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Chapter 8

In the year 1851, President Brigham Young sent colonists to extend the Mormon territory to the south. Those who went had to fight four adversaries: the Utes, the Navajos, the renegade whites, and nature, which seemed at times the greatest adversary of all. No treaty with the United States could guarantee the settlers from depredations of the Navajos. Even Kit Carson who displaced the Indians had found it impossible to quell them. Jacob Hamblin and Thales Haskell genuinely loved the Indians, and time after time won them to a reluctant peace, only to have it broken again because of the actions of the renegade whites. But at last the Mormons had begun their settlement, in the face of Indian attacks and nature.

When the people of Bluff celebrated the first anniversary of their arrival, a practice which Bishop Nielson insisted on as long as he lived, their progress towards mastering the big objectives had served only to reveal the hugeness of the work before them. It meant the taming of fifteen thousand savages who saw themselves facing an invasion of white men and the prospect of losing their place and their liberty as a nation – fifteen thousand primitive souls as fickle and as imaginative as children, and as ready as a nest of hornets to get all worked up and swarm out to war. How could a handful of impoverished people so much as begin on such a labor? This wild nation, hotheaded and superstitious, might rise up at any time in a frenzy of anger, obliterate the helpless fort, and race on with red hands to the unsuspecting outside. Right at this time, although the celebrators in the fort knew nothing about it and were not to know for weeks to come just what had happened, the Piutes were staging a bloody massacre at Piute Springs, east of Blue Mountain. The fierce particulars of the murder could cause no surprise to the people of Bluff, but they had no inkling now of what was going on, and they celebrated the annual date of their arrival in peaceful ignorance of the black cloud soon to reach over them, cherishing still the fond hope that destiny would favor them on this forbidding front. While they danced and sang and related the good fortunes which had attended their efforts thus far, the Piutes robbed and murdered three men at the lonely Thurman horse ranch sixty miles away, and then headed with their plunder and the stolen band of blooded horses off in the direction of Bluff and the more inaccessible parts of the county. Five miles from the fort they appeared suddenly with their great drive of horses from a ravine, and seeing the herd of horses belonging to the Mormons, and guarded by a Mormon boy, they circled the herd in to their roundup, and sent a bullet whistling over the head of the herder, as he, Joe Nielson, raced like the wind, dashing pell-mell down the narrow trail in Cow Canyon, and through the gateway of the fort when the sun was dipping low on the horizon. His report spread consternation and alarm. Their herd was gone in a body, taken from their guard in broad daylight. Except for a few ponies and two teams they had been working, they were afoot.

Long shadows from the setting sun stretched across the fort, carrying gloomy forebodings along with them. Even if they could mount all their men and go in pursuit, it would still be a dreadful hazard. Of their thirty men and boys, some were freighting between there and Durango, some away at work or hunting lost cattle, only a limited number at home. Suppose they could mount and arm twelve men – what could twelve men do to take their horses from that unscrupulous gang of robbers? The recovery of these horses would be a miracle, nothing short of it. Also, if twelve men were to be sent for the recovery of the horses, who would guard the fort with the women and children left in terror and suspense? Notwithstanding all these terrible “ifs,” they must have their horses. The women were no less resolute about that than the men, and no doubt equally capable of carrying on the warfare which was comprehended in the plan of the mission. Furthermore, and more important if possible than the horses, the Piutes must never see them show the white feather. Their prestige with these insolent Piutes must wave on high as their banner till such time as the Piutes could appreciate and respond to friendship.

In the stillness of that April evening, eleven men rode out through the west gate of the fort, and the dull tread of their hoofs on the sand died away in to the ominous silence of night. Wives and mothers and children laid their heads on sleepless pillows, listening in dread to the solemn and portending sounds of night – echoes in the towering cliffs – the moaning of the river, and the doleful barking of dogs in the Navajo camps beyond it. If they dozed in all those restless hours, it was to dream visions of torture, blood, their loved ones lying prone on the sand. When morning came at last, no tidings had come from the eleven who rode out through the west gate and away into darkness. Joe Nielson had observed that the Piutes were headed westward, perhaps for Butler Wash, and that was the objective of the men who started from the fort. They rode quietly and in single file along the sandy trail up Cottonwood Wash: Lem Redd, Jr., Kumen Jones, Platte D. Lyman, Jess Smith, Amasa Barton, Orin Kelsey. The complete personnel of that party is not on record. After traveling four miles in the darkness and stillness between the high cliffs of Cottonwood, they crossed a sandy bench to the northwest and stopped on a hill overlooking a valley by Boiling Spring. Across from them on the long sloping rock above the spring, they saw a community of fires, like stars in the darkness. Faintly on the night wind as they listened, they caught the weird chant of the Piute war song. It rose to their ears and died away on the wind, but they could mark the heavy beat, the lusty volume of many voices-the spirit of exultation, of defiance. The big drive of horses was perhaps scattered between them and the fires, but it was too dark to hunt among them. They would have to wait there till morning, and to get along without fires since that would advertise their presence to their enemies. Shifting from side to side in their saddles or standing by while they gazed at the dread lights in the distance, they speculated on their chances of getting their horses without being shot to ribbons. Yet, they had firmly resolved to have those horses, for without them they would be stranded, afoot, helpless. No time now to change their minds

about it; any lack of firm answer to this bold challenge would shatter their prestige and leave them helpless at the mercy of these murderers. Every one of the eleven men was armed-a gun, a pistol, or both. Yet everyone knew, no matter how stoically he refrained from saying it in words, that his firearms, in the jeopardy which daylight would bring, were but a mock and a menace to any hope of victory with the shoot it-out ethics of the old warfare. If, in the morning, the Piutes failed utterly to consider their helplessness, to remember that they wanted to be friends, and to make generous exception accordingly, then their doom was sealed, as was also the doom of the defenseless loved ones waiting in fear and anxiety at the fort. Furthermore, if there were not some benevolent Deity fighting their battles for them, then the whole scheme of the mission was folly and madness personified.

The gray dawn showed the valley full of horses as they had expected. And with the dawn the campfires on the rock blazed into new life, voices could be heard and the barking of dogs. The Bluff men rode down from their place of long vigil and began gathering their horses out of the scattered herd. Sharp eyes from the camps spied them in their first motion, and down from the sloping rock with angry yell, hair flying wildly behind, came twenty or more Piutes on their cayuses at top speed. With drawn guns they dashed up to the men of the fort, demanding that they get away from the horses and be gone. The men of the fort demanded their horses; they would have them; their resolution had been crystallizing all night: and they could make no compromise. They intended to get their stolen animals or fight to the last man. The possibilities, even the probabilities, looked perilous indeed, but the loss was already perilous. Their failure to meet this sharp issue would mean utter failure of their entire project in San Juan. Guns flashed into position for use. Old Baldy shoved a triggerless forty-five calibre six-shooter against Lem Redd's stomach and was ready to discharge it with a stone he carried for that purpose. Lem Redd held his pistol in position to kill the Indian if he started to bring that stone into action. Jess Smith and Amasa Barton had countered other Piute guns with their own to make any killing a mutual affair. Just a thin jiffy was all it lacked now-the weight of things infernal hung suspended on a hair. If the hair broke, it might rid the world of a dozen Piute braves, but it would surely stop at nothing less than the slaughter of every white man in the valley, and then it would turn with fury on the fort. Where was the magic now to save them from doom? This crisis had come like a whirlwind, leaving no chance for any interfering influence. Suddenly a voice pierced the morning air, loud and long and shrill. Its urgency of tone, almost superhuman, and vibrant with command or appeal, arrested every motion, checked every breath. High on the rock above them they saw the slender figure of the youth, Henry, his arms extended, hands outstretching and head thrown back as he poured the strongest emotions of his young heart into the fresh morning air. "These are our friends!" he shouted in his native tongue, "Don't hurt our friends! Give them their horses!" It was that dignity of command to which men yield instinctively even though they may hate themselves for it when they lapse back to the vicious level from which it raised them. The cocked guns lowered from their death-set aim-the spell was broken.

Twenty braves , stood by in silence while eleven Mormons selected their horses from the numerous band, even horses which the Piutes had stolen long before and had been using as their own. In that band with which the Indians had come were many blooded American horses. The Mormons knew now that something was surely wrong! And those Piutes had harness-straps, work-horse bridles, clothing, and other things which they must have taken by a raid on some ranch or town. One of them had a watch. They also had money, great wads of it, and no more notion than a baby what it was worth. One of them gave Jess Smith twenty-five dollars in greenbacks for a wide-rimmed hat. Another gave fifty for a similar hat without the least idea how much he was paying. They made lavish offers with worthless printed matter which they took to be money. The fact of the matter was, a Mr. Smith, a horse-buyer, had come from somewhere in Colorado accompanied by a Mr. May, to buy Mr. Thurman's horses, and had brought with him money for the purpose, checks not being as acceptable in faraway San Juan then as now. For some time the Piutes had contemplated Thurman's fine horses with the worst of intentions, but when they became aware of the money carried by Smith, they figured the plum was ripe for plucking, and they left no one alive to tell just how it was accomplished. After the killing they ransacked everything looking for money which they could not tell from other paper.

The gentle spell of that youthful voice from the high rock was too fine a thing to linger long in the hearts of Henry's people, their hands reeking with blood. By the middle of the forenoon they had reverted to all the deep grooves of their savagery. As they moved on up the valley of the Butler, driving their stolen horses and loaded with their plunder, they found a few cattle belonging to the people of the fort, and some of these they shot to see them fall, and others they caught and tortured and mutilated with savage delight. They raced back and forth over the hills on Thurman's horses in a drunken fit of jubilation. They went by their secret trail into the fastnesses of Elk Mountain, known at that time to them only, and they waited there a month hoping someone would be foolish enough to try to follow them. During all this time a gang of cowpunchers and soldiers hunted to find where they had gone, and in May they found them at LaSal. In the fight that followed the Indians made a big killing, fourteen to sixteen men, and lost but one of their own number. Besides that they got away with the horses, the saddles, the pack outfits, and about everything the cowpunchers had brought with them. Having spent the spring and summer with their raids and their fights and the prodigal disposition of their rich plunder, they returned in the fall to the fort with the glory and satisfaction of having killed more than seventeen white men since the first of April. They still had hats, clothing, saddles, guns, horses, and money they had gained in the fascinating game of murder. When the arm of the law failed to reach out and demand the stipulated price of the good time they had been having, they became more chesty than before, more insolent, more ugly, more dangerous as neighbors.