



**KEITH  
OF THE  
BORDER**  
*A TALE OF THE PLAINS*  
By RANDALL PARRISH.  
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"WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING," ETC., ETC.  
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**SYNOPSIS.**

Jack Keith, a Virginian, now a border plainsman, is riding along the Santa Fe trail. He is looking for his missing party of savages. He notices an camp fire at a distance and then sees a team pursued by men on ponies. When Keith reaches the trail he finds a message across two men and departs. He searches the victims finding papers and a locket with woman's portrait. He resolves to hunt down the murderer. Keith is arrested by Carson, his charge with the murder, his accuser being a ruffian named Black Bart. He goes to jail fully realizing the peril of swift border justice. A companion in his cell is a negro, who tells him he is Neb and that he knew the Keith family back in Virginia.

**CHAPTER V.—(Continued.)**

"I dunno, Massa, I done heerd 'em talk some 'bout dey plans, an' 'bout some gal gay wanted ter fin', but I didn't git no right sense to it. De Gin'r'al, he was a might still man."

"The General? Whom do you mean?

Not Waite?"

"John Sibley done called him dat." Then Keith remembered—just a dim, misty thread at first, changing slowly into a clear recollection. He was riding with despatches from Longstreet to Stonewall Jackson, and had been shot through the side. The first of Jackson's troops he reached was a brigade of North Carolinians, commanded by General Waite—General Willis Waite. He had fallen from his horse at the outposts, was brought helpless to the General's tent, and another sent on with the papers. And Mrs. Waite had dressed and bandaged his wound. That was where he had seen that woman's face before, with its haunting familiarity. He drew the locket from beneath his shirt, and gazed at the countenance revealed, with new intelligence. There could be no doubt—it was the face of her who had cared for him so tenderly in that tent at Manassas before the fever came and he had lost consciousness. And that, then, was Willis Waite lying in that shallow grave near the Cimarron Crossing, and for whose death he had been arrested. "Twas a strange world, and a small one. What a miserable ending to a life like his—a division commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, a Lieutenant-Governor of his state. What strange combination of circumstances could ever have brought such a man to this place, and sent him forth across those Indian-scouted plains? Surely nothing ordinary. And why should those border desperados have followed, through sixty miles of desolation, to strike him down? It was not robbery, at least in the ordinary sense. What then? And how was "Black Bart" involved? Why should he be sufficiently interested to swear out a warrant, and then assist in his arrest? There must be something to all this not apparent upon the surface—some object, some purpose shrouded in mystery. No mere quarrel, no ordinary feud, no accident of meeting, no theory of commonplace robbery, would account for the deed, or for the desperate efforts now being made to conceal it.

Some way, these questions, thus surging upon him, became a call to live, to fight, to unravel their mystery. The memory of that sweet-faced woman who had bent above him when the fever began its mastery, appealed to him now with the opportunity of service. He might be able to clear this, bring to her the truth, save her from despair, and hand over to justice the murderers of her husband. It was up to him alone to accomplish this—no one else knew what he knew, suspected what he suspected. And there was but one way—through escape. To remain there in weak surrender to fate could have but one ending, and that swift and sudden. He had no doubt as to "Black Bart's" purpose, or of his ability to use the "Red Light" outfit as desired. The whole plan was clearly evident, and there would be no delay in execution—all they were waiting for was night, and a law guard. He glanced about at the walls of the room, his eyes grown hard, his teeth clenched.

"Neb," he said shortly, "I guess that was your outfit all right, but they were not killed by Indians. They were run down by a gang from this town—the same fellows who have put you and me in here. I don't know what they were after—that's to be found out later—but the fight you put up at the camp spoiled their game for once, and led to your arrest. They failed to get what was wanted in Carson, and so they trailed the party to the Cimarron Crossing. Then I got on their track, and fearing the result, they landed me also. Now they'll get rid of us both as best they can. These fellows won't want any trial—that would be liable to give the whole trick away—but they have got to put us where we won't talk. There is an easy way to do this, and that is by a lynching bee. Do you get my drift, Neb?"

The whites of the negro's eyes were very much in evidence, his hands gripping at the bench on which he sat.

"Fo' de Lawd, yes, Massa Jack, I sho' does. I corroborates de whole thing."

"Then you are willing to take a chance with me?"



"Land's Sake, You Doan Mean to Steal Dem Hosses?"

"Willin'! Why, Massa Jack, I'se overjoyed; I ain't gwine leave yer no mo'. I'se sho' gwine ter be yo' nigger. What yo' gwine ter do?"

Keith ran his eyes over the walls, carefully noting every peculiarity.

"We'll remain here quietly just as long as it is daylight, Neb," he replied finally, "but we'll try every board and every log to discover some way out. Just the moment it grows dark enough to slip away without being seen we've got to hit the prairie. Once south of the Arkansas we're safe, but not until then. Have you made any effort to get out?"

The negro came over to him, and bent down.

"I was layin' on a board what I'd worked loose at one end," he whispered hoarsely, "back ob de bench, but I couldn't jerk it out wid'out somethin' ter pry it up wid."

"Where is it?"

"Right yere, Massa Jack."

It was a heavy twelve-inch plank, part of the flooring, and the second from the side-wall. Keith managed to get a grip next to the black fingers, and two pressed it up far enough for the white man to run one arm through the opening up to his shoulder and grope about below.

"There's a two-foot space there," he reported, as they let the board settle silently down into position. "The back part of this building must be set up on piles. I reckon we could pry that plank up with the bench, Neb, but it's liable to make considerable racket. Let's hunt about first for some other weak spot."

They crept across the floor, testing each separate board, but without discovering a place where they could exert leverage. The thick planks were tightly spiked down. Nor did the nails offer any better encouragement. Keith lifted himself to the grated window, getting a glimpse of the world without, but finding the iron immovable, the screws solidly imbedded in the outside wood. He dropped the floor, feeling baffled and discouraged.

"It will have to be the plank back of the bench, Neb," he announced briefly, wiping the perspiration from his face. "Get down there, and work it as loose as you can without making any noise, while I keep my ear to the door and listen for any interruption."

They took turns at this labor, discovering a loose nail which gave an opening purchase at the crack, thus enabling the insertion of a small wooden block, and insuring space for a good finger grip when the right time came. A sleepy Mexican brought in their dinner, and set it down on the bench without a word, but on his return with supper, the marshal accompanied him, and remained while they ate, talking to Keith, and staring about the room. Fortunately, the single window was to the west, the last rays of the sun struck the opposite wall, leaving the space behind the bench in deep shadow. Whatever might be the plans of "Black Bart"

and his cronies, Keith was soon convinced they were unknown to Hicks, who had evidently been deceived into thinking that this last arrest had created no excitement.

"That's why we picked yer up so early," he explained, genially. "Bart said if we got to yer afore the boys woke up they'd never hear nuthin' bout it, an' so that wouldn't be no row. He didn't even think thar'd be enny need o' keepin' a special guard ter-night, but I reckon I won't take no such chance as that, an' I'll have couple o' deputies prowlin' round fer luck. When Carson does wake up, she's hell."

He left them tobacco and pipes, and went away evidently convinced that he had performed his full duty.

The two prisoners, puffing smoke-rings into the air, heard the heavy clang of the iron bar falling into place across the door, and sat looking into one another's faces through the deepening twilight. In the mind of both black and white reposed the same thought. The negro was first to break the silence.

"Pears ter me, Massa Jack, like dis yere Bart pusson am mighty anxious ter hab no suspicious raised."

"Anybody but Hicks would see that," acknowledged the other, the rings of smoke circling his head, "but he hasn't any brains. It was pure nerve that got him the job. Well, this is one time that 'Bart pusson' is going to find an empty coop. We'll get out, Neb, just as soon as it gets dark enough. Hicks isn't likely to put on his extra guard for an hour yet, and the 'Red Light' bunch won't be fit for business much before midnight. By that time we'll be in the sand hills, heading south, able to give them a run for their money—we'll have horses, too, if we can find them."

The negro's eyes shone white.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, Massa," he protested, "dat'd sho' be a hangin' job if ebber day cotched us."

Keith laughed, knocking out the ashes from his pipe.

"With an hour's start that will be the least of my troubles," he said, quietly.

**CHAPTER VI.****The Escape.**

It was dark enough for their purpose in half an hour, the only gleam of remaining color being the red glow of the negro's pipe, even the opening in the iron grating being blotted from sight. Keith, staring in that direction, failed to perceive any distant glimmer of star, and decided the night must be cloudy, and that time for action had come. Guided by Neb's pipe bowl, he touched the boy on the shoulder.

"Knock out your ashes, and shuffle about lively with your feet, while I pry up the board."

In spite of his slenderness, Keith possessed unusual strength, yet no exertion on his part served to start the loosened plank sufficiently for their purpose. Ripping a strip from the bench he managed to pry the hole

somewhat larger, arranging the bench itself so as to afford the necessary leverage, but even then his entire weight failed to either start the spikes, or crack the plank. Some altercation began in the other room, the sound of angry voices and shuffling feet being plainly audible. It was clear to Keith that they must take the chance of a noise, and no better time than this could be chosen.

"Here, Neb, take hold with me, and bear down—put your whole weight on it, boy."

The two flung themselves upon the end of the bench, leaping up and down so as to add weight to power. Something had to give, either the stout wood of their improvised lever or else the holding of the plank. For an instant it seemed likely to be the former; then, with a shrill screech, the long spikes yielded and the board suddenly gave. With shoulders inserted beneath, the two men heaved it still higher, ramming the bench below so as to leave the opening clear. This was now sufficiently ample for the passage of a man's body, and Keith, lowering himself, discovered the earth to be fully four feet below. The negro instantly joined him, and they began creeping about in the darkness, seeking some way out. A rudely laid foundation of limestone along obstructed their path to the open air. This had been laid in mortar, but of inferior quality, so that little difficulty was experienced in detaching sufficient to obtain hand hold. Working silently, not knowing what watchers might be already stationed without, they succeeded in loosening enough of the rock to allow them to crawl through, lying breathless in the open. Accustomed as they were to the darkness, they could yet see little. They were upon the opposite side from the town, with no gleam of lights visible, prairie and sky blending together into spectral dimness, with no sound audible but the continued quarrel in the front room of the jail. Keith crept along to the end of the building from where he could perceive the lights of the town twinkling dimly through the intense blackness. Evidently the regular evening saturnalia had not yet begun, although there was already semblance of life about the numerous saloons, and an occasional sound punctured the stillness. A dog howled in the distance, and the pounding of swift hoofs along the trail told of fresh arrivals. An hour later and the single street of Carson City would be alive with humanity, eager for any excitement, ready for any wild orgy, if only once turned loose. That it would be turned loose, and also defeated, the man lying on his face in the grass felt fully assured. He smiled grimly, wishing he might behold "Black Bart's" face when he should discover the flight of his intended victims. But there was no time to lose; every moment gained, added to their chance of safety.

"Are those horses tied there by the blacksmith's shop?" he asked, pointing.

The negro stared in the direction indicated, confused by the shadows thrown by the dim lights.

"I reck'n dey am, Massa Jack; I done make out fo'."

"Then two of them must belong to us; come on, boy."

He ran forward, crouching behind every chance cover, and keeping well back behind the line of shacks. A slight depression in the prairie helped conceal their movements, and neither spoke until they were crouching together beside the wall of the shop. Then Neb, teeth chattering, managed to burst out:

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, yer don't actually mean ter steal dem horses?"

Keith glanced about at the other's dim, black shadow.

"Sure not; just borrow 'em."

"But dat's a hangin' job in dis country, Massa Jack."

"Sure it is if they catch us. But we'd be strung up anyway, and we can't be hung twice. Besides there is a chance for us with the ponies, and none at all without. An hour's start in the saddle, Neb, and this bunch back here will never even find our trail; I pledge you that. Come, boy, stay close with me."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

**The Pancake.**

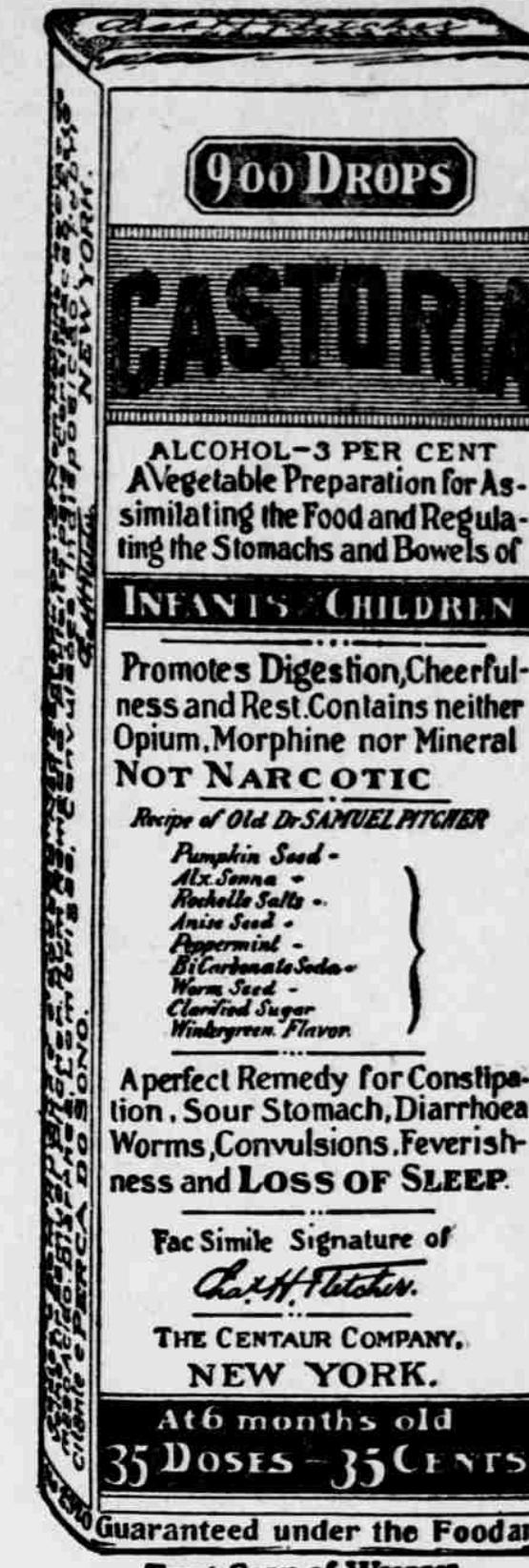
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