

**LAND OF THE RIPPLING GOLD**

**by**

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# CHAPTER ONE

## The movie buffs

'WHAT'S THAT frightful racket out front?'

Wendy, totally absorbed in her book, looked up blankly as her mother thumped her petrol iron down so hard that blue flames within roared and spurted crazily.

'Sounds like someone clanging a cow bell', Mrs Bailey kept on, adding a pillowslip to a freshly ironed pile beside her.'

Wendy resignedly slammed her book shut. 'Okay, I'll go and see.'

As she rounded the corner of their weatherboard home, a large dray, hauled by a pair of magnificent Clydesdales, was slowly passing the front gate. Interest sparked her dreamy, greenish-grey eyes when she saw coloured posters of Tim Holt and William Boyd displayed on huge sandwich boards standing on the dray. Big lettering beneath the posters announced:

**FIRST EVER MOVIE MATINEES IN TOWN,  
GRAND OPENING; SATURDAY WEEK.  
ADMISSION: SIXPENCE.**

'You beaut!' She clapped her hands in delight. Tim Holt was her idol.

The young driver, a wholesome-faced lad of fourteen years, grinned and shook his bell even louder. 'G'day Wendy. Say hello to your big sister for me', he yelled, slapping his reins smartly on the massive rumps.

Neither noticed the slight, dapper man, busily examining the posters on the other side, until they heard

his curses as he executed some fancy footwork to jump clear of the lurching horses.

'Gee, sorry, Mr Keller', Leo exclaimed, chortling openly as he drove on.

Wendy got the giggles. She just couldn't help it.

Mr Keller straightened his tie angrily and flicked red dust from his neat, navy-blue suit. 'I trust you've done your homework, Miss Bailey', he said coldly, striding off towards the shops.

A horse and sulky came clip-clopping along the dusty road. Its occupant stuck her nose in the air rudely as she passed, then reining-in further along beside their headmaster, smiled ingratiatingly as she offered him a lift.

Wendy looked after the bouncing 'Shirley Temple' curls enviously. Marjorie Baume, her classmate, looked exactly as she had always longed to. Heaving a sigh, she went back inside to give her mother and Laura the long-awaited news.

Mrs Bailey did not share her daughters' enthusiasm. 'I've no money for pictures', she said, tightening her lips. 'Your father's hardly made enough for food lately, let alone anything else. I don't know what we will do when the bank won't lend any more on our house. They own a good part of it now! You get threepence pocket-money – all I can afford – and you've already spent next week's in advance, remember? What did you spend that on?'

'I bought my Tip-Top comic. There's a serial—'

'Yeah and she bought a threepenny honey and almond chocolate and 'piggied' it all by herself', Laura broke in with sisterly spite.

'You can't talk!' Wendy defended herself hotly and the pair began bickering loudly.

'That's enough!' Their mother's voice rose above theirs. She looked at her daughters in exasperation as she tenderly rubbed at her throbbing temples. The two were not a bit alike, either in appearance or temperament. It was little wonder they frequently clashed. Laura, with her bush of vibrant curls and flashing eyes, over-shadowed the shy, fairer-skinned Wendy, who, though twenty-one

months younger, was the taller of the two. She resembled her father's family, while Laura was the image of herself when young. 'Please don't fight, girls', she begged. 'I've enough to put up with. If only your father would sell up; take us out of the godforsaken town. But no, he loves it. He doesn't care how I feel. The Depression is over in other parts; he could soon find a job. He's just plain selfish.'

Wendy squirmed. She loved her father dearly and hated to hear him criticised even when he deserved it.

'The town is dying', Mrs Bailey continued, 'but he just can't, or won't, see it. If he says, once more, that next year there'll be bumper crops, I'll...'

Laura flashed mischievous brown eyes at Wendy, raising them to heaven expressively behind her mother's back. The complaints were the subject of unending arguments between the parents, and the children now tuned out unfeelingly whenever she started.

'Oh dear, I've forgotten the ice!' Taking a battered small purse from the ice-chest top, Mrs Bailey selected a silver sixpenny piece from among a few copper coins and handed it to Wendy. 'Run and fetch it before the meat and milk goes off, there's a good girl. And tell David I want him, if you see him. He hasn't chopped the kindling yet.'

\* \* \*

Down in the main street, young David Bailey, concealed behind a huge billboard, was just preparing to leap out at unsuspecting passers-by. Half crouching, chubby cheeks swelling with mischief and anticipation, left hand restrainingly on his small dog and right curled around a toy pistol, he waited tensely for the sound of approaching footsteps on the hard-packed dirt footpath.

Posters of William Boyd astride Topper, his galloping white steed, starring in *Cassidy at Bar 20*, the main feature, and handsome Tim Holt with his blazing guns (hero of *The Law West of Tombstone*) had only recently been pasted on the billboard, and though there were few

people about, the boy was counting on someone stopping to read them.

His patience was rewarded when he heard shuffling steps becoming louder. He tensed, readying himself. A pair of battered, well-worn boots appeared beneath the board and stopped. Releasing his dog, David leapt out to confront their owner. 'Stick 'em up!' he cried in his deepest voice, pointing the pistol ominously. Toddy, barking loudly, jumped and pranced about enjoying the fun.

The 'victim' was an elderly swaggie weighed down with all his worldly possessions, an assortment of bulging bags and bundles. His dog, a mongrel with ginger and grey wispy hair comically resembling his master's, curled his lip and growled deep within his chest.

'Down, Peg!' the swagman commanded, raising his arms in mock terror. 'Down, boy.' Then pulling his pockets out and letting them dangle emptily, he informed the 'hold-up' man, with a grin, 'You can't get blood out of a stone, lad'.

The boy's eyes widened in surprise. The cultured voice didn't fit the ragged and unkempt appearance. David was about to wave him on magnanimously when he had a thought. 'If you're looking for a feed, Mum'll give you one', he said. 'Lots of...er...'

'Gentlemen of the road?' the swaggie prompted, smiling.

David nodded. 'Yes. They often offer to work for something to eat. There's wood to cut.' He pointed. 'Straight up that road, second last house. Ask for Mrs Bailey.'

'Thank you, laddie. You've a kind heart.' The old man tipped his greasy, dust-stained hat. 'Bill Mitchell, at your service, Sir.'

As he ambled off, his dog following, David grabbed Toddy and disappeared behind the billboard again. He hadn't noticed the sulky stop just up the road to let someone step down. A minute later he heard footsteps and made ready. When the well-shone shoes and neat

trouser legs appeared below, David let out a blood-curdling yell and sprang. 'Stick 'em—' He stopped dead and stared in horror. 'Aw gee...!' Turning tail, he scuttled off.

Mr Keller caught a brief glimpse of him as he disappeared at the rear of a short row of shops. The man stood for a moment, plucking thoughtfully at his little black moustache, then, making up his mind, strode purposefully to a large corrugated-iron shed nearby with the words S.L. Bailey, *Stock and Station Agent: Commission Agent*, painted clearly across both side and front.

Black eyes like polished coal glinted curiously as he stood in the big open doorway looking about for his quarry. A number of bales containing wheat bags for the farmers were piled in the shadows at the back. Shelves, thick with dust, yawned almost empty of the farm-machinery spares they were built to house. Seeing a small office nestling in one corner, he advanced upon it.

'Why, Mr Keller!' Sid Bailey, a thickset man with a fresh complexion belying his largely outdoor life, rose from a cluttered desk and extended his hand affably.

'Look here, Bailey', his hand was pointedly ignored, 'are you aware David's been conducting stick-ups in the main street?'

Mr Bailey grinned sheepishly and ran stubby fingers through his greying curls. 'Well, sort of. Don't tell me he...gosh, Mr Keller, most folks would take it as a bit of a lark. It's only play-acting; excitement over the matinees. Poor kids, they've only ever had occasional pictures shows at night. They get precious little entertainment in town.'

'No excuse', Mr Keller snapped. 'If a few posters cause this sort of behaviour, what will happen when rubbishy cowboys start filling their heads with a load of tripe? It's hard enough to hammer anything in as it is! I've a good mind to call a public meeting and have the matinees stopped.'

Mr Bailey's pleasant features hardened. 'I wouldn't do that Sir, if I were you. The shopkeepers in town are hoping the picture shows will bring in some much-needed business before any more shops go bust. The bank manager—'

'Oh yes, Mr Allan', interjected Mr Keller triumphantly. 'Now I remember. I heard the tale soon after arriving in town. That also involved David and a gun—a real one! He held up the manager in his own bank.'

David's father chuckled. 'It wasn't as bad as that. Jerry accidentally locked himself out. He helped the boy through a window to open up, forgetting he'd stupidly left his revolver on the desk. Kid-like, David picked it up, opened the door and as he came in jokingly demanded he "Stick em up". Trouble was it was loaded. Jerry nearly died of shock. He admitted it was his own fault for not securing the gun. Gosh, the kid was only about seven at the time.'

The headmaster was not amused. 'Old enough to pull the trigger! Time you taught him not to point a gun, Bailey. As for the matinee, if I was his father that'd be the *last* place he'd go. Good day!' He turned on his heel and marched out.

Mr Bailey stood gazing unhappily after him. 'Pompous goat', he said under his breath. 'It'd be just like him to hold a protest meeting.'

A noise came from the rear of the shed as a seldom-used door creaked open and a ray of light pierced the shadows. 'That you, David? Get your tail in here, pronto!'

A cheeky face appeared around the door and a whisper came back, 'Has he gone?'

'Yes, but you'll have to face him at school tomorrow. Come here! I want a word with you.' Mr Bailey's voice was as stern as he could make it. 'No more pointing a gun, toy or not, understand?'

David clambered over the bales and peered anxiously up at his father. What he saw reassured him. 'Gee whiz, Dad, I ran like a scared rabbit. He frightened me witless.'

'I reckon you gave him a fright too', he answered, turning away to hide a smile. 'Now get off home and help your mother.'

\* \* \*

As Wendy entered Towner's café carrying a hessian sugar-bag for the block of ice, the first thing to catch her eye was, as usual, the big glass display case crammed with lollies. She was glad to find no one serving; it gave her a chance to drool over her favourites without being hurried along by foot-tapping impatience. There was a mouth-watering array of sweet-smelling musk sticks, shiny black liquorice sticks, aniseed balls, chocolate-coated mint toffee bars, cherry bars and coconut bars, all for one penny each. Her special favourite, whole almonds floating in honey syrup encased in dairy-milk chocolate, was displayed temptingly within easy reach, in an open box on the glass top. All too frequently, the memory of its delicious taste on her tongue enticed her to squander her whole threepence on it. Without thinking, she picked up one of the red and gold-wrapped bars and sniffed the delightful aroma. Before she could put it back, the grey-gowned bulk of Mrs Towner rose ghostlike and accusing from a chair hidden behind the high counter.

Meeting the icy stare, Wendy froze inside. 'I...I was just looking', she stammered, dropping the sweet back. She tried but was unable to stem the guilty rush of burning to her cheeks as the woman's steely eyes continued to regard her coldly.

'Oh yeah?' Mrs Towner said sarcastically, making no pretence at believing her. 'Wanta buy it, do yeh?'

'N-no.' The girl shrank back. She wanted to sink through the floor. 'J-just a block of ice, please.'

The storekeeper snatched the sugar bag. It was plain from the glare she gave Wendy that she was reluctant to trust her alone in the shop while she went out to the icehouse. Wendy flushed again, furious with herself because she wasn't able to boldly plead her innocence.

Laura would have stuck up for herself; told the horrid, disbelieving woman in no uncertain terms how wrong she was. She wanted to quit the shop and never return but forced herself to wait, for her mother needed the ice and would only send her back. Besides, she'd want to know what had happened; might not believe her. Everyone knew she had a sweet tooth.

As Wendy stumbled out with her burden, the tears she had been holding back almost blinded her and she collided with someone hurrying past.

'Watch it!' David yelled in her ear. Startled, she dropped the heavy ice on her foot, making her hop about in agony. Her brother laughed at first, but when he saw how distressed she was, he tried to comfort her. 'Don't cry, Wend. I'm sorry. I'll carry the ice.'

'Thanks', she said gratefully, blowing her nose hard. 'I'll have to hurry or I'll be in strife with Mum next.' It made her feel better just to have him around. The pair, also separated by twenty-one months, had always been close and rarely argued, something which could not be said of her and Laura.

Soon after Wendy left to get the ice, her mother, responding to a gentle knock on the screen door, had discovered an old swaggie on her doorstep.

'Sorry to trouble you, Ma'am', he said, lifting his hat apologetically. 'Your laddie said you might have some wood needs cutting.'

'Oh, he did, did he?' she responded grimly. 'That's his job. I can't afford—'

'No, no! I wasn't expecting money.' As he replaced his hat and turned to go, she saw how old he was under the grizzled stubble and how frail beneath the much-patched clothing.

'Wait! Perhaps some food?'

'Well now.' The bleary old eyes lit up. 'I'm not completely without funds', he told her, drawing himself up proudly. 'Home cooking, though, is a different matter.' He waved a gnarled hand at the woodheap in the backyard. 'I'll get started, then.'

And although she tried to say it wasn't necessary, he wouldn't be deterred. So, when the children reached their backyard, they found Mr Mitchell swinging the heavy axe and sweat beading his brow. He stopped for a moment to mop it and wink at David.

Wendy left them and hurried in with the melting ice. Mrs Bailey was setting out a meal; the remainder of Sunday's roast with homemade pickle, thick slice of bread and butter, and the last of the treacle tart.

'Where's David?' she demanded.

'At the woodheap watching an old swaggie chop logs.'

'What?'

Wendy turned in surprise as her mother dropped the pepper and salt and hurried out to the verandah to call the old man in. 'I expected him to split kindling', she explained. 'Poor fellow, he's not fit for such hard work. I hope he's all right.'

Certainly there was nothing wrong with his appetite. He didn't leave a crumb. And while he ate, the children plied him with many questions. They had never been further than sixty miles from their home and they wanted to hear what it was like in the big cities.

'All rush and bustle and newfangled motor cars', he answered. 'I could not live there again. The big country towns though, they have the best of both worlds. Plenty of fresh air and park benches, kind folks, and work if you want it.'

Laura looked up briefly from a doyley she was embroidering.

'Picture shows every week?' asked David eagerly.

'Every night!' Mr Mitchell said with a grin. 'And twice on Saturdays. Plenty of high schools too, when you're old enough.'

'That'll be next year for me', Wendy informed him. 'Our school goes to ninth class, but you can't take typewriting and shorthand. Our Laura wants to be a secretary, so she's going to live with Grandfather in the city next term. She's lucky. I wish I could go', she finished wistfully.

Mr Mitchell glanced over at the mother, noting a deep sadness in the faded brown eyes. They must once have been as bright as her eldest daughter's. 'It's hard to lose one's children', he said softly, looking way into the distance. 'I see it happening in all the little bush towns. Not enough jobs, no entertainment, nothing to hold them. The big towns are growing larger and the small ones gradually shrinking.'

'I wish I could convince my husband of that', Mrs Bailey said with a sigh.

'Bless you for your kindness. Now', her elderly guest pushed back his chair, 'I must away. We've much ground to cover before nightfall'. He clicked his tongue in annoyance. 'Oh, I have been remiss. My mate, Peg-leg, Peg for short, we usually share. In my selfish enjoyment I...'

Before he finished, Wendy jumped up and began wrapping the mutton bone in newspaper for him. 'Just don't tell Toddy', she said, laughing half in earnest.

David was anxious to know if they would see their guest again.

The old man ruffled the boy's curly hair. 'Who knows what's in store for us, lad. I trust our paths will cross again one day.'

After he'd gone, David sat, chin in hands, thinking deeply. Finally he asked, 'Why *do* men just keep wandering from one place to another, Mum?'

Mrs Bailey shook her head. 'It's hard to say. Some like the freedom, no responsibilities. Some just like to roam. Then there's them, like your father', her voice became bitter, 'who dig their feet in in one spot and refuse to budge for the rest of their lives.'

'I like it here!' Wendy cried loyally. 'I'm never leaving either.'

'I want to see the world. I'll follow Mr Mitchell when I'm bigger', David decided.'

His mother looked at him in alarm. 'No you will not! And another thing, don't speak to swagmen in future. You've been told before. There are some mean characters

about. They're not all like Mr Mitchell. One might grab you and we'd never see you again.' She stacked the dirty dishes on the small table used for washing-up. 'Now, whatever can I give your father for his tea tonight? He'll have to have bread and jam like the rest of us, I suppose.'

'Make some pancakes, Mum', chorused the younger children.

'Can't', she said shortly. 'I'm out of eggs. The chooks didn't lay today.'

'Golden syrup dumplings, then?'

'Well...perhaps, now there's some wood cut. Your father's always forgetting. Fetch some kindling, David. You light the fire though, Wendy. Laura, haven't you got homework?'

David's jaw dropped. He'd completely forgotten about school the next day.

\* \* \*