

Albert W. Aiken



*The Rival
Trappers: or,
Old Pegs,
The Mountaineer*

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CHAPTER I. OLD PEGS.

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Hush! Is that a footstep coming up the canon? It came nearer and nearer, and a man of strange appearance suddenly stepped into view, rounding a bend in the canon. At the first glance it seemed that he was a dwarf in stature, but as he advanced, it was plainly to be seen that this was a mistake, for those broad shoulders and herculean arms never belonged to a dwarf. In height he would scarcely have reached five feet, but his girth of shoulder and hip was something wonderful. In short, he had the body of a giant, set upon a pair of legs so crooked and misshapen that it seemed as if he had borrowed those limbs from some one else.

He came on with a peculiar, sidelong, hitching gait, swinging out his left leg and throwing forward the shoulder upon that side in an irresistibly ludicrous way, but getting over the ground at a very fair pace.

His dress was that of the mountainman, of greasy buckskin, yet showing the careful hand of woman in the manner in which it was made. He wore fringed leggins, moccasins of ponderous size, and a high bear-skin cap, which added considerably to his ludicrous "make-up." His weapons were a carefully-polished rifle, a pair of splendid revolvers, a knife and a hatchet.

His face was broad, ruddy and good-natured, fringed by a russet-brown hair and beard, slightly sprinkled with gray. A single look at the high forehead, merry brown eyes and

smiling mouth, about which a whimsical look would linger in spite of himself, showed that he was a merry, reckless soul, but a man of undaunted courage.

“Hyar we come and hyar we go, pegging along the canon,” he half-sung. “Thar was some mistake in my make-up, I reckon, or I’d be a different man. But who keers, ez long ez I am happy ez a buck Digger in grasshopper time? Oh, Lordy, yes.”

He stopped and cast a penetrating glance about him, at the same time dropping one leg a little, showing that it was shorter than the other by some two inches. He seemed to listen, and his leonine head was thrown to one side in an attitude of profound attention. The next moment, by a movement of wonderful rapidity, he threw himself out of sight into one of the crevices with which the ravine abounded, and dropping to the earth behind a boulder, awaited the event.

To the casual observer there had been no break in the usual sounds in mountain and forest, but a moment more showed that the wanderer was not at fault, for the sound of hoofs could be plainly heard, coming up from the east. Nearer and nearer they came, and the rapidity of the hoof-beats showed that the horseman, whoever he might be, was coming at the top of his speed; and directly the head of a horse appeared, and a single rider came thundering down the pass, half-lying on the animal’s back, and urging him on with knife and spur, while behind him sounded other hoof-beats, showing that he was pursued.

It was a white man, and that was enough for the old hunter, who started out from his place of concealment and

checked the flying steed.

“Hi, thar, stranger—what’s up?”

The rider reined in his furious horse and grasped a weapon, but, seeing that it was a white man who barred the way, dropped his hand and answered, hurriedly:

“Indians!”

“After you?”

“Looks like it, old man.”

“Get down quick, then—take yer weepens, and send the hoss on. You’ve got ter lose him, or yer sculp.”

The man did not hesitate, but flung himself from the saddle and scored his knife-point sharply across the flank of the horse, which fled on lightly, being freed from its rider, and without a word the hunter led the way into the crevice which he had just left.

The horse had just made the last turn in the canon when about twenty of those Arabs of the plains, the Blackfeet, suddenly came in view, riding with loosened reins, their mustangs scrambling like cats along the bed of the canon, and the riders, bending forward like huntsmen in the chase, urging them on by word and blow. They passed like a whirlwind, and were gone; then the hunter bounded to his feet.

“Thar they go, the painted reptiles, like bed-bugs armed fur war! Come on, stranger; the quicker we git up these yer rocks the better.”

“I am a poor footpad,” said the stranger, with a light laugh; “but lead the way, old True Blue, and I’ll follow. That was a close shave, I tell you.”

“Clust enuff fur comfert,” replied the hunter. “This a-way.”

He began to climb the rugged side of the ravine with the agility of a cat, swinging his huge body from ledge to ledge by the power of his gigantic arms, and then turning to assist his companion, who, although younger, was by no means so agile.

Again and again, but for the timely aid of those muscular arms, the younger man would have fallen headlong into the gulf below, but at last they reached the top of the ledge, fifty feet above the canon bottom.

“Down—fur yer life—down!” hissed the hunter, as they reached the top of the ledge.

Both men fell prostrate, and not a moment too soon, for the Indians were coming back at a flying gallop, leading among them the horse which had so lately been abandoned by the rescued man. They came to a halt directly beneath the ledge, sitting erect and grim upon their panting mustangs, without uttering a word.

No body of men on earth can present a more warlike appearance than the Blackfeet—a nation brave even to desperation. Their bronzed bodies, shimmering ornaments and flaunting feathers; their long lances glittering in the sun; the ease and grace with which they sat their horses, as if horse and man were one piece, combined to make the appearance of this body at once imposing and threatening.

The chief was a man of gigantic size, armed with lance, hatchet, knife and a sort of mace—which he carried slung at the pommel of the high Mexican saddle, with which he rode. He spoke, and at the sound of his sonorous voice the hunter

started, for he knew the voice well. It was that of Whirlwind, a chief who had made himself a terror throughout that region, and the deadly enemy of white men, under all circumstances.

“Let the braves scatter and search the canon,” cried Whirlwind. “The white dog has leaped from his saddle and is hidden among the rocks like a rabbit. We must have his scalp, for he has killed Flying Cloud the son of Natal—Nemissa. Can we return to the Blackfoot lodges with empty hands?”

The majority of the warriors, leaving their horses in charge of the rest, sprung down and began the search, but the feet of their flying steeds had obliterated all signs of a trail, had there been one, and the place where the white men had ascended was a rock which would not leave the mark of a foot. The old hunter was lying on the earth, literally convulsed with laughter at the manner in which he had outwitted Whirlwind, an enemy to the death, when, turning his eyes upon the man he had saved, he saw him in the act of thrusting forward the rifle with the intention of killing the chief. Rolling over quickly the hunter grasped the rifle, and after a struggle succeeded in tearing the weapon from the young man’s grasp. In doing so, however, a small piece of rock was detached and fell over the cliff upon the head of an Indian below, who was knocked senseless by the blow. The chief started and cast a quick glance upward, but at this moment the hunter while holding his companion down, managed to give an exact counterfeit of the bleat of a Bighorn. So perfect was the imitation that the chief at once concluded that the Bighorn in moving about had

knocked down the stone upon the head of the stricken warrior, and seeing that his men were puzzled he called them in and they moved up the pass together searching every crevice for the man who had escaped them. When the sound of hoofs came faintly back from the upper part of the ravine, the hunter released his companion and stood up while the other bounded to his feet, flushed and excited.

“It is a good thing for you that you have just saved my life, old man, or we should quarrel. What did you mean by stopping me when I was going to shoot that old thief, Whirlwind?”

“Look yer, young ’un,” demanded the hunter, “d’ye know who I am?”

“No.”

“Mebbe you don’t want to?”

“Of course I wish to know the name of the man who has just saved my life, but let me warn you never to attempt again what you did just now.”

“You’d mount me ez a spider mounts a fly, I ’spose?” said the hunter, coolly. “My young fr’end, never let yer angry passhins git the best ov you, and by all means never hop on a man untel you ar’ tollable sartin you kin lick him. I don’t want to put you in mind ov the fac’ thet I hev just saved yer life—I’d do that ag’in, any way—but, what was you going ter do ef you hed killed Whirlwind?”

“There would have been one less scoundrel on the face of the earth.”

“Sartin; I agree; but, look yer, my lad; kin we two lick nineteen Blackfeet?”

“I don’t suppose we could.”

“No, sirree! I’ve fou’t Injuns ever sence I was knee high ter a grasshopper, and I want ter hev it sot down that an Injun in his own kentry and well fixed, is an or’nary and orkard cuss to manige; he is, by thunder! I’ve hern tell ov one man sending ten or twelve to grass, but he can’t do it every day, bet yer life.”

“But they could not get at us here—”

“I ’spose not. An Injun can’t climb ez well ez the next man, I ’spose. Now did ye ever hear tell ov Old Pegs?”

The young man started and looked at him keenly.

“Old Pegs the guide—Old Pegs the hunter, Old Pegs the Indian terror? I should think so.”

“Them’s my handles, stranger; I’m Old Pegs.”

“I beg your pardon for saying what I did then, for I have no desire to quarrel with a man of your reputation. Perhaps it is for the best that Whirlwind should escape at this time, but my hour will come, and when it does—let him beware of me.”

“All hunky; rub him out the fust chaince you git. Now what’s *your* handle, young man?”

“People who know me well, call me Rafe Norris.”

“I don’t keer what people *call* you. Is Rafe Norris yer handle?”

“Yes.”

“What’s yer biz?”

“I can’t tell you that just now, my good friend. I—”

He did not finish the sentence, for Old Pegs caught him by the shoulders and flung him heavily to the ground, falling beside him from the impetus of his own exertions. The hand of the old guide was outstretched, and catching up a heavy

stone he flung it with deadly aim at the feathered head of an Indian which at this moment rose above the ledge and who was poising a lance for a throw. Straight between the eyes the heavy stone struck, and, spreading his arms abroad, the Indian plunged head-foremost into the depths below, where his skull was shattered out of the semblance of humanity upon the rocks. So quickly was it done that Rafe Norris had no idea why he had been so rudely assailed, and seizing upon Old Pegs, began to pommel him about the head and shoulders.

“See yer, my boy,” said Old Pegs, “ef you hit me *and I find it out*, I’ll be darned ef I don’t send fer ye once, jest fer fun—now you hear me. Confound each individual wolverine in these tempestuous wilds ef I knows what’s the matter with you.”

“What did you pitch into me for?” hissed Rafe, in an angry tone.

“Come hyar, you fool, ef I must say it,” replied Old Pegs. “Creep to the edge of the cliff and look over.”

Considerably awed by the manner of the hunter, Rafe crawled to the edge of the cliff, and looking down cautiously saw the dead form of the savage below, while the rattle of hoofs told that some of the Indian’s comrades were coming back to look for him. The unfortunate savage, suspecting something wrong and desirous of distinguishing himself, had come back to search again for Rafe Norris, and hearing voices, had scaled the cliff unheard just in time to meet his fate.

“Come along,” whispered Old Pegs. “Show a leg and foller me.”

CHAPTER II.

OLD PEGS' TREASURE.

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The country through which Old Pegs led his new friend was one of the most difficult and dangerous in the portion of the foothills in which they were placed. No one, save a man who loved solitude, and would have chosen it from all others as a home, would have thought of spending so many years of his life in this lonely place. They passed through defile after defile, clambered over ridges and forded mountain streams in which the trout were so abundant that their feet touched them as they passed.

On the march, Old Pegs had a chance to observe his companion closely, and he did so without allowing him to think that he was watched. Rafe might have been thirty years of age, of an erect, stately figure, with very black hair and eyes. His hair was suffered to grow long, and curled slightly at the ends; he wore a heavy mustache—the point dropping nearly to his collar as he stood erect—and a long imperial. His eyes were of that vivid black so seldom seen, and looked wicked and bold. Although in mountain garb, there was a sort of dandyism even in this dress which did not strike Old Pegs favorably.

“I don't know whether I'm doing the right thing in showing you this road,” said the hunter. “I'm a plain man and in a humble station, and I've got a treasure to guard.”

“A treasure?”

“You bet!”

“Have you found a gold-mine?”

“No; gold ain’t no use ter me, or I could find it soon enough.”

“It can not be diamonds?”

“Better’n diamonds, young ‘un; better’n gold; better’n beaver, even.”

“What can you be talking of?” said Rafe, impatiently.

“Never you mind about that. I know what I’m talking about, and when I get home I’ll show you my treasure.”

At a turn in the path they were traversing they came suddenly upon a huge bear, which reared upon its haunches and sat, in a silly way, looking at them, with its tongue hanging out. Rafe Norris, who had no love for close companionship with a grizzly, dropped his rifle into the hollow of his hand, and was about to fire, when Old Pegs struck up the weapon.

“Don’t shoot that b’ar, confound you!” he cried. “He’s mine.”

“A pet bear! Is that your treasure, then?”

“Not a bit of it,” replied Old Pegs. “Kinder inquisitive, ain’t you?”

“You have aroused my curiosity, I must confess,” replied Rafe.

“Bruin! Bruin!” cried a clear, sweet voice. “Come here, sir!”

Down dropped the bear upon all fours, and waddled away in the direction of the voice, while Rafe stopped and looked at Old Pegs in amazement.

“*That* is your treasure, eh?” he demanded. “I thought you were too old a man to care for a woman.”