

little broncos, they drew to themselves in the early light the impressiveness of an age—the age of pioneers.

At their head rode Billy Knapp. At their rear rode Jim Buckley. Alfred was a little of everywhere at once. As a matter of habit, these three carried their rifles cross fashion in front of them, but the new Winchesters and the old long-barrelled pieces of the other score of men were still slung inside the canvas covers, for the Indian country was yet to see. Beneath the axles hung pails. The wagons contained much food, a good supply of ammunition, and a scanty equipment of the comforts of life. In one of them were three wooden boxes, two trunks, the doctor, Mrs. Prue, and little Miss Prue herself, laughing, proud at being allowed to dangle along the dew-wet grass the heavy coil of a black snake whip.

The men shouted suddenly, the horses leaned to their collars, the wagons creaked, and the swaying procession began to loom huge and ghost-like in the mist that steamed golden white from the surface of the prairie.

Then, from the haze of the town, six more wagons silently detached themselves, and followed in the wake of the first.

This second caravan differed from the other in that it deployed no outriders, and from the close drawn canvas of its wagons came, once in a while, the sharp cry of a child, followed immediately by the comforting of a woman. The men drove from the seats, and across the lap of each was a weapon.

About five miles out, the first caravan halted until the second drew nearer. Billy Knapp cantered back to it. One of the men in the foremost wagon thereupon clamped the brake and jumped to the ground, where he stood, leaning on the muzzle of his big mountaineer's rifle, chewing a nonchalant plug.

"What's this?" demanded Billy, reining in his horse.

The man shifted his quid.

"Nawthin'," he drawled, "'xcept that this yare outfit's a-goin' too."

Billy's eyes snapped.

"We settled all that afore," said he with outward calm.

"This yare outfit's a-goin' too," reiterated the man.

"The hell it is!" cried the scout angrily. "We all said no women and no poor hosses, and that goes. Yore hosses are a lot of crowbait, and——"