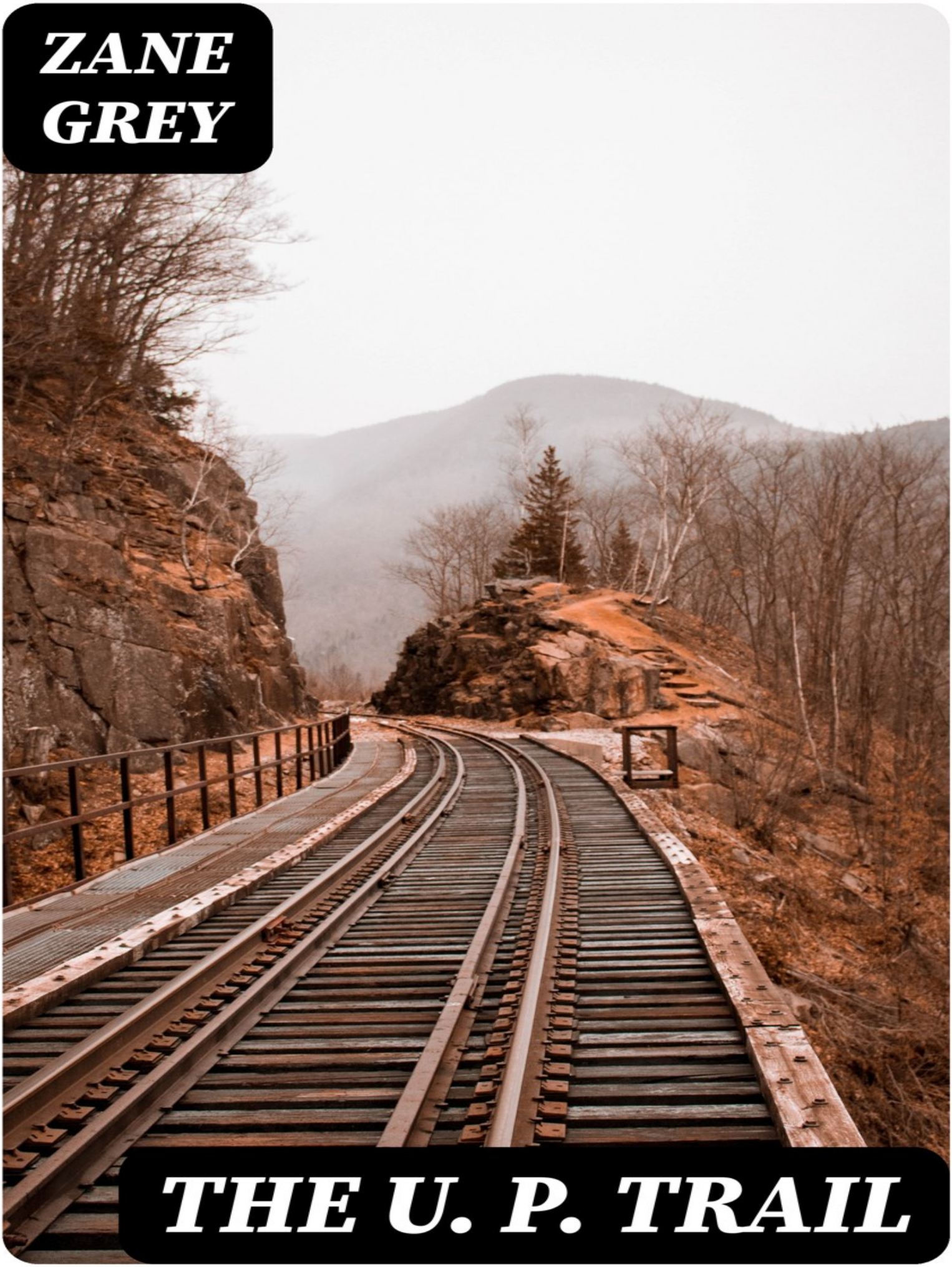
ZANE GREY



THE U. P. TRAIL

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Table of Contents

1

Table of Contents

In the early sixties a trail led from the broad Missouri, swirling yellow and turgid between its green-groved borders, for miles and miles out upon the grassy Nebraska plains, turning westward over the undulating prairie, with its swales and billows and long, winding lines of cottonwoods, to a slow, vast heave of rising ground—Wyoming—where the herds of buffalo grazed and the wolf was lord and the camp-fire of the trapper sent up its curling blue smoke from beside some lonely stream; on and on over the barren lands of eternal monotony, all so gray and wide and solemn and silent under the endless sky; on, ever on, up to the bleak, black hills and into the waterless gullies and through the rocky gorges where the deer browsed and the savage lurked; then slowly rising to the pass between the great bold peaks, and across the windy uplands into Utah, with its verdant valleys, green as emeralds, and its haze-filled cañons and wonderful wind-worn cliffs and walls, and its pale salt lakes, veiled in the shadows of stark and lofty rocks, dim, lilac-colored, austere, and isolated; ever onward across Nevada, and ever westward, up from desert to mountain, up into California, where the white streams rushed and roared and the stately pines towered, and seen from craggy heights, deep down, the little blue lakes gleamed like gems; finally sloping to the great descent, where the mountain world ceased and where, out beyond the golden land, asleep and peaceful, stretched the illimitable Pacific, vague and grand beneath the setting sun.

2

Table of Contents

Deep in the Wyoming hills lay a valley watered by a stream that ran down from Cheyenne Pass; a band of Sioux Indians had an encampment there. Viewed from the summit of a grassy ridge, the scene was colorful and idle and quiet, in keeping with the lonely, beautiful valley. Cottonwoods and willows showed a bright green; the course of the stream was marked in dark where the water ran, and light where the sand had bleached; brown and black dots scattered over the valley were in reality grazing horses; lodge-pole tents gleamed white in the sun, and tiny bits of red stood out against the white; lazy wreaths of blue smoke rose upward.

The Wyoming hills were split by many such valleys and many such bare, grassy ridges sloped up toward the mountains. Upon the side of one ridge, the highest, there stood a solitary mustang, haltered with a lasso. He was a ragged, shaggy, wild beast, and there was no saddle or bridle on him, nothing but the halter. He was not grazing, although the bleached white grass grew long and thick under his hoofs. He looked up the slope, in a direction indicated by his pointing ears, and watched a wavering movement of the long grass.

It was wild up on that ridge, bare of everything except grass, and the strange wavering had a nameless wildness in

its motion. No stealthy animal accounted for that trembling—that forward undulating quiver. It wavered on to the summit of the ridge.

What a wide and wonderful prospect opened up to view from this lofty point! Ridge after ridge sloped up to the Wyoming hills, and these in turn raised their bleak, dark heads toward the mountains, looming pale and gray, with caps of snow, in the distance. Out beyond the ridges, indistinct in the glare, stretched an illimitable expanse, gray and dull—that was the prairie-land. An eagle, lord of all he surveyed, sailed round and round in the sky.

Below this grassy summit yawned a valley, narrow and long, losing itself by turns to distant east and west; and through it ran a faint, white, winding line which was the old St. Vrain and Laramie Trail.

There came a moment when the wavering in the grass ceased on the extreme edge of the slope. Then it parted to disclose the hideous visage of a Sioux Indian in war paint. His dark, piercing, malignant glance was fixed upon the St. Vrain and Laramie Trail. His half-naked body rested at ease; a rifle lay under his hand.

There he watched while the hours passed. The sun moved on in its course until it tipped the peaks with rose. Far down the valley black and white objects appeared, crawling round the bend. The Indian gave an almost imperceptible start, but there was no change in his expression. He watched as before.

These moving objects grew to be oxen and prairie-schooners—a small caravan traveling east. It wound down the trail and halted in a circle on the bank of a stream.

The Indian scout slid backward, and the parted grass, slowly closing, hid from his dark gaze the camp scene below. He wormed his way back well out of sight; then rising, he ran over the summit of the ridge to leap upon his mustang and ride wildly down the slope.

3

Table of Contents

Bill Horn, leader of that caravan, had a large amount of gold which he was taking back East. No one in his party, except a girl, knew that he had the fortune.

Horn had gone West at the beginning of the gold strikes, but it was not until ‘53 that any success attended his labors. Later he struck it rich, and in 1865, as soon as the snow melted on the mountain passes, he got together a party of men and several women and left Sacramento. He was a burly miner, bearded and uncouth, of rough speech and taciturn nature, and absolutely fearless.

At Ogden, Utah, he had been advised not to attempt to cross the Wyoming hills with so small a party, for the Sioux Indians had gone on the war-path.

Horn was leading his own caravan and finding for himself the trail that wound slowly eastward. He did not have a scout or hunter with him. Eastward-traveling caravans were wont to be small and poorly outfitted, for only the homesick, the failures, the wanderers, and the lawless turned their

faces from the Golden State. At the start Horn had eleven men, three women, and the girl. On the way he had killed one of the men; and another, together with his wife, had yielded to persuasion of friends at Ogden and had left the party. So when Horn halted for camp one afternoon in a beautiful valley in the Wyoming hills there were only nine men with him.

On a long journey through wild country strangers grow close together or far apart. Bill Horn did not think much of the men who had accepted the chance he offered them, and daily he grew more aloof. They were not a responsible crowd, and the best he could get out of them was the driving of oxen and camp chores indifferently done. He had to kill the meat and find the water and keep the watch. Upon entering the Wyoming hills region Horn showed a restlessness and hurry and anxiety. This in no wise affected the others. They continued to be aimless and careless as men who had little to look forward to.

This beautiful valley offered everything desirable for a camp site except natural cover or protection in case of attack. But Horn had to take the risk. The oxen were tired, the wagons had to be greased, and it was needful to kill meat. Here was an abundance of grass, a clear brook, wood for camp-fires, and sign of game on all sides.

“Haul round—make a circle!” Horn ordered the drivers of the oxen.

This was the first time he had given this particular order, and the men guffawed or grinned as they hauled the great, clumsy prairie-schooners into a circle. The oxen were

unhitched; the camp duffle piled out; the ring of axes broke the stillness; fires were started.

Horn took his rifle and strode away up the brook to disappear in the green brush of a ravine.

It was early in the evening, with the sun not yet out of sight behind a lofty ridge that topped the valley slope. High grass, bleached white, shone brightly on the summit. Soon several columns of blue smoke curled lazily aloft until, catching the wind high up, they were swept away. Meanwhile the men talked at their tasks.

“Say, pard, did you come along this here Laramie Trail goin’ West?” asked one.

“Nope. I hit the Santa Fe Trail,” was the reply.

“How about you, Jones?”

“Same fer me.”

“Wal,” said another, “I went round to California by ship, an’ I’d hev been lucky to drown.”

“An’ now we’re all goin’ back poorer than when we started,” remarked a third.

“Pard, you’ve said somethin’.”

“Wal, I seen a heap of gold, if I didn’t find any.”

“Jones, has this here Bill Horn any gold with him?”

“He acts like it,” answered Jones. “An’ I heerd he struck it rich out thar.”

The men appeared divided in their opinions of Bill Horn. From him they drifted to talk of possible Indian raids and scouted the idea; then they wondered if the famous Pony Express had been over this Laramie Trail; finally they got on the subject of a rumored railroad to be built from East to West.

“No railroad can’t be built over this trail,” said Jones, bluntly.

“Sure not. But couldn’t more level ground be dug?” asked another.

“Dug? Across them Utah deserts an’ up them mountains? Hell! Men sure hev more sense than thet,” exclaimed the third.

And so they talked and argued at their tasks.

The women, however, had little to say. One, the wife of the loquacious Jones, lived among past associations of happy years that would not come again—a sober-faced, middle-aged woman. The other woman was younger, and her sad face showed traces of a former comeliness. They called her Mrs. Durade. The girl was her daughter Allie. She appeared about fifteen years old, and was slight of form. Her face did not seem to tan. It was pale. She looked tired, and was shy and silent, almost ashamed. She had long, rich, chestnut-colored hair which she wore in a braid. Her eyes were singularly large and dark, and violet in color.

“It’s a long, long way we are from home yet,” sighed Mrs. Jones.

“You call East home!” replied Mrs. Durade, bitterly.

“For land’s sake! Yes, I do,” exclaimed the other. “If there was a home in that California, I never saw it. Tents and log cabins and mud-holes! Such places for a woman to live. Oh, I hated that California! A lot of wild men, all crazy for gold. Gold that only a few could find and none could keep!... I pray every night to live to get back home.”

Mrs. Durade had no reply; she gazed away over the ridges toward the east with a haunting shadow in her eyes.

Just then a rifle-shot sounded from up in the ravine. The men paused in their tasks and looked at one another. Then reassured by this exchange of glances, they fell to work again. But the women cast apprehensive eyes around. There was no life in sight except the grazing oxen. Presently Horn appeared carrying a deer slung over his shoulders.

Allie ran to meet him. She and Horn were great friends. To her alone was he gentle and kind. She saw him pause at the brook, then drop the deer carcass and bend over the ground, as if to search for something. When Allie reached his side he was on his knees examining a moccasin print in the sand.

“An Indian track!” exclaimed Allie.

“Allie, it sure ain’t anythin’ else,” he replied. “Thet is what I’ve been lookin’ fer.... A day old—mebbe more.”

“Uncle Bill, is there any danger?” she asked, fearfully gazing up the slope.

“Lass, we’re in the Wyoming hills, an’ I wish to the Lord we was out,” he answered.

Then he picked up the deer carcass, a heavy burden, and slung it, hoofs in front, over his shoulders.

“Let me carry your gun,” said Allie.

They started toward camp.

“Lass, listen,” began Horn, earnestly. “Mebbe there’s no need to fear. But I don’t like Injun tracks. Not these days. Now I’m goin’ to scare this lazy outfit. Mebbe thet’ll make them rustle. But don’t you be scared.”

In camp the advent of fresh venison was hailed with satisfaction.

“Wal, I’ll gamble the shot thet killed this meat was heerd by Injuns,” blurted out Horn, as he deposited his burden on the grass and whipped out his hunting-knife. Then he glared at the outfit of men he had come to despise.

“Horn, I reckon you ‘pear more set up about Injuns than usual,” remarked Jones.

“Fresh Sioux track right out thar along the brook.”

“No!”

“Sioux!” exclaimed another.

“Go an’ look fer yourself.”

Not a man of them moved a step. Horn snorted his disdain and without more talk began to dress the deer.

Meanwhile the sun set behind the ridge and the day seemed far spent. The evening meal of the travelers was interrupted when Horn suddenly leaped up and reached for his rifle.

“Thet’s no Injun, but I don’t like the looks of how he’s comin’.”

All gazed in the direction in which Horn pointed. A horse and rider were swiftly approaching down the trail from the west. Before any of the startled campers recovered from their surprise the horse reached the camp. The rider hauled up short, but did not dismount.

“Hello!” he called. The man was not young. He had piercing gray eyes and long hair. He wore fringed gray buckskin, and carried a long, heavy, muzzle-loading rifle.

“I’m Slingerland—trapper in these hyar parts,” he went on, with glance swiftly taking in the group. “Who’s boss of this caravan?”

“I am—Bill Horn,” replied the leader, stepping out.

“Thar’s a band of Sioux redskins on your trail.”

Horn lifted his arms high. The other men uttered exclamations of amaze and dread. The women were silent.

“Did you see them?” asked Horn.

“Yes, from a ridge back hyar ten miles. I saw them sneakin’ along the trail an’ I knowed they meant mischief. I rode along the ridges or I’d been hyar sooner.”

“How many Injuns?”

“I counted fifteen. They were goin’ along slow. Like as not they’ve sent word fer more. There’s a big Sioux camp over hyar in another valley.”

“Are these Sioux on the war-path?”

“I saw dead an’ scalped white men a few days back,” replied Slingerland.

Horn grew as black as a thundercloud, and he cursed the group of pale-faced men who had elected to journey eastward with him.

“You’ll hev to fight,” he ended, brutally, “an’ thet’ll be some satisfaction to me.”

“Horn, there’s soldiers over hyar in camp,” went on Slingerland. “Do you want me to ride after them?”

“Soldiers!” ejaculated Horn.

“Yes. They’re with a party of engineers surveyin’ a line fer a railroad. Reckon I could git them all hyar in time to save you—IF them Sioux keep comin’ slow.... I’ll go or stay hyar with you.”

“Friend, you go—an’ ride thet hoss!”

“All right. You hitch up an’ break camp. Keep goin’ hard down the trail, an’ I’ll fetch the troops an’ head off the redskins.”

“Any use to take to the hills?” queried Horn, sharply.

“I reckon not. You’ve no hosses. You’d be tracked down. Hurry along. Thet’s best.... An’ say, I see you’ve a young girl hyar. I can take her up behind me.”

“Allie, climb up behind him,” said Horn, motioning to the girl.

“I’ll stay with mother,” she replied.

“Go child—go!” entreated Mrs. Durade.

Others urged her, but she shook her head. Horn’s big hand trembled as he held it out, and for once there was no trace of hardness about his face.

“Allie, I never had no lass of my own.... I wish you’d go with him. You’d be safe—an’ you could take my—”

“No!” interrupted the girl.

Slingerland gave her a strange, admiring glance, then turned his quick gray eyes upon Horn. “Anythin’ I can take?”

Horn hesitated. “No. It was jest somethin’ I wanted the girl to hev.”

Slingerland touched his shaggy horse and called over his shoulder: “Rustle out of hyar!” Then he galloped down the trail, leaving the travelers standing aghast.

“Break camp!” thundered Horn.

A scene of confusion followed. In a very short while the prairie-schooners were lumbering down the valley. Twilight came just as the flight got under way. The tired oxen were beaten to make them run. But they were awkward and the loads were heavy. Night fell, and the road was difficult to follow. The wagons rolled and bumped and swayed from side to side; camp utensils and blankets dropped from them. One wagon broke down. The occupants, frantically

gathering together their possessions, ran ahead to pile into the one in front.

Horn drove on and on at a gait cruel to both men and beasts. The women were roughly shaken. Hours passed and miles were gained. That valley led into another with an upgrade, rocky and treacherous. Horn led on foot and ordered the men to do likewise. The night grew darker. By and by further progress became impossible, for the oxen failed and a wild barrier of trees and rocks stopped the way.

Then the fugitives sat and shivered and waited for dawn. No one slept. All listened intently to the sounds of the lonely night, magnified now by their fears. Horn strode to and fro with his rifle—a grim, dark, silent form. Whenever a wolf mourned, or a cat squalled, or a night bird voiced the solitude, or a stone rattled off the cliff, the fugitives started up quiveringly alert, expecting every second to hear the screeching yell of the Sioux. They whispered to keep up a flickering courage. And the burly Horn strode to and fro, thoughtful, as though he were planning something, and always listening. Allie sat in one of the wagons close to her mother. She was wide awake and not so badly scared. All through this dreadful journey her mother had not seemed natural to Allie, and the farther they traveled eastward the stranger she grew. During the ride that night she had moaned and shuddered, and had clasped Allie close; but when the flight had come to a forced end she grew silent.

Allie was young and hopeful. She kept whispering to her mother that the soldiers would come in time.

“That brave fellow in buckskin—he’ll save us,” said Allie.

“Child, I feel I’ll never see home again,” finally whispered Mrs. Durade.

“Mother!”

“Allie, I must tell you—I must!” cried Mrs. Durade, very low and fiercely. She clung to her daughter.

“Tell me what?” whispered Allie.

“The truth—the truth! Oh, I’ve deceived you all your life!”

“Deceived me! Oh, mother! Then tell me—now.”

“Child—you’ll forgive me—and never—hate me?” cried the mother, brokenly.

“Mother, how can you talk so! I love you.” And Allie clasped the shaking form closer. Then followed a silence during which Mrs. Durade recovered her composure.

“Allie, I ran off with Durade before you were born,” began the mother, swiftly, as if she must hurry out her secret. “Durade is not your father.... Your name is Lee. Your father is Allison Lee. I’ve heard he’s a rich man now.... Oh, I want to get back—to give you to him—to beg his forgiveness.... We were married in New Orleans in 1847. My father made me marry him. I never loved Allison Lee. He was not a kind man—not the sort I admired.... I met Durade. He was a Spaniard—a blue-blooded adventurer. I ran off with him. We joined the gold-seekers traveling to California. You were born out there in 1850.... It has been a hard life. But I taught you—I did all I could for you. I kept my secret from you—and his!... Lately I could endure it no longer. I’ve run off from Durade.”

“Oh, mother, I knew we were running off from him!” cried Allie, breathlessly. “And I know he will follow us.”

“Indeed, I fear he will,” replied the mother. “But Lord spare me his revenge!”

“Mother! Oh, it is terrible!... He is not my father. I never loved him. I couldn’t.... But, mother, you must have loved him!”

“Child, I was Durade’s slave,” she replied, sadly.

“Then why did you run away? He was kind—good to us.”

“Allie, listen. Durade was a gambler—a man crazy to stake all on the fall of a card. He did not love gold. But he loved games of chance. It was a terrible passion with him. Once he meant to gamble my honor away. But that other gambler was too much of a man. There are gamblers who are men!... I think I began to hate Durade from that time.... He was a dishonest gambler. He made me share in his guilt. My face lured miners to his dens.... My face—for I was beautiful once!... Oh, I sunk so low! But he forced me.... Thank God I left him—before it was too late—too late for you.”

“Mother, he will follow us!” cried Allie.

“But he shall never have you. I’ll kill him before I let him get you,” replied the mother.

“He’d never harm me, mother, whatever he is,” murmured Allie.

“Child, he would use you exactly as he used me. He wanted me to let him have you—already. He wanted to train you—he said you’d be beautiful some day.”

“Mother!” gasped Allie, “is THAT what he meant?”

“Forget him, child. And forget your mother’s guilt!... I’ve suffered. I’ve repented.... All I ask of God is to take you safely home to Allison Lee—the father whom you have never known.”

The night hour before dawn grew colder and blacker. A great silence seemed wedged down between the ebony hills. The stars were wan. No cry of wolf or moan of wind disturbed the stillness. And the stars grew warmer. The black east changed and paled. Dawn was at hand. An opaque and obscure grayness filled the world; all had changed, except that strange, oppressive, and vast silence of the wild.

That silence was broken by the screeching, blood-curdling yell of the Sioux.

At times these bloody savages attacked without warning and in the silence of the grave; again they sent out their war-cries, chilling the hearts of the bravest. Perhaps that warning yell was given only when doom was certain.

Horn realized the dread omen and accepted it. He called the fugitives to him and, choosing the best-protected spot among the rocks and wagons, put the women in the center.

“Now, men—if it’s the last for us—let it be fight! Mebbe we can hold out till the troops come.”

Then in the gray gloom of dawn he took a shovel; prying up a piece of sod, he laid it aside and began to dig. And while he dug he listened for another war-screech and gazed often and intently into the gloom. But there was no sound and nothing to see. When he had dug a hole several feet deep he carried an armful of heavy leather bags and deposited them in it. Then he went back to the wagon for another armful. The men, gray-faced as the gloom, watched him fill up the hole, carefully replace the sod, and stamp it down.

He stood for an instant gazing down, as if he had buried the best of his life. Then he laughed grim and hard.

“There’s my gold! If any man wins through this he can have it!”

Bill Horn divined that he would never live to touch his treasure again. He who had slaved for gold and had risked all for it cared no more what might become of it. Gripping his rifle, he turned to await the inevitable.

Moments of awful suspense passed. Nothing but the fitful beating of hearts came to the ears of the fugitives—ears that strained to the stealthy approach of the red foe—ears that throbbed prayerfully for the tramp of the troopers’ horses. But only silence ensued, a horrible silence, more nerve-racking than the clash of swift, sure death.

Then out of the gray gloom burst jets of red flame; rifles cracked, and the air suddenly filled with hideous clamor. The men began to shoot at gliding shadows, grayer than the gloom. And every shot brought a volley in return. Smoke mingled with the gloom. In the slight intervals between rifleshots there were swift, rustling sounds and sharp thuds from arrows. Then the shrill strife of sound became continuous; it came from all around and closed in upon the doomed caravan. It swelled and rolled away and again there was silence.

4

Table of Contents

In 1865, just after the war, a party of engineers was at work in the Wyoming hills on a survey as hazardous as it was problematical. They had charge of the laying out of the Union Pacific Railroad.

This party, escorted by a company of United States troops under Colonel Dillon, had encountered difficulties almost insurmountable. And now, having penetrated the wild hills to the eastern slope of the Rockies they were halted by a seemingly impassable barrier—a gorge too deep to fill, too wide to bridge.

General Lodge, chief engineer of the corps, gave an order to one of his assistants. “Put young Neale on the job. If we ever survey a line through this awful place we’ll owe it to him.”

The assistant, Baxter, told an Irishman standing by and smoking a short, black pipe to find Neale and give him the chief’s orders. The Irishman, Casey by name, was raw-boned, red-faced, and hard-featured, a man inured to exposure and rough life. His expression was one of extreme and fixed good humor, as if his face had been set, mask-like, during a grin. He removed the pipe from his lips.

“Gineral, the flag I’ve been holdin’ fer thot dom’ young surveyor is the wrong color. I want a green flag.”

Baxter waved the Irishman to his errand, but General Lodge looked up from the maps and plans before him with a faint smile. He had a dark, stern face and the bearing of a soldier.

“Casey, you can have any color you like,” he said. “Maybe green would change our luck.”

“Gineral, we’ll niver git no railroad built, an’ if we do it’ll be the Irish thot builds it,” responded Casey, and went his way.

Truly only one hope remained—that the agile and daring Neale, with his eye of a mountaineer and his genius for estimating distance and grade, might run a line around the gorge.

While waiting for Neale the engineers went over the maps and drawings again and again, with the earnestness of men who could not be beaten.

Lodge had been a major-general in the Civil War just ended, and before that he had traveled through this part of the West many times, and always with the mighty project of a railroad looming in his mind. It had taken years to evolve the plan of a continental railroad, and it came to fruition at last through many men and devious ways, through plots and counterplots. The wonderful idea of uniting East and West by a railroad originated in one man’s brain; he lived for it, and finally he died for it. But the seeds he had sown were fruitful. One by one other men divined and believed, despite doubt and fear, until the day arrived when Congress put the Government of the United States, the army, a group of frock-coated directors, and unlimited gold back of General Lodge, and bade him build the road.

In all the length and breadth of the land no men but the chief engineer and his assistants knew the difficulty, the peril of that undertaking. The outside world was interested, the nation waited, mostly in doubt. But Lodge and his engineers had been seized by the spirit of some great thing to be, in the making of which were adventure, fortune,

fame, and that strange call of life which foreordained a heritage for future generations. They were grim; they were indomitable.

Warren Neale came hurrying up. He was a New Englander of poor family, self-educated, wild for adventure, keen for achievement, eager, ardent, bronze-faced, and keen-eyed, under six feet in height, built like a wedge, but not heavy—a young man of twenty-three with strong latent possibilities of character.

General Lodge himself explained the difficulties of the situation and what the young surveyor was expected to do. Neale flushed with pride; his eyes flashed; his jaw set. But he said little while the engineers led him out to the scene of the latest barrier. It was a rugged gorge, old and yellow and crumbled, cedar-fringed at the top, bare and white at the bottom. The approach to it was through a break in the walls, so that the gorge really extended both above and below this vantage-point.

“This is the only pass through these foot-hills,” said Engineer Henney, the eldest of Lodge’s corps.

The passage ended where the break in the walls fronted abruptly upon the gorge. It was a wild scene. Only inspired and dauntless men could have entertained any hope of building a railroad through such a place. The mouth of the break was narrow; a rugged slope led up to the left; to the right a huge buttress of stone wall bulged over the gorge; across stood out the seamed and cracked cliffs, and below yawned the abyss. The nearer side of the gorge could only be guessed at.

Neale crawled to the extreme edge of the precipice, and, lying flat, he tried to discover what lay beneath. Evidently he did not see much, for upon getting up he shook his head. Then he gazed at the bulging wall.

“The side of that can be blown off,” he muttered.

“But what’s around the corner? If it’s straight stone wall for miles and miles we are done,” said Boone, another of the engineers.

“The opposite wall is just that,” added Henney. “A straight stone wall.”

General Lodge gazed at the baffling gorge. His face became grimmer, harder. “It seems impossible to go on, but we must go on!” he said.

A short silence ensued. The engineers faced one another like men confronted by a last and crowning hindrance. Then Neale laughed. He appeared cool and confident.

“It only looks bad,” he said. “We’ll climb to the top and I’ll go down over the wall on a rope.”

Neale had been let down over many precipices in those stony hills. He had been the luckiest, the most daring and successful of all the men picked out and put to perilous tasks. No one spoke of the accidents that had happened, or even the fatal fall of a lineman who a few weeks before had ventured once too often. Every rod of road surveyed made the engineers sterner at their task, just as it made them keener to attain final success.

The climb to the top of the bluff was long and arduous. The whole corps went, and also some of the troopers.

“I’ll need a long rope,” Neale had said to King, his lineman.

It was this order that made King take so much time in ascending the bluff. Besides, he was a cowboy, used to riding, and could not climb well.

“Wal—I—shore—rustled—all the line—aboot heah,” he drawled, pantingly, as he threw lassoes and coils of rope at Neale’s feet.

Neale picked up some of the worn pieces. He looked dubious. “Is this all you could get?” he asked.

“Shore is. An’ thet includes what Casey rustled from the soldiers.”

“Help me knot these,” went on Neale.

“Wal, I reckon this heah time I’ll go down before you,” drawled King.

Neale laughed and looked curiously at his lineman. Back somewhere in Nebraska this cowboy from Texas had attached himself to Neale. They worked together; they had become friends. Larry Red King made no bones of the fact that Texas had grown too hot for him. He had been born with an itch to shoot. To Neale it seemed that King made too much of a service Neale had rendered—the mere matter of a helping hand. Still, there had been danger.

“Go down before me!” exclaimed Neale.

“I reckon,” replied King.

“You will not,” rejoined the other, bluntly. “I may not need you at all. What’s the sense of useless risk?”

“Wal, I’m goin’—else I throw up my job.”

“Oh, hell!” burst out Neale as he strained hard on a knot. Again he looked at his lineman, this time with something warmer than curiosity in his glance.

Larry Red King was tall, slim, hard as iron, and yet undeniably graceful in outline—a singularly handsome and picturesque cowboy with flaming hair and smooth, red face and eyes of flashing blue. From his belt swung a sheath holding a heavy gun.

“Wal, go ahaid,” added Neale, mimicking his comrade. “An’ I shore hope thet this heah time you-all get aboot enough of your job.”

One by one the engineers returned from different points along the wall, and they joined the group around Neale and King.

“Test that rope,” ordered General Lodge.

The long rope appeared to be amply strong. When King fastened one end round his body under his arms the question arose among the engineers, just as it had arisen for Neale, whether or not it was needful to let the lineman down before the surveyor. Henney, who superintended this sort of work, decided it was not necessary.

“I reckon I’ll go ahaid,” said King. Like all Texans of his type, Larry King was slow, easy, cool, careless. Moreover, he gave a singular impression of latent nerve, wildness, violence.

There seemed every assurance of a deadlock when General Lodge stepped forward and addressed his inquiry to Neale.

“Larry thinks the rope will break. So he wants to go first,” replied Neale.

There were broad smiles forthcoming, yet no one laughed. This was one of the thousands of strange human incidents that must be enacted in the building of the

railroad. It might have been humorous, but it was big. It fixed the spirit and it foreshadowed events.

General Lodge's stern face relaxed, but he spoke firmly. "Obey orders," he admonished Larry King.

The loop was taken from Larry's waist and transferred to Neale's. Then all was made ready to let the daring surveyor with his instrument down over the wall.

Neale took one more look at the rugged front of the cliff. When he straightened up the ruddy bronze had left his face.

"There's a bulge of rock. I can't see what's below it," he said. "No use for signals. I'll go down the length of the rope and trust to find a footing. I can't be hauled up."

They all conceded this silently.

Then Neale sat down, let his legs dangle over the wall, firmly grasped his instrument, and said to the troopers who held the rope, "All right!"

They lowered him foot by foot.

It was windy and the dust blew up from under the wall. Black cañon swifts, like swallows, darted out with rustling wings, uttering frightened twitterings. The engineers leaned over, watching Neale's progress. Larry King did not look over the precipice. He watched the slowly slipping rope as knot by knot it passed over. It fascinated him.

"He's reached the bulge of rock," called Baxter, craning his neck.

"There, he's down—out of sight!" exclaimed Henney.

Casey, the flagman, leaned farther out than any other. "Phwat a dom' sthrange way to build a railroad, I sez," he remarked.

The gorge lay asleep in the westering sun, silent, full of blue haze. Seen from this height, far above the break where the engineers had first halted, it had the dignity and dimensions of a cañon. Its walls had begun to change color in the sunset light.

Foot by foot the soldiers let the rope slip, until probably two hundred had been let out, and there were scarcely a hundred feet left. By this time all that part of the cable which had been made of lassoes had passed over; the remainder consisted of pieces of worn and knotted and frayed rope, at which the engineers began to gaze fearfully.

“I don’t like this,” said Henney, nervously. “Neale surely ought to have found a ledge or bench or slope by now.”

Instinctively the soldiers held back, reluctantly yielding inches where before they had slacked away feet. But intent as was their gaze, it could not rival that of the cowboy.

“Hold!” he yelled, suddenly pointing to where the strained rope curved over the edge of the wall.

The troopers held hard. The rope ceased to pay out. The strain seemed to increase. Larry King pointed with a lean hand.

“It’s a-goin’ to break!”

His voice, hoarse and swift, checked the forward movement of the engineers. He plunged to his knees before the rope and reached clutchingly, as if he wanted to grasp it, yet dared not.

“Ropes was my job! Old an’ rotten! It’s breakin’!”

Even as he spoke the rope snapped. The troopers, thrown off their balance, fell backward. Baxter groaned; Boone and Henney cried out in horror; General Lodge stood aghast,

dazed. Then they all froze rigid in the position of intense listening.

A dull sound puffed up from the gorge, a low crash, then a slow-rising roar and rattle of sliding earth and rock. It diminished and ceased with the hollow cracking of stone against stone.

Casey broke the silence among the listening men with a curse. Larry Red King rose from his knees, holding the end of the snapped rope, which he threw from him with passionate violence. Then with action just as violent he unbuckled his belt and pulled it tighter and buckled it again. His eyes were blazing with blue lightning; they seemed to accuse the agitated engineers of deliberate murder. But he turned away without speaking and hurried along the edge of the gorge, evidently searching for a place to go down.

General Lodge ordered the troopers to follow King and if possible recover Neale's body.

"That lad had a future," said old Henney, sadly. "We'll miss him."

Boone's face expressed sickness and horror.

Baxter choked. "Too bad!" he murmured, "but what's to be done?"

The chief engineer looked away down the shadowy gorge where the sun was burning the ramparts red. To have command of men was hard, bitter. Death stalked with his orders. He foresaw that the building of this railroad was to resemble the war in which he had sent so many lads and men to bloody graves.

The engineers descended the long slope and returned to camp, a mile down the narrow valley. Fires were blazing;

columns of smoke were curling aloft; the merry song and reckless laugh of soldiers were ringing out, so clear in the still air; horses were neighing and stamping.

Colonel Dillon reported to General Lodge that one of the scouts had sighted a large band of Sioux Indians encamped in a valley not far distant. This tribe had gone on the war-path and had begun to harass the engineers. Neale's tragic fate was forgotten in the apprehension of what might happen when the Sioux discovered the significance of that surveying expedition.

"The Sioux could make the building of the U. P. impossible," said Henney, always nervous and pessimistic.

"No Indians—nothing can stop us!" declared his chief.

The troopers sent to follow Larry King came back to camp, saying that they had lost him and that they could not find any place where it was possible to get down into that gorge.

In the morning Larry King had not returned.

Detachments of troopers were sent in different directions to try again. And the engineers went out once more to attack their problem. Success did not attend the efforts of either party, and at sunset, when all had wearily returned to camp, Larry King was still absent. Then he was given up for lost.

But before dark the tall cowboy limped into camp, dusty and torn, carrying Neale's long tripod and surveying instrument. It looked the worse for a fall, but apparently was not badly damaged. King did not give the troopers any satisfaction. Limping on to the tents of the engineers, he set down the instrument and called. Boone was the first to