

KEITH OF THE BORDER. A TALE OF THE PLAINS. By RANDAL DARRISH. AUTHOR OF 'MY LADY OF THE SOUTH' WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING ETC. ILLUSTRATIONS BY DEARBORN MELVILL. (Copyright, A. C. McChesny & Co., 1915.)

CHAPTER I.

The man was riding just below the summit of the ridge, occasionally up-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 a certain stiffness, his glance roaming the barren ridges, a brown Winchester lying cocked 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 trot or gallop 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 bronzed. 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 tucked low at the neck, with a kerchief knotted loosely about the shaven 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, a level like the sea, and from off the crest of its higher ridges, the wide level sweep of the plains was visible, extending like vast brown ocean to the foothills of the far-away mountains. Yet the actual commencement of that great, 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 to it. 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 snake-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 compressed lips smiled slightly, his hand unconsciously patting the horse's neck.

"I reckon we'st 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 contain the warriors he sought to avoid, yet 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 resting openly against 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 forgotten, 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 advanced lines, guarded by small detachments of regular troops posted here and there amid that broad wilderness, scarcely within touch of each other.

patrol wandered roaming war parties attacking travelers on the trails, raiding exposed settlements, and occasionally venturing to try open battle with the small squads of armed men in this stress of sudden emergency. Every available soldier on active duty—civilians had been pressed into service, and hastily despatched to war-exposed settlements, guide wagon trains or carry despatches between outposts. And thus our rider, Jack Keith, who knew every foot of the plains, lying between the Republican and the Canadian rivers, was one of these who suddenly requisitioned, merely because he chanced to be discovered, and employed by the harassed command of a cantonment just without the environs of Carson City. Twenty minutes later he was riding swiftly in the northwest, bearing important news to General Sheridan, commander of the Department, who happened at that moment to be at Fort Cairnes. To Keith this had been merely another page in his career of adventure, but to take his life in his hands so long ago become an old story. He had quietly performed the special duty allotted him, watched a squadron of troopers trot forth down the valley of the Republican, received the hasty thanks of the peppery little general, and then, having nothing better to do, traded his horse in at the government corral for a fresh mount and started back again for Carson City. For the greater portion of two nights and a day he had been in the saddle, but he was accustomed to this, for he had driven more than one bunch of longhorns up the Texas trail; and as he had slept three hours at Cairnes, and as his nerves were like steel, the thought of danger gave him slight concern. He was thoroughly tired, and it rested him to get out of the saddle, while the freshness of the morning air was a tonic, the very breath of which made him forgetful of fatigue.

After all, this was indeed the very sort of experience which appealed to him, and always had—this life of peril in the open, under the stars and the sky. He had constantly experienced it for so long, now eight years, as it were, that it was merely natural. While he ploughed steadily forward, through the shifting sand of the coulees, his thought drifted idly back over those years, and sometimes he smiled, and occasionally frowned, as various incidents returned to memory. It had been a rough life, yet one not unusual to those of his generation. Born of a well-to-do family in Tidewater Virginia, his father a successful planter, his mother had died while he was still in early boyhood, and he had grown up out of all womanly influence. He had barely attained his majority, a senior at William and Mary's College when the Civil War came; and one month after Virginia cast in her lot with the South, he became a sergeant in a cavalry regiment commanded by his father. He had enjoyed that life and won his spurs, yet it had cost. There was much not over-pleasant to remember, and those strenuous years of almost ceaseless fighting, of long night marches, of swift, merciless raiding, of lonely scouting within the enemy's lines, of severe wounds, hardship and suffering, had left their mark on both body and soul. His father had fallen on the field at Antietam, and left him utterly alone in the world, but he had fought on grimly to the end, until the last flag of the Confederacy had been furled. By that time, upon the collar of his tattered gray jacket appeared the tarnished insignia of a cavalry captain. The quick tears dimmed his eyes even now as he recalled anew that final parting following Appomattox, the battle-worn faces of his men, and his own painful journey homeward, defeated, wounded and penniless. It was no home when he got there, only a heap of ashes and a few weed-grown acres. No familiar face greeted him; not even a slave was left.

He had honestly endeavored to remain there, to face the future and work it out alone; he persuaded himself to feel that this was his paramount duty to the state, to the memory of the dead. But those very years of army life made such a task impossible; the dull, dead monotony of routine, the loneliness, the slowness of results, became intolerable. As it came to thousands of his comrades, the call of the West came to him, and at last he yielded, and drifted toward the frontier. The life there fascinated him, drawing him deeper and deeper into its swirling vortex. He became a freighter, mail carrier, hunter, government scout, cowboy. Once he had drifted into the mountains, and took a chance in the mines, but the wide plains called him back once more to their desert loneliness. What an utter waste it all seemed, now that he looked back upon it. Night years of fighting, hardship and open trail in vain hope of reaching "hard rim," what had they brought him? The reputation of a hard rider, a daring player at cards, a quick shot, a scorner of danger, and a bad man to fool with—that was the whole of a record hardly won. The

man's eyes hardened, his lips set firmly by, as if in truth some crushing blow. A pretty life story surely, one to be proud of, and with probably no better ending than an Indian bullet, or 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 its wild beauty. Then he perceived something which for a moment startled him into attention—yonder close beside the river, just beyond that ragged bunch of cottonwoods slender sprays 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 against the bluff, coming down to the river at the ford two miles further west. No party of plainsmen would ever venture to kindle 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 motley 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 in the bluff leading down into the valley. It was a rugged gash, nearly impossible, 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 deep, 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 to be observed, the spot sought must be considerably to the right of where he had advanced. 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, dutiful 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 curve to the left, at a hundred feet further, at a slanting gallop. Just outside their trail ap-



Slender Spirals of Blue Smoke Were Visible.

peared 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 they were traveling west—west! Keith drew a deep breath, and swore to himself, "Of all the blame fools!"

He perceived the picture in all its gruesome details—the 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 either side. From their ponies' tracks there must have been a dozen in the band. Perhaps a hundred yards further along lay two dead ponies. Keith examined them closely—both had been ridden with saddles, the marks of the cinches plainly visible. Evidently one of the wagon mules had also dropped in the traces here, and had been dragged along by his mate. Just beyond came a sudden depression in the prairie down which the wagons had plunged so heavily as to break one of the axles; the wheel lay a few yards away, and, somewhat to the right, there lay the wreck of the wagon itself, two dead mules still in the traces, the vehicle stripped of contents and charred by fire. A hundred feet further along, where the other wagon, its tongue broken, the canvas top ripped open, while the between the two were scattered odds and ends of wearing apparel and provisions, with a pile of boxes smoking grimly. The remaining mules were gone, and no semblance of life remained anywhere. Keith dropped his reins over his shoulder, and, with Winchester cocked and ready, advanced cautiously.

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, though his scalp felt hot and his forehead 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, before 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 strange suspicion. There had appeared merely the hooded figure 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 he believed 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, marking this time every separate indent, even 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.

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 had seen the earlier gun of anger, the spirit driven, had left him, but it had merely changed into a dogged resolution to discover the perpetrators of this outrage and bring them to justice for the crime. The face in the locket seemed to ask it of him, and his nature urged response. But he could hope to accomplish nothing more here, and the plainsman swung himself into the saddle. He turned his horse's head eastward, and rode away. From the deeply rutted trail he looked back to where the fire still smoked in the midst of that desolate silence.

CHAPTER III

An Arrest

The Santa Fe trail was far too exposed to be safely traveled alone and in broad daylight, but Keith considered it best to put sufficient space between himself and those whom he felt confident were still watching his movements from across the river. How much they might already suspect his discoveries he possessed no means of knowing, yet, conscious of their own guilt, they might easily feel safer if he were also put out of the

way. He had no anticipation of open attack, but must guard against treachery. As he rode, his eyes never left those far-away sand dunes, although he perceived no movement, no black dot even which he could conceive to be a possible enemy. Now that he possessed ample time for thought, the situation became more puzzling. This tragedy which he had accidentally stumbled upon must have had a cause other than blind chance. It was the culmination of a plot, with some reason behind more important than ordinary robbery. Apparently the wagons contained nothing of value, merely the clothing, provisions, and ordinary utensils of an emigrant party. Nor had the victims' pockets been carefully searched. Only the mules had been taken by the raiders, and they would be small booty for such a crime.

The trail, continually skirting the high bluff and bearing farther away from the river, turned sharply into a narrow ravine. There was a considerable break in the rocky barrier here, leading back for perhaps a hundred yards, and the plainsman turned his horse that way, dismounting when out of sight among the bushes. He could rest here until night with little danger of discovery. He lay down on the rocks, pillowing his head on the saddle, but his brain was too active to permit sleeping. Finally he drew the letters from out his pocket, and began examining them. They yielded very little information, those taken from the older man having no envelopes to show to whom they had been addressed. The single document found in the pocket of the other was a memorandum of account at the Pioneer Store at Topeka, charged to John Sibley, and marked paid. This then must have been the younger man's name, as the letters to the other began occasionally "Dear Will." They were missives such as a wife might write to a husband long absent, yet upon a mission of deep interest to both. Keith could not fully determine what this mission might be, as the person evidently understood each other so thoroughly that mention of the place of detail. Twice the name Phyllis was mentioned, and once a "Fred" was also referred to, but in neither instance clearly enough to reveal the relationship, although the latter appeared to be pleaded for. Certain references caused the belief that these letters had been mailed from some small Missouri town, but no name was mentioned. They were invariably signed "Mary." The only other paper Keith discovered was a brief itinerary of the Santa Fe trail extending as far west as the Raton Mountains, giving the usual camping spots and places where water was accessible. He slipped the papers back into his pocket with a distinct feeling of disappointment, and lay back staring up at the little strip of blue sky. The silence was profound, even his horse standing motionless, and finally he fell asleep.

The sun had disappeared, and even the gray of twilight was fading out of the sky, when Keith returned again to consciousness, aroused by his horse rolling on the soft turf. He awoke thoroughly refreshed, and eager to get away on his long night ride. A cold lunch, hastily eaten, for a fire would have been dangerous, and he saddled up and was off, trotting out of the narrow ravine and into the broad trail, which could be followed without difficulty under the dull gleam of the stars. Horse and rider were soon at their best, the animal swinging unurged into the fresh air, fanning the man's face as he leaned forward. Once they halted to drink from a narrow stream, and then pushed on, hour after hour, through the deserted night. Keith had little fear of Indian raiders in that darkness, and every stride of his horse brought him closer to the settlements, and further removed from danger. His eyes and ears were alert to every shadow and sound. Once, it must have been after midnight, he drew his pony sharply back into a rock shadow at the noise of something approaching from the east. The stage to Santa Fe rattled past, the four mules trotting swiftly, a squad of troopers riding hard behind it. It was merely a lumpy shadow sweeping swiftly past; he could perceive the dim outlines of driver and guard, the soldiers swaying in their saddles, heard the pouncing of hoofs, the creak of axles, and then the apparition disappeared into the black void. He had not called out—what was the use? Those people would never pause to hunt down prairie outlaws, and their guard was sufficient to prevent attack. Their ac-

knowledge, but one duty—to get the mail through on time. The dust of their passing still in the air, Keith rode on, the noise dying away in his rear. As the hours passed, his horse wearied and had to be spurred into the swifter stride, but the man seemed tireless. The sun was an hour high when they climbed the long hill, and looped into Carson City. The cantonment was to the right, but Keith, having no report to make, rode directly ahead down the one long street to a livery corral, leaving his horse there, and sought the nearest restaurant.

Exhausted by a night of high play and deep drinking, the border town was sleeping off its debauch, saloons and main-tenance were silent, the streets almost deserted. To Keith, whose former acquaintance with the place had been entirely after nightfall, the view of it now was almost a shock—the miserable saloons, the gaudy saloon keepers, the flickered streets, the dingy, unpainted hotel, the dirty flap of canvas, the unoccupied seats of the full prairie sweeping away to the horizon, all composed a hideous picture beneath the sun glare. He could scarcely find a man to attend his horse, and at the restaurant a drowsy Chinaman had to be shaken awake, and frightened into serving him. He sat down to the miserable meal oppressed with disgust—never before had his life seemed so mean, useless, utterly without excuse.

He possessed the appetite of the open, of the normal man in perfect physical health, and he ate heartily, his eyes wandering out of the open window down the long, dismal street. A drunken man lay in front of the "Red Light" saloon sleeping undisturbed; two dog dogs were snarling at each other about a bone; a mover's wagon was slowly coming in across the open through a cloud of yellow dust. That was all within the radius of vision. For the first time in years the East called him—the old life of cleanliness and respectability. He swore to himself as he tossed the Chinaman pay for his breakfast, and strove out on the steps. Two men were coming up the street together from the opposite direction—one lean, dark-skinned, with black goatee, the other heavily set with closely trimmed gray beard. Keith knew the latter, and waited, leaning against the door, one hand on his hip.

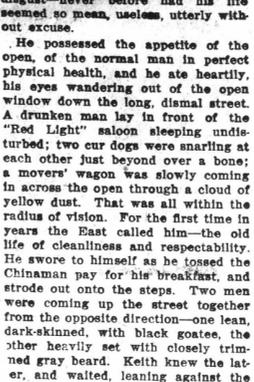
"Hullo, Bob," he said genially; "they must have routed you out pretty early today." "They showed did, Jack," was the response. He came up the steps somewhat heavily, his companion stopping below. "The boys raise hell all night, an' then come ter me ter straighten it out in the mawnin'. When did ye git in?" "An hour ago; had to wake the 'chink' up to get any chuck. Town looks dead." "That ain't over lively at this time of day," permitting his blue eyes to wander up the silent street, but instantly bringing them back to Keith's face, "but I reckon it'll wke up later on." "He stood squarely on both feet, and one hand rested on the butt of a revolver. Keith noticed this, wondering vaguely.

"I reckon yer know, Jack, as how I generally git what I goes after," said the slow drawing voice, "an' that I draw 'em as quick as a gun-fighter, but it won't do me no good ter make a play yer fer one of us is sure to git yer—do yer best?" "Get me!" Keith's voice and face be pleaded for. Certain references caused the belief that these letters had been mailed from some small Missouri town, but no name was mentioned. They were invariably signed "Mary." The only other paper Keith discovered was a brief itinerary of the Santa Fe trail extending as far west as the Raton Mountains, giving the usual camping spots and places where water was accessible. He slipped the papers back into his pocket with a distinct feeling of disappointment, and lay back staring up at the little strip of blue sky. The silence was profound, even his horse standing motionless, and finally he fell asleep.

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expressed astonishment, but not a muscle of his body moved. "What do you mean, Bob—are you fellows after me?" "Sure thing; got the warrant here," and he slapped the breast of his shirt with his left hand. The color mounted into the cheeks of the other, his lips grew set and white, and his gray eyes darkened. "Let it all out, Marshal," he said sternly, "you've got me roped and tied. Now what's the charge?" "Neither man moved, but the one before swung about so as to face them, one hand thrust out of sight beneath the tail of his long coat. "Make him throw up his hands, Bob," he said sharply. "Oh, I reckon that ain't goin' ter be no trouble," returned the marshal genially, yet with no relaxation of attention. "Keith knows me, an' expects a fair deal. Still, maybe I better ask yer to unhook yer belt, Jack."

A moment Keith seemed to hesitate, plainly provoked by the situation and endeavoring to see some way of escape; then his lips smiled, and he silently unhooked the belt, handing it over.



Plunged into the Gorge.

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"Are You Goin' to Raise a Row, or Come Along Quietly?"

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