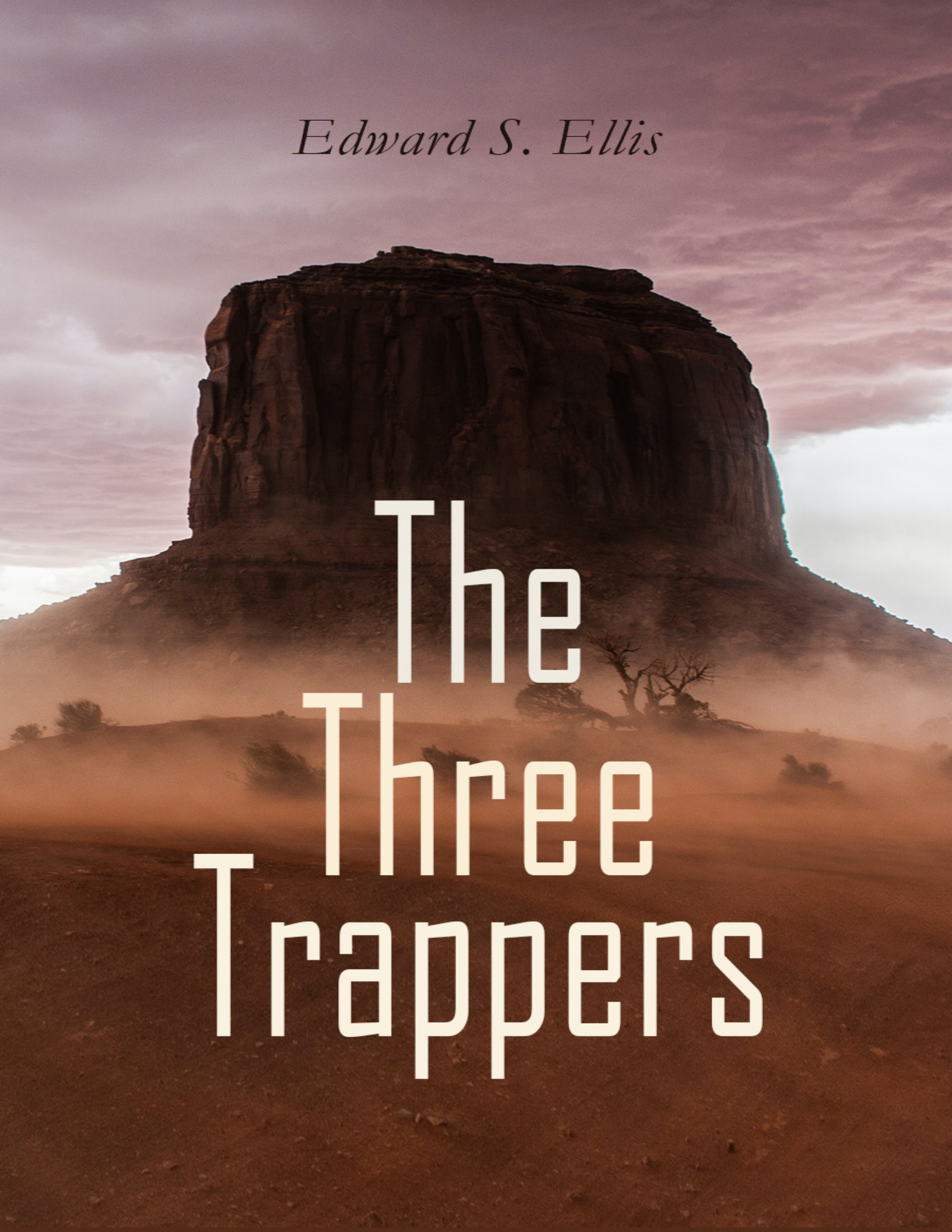


Edward S. Ellis

The Three Trappers



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Western Novel - The Comanche Chief's Ruse

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CHAPTER I.

COMANCHES.

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It was now quite late in the afternoon, and Fred Wainwright reined up his mustang, and from his position took a survey of the surrounding prairie. On his right stretched the broad dusty plain, broken by some rough hills, and on his left wound the Gila, while in the distance could be detected the faint blue of the Maggolian Mountains.

But it was little heed he paid to the natural beauties of the scene, for an uncomfortable fear had taken possession of him during the last hour. Once or twice he was sure he had detected, off towards the mountains signs of Comanche Indians, and he was well satisfied that if such were the case they had assuredly seen him, and just now he was speculating upon the best line of retreat if such were the case.

“If they are off there, and set their eyes on me,” he speculated, “the only chance for me is towards the Gila, and what can I do there?”

He might well ask the question, for it was one which would probably require a speedy answer. The Comanches, as are well known, are among the most daring riders and bravest red men on the American Continent, and when they take it into their heads to follow up an enemy, one of three things is certain—his destruction, a desperate fight or a skilful escape.

The young hunter had no desire to encounter these specimens of aboriginal cavalry, for he was certain in the first place that there were half a dozen of them, and that it would be madness to stand his ground, while his chances of eluding them were exceedingly dubious. Although mounted on a fine mustang, there was little doubt but what the Indians were equally well mounted, and he had little prospect of success in a trial of speed.

There was only one thing in his favor, and that was that night was close at hand. He was somewhat in the situation of the mariner when pursued by the pirate, who sees his only hope of life in the friendly darkness which is closing around. The young hunter looked at the low descending sun, and wondered what kept it so long above the horizon, and then he scanned every portion of the sky, to see whether no clouds were gathering in masses, which would increase the intensity of the darkness. But the sky was clear, although he remembered that there was no moon, and when night should fairly come it would be one of Egyptian gloom, which would give him all the shelter he wished.

At the precise point where the young hunter was journeying was a mass of tall grass, which partially concealed himself and horse, and which, as a natural consequence, he was reluctant to leave so long as he was sure that danger threatened him. His little mustang advanced slowly, his rider holding a tight rein and glancing toward the river, and then toward the hills on the right, from which he expected each moment to see the screeching Comanches emerge and thunder down toward him.

But as the sun dipped below the horizon the young hunter began to take heart.

"If they give me an hour longer, I think my chances will be good," he muttered, growing more anxious each moment.

At one point in the hills he noticed a broken place, a sort of pass, from which he seemed to feel a premonition that the Indians would sally forth to make their attack; so before coming opposite he reined up, determined to proceed no further until it was dark enough to be safe.

He had sat in this position a half an hour or so, and the gloom was already settling over the prairie, when a succession of terrific yells struck upon his ear, and glancing toward the hills, he saw half a dozen Comanches thundering down toward him. The hunter at once threw himself off his horse, and resting his rifle on his back, sighted at the approaching redskins. They were nigh enough to be in range, and satisfied that they could be intimidated in no other way, he took a quick aim and fired.

Fred Wainwright possessed an extraordinary skill in the use of the rifle, and the shriek and the frantic flinging up of the arms, and the headlong stumble from his horse of the leading Comanche, showed that the fright of his situation had not rendered his nerves unsteady.

This decided action had the effect of checking the tumultuous advance for a few moments; but the hunter had been in the South-West long enough to understand the nature of these Comanches, and he knew they would soon be after him again. Springing on his horse therefore, he

wheeled about without a moment's delay, and started at full speed on his back track.

Wainwright soon made the gratifying discovery that the speed of his own mustang was equal to that of the animals bestrode by the Comanches, and that even for a time he steadily drew away from them. But his own horse was jaded with half a day's tramp, and could maintain this tremendous gait for comparatively a short period, while those of the Indians were fresh and vigorous and could not fail soon to draw nigh him.

"However, if the fellow keeps this up for a half hour longer, we shall care nothing for them."

The little animal strained every nerve, and worked as if he knew the fate of himself and master was depending upon his efforts. The young hunter glanced over his shoulder and could just discern his followers through the gloom, they still shouting and yelling like madmen, as if they sought to paralyze him through great terror. He loaded his gun as he rode, and several times was on the point of turning and exchanging shots with them; but he did not forget there were two parties to the business, and that their return shots might either kill or wound himself or mustang, the ultimate result in each case being the same. So he gave his whole attention to getting over the prairie as fast as possible.

About fifteen minutes had elapsed when the crack of a rifle rung out upon the air, and the bullet whistled within a few feet of the head of the fugitive. He again looked back and could see nothing of his pursuers. At this juncture he struck in among some tall grass similar to that in which he

halted when he first beheld the Comanches; and at the same instant he saw that his beast was rapidly giving out.

He hated to part with him but it could not be helped. Delay would be fatal, and reining his horse down to a moderate canter, he sprang to the earth and gave him a blow, which sent him with renewed speed on his way.

Then running rapidly a few rods the hunter dropped flat on his face and listened. All the time he heard the thundering of the approaching horsemen, but he did not dare to raise his head to look. They came nearer and nearer, and the next moment had passed by and for the present he was safe.

Not doubting but that they would speedily come up with the fleeing mustang and discover the ruse played upon them, Wainwright arose to his feet and made all haste toward the Gila.

By this time it was very dark and he was guided only by a general knowledge of the direction in which it lay, and by the sound of its gentle flowing. Once along its steep banks he felt sure of being able to conceal himself, and, if needful, of throwing his enemies off his trail entirely, should they attempt pursuit, when it again became light.

Hurrying thus carelessly forward he committed a natural blunder but one which made him ashamed of himself. He walked straight off the bank a dozen feet high, dropping within a yard of a small camp fire, around which were seated two trappers smoking their pipes.

"Hullo, stranger, did you drop from the clouds?" asked one of them, merely turning his head without changing his position. The other turned his eyes slightly but did nothing

more. "This 'yer what I call a new style of introducing yourself into gentlemen's society; shoot me for a beaver if it aint!"

"That it is," laughed Wainwright, "but you see I was in quite a hurry!"

"What made you in such a hurry?"

"I was fleeing from Indians——"

"What's that?" demanded both of them in a breath.

"I was fleeing from Indians, and was looking more behind than in front of me."

"That yer's what I call a different story," exclaimed the oldest, springing up and dashing the burning embers apart, so as to extinguish the light as soon as possible. It required but a few moments thoroughly to complete the work, when he turned to Wainwright and asked in a whisper:

"Mought they be close at hand, stranger?"

"I don't think they are."

"Have you time to talk a few minutes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then just squat yourself on the ground and tell us all about this scrape you 'pear to have got yourself into."

Our hero did as requested, giving a succinct account of what we have told the reader, beginning the narration at precisely the same point in which we did, and carrying it up to his "stepping off" the bank. The two trappers listened respectfully until he was done, when one of them gave an expressive grunt.

"'Yunker, you don't look as if you had two faces, and I make no doubt you've told us the truth; but it was qua'r you

should happen to be trampin' alone so far away from the settlement."

"I was with a party of hunters this morning, but became separated from them and was on my return to the camp when I was shut off in the manner I have told you."

"Do you want to get back to them?"

"I aint particular," laughed the young hunter, with a peculiar expression. "It aint likely they have waited an hour for me when they discovered my absence, and so I should be at a loss to know where to look for them."

"Wal, it's all the same to us," said the trapper; "you don't look like a scamp, and you can stay with us, if you want to do so."

"You see, furthermore, that I have lost my horse, and shall have to take it afoot until I can buy or capture another."

"We can fix that up easy enough," grunted the trapper. "My hoss Blue Blazes can carry all that can get on his back, and we can give you a lift till you can scare up an animile of some kind or other."

It was plain that the trappers were really kind at heart, and were anxious to give the young hunter a "lift." They were rough in their manner and speech but the diamond is frequently forbidding in its appearance until it is polished, and the wonderful gem displayed.

While this trapper was conversing with the stranger, his companion had stealthily made his way down the bank some distance, where he had clambered up on the plain, and made a reconnoissance to assure himself that the

“coast was clear.” Discovering nothing suspicious, he had turned back again and speedily rejoined the other two.

The fire having completely gone out they were left in entire darkness sitting together on the bank of the Gila.

One of the trappers was short, muscular, with a compact frame, resembling in physique the renowned Kit Carson. His name was George Harling, and he hailed from Missouri, and was a hunter and trapper of a dozen years experience. He was generally mild, quick and genial tempered, but when in the Comanche fight, or when on the trail of some of the daring marauders of the northern tribes, he was a perfect terror, fearless, dashing and heedless of all danger.

The second hunter who hitherto had maintained the principal part of the conversation with Wainwright was a tall, lank, bony individual, restless in manner and sometimes impulsive in speech, was called Ward Lancaster, and seemed to have tramped in every part of the country west of the Mississippi; for you could not mention a tribe of Indians, or a peculiar locality, but what he had been there, and had something interesting to tell about it.

He was about fifty years of age, with not a gray hair in his head, and with as gleaming an eye as he possessed thirty years before, when he first placed his foot on the western bank of the Father of Waters, and slinging his rifle over his shoulder, plunged into the vast wilderness, an eager sharer in the adventures and dangers that awaited him.

Ward was a pleasant, even tempered individual, who, when led into the ambush, and fighting desperately the dusky demons who were swarming around him, did so as