



KEITH OF THE BORDER

A TALE OF THE PLAINS
By RANDALL DARRISH
AUTHOR OF MY LADY OF THE SOUTH
WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING, ETC., ETC.
ILLUSTRATIONS BY DEARBORN MELVILLE.

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

Again at the Cabin.

They were two weary days reaching Carson City, traveling along the open trail yet meeting with no one, not even a mail coach passing them. Evidently the Indians were so troublesome as to interrupt all traffic with Santa Fe and the more western forts. The slowness of their progress was on account of the General, whose condition became worse in spite of Fairbairn's assiduous attentions. With no medicine the doctor could do but little to relieve the sufferings of the older man, although he declared that his illness was not a serious one, and would yield quickly to proper medical treatment. They constructed a rude travois from limbs of the cottonwood, and securely strapped him thereon, one man leading the horse, while the doctor tramped behind.

Keith, fretting more and more over this necessary delay, and now obsessed with the thought that Hawley must have rejoined his party on the Arkansas and gone south with them, finally broke away from the others and rode ahead, to gather together the necessary horses and supplies in advance of their arrival. He could not drive from his mind the remembrance of the gambler's attempted familiarity with Hope, when he had her, as he then supposed, safe in his power once before in that lonely cabin on the Salt Fork. Now, angry with baffled ambition, and a victim of her trickery, there was no guessing to what extremes the desperado might resort. The possibilities of such a situation made the slightest delay in rescue an agony almost unbearable. Reaching Carson City, and perfectly reckless as to his own safety there from arrest, the plainsman lost no time in perfecting arrangements for pushing forward. Horses and provisions were procured, and he very fortunately discovered in town two cowboys belonging to the "Bar X" outfit, their work there accomplished and about ready to return to the ranch on the Canadian, who gladly allied themselves with his party, looking forward to the possibilities of a fight with keen anticipation. Keith was more than ever delighted with adding these to his outfit, when, on the final arrival of the others, the extra man brought from Sheridan announced that he had had enough, and was going to remain there. No efforts made revealed any knowledge of Hawley's presence in Carson City; either he had not been there, or else his friends were very carefully concealing the fact. The utter absence of any trace, however, led Keith to believe that the gambler had gone elsewhere—probably to Fort Larned—for his new outfit, and this belief left him more fully convinced than ever of the fellow's efforts to conceal his trail.

The party escorting Waite reached the town in the evening, and in the following gray dawn the adventurers forded the river, and mounted on fresh horses and fully equipped, headed forth into the sand hills. The little company now consisted of Keith, Fairbairn, who, in spite of his rotundity of form had proven himself hard and fit, Neb, having charge of the single pack-horse, the scout Bristoe, and the two cowboys of the "Bar X," rough, wiry fellows, accustomed to exposure and peril. It was emphatically a fighting outfit, and to be trusted in emergency.

They followed the cattle trail south toward the Salt Fork, as this course would afford them a camp at the only water-hole in all that wide desert lying between. With this certainty of water, they ventured to press their animals to swifter pace, although the sand made traveling heavy, and the trail itself was scarcely discernible. It was a hard, wearisome ride, hour after hour through the same dull, dreary landscape of desolation, the hot, remorseless sun beating down upon them, reflecting up into their blistered faces from the hot surface of sand. There was scarcely a breath of air, and the bodies of men and horses were bathed in perspiration. Not a cloud hung in the blue sky; no wing of a bird broke the monotony of distance, no living animal crept across the blazing surface of the desert. Occasionally a distant mirage attracted the eye, making the dead reality even more horrible by its semblance to water, yet never tempting them to stray aside. After the first mile conversation ceased, the men riding grimly, silently forward, intent only on covering all the distance possible. Late that night they camped at the water-hole, sleeping as best they could, scourged by the chill wind which swept over them and lashed grit into exposed faces. With the first gray of dawn they swung stiffened forms into the saddles and rode on, straight as the crow flies, for the Salt Fork. They attained that stream at sundown, gray with sand dust, their faces streaked from perspiration, feeling as though the sun rays had burned their brains, with horses fairly reeling under them.

According to Keith's calculation this cattle-ford must be fully ten miles below where the cabin sought was situated; two hours' rest, with water and food, would put both horses and men again in condition, and the traveling was easier along the bank of the Fork. With this in mind, cinches were loosened, the animals turned out to graze, and the men, snatching a hasty bite, flung themselves wearily on the ground.

All but Fairbairn were asleep when Keith aroused them once more, a little before nine, unable in his impatience to brook longer delay. Within ten minutes horses were saddled, weapons looked to carefully, and the little party began their advance through the darkness, moving cautiously over the uneven ground, assisted greatly by the bright desert stars gleaming down upon them from the cloudless sky overhead. The distance proved somewhat less than had been anticipated, and Keith's watch was not yet at eleven, when his eyes revealed the fact that they had reached the near vicinity of the lonely island on which the cabin stood. Reining in his horse sharply, he swung to the ground, the others instantly following his example, realizing they had reached the end of the route. Hands instinctively loosened revolvers in readiness for action, the younger of the "Bar X" men whistling softly in an effort to appear unconcerned. Keith, with a gesture, gathered them more closely about him.

"If Hawley is here himself," he said quietly, watching their faces in the starlight, "he will certainly have a guard set, and there may be one anyhow. We can't afford to take chances, for there will be five men, at least, on the island, and possibly several more. If they are looking for trouble they will naturally expect it to come from the north—consequently we'll make our attack from the opposite direction and creep in on them under the shadow of the corral. The first thing I



The Four Crossed the Stream, Wading to Their Waists in the Water.

want to do is to locate Miss Waite so she will be in no danger of getting hurt in the melee. You boys hold your fire until I let loose or give the word. Now, Doctor, I want you and Neb to creep up this bank until you are directly opposite the cabin—he'll know the spot—and lie there out of sight until we begin the shooting. Then both fall in as fast as you can. I'll take Bristoe and you two "Bar X" men along with me, and when we turn loose with our shooting irons you can all reckon the fight is on. Any of you got questions to ask?"

No one said anything, the silence accentuated by the desert wind howling mournfully in the branches of near-by cottonwood.

"All right then, boys, don't get excited and go off half cocked; be easy on your trigger fingers. Come along, you fellows who are traveling with me."

The four crossed the stream, wading to their waists in the water, their horses left bunched on the south bank, and finally crawled out into a bunch of mesquite. As they crept along through the darkness, whatever doubts Keith might have previously felt regarding the presence on the island of the party sought were dissipated by the unmistakable noise made by numerous horses in the corral. Slowly, testing each step as they advanced, so no sound should betray them, the four men reached the shelter of the stockade. The older of the "Bar X" men lifted himself by his hands, and peered cautiously over.

"Eight horses in that," he announced soberly; then turned to Keith. "Say, Jack, what do you figure this shebang to be, anyhow? You don't reckon it's old Sanchez's outfit, do yer?"

"Likely as not, Joe, though I never saw him around here."

Joe filled his cheek with tobacco, starting about through the darkness.

"Well, if that ol' cuss is yere now we'uns is sure in fer a fight," he commented positively.

They rounded the corral fence on hands and knees, crawled into a bunch

of bushes somewhat to the rear of the silent, desolate-appearing cabin, and lay down flat behind a pile of saddies, from which position they could plainly discern the rear door. There was no movement, no evidence anywhere that a living soul was about the place. Keith could barely distinguish that it was Bristoe lying next to him.

"Had their camp over there in the corner of the corral when I was here before," he said in a whisper. "Where do you suppose they can be now?"

The wary scout lifted his head, sniffing into the darkness like a pointer dog.

"West o' ther cabin thar, out o' ther wind, most likely. I smell tobacco."

Even as the words left his lips a man came sauntering slowly around the eastern corner, his outlines barely visible, but the red glow of a pipe bowl showing plainly. He stopped, directly facing them, yawning sleepily, and then turned the other corner. Another moment and they distinctly heard a voice:

"Hustle up thar now, Manuel, an' turn out; it's your watch; wake up, dam yer—maybe that'll bring yet ter life."

The remedy applied to the sleeper must have been efficacious, as, an instant later, another figure slouched into view, the new arrival rubbing his eyes with one hand, the other clutching a short-barreled gun. From the high peak of his hat it was evident this new guard was a Mexican. He walked to the corner, glanced along the east side wall toward the front of the cabin, and then, apparently satisfied the coast was clear, started toward the stream, shuffling along within a foot of where Keith lay flat on the ground. A moment later the man heard him splashing softly in the water, and Keith rolled over, his lips at Bristoe's ear.

"Slip down there, Ben," he whispered, "and quiet that fellow. I'll find out how many are on the west side. Do the job without any noise."

He waited until the scout had disappeared like a snake, not even a rustling leaf telling of his passage and then silently crept forward himself, yet with less caution, until he was able to peer about the corner of the cabin and dimly distinguish the blancketed forms of several men lying close in against the side wall. They rested so nearly together it was difficult to separate them in that darkness, stars giving the only light, but he finally determined their number at five. Five; the Mexican would make six, and there would surely be another guard posted out in the front—seven. But there were eight horses down there in the corral. Then the eighth man—Hawley, without doubt—must be in the cabin. At the thought Keith's teeth clinched, and he had to struggle to control his passion. But no; that would never do; he must discover first exactly where the girl was located; after that they would attend to the curs. Before creeping back to the others, he made quick examination along the rear of the cabin, but could find no visible point of weakness. He tried to recall from memory the nature of the lock on that back door, but could remember nothing except an ordinary wooden latch. If he could insert a knife into the crack that might very easily be dislodged. He drew his hunting knife for the attempt, and, first glancing about, perceived a man creeping toward him. It proved to be Bristoe.

"Fixed the greaser all right, cap, and I reckon he'll be quiet for an hour or two. Look whar he slashed me; struck a pack o' playin' keards, er I'd a got my ticket." The front of his blouse was cut wide open, and Keith thought he perceived a stain of blood. "Pricked you as it was, didn't he?"

"Opened the skin. Thought the cuss had given up, an' got careless. What's round to the west?"

Keith's lips closed, his hand shutting hard on the knife.

"Five, and another out in front; that leaves the eighth man inside. Bring our fellows up closer, and post them where they can cover those fellows asleep, while I make an effort at breaking in here."

Bristoe crawled back like a snail, and confident the others would do their part, Keith thrust his knife blade deep into the narrow crack and began probing after the latch. In spite of all caution this effort caused a slight noise and suddenly he started back at the sound of a woman's voice:

"What do you want? I am armed, and will fire through the door if you do not go away!"

His heart leaping with exultation, Keith put his lips close to the crack.

"Hope," he exclaimed as loudly as he dared. "This is Keith; open the door."

He could hear a little smothered cry break from her lips, and then the sound of a bar being hastily removed. An instant, and the door opened silently, just wide enough to permit her slender figure to slip through. She grasped him with her hands, turning his face to the light of the stars, and he could feel her form tremble.

"Oh, I knew you would come! I knew you would come!" she sobbed, the words barely audible.

The man's lips set firmly, yet he held her close to him, begging her not to break down now.

"It's all right, little girl," he said pleadingly. "We've got you safe, but there is a fight to be attended to. Come with me; I must ask you a question or two."

He drew her back into the fringe of bushes, placing her safely behind the stack of saddies. She was not crying any more, just clinging to him, as though she could never again bear to let him go.

"Oh, Jack, it is so good just to feel you near again."

"Yes, dear," soothingly, "and it is

good to hear you say Jack, but tell me one thing—is any one else in the cabin? Is Hawley here?"

"No, no! He left us early the first morning. I haven't either seen or heard of him since. The men have left me alone since we got here; have had the cabin all to myself until tonight. I have not suffered, only mentally—from dread of what they intended doing with me—until tonight. Three men rode in here just before sundown—two Mexicans and an Indian. One of them was an awful looking old man, with a scar on his cheek, and a face that made me shudder. He didn't see me, but I saw him through the window, and he had such strange eyes. All the men acted as though they were afraid of him, and I heard him say he didn't care what Hawley's orders were, he was going to sleep inside; if the girl didn't like it she could take the other room. I didn't know what to do—oh, I was so afraid of him; but what he said gave me an idea, and I went into the back room, and put up a bar across the door. When he came in he tried the door; then he spoke through it, but I never answered; and finally he lay down and went to sleep. I sat there in the dark so long, and when I heard you—I thought it must be some of the others."

He stroked her hair, whispering words of encouragement.

"That is all done with now, Hope, and we'll have those fellows at our mercy in another half-hour. But I must go now to the boys; lie here behind these saddies, and don't move until I come for you. I can trust you to remain right here?"

"Yes." He was bending over, and her eyes were upon his face. Suddenly, obeying an irresistible impulse, he clasped her to him, and their lips met. "Sweetheart," he whispered softly. He could not hear her answer, but her arms were about his neck.

(To Be Continued.)

COMMITTS SUICIDE ON MOVING TRAIN

C. E. Martin Experiences Sad Sight on Return Trip From a Sad Mission in Ohio.

Charles Martin, the barber, returned from Mingo, Ohio, last evening, and reports the temperature 10 below zero last Sunday and three feet of snow. His father was buried Sunday in a blinding blizzard; when the casket was lowered into the grave it could not be seen for the whirling snow and the storm was one of the worst Mr. Martin has been in.

On his return trip to Plattsmouth, after leaving Chicago, he witnessed a sight which he does not care to see again. A well dressed Swede, whose name he learned afterward was Johnson, sat opposite him in the coach, and appeared to be nervous and ill at ease. Mr. Martin and others inquired if he was sick, when the man stated that he was sick at heart. In a short time, while on his knees with head bowed, as in prayer, the man suicided by sticking a dagger in his jugular vein. It was learned that Johnson was on his way from the east to Nebraska. A physician was summoned at the first station after the incident, but the wound was fatal.

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Red Men Elect Officers.
From Saturday's Daily.
At the last regular meeting of the Red Men the following officers were elected for the coming year, to be installed the first meeting night in January: Ed Kruger, sachem; L. G. Larson, senior sagamore; R. D. Dalton, junior sagamore; Emil Walters, keeper of records; Thomas Walling, keeper of wampum; John Cory, prophet; J. C. York, trustee for eighteen months. The member who will get five new members between this and December 21 will receive a gold pin from the order in recognition of his services. On December 21 there will be one heap big dogfest.

Came Near Losing an Eye.
H. J. Meisinger of near Murray met with an accident while assisting his brother, John Meisinger, butcher, last Thursday, which might have cost him the sight of his right eye. While attempting to hang up a hog which had been killed the man who was assisting H. J. at the time allowed the gammon stick to get away from him and the sharp end rebounded, striking Mr. Meisinger an inch below his right eye. The blow left an ugly wound under the organ that it barely missed.

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December Travel Bulletin

TO THE PACIFIC COAST. Inquire about the personally conducted through tourist excursions to Los Angeles, via Denver-Santa Fe Route—a route of sunshine and mild climate. From Omaha and Lincoln every Tuesday night; from Denver Wednesdays.

WINTER TOURIST TICKETS. The attractive south-land is claiming its own in Winter tourist patronage. From the Missouri Valley the Winter excursion fares to southern resorts are extremely favorable and involve but a modest outlay for a tour of the south.

HOMESEEKERS' EXCURSION TICKETS on the first and third Tuesdays of each month to the Big Horn Basin, the Northwest, West and the South.

AMERICAN LIVE STOCK MEETING, Denver, December 12th and 13th, 1911.

NATIONAL SHEEP SHOW AND WOOL GROWERS' CONVENTION, Omaha, December 14th to 16th, 1911.

R. W. CLEMENT, Ticket Agent.
L. W. WAKELY, General Passenger Agent, Omaha, Neb.

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