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## CHAPTER I.

### The Plainsman.

The man was riding just below the summit of the ridge, occasionally lifting his head so as to gaze across the crest, shading his eyes with one hand, to thus better concentrate his vision. Both horse and rider plainly exhibited signs of weariness, but every movement of the latter showed unswerving vigilance, his glance roaming the barren ridges, a brown Winchester lying across the saddle pommel, his left hand taut on the rein. Yet the horse he bestrode manfully required restraint, advancing slowly, with head hanging low, and only occasionally breaking into a brief trot under the impetus of the spur.

The rider was a man approaching thirty, somewhat slender and long of limb, but possessing broad, squared shoulders above a deep chest, sitting the saddle easily in plainsman fashion, yet with an erectness of carriage which suggested military training. The face under the wide brim of the weather-worn slouch hat was clean shaven, marked by sun and wind, and strongly browned, the chin slightly prominent, the mouth firm, the gray eyes full of character and daring. His dress was that of rough service, plain leather "chaps," showing marks of hard usage, a gray woolen shirt turned low at the neck, with a kerchief knotted loosely about the slender bronzed throat. At one hip dangled the holster of a "forty-five," on the other hung a canvas-covered canteen. His figure and face to be noted anywhere, a man from whom you would expect both thought and action, and one who seemed to exactly fit into his wild environment.

Where he rode was the very western extreme of the prairie country, level like the sea, and from off the crest of its higher ridges, the wide level sweep of the plains was visible, extending like a vast brown ocean to the foothills of the far-away mountains. Yet the actual commencement of that drear, barren expanse was fully ten miles distant, while all about where he rode the conformation was irregular, comprising narrow valleys and swelling mounds, with here and there a sharp ravine, riven from the rock and invisible until one drew up startled at its very sight. The general trend of depression was undoubtedly southward leading toward the valley of the Arkansas, yet irregular ridges occasionally cut across adding to the confusion. The entire surrounding landscape presented the same aspect, with no special object upon which the eye could rest for guidance—no tree, no upheaval of rock, no peculiarity of summit, no smoke-like trail—all about extended the same dull, dead monotony of brown, sun-baked hills, with slightly greener depressions lying between interspersed by patches of sand or the white gleam of alkali. It was a dreary, deserted land, parched under the hot summer sun, brightened by no vegetation, excepting sparse bunches of buffalo grass or an occasional stunted sage bush, and disclosing nowhere the slightest sign of human habitation.

The rising sun reddened the crest of the hills, and the rider, halting his willing horse, sat motionless, gazing steadily into the southwest. Apparently he perceived nothing there unusual, for he slowly turned his body about in the saddle, sweeping his eyes, inch by inch, along the line of the horizon, until the entire circuit had been completed. Then his hand pressed his lips slightly, his hand unconsciously patting the horse's neck.

"I reckon we're still alone, old girl," he said quietly, a bit of Southern drawl in the voice. "Well try for the trail, and take it easy."

He swung stiffly out of the saddle, and with reins dangling over his shoulder, began the slower advance on foot, the exhausted horse trailing behind. His was not a situation in which one could feel certain of safety, for any ridge might conceal a wary Indian, or a band of desperadoes, and he proceeded now with renewed confidence. It was the summer of 1868, and the place the very heart of the Indian country, with every separate tribe ranging between the Yellowstone and the Brazos, either resented openly the war-path. Rumors of atrocities were being retold the length and breadth of the border, and every report drifting in to either fort or settlement only added to the alarm. For once at least the Plains Indians had discovered a common cause, tribal differences had been adjusted, it was against the white invaders, and Kiowa, Comanches, Arapahoes, Cheyennes and Sioux had become welded together in savage brotherhood. To oppose them were the scattered and unorganized settlers lining the more eastern streams, guarded by small detachments of regular troops posted here and there amid that broad wilderness, scarcely within touch of each other.

Everywhere beyond these lines of

man's eyes hardened, his lips set firmly, as if truth were crushing home. A pretty life story surely, one to be proud of, and with probably no better ending than an Indian bullet, to the flash of a revolver in some barroom fight.

The narrow valley along which he was traveling suddenly changed its direction, compelling him to climb the rise of the ridge. Slightly below the summit he halted. In front extended the wide expanse of the Arkansas valley, a scene of splendor under the golden rays of the sun, with vivid contrast of colors, the gray of rocks, the yellow of sand, the brown of distant hills, the green of vegetation, and the silver sheen of the stream half hidden behind the fringe of cottonwoods lining its banks. This was a sight Keith had often looked upon but always with appreciation, and for the moment his eyes swept across from bluff to bluff without thought except for his wild beauty. Then he perceived something which instantly startled him. Into attention—yonder close beside the river, just beyond that ragged bunch of cottonwoods slender spirals of blue smoke were visible. That would hardly be a camp of freighters at this hour of the day, and besides, the Santa Fe trail alone here ran close in against the bluff, coming down to the river at the ford two miles further west. No party of plainsmen would ever venture to build a fire in so exposed a spot, and no small company would take the chances of the trail. But surely that appeared to be the flap of a canvas wagon top a little to the right of the smoke, yet all was so far away he could not be certain. He stared in that direction a long while, shading his eyes with both hands, unable to decide. There were three or four more long black dots higher up the river, but so far away he could not distinguish whether men or animals. Only as outlined against the yellow sand dunes could he tell they were advancing westward toward the ford.

Decidedly puzzled by all this, yet determined to solve the mystery and unwilling to remain hidden there until night, Keith led his horse along the slant of the ridge, until he attained a sharp break through the bluff leading down into the valley. It was a rugged gash, nearly impassable, but a half hour of toil won them the lower prairie, the winding path preventing the slightest view of what might be meanwhile transpiring below. Once safely out in the valley the river could no longer be seen, while barely a hundred yards away, winding along like a great serpent, ran the desolate rutted trail to Santa Fe. In neither direction appeared any sign of human life. As near as he could determine from those distant cottonwoods outlined against the sky, for the smoke spirals were too thin by then to be observed, the spot sought must be considerably to the right of where he had emerged. With this in mind he advanced cautiously, his every sense alert, searching anxiously for fresh signs of passage or evidence of a wagon train having deserted the beat on track, and turned south. The trail itself, dusty and packed hard, revealed nothing, but some five hundred yards beyond the ravine he discovered what he sought—here two wagons had turned sharply to the left, their wheels cutting deeply enough into the prairie sod to show them heavily laden. With the experience of the border he was able to determine that these wagons were drawn by mules two span of each, their small hoofs clearly defined on the turf, and that they were being driven rapidly, on a sharp trot, and that horse had been newly shod. But there were two dead ponies lying back yonder; neither shod, yet both had borne saddles. More than this, they had been spurred, the blood marks still plainly visible, and one of them, a bay gelding, he remembered it now, a star and arrow. What could all this portend? Was it possible this attack was no Indian affair after all? Was the disfiguring of bodies, the scalping, merely done to make it appear the act of savages? Driven to investigation by this suspicion, he passed again over the scene, marked this time every separate indentation, every faintest imprint of hoof or foot. There was no impression of a moccasin anywhere; every mark remaining was of booted feet. The inference was sufficiently plain—this had been the deed of white men, not of red; foul murder, and not savage war.



Slender Spirals of Blue Smoke Were Visible.

Heard the marks of a galloping horse. A few rods farther along Keith came to a confused blur of pony tracks sweeping in from the east, and the whole story of the chase was revealed as though he had witnessed it with his own eyes. They must have been crazy, or else impelled by some great necessity, to venture along this trail in so small a party. And Keith drew a deep breath, and swore to himself, "Of all the blame fools!"

He perceived the picture in all its grim details—two mule-drawn wagons moving slowly along the trail in the early morning; the band of hostile Indians suddenly swooping out from some obscure hiding place in the bluffs; the discovery of their presence; the desperate effort at escape; the swerving from the open trail in vain hope of reaching the river and finding protection underneath its banks; the frightened mules galloping wildly, lashed into a

frenzy by the man on horseback; the pounding of the ponies' hoofs, punctuated by the exultant yells of the pursuers. Again he swore: "Of all the blame fools!"

## CHAPTER II.

### The Scene of Tragedy.

Whatever might be the nature of the tragedy it would be over with long before this, and those moving black spots away yonder to the west, that he had discerned from the bluff, were undoubtedly the departing raiders. There was nothing left for Keith to do except determine the fate of the unfortunate, and give their bodies decent burial. That any had escaped, or yet lived, was altogether unlikely, unless, perchance, women had been in the party, in which case they would have been borne away prisoners.

Confident that no hostiles would be left behind to observe his movements, Keith pressed steadily forward, leading his horse. He had thus traversed fully half a mile before coming upon any evidence of a fight—here the pursuers had apparently come up with the fugitives, and given their bodies decent burial. That any had escaped, or yet lived, was altogether unlikely, unless, perchance, women had been in the party, in which case they would have been borne away prisoners. Confident that no hostiles would be left behind to observe his movements, Keith pressed steadily forward, leading his horse. He had thus traversed fully half a mile before coming upon any evidence of a fight—here the pursuers had apparently come up with the fugitives, and given their bodies decent burial. That any had escaped, or yet lived, was altogether unlikely, unless, perchance, women had been in the party, in which case they would have been borne away prisoners.

Death from violence had long since become almost a commonplace occurrence to Keith, yet now he shrank for an instant as his eyes perceived the figure of a man lying motionless across the broken wagon tongue. The grizzled hair and beard were streaked with blood, the face almost unrecognizable, while the hands yet grasped a bent and shattered rifle. Evidently the man had died fighting, beaten down by overwhelming numbers after expending his last shot. Then, then, he fell. Fifty feet beyond, shot in the back, lay a younger man, doubled up in a heap, also scalped and dead. That was all; Keith scouted over a wide circle, even scanning the stretch of gravel under the river bank, but he could fully satisfy himself there were no others in the party. It seemed impossible that these two traveling alone would have ventured upon such a trip in the face of known Indian hostility. Yet they must have done so, and once again his lips muttered: "Of all the blame fools!"

Suddenly he halted, staring about over the prairie, obsessed by a new thought, a new suspicion. There had appeared merely the hoofprints of the one horse alongside of the fleeing wagons when they first turned out from the trail, and that horse had been newly shod. But there were two dead ponies lying back yonder; neither shod, yet both had borne saddles. More than this, they had been spurred, the blood marks still plainly visible, and one of them, a bay gelding, he remembered it now, a star and arrow. What could all this portend? Was it possible this attack was no Indian affair after all? Was the disfiguring of bodies, the scalping, merely done to make it appear the act of savages? Driven to investigation by this suspicion, he passed again over the scene, marked this time every separate indentation, every faintest imprint of hoof or foot. There was no impression of a moccasin anywhere; every mark remaining was of booted feet. The inference was sufficiently plain—this had been the deed of white men, not of red; foul murder, and not savage war.

The knowledge seemed to sear Keith's brain with fire, and he sprang to his feet, hands stretched and eyes blazing. He could have sworn he was an Indian, it was according to their nature, their method of warfare; but the cowardliness of it, the atrocity of the act, as perpetrated by men of his own race, instantly aroused within him a desire for vengeance. He wanted to run the fellows down, to discover their identity. Without time even to separate indignation from the faintest imprint of hoof or foot, there was no impression of a moccasin anywhere; every mark remaining was of booted feet. The inference was sufficiently plain—this had been the deed of white men, not of red; foul murder, and not savage war.

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vaguely across toward the opposite shore. Even as he stood there, realizing the futility of further pursuit amid the maze of sand dunes opposite, the sharp reports of two rifles reached him, spurts of smoke rose from the farther bank, and a bullet chugged into the ground at his feet, while another sang shrilly overhead.

These shots, although neither came sufficiently near to be alarming, served to send Keith to cover. Cool-headed and alert now, his first mad rage dissipated, he scanned the opposite bank cautiously, but could nowhere discover any evidence of life. Little by little he comprehended the situation, and decided upon his own action. The fugitives were aware of his presence, and would prevent his crossing the stream, yet they were not at all liable to return to this side and thus reveal their identity. To attempt any further advance would be madness, but he felt perfectly secure from molestation so long as he remained quietly on the north shore. Those shots were merely a warning to keep back; the very fact that the men firing kept concealed was proof positive that they wished to be left alone. They were not afraid of what he knew now, only desirous of not being seen. Confident as to this, he retreated openly, without making the slightest effort to conceal his movements, until he had regained the scene of murder. In evidence of the truth of his theory no further shots were fired, and although he watched that opposite bank carefully, not the slightest movement revealed the presence of others. That every motion he made was being observed by keen eyes he had no doubt, but this knowledge did not disconcert him, now that he felt convinced fear of revelation would keep his watchers at a safe distance. Whoever they might be they were evidently more anxious to escape discovery than he was fearful of attack, and possessed no desire to take his life, unless it became necessary to prevent recognition. They still had every reason to believe their attack on the wagons would be credited to hostile Indians, and would consider it far safer to remain concealed, and thus harbor this supposition. They could not suspect that Keith had already stumbled upon the truth, and was determined to verify it.

secure in this conception of the situation, yet still keeping a wary eye about to guard against any treachery, the plainsman, discovering a spade in the sand, wrapped the dead bodies in blankets, and deposited them there, in piling above the mound the charred remains of boxes as some slight protection against prowling wolves. He searched the clothing of the men, but found little to reward the effort. A few letters which were slipped into his pockets to be read later, some of the nearest wagon, hastily dug a hole in the sand, wrapped the dead bodies in blankets, and deposited them there, in piling above the mound the charred remains of boxes as some slight protection against prowling wolves. He searched the clothing of the men, but found little to reward the effort. 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