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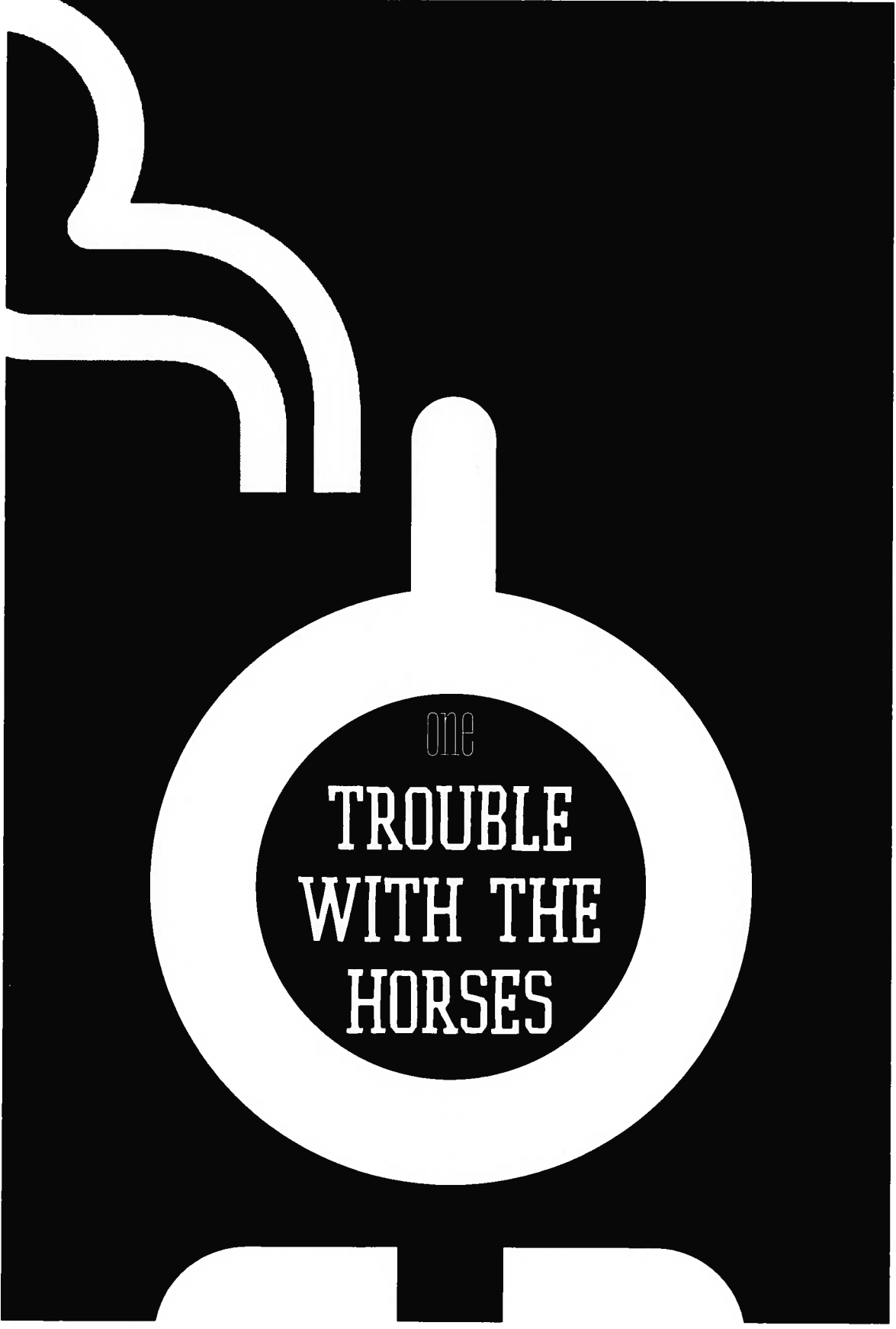


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For my mother



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**TROUBLE
WITH THE
HORSES**

I was sitting outside the Commodore's mansion, waiting for my brother Charlie to come out with news of the job. It was threatening to snow and I was cold and for want of something to do I studied Charlie's new horse, Nimble. My new horse was called Tub. We did not believe in naming horses but they were given to us as partial payment for the last job with the names intact, so that was that. Our unnamed previous horses had been immolated, so it was not as though we did not need these new ones but I felt we should have been given money to purchase horses of our own choosing, horses without histories and habits and names they expected to be addressed by. I was very fond of my previous horse and lately had been experiencing visions while I slept of his death, his kicking, burning legs, his hot-

popping eyeballs. He could cover sixty miles in a day like a gust of wind and I never laid a hand on him except to stroke him or clean him, and I tried not to think of him burning up in that barn but if the vision arrived uninvited how was I to guard against it? Tub was a healthy enough animal but would have been better suited to some other, less ambitious owner. He was portly and low-backed and could not travel more than fifty miles in a day. I was often forced to whip him, which some men do not mind doing and which in fact some enjoy doing, but which I did not like to do; and afterward he, Tub, believed me cruel and thought to himself, Sad life, sad life.

I felt a weight of eyes on me and looked away from Nimble. Charlie was gazing down from the upper-story window, holding up five fingers. I did not respond and he distorted his face to make me smile; when I did not smile his expression fell slack and he moved backward, out of view. He had seen me watching his horse, I knew. The morning before I had suggested we sell Tub and go halves on a new horse and he had agreed this was fair but then later, over lunch, he had said we should put it off until the new job was completed, which did not make sense because the problem with Tub was that he would impede the job, so would it not be best to replace him prior to? Charlie had a slick of food grease in his mustache and he said, 'After the job is best, Eli.' He had no complaints with Nimble, who was as good or better than his previous horse, unnamed, but then he had had first pick of the two while I lay in bed recovering from a leg wound received on the job. I did not like Tub but my brother was satisfied with Nimble. This was the trouble with the horses.

Charlie climbed onto Nimble and we rode away, heading for the Pig-King. It had been only two months since our last visit to Oregon City but I counted five new businesses on the main street and each of these appeared to be doing well. 'An ingenious species,' I said to Charlie, who made no reply. We sat at a table in the back of the King and were brought our usual bottle and a pair of glasses. Charlie poured me a drink, when normally we pour our own, so I was prepared for bad news when he said it: 'I'm to be lead man on this one, Eli.'

'Who says so?'

'Commodore says so.'

I drank my brandy. 'What's it mean?'

'It means I am in charge.'

‘What’s it mean about money?’

‘More for me.’

‘My money, I mean. Same as before?’

‘It’s less for you.’

‘I don’t see the sense in it.’

‘Commodore says there wouldn’t have been the problems with the last job if there had been a lead man.’

‘It doesn’t make sense.’

‘Well, it does.’

He poured me another drink and I drank it. As much to myself as to Charlie I said, ‘He wants to pay for a lead man, that’s fine. But it’s bad business to short the man underneath. I got my leg gouged out and my horse burned to death working for him.’

‘I got my horse burned to death, too. He got us new horses.’

‘It’s bad business. Stop pouring for me like I’m an invalid.’ I took the bottle away and asked about the specifics of the job. We were to find and kill a prospector in California named Hermann Kermit Warm. Charlie produced a letter from his jacket pocket, this from the Commodore’s scout, a dandy named Henry Morris who often went ahead of us to gather information: ‘Have studied Warm for many days and can offer the following in respects to his habits and character. He is solitary in nature but spends long hours in the San Francisco saloons, passing time reading his science and mathematics books or making drawings in their margins. He hauls these tomes around with a strap like a schoolboy, for which he is mocked. He is small in stature, which adds to this comedy, but beware he will not be teased about his size. I have seen him fight several times, and though he typically loses, I do not think any of his opponents would wish to fight him again. He is not above biting, for example. He is bald-headed, with a

wild red beard, long, gangly arms, and the protruded belly of a pregnant woman. He washes infrequently and sleeps where he can—barns, doorways, or if need be, in the streets. Whenever he is engaged to speak his manner is brusque and uninviting. He carries a baby dragoon, this tucked into a sash slung around his waist. He does not drink often, but when he finally lifts his bottle, he lifts it to become completely drunken. He pays for his whiskey with raw gold dust that he keeps in a leather pouch worn on a long string, this hidden in the folds of his many-layered clothing. He has not once left the town since I have been here and I do not know if he plans to return to his claim, which sits some ten miles east of Sacramento (map enclosed). Yesterday in a saloon he asked me for a match, addressing me politely and by name. I have no idea how he knew this, for he never seemed to notice that I was following him. When I asked how he had come to learn my identity he became abusive, and I left. I do not care for him, though there are some who say his mind is uncommonly strong. I will admit he is unusual, but that is perhaps the closest I could come to complimenting him.’

Next to the map of Warm’s claim, Morris had made a smudged drawing of the man; but he might have been standing at my side and I would not have known it, it was so clumsy a rendering. I mentioned this to Charlie and he said, ‘Morris is waiting for us at a hotel in San Francisco. He will point Warm out and we will be on our way. It’s a good place to kill someone, I have heard. When they are not busily burning the entire town down, they are distracted by its endless rebuilding.’

‘Why doesn’t Morris kill him?’

‘That’s always your question, and I always have my answer: It’s not his job, but ours.’

‘It’s mindless. The Commodore shorts me my wage but pays

this bumbler his fee and expenses just to have Warm tipped off
that he is under observation?