The nearest relief was the shade of the west side of the stack of baled hay in the center of the horse corral. He rolled over the willow-pole fence and ran for it, his mouth open and his eyes glazed. Once in the shadow of the stack he squatted on his heels, panting.

There were a dozen saddle horses in a single file, some head to head, some nose to tail, leaning against the stack, for the

hay was still several degrees cooler than the air. South Boy felt no inclination to go out into the sun again to find a saddle or bridle, so he kicked through the litter underfoot until he found an old piece of stake rope, and walking up to the nearest animal—she happened to be a dun mare with a brown stripe the length of her back—he had the rope tied around her neck and a half-hitch bent around her nose before she roused out of her daze.

South Boy heaved himself onto her back and clamped fast with his knees, drumming his heels against her fat sides to drive her away from the stack. The mare stood the drumming for a full minute as though she were debating whether it was worth the effort to try to buck him off, and then shook her head. She moved slowly away from the hay, with little steps. She walked past the other horses, so close that South Boy's nigh leg rubbed hard against several of them, and then out into the killing sun.

Near the end of the half-mile stretch of shadeless trail to the lower irrigation ditch the mare began to stagger. South Boy did his best to keep her on her feet but she fell right by the fringe of small willows at the edge of the ditch. He jumped free, slipped off the hackamore, and stood coiling the rope over his left hand and elbow, staring down at the mare with amazement. "What do you know! She foundered out on me! I ain't never seen the sun knock out a horse so soon!"

Up to this point he hadn't noticed any particular ill effects of the sun on himself except the usual discomfort of sweat that poured out and dried in a sticky salt rime all over his body. He did notice he was a little bit dizzy and a little bit frightened. Fortunately the ditch was running bank-full. He promptly dived headlong into it, rolled over, sat up chest-deep in the roily water, fetched up handfuls of cool red mud from the bottom and began plastering it over his head and the back of his neck.

"Good thing my hair is a little bit long," he said. "Damn sun might have killed me." He remembered he had been warned

that the summer's sun would kill white people who didn't wear hats. He never wore a hat five weekdays in his life, so he hadn't believed it.

He sat thinking. "It's too far to Havek's, but it is only a half-mile to the river. The river water runs deep, and it's cooler than ditch water. I'll go to the river and stay there until the crazy weather is past."

He rose to his knees and looked over the bank at the mare. She lay still, her neck stretched out. She looked dead, but South Boy noticed she had fallen craftily, her head in the shade of the willows. He got out of the ditch, raised his left foot over her head and let about a pint of muddy water run out of the leg of his jeans and over her head.

The mare promptly scrambled to her feet; giving South Boy a look of infinite disgust, she bolted into the nearest mesquite without regarding its thorns, and there she stood, with only her defiant rump showing.

"No, I ain't going to try and dig you out of there," said South Boy, and he went slowly away toward the west, toward the *Colorado Grande*, dripping a twisting trail, for he traveled from the lacy shade of one mesquite tree to another for the relief of his feet.

There was a sort of boundary line by the river's bank where mesquite and gourd vines and soapweed gave way to current-scoured earth and big willows—big enough to have stood against the last high water—and at this place South Boy ran across the old man called Hook-a-row.

Time and heat had shriveled Hook-a-row to much less than the six feet, two hundred pounds that was the size of a Mojave man in his prime. But he still walked upright and struck his long staff at the ground with force and decision. He was a rather disreputable-looking old man. His long gray hair was not twisted into ropes in the Mojave way, but fell in a loose, untidy tangle to his shoulders, and there was a rag bound around his head Apache-fashion. He wore a dirty white man's

suit of ancient cut and a long undershirt that hung outside his pants and almost to his knees. At the same time there was an air of distinction about him that marked him as a man of quality and he showed his good manners in the courteous way he greeted South Boy.

"Friend-of-mine."

South Boy said, "Old-man-my-uncle," which is the polite way to greet a man of his age; and he added, "It's hot," in English.

"Hot? Hot?" laughed Hook-a-row, as cheerfully as if it had been a spring morning. He put his head a little to one side, like an inquiring bird. He had something else on his mind, for while he appeared to be trying to remember the meaning of the English word his sparsely bearded face lost its cheerfulness and grew sadder and sadder until there were tears brimming in his eyes.

"What's the matter?" asked South Boy.

"It's the matter of your half-long hair. There is tears in my eyes because there is sorrow to your left, or so I hear. Nothing was said and nothing was known, or we would have come and cried at the proper time."

Stupid from the heat and still beset with the recurrent uneasiness that had troubled him since he first awoke, South Boy shuffled his feet and pondered the old man's meaning. "Half-long hair": that would be a sign of mourning to a Mojave. The old man was referring to a death with the elaborate circumlocution necessary to avoid giving offense. "To your left": that meant on South Boy's mother's side.

South Boy cried, "Oh, no, she isn't dead. Truly. She went away for doctoring by the ocean." South Boy's mother had gone to Los Angeles for an operation eight months before. "She was cured, but the doctor said she must stay there until the hot weather breaks. You will see her back here by the second full moon from now, or thereabouts."

Whereupon the old man laughed in great relief and wiped

his eyes with his dirty sleeve. He pointed to South Boy's mud-smeared hair. "Then that means nothing," he said.

"Nothing," said South Boy, thinking sullenly, First, the cook, then this old man . . . He added, "My hair has grown lately."

"Yes," said Hook-a-row. "Yes, truly. Maybe it grows all-the-way-long and it will be twisted into fifty strands and you will become a Real Person indeed."

He went away chuckling to himself, and South Boy went on down to the river, not knowing that more seeds of thought had been planted in the back of his mind.

There was a big black-willow that made shade over the water all day long at the spot where he came to the river's bank. And the river in those days was the old wild river, before any dams had tamed it. It was deep and strong, and its usual color was that of coffee with a spoonful of cream in it; but today it showed a strong tinge of red as it did when there had been big rains far away in the Navajo country causing the Little Colorado to dump a stinking red flood into the big river above the Grand Canyon.

So the river on this day not only was red, but was a foot higher than it had been the day before, and there was an added restlessness to its surge. South Boy heard it talking to him in disquieting tones. He stripped off his clothes, caked with ditch mud that had already dried, dropped them on the bank, and slid into the water.

By and by he crawled up the bank and into the first fork of the big willow, where such breeze as did come off the river cooled his wet skin. Against the sooty gray of the willow bark he made a motionless pattern of golden brown—the color of a new saddle freshly oiled. His back was against the downstream side of the fork, his right knee was braced against the upstream limb, and his left leg hung down the trunk.

For a moment he was almost happy, watching the river, wide and strong, its rolling sand boils and its ever-changing

pattern of crosscurrents and back currents. There was a great sand bar out in the middle, dried bone-white in the two months since the recession of the annual great flood. Over it the heat waves danced frantically, distorting the line of green that was the grove of willows and cottonwoods on the Nevada bank. But in the heat and unaccustomed idleness, the seeds of thought that had been planted in the back of his mind grew disturbingly.

First, he frowned as he puzzled over the cook's talk about his hair. Then he squirmed over Hook-a-row's mention of his mother. So the Mojaves had decided she was dead. That was why no one had asked about her lately.

Well, she'd be back by October, and he'd be very glad.

Truly, hadn't he always been waiting by the Needles road each Tuesday and Saturday when the stage went by on its way to Fort Mojave to collect her long letter? Didn't he read it to his father whenever he was home and see to it his father wrote an answer in time to make the down stage on Wednesdays and Mondays? Didn't he always write her a full, honest page, himself, for every letter, and two pages when his father was not at home?

Still, when she came back he would be confronted with Cultural Advancement and Christian Instruction again. And he would hear the cry that grew in persistence every year. "When are we sending this boy away to school?"

For South Boy's mother was not only a white woman, she was a lady. She said herself she belonged to Another World. Certainly she was no part of either of the two worlds around her—these, according to her own description, were the Rough World of the White Man and the Heathen World of the Indian. She had been forced by a fraud of nature to give South Boy to the breast of an Indian woman, but almost from the day he learned to drink cow's milk out of a glass she had sought to armor him with Cultural Advancement and Christian Instruction against the Rough and the Heathen Worlds.

Every weekday South Boy received two hours of Cultural Advancement, which began with reading and writing when he was small and afterwards developed into two pages of Tarr and McMurry's "Advanced Geography," one chapter of Wells's "History of the United States," and two pages of "Gems of Great Literature," the first two to be memorized at least in part, and the latter to be read "with feeling and proper pronunciation." All this was no great chore for South Boy, who had all three volumes almost by heart within a year and had learned to think of more interesting things, like shooting ducks or wild pigs, while he was reciting.

At the end of the two hours he was turned over to his father, who spent fifteen or twenty minutes teaching him arithmetic and, lately, double entry bookkeeping—both of which he enjoyed. By that time his mother, always in delicate health, had retired to read in her own room; so South Boy sallied out into the Rough or the Heathen World, as suited his fancy, and learned all those things he had been armored against: from the Foreman; from various callous cowhands (most of them fugitives from something or other); from the Mormonhater; from the Yavapai roustabout; and from several score Mojaves, his most cherished companions.

Christian Instruction came on the long weary Sabbath. He read ten selected chapters out of the Bible—selected by his mother so he wouldn't run into any embarrassingly frank language—and one sermon, long, tough, and dry, by some Scotchman. On the Sundays they stayed at home he could escape after dinner, when his mother took a nap. On alternate Sundays he was stuck for all day. He had to hitch up his mother's surrey, drive around to the house for his mother and the cook, drive down to a point across the river from Needles, yell his lungs out to fetch the cable ferry, lead the skittish horses on and off the old flatboat—and carefully keep from cussing when they tried to jump into the river—drive the cook to the Catholic church, go with his mother to the Presbyterian mission, sit

through a sermon, and then reverse all that tedium homeward.

All in his good clothes, too. The only bright spot on these days was when the rig would encounter a rattlesnake. As his mother loathed snakes and there was a biblical admonition against them, it was permissible for him to use the shotgun that he was allowed to carry in the rig for defense purposes only.

Usually he fired suddenly, scaring the wits out of his passengers and the horses. After he had checked the runaways and after the screams in the back seat had been reduced to gasps he would explain he had to shoot the snake without warning because it was coming to attack the horses.

Of course the cook never believed him, but his mother still thought a snake, no matter how far away it was, had murder on its mind. For all these years in the wilderness—her own term —she had lived in her own island of Culture and Civilization, hermetically sealed against the facts of the world without—Rough, Heathen or Herpetological.

Still, South Boy loved his mother. She was a dear, good woman. He missed her very much and he would be glad to give all his Sundays and two hours of every other day to have her back. It was the thought of being sent away to be shut up among white strangers in a school that made his skin prickle and the sweat beads form on his hands. As the day of her return approached, he had fought off thinking about it and had succeeded because he kept busy. Now that crazy weather enforced idleness he could fight it off no longer.

As though the thought of white strangers could conjure them up, the sound of voices talking English came floating down the river and after it came a good big boat with an awning rigged on willow poles and three white men under it, cursing the heat and dipping up hatfuls of water to pour over their perspiring heads. The boat drifted into the near channel.

"Hullo," said the man in the bow. There was a surveying transit leaning against the gunwale beside him. South Boy said to himself: "Strangers. Government men. What are they doing