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Chapter 13

In the year 1851, President Brigham Young sent colonies 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 the 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 attack and nature.

The silence which followed was broken only by the quick-drawn breath of twenty men in blank surprise at the bishop's tremendous decision. Yet he had considered it all very carefully in connection with the good standing of the San Juan Co-op with the banks in Durango, where so far they had refrained from borrowing as invited. At his suggestion the co-op assumed the heavy obligation, bought O'Donnell's sheep and began the Co-op Sheep Herd, which they moved from Bluff to better range farther away. With their right to Elk Mountain secured from the Piutes, they devoted the north half of the mountain to their sheep, the south to their limited number of cattle, too few to make good their claim to the amount of range they hoped to use, and, behold, the big L C Outfit with its numerous herd, was rapidly getting into all range not already in use. Every Piute knew where the lack of a blind trail made it best to travel that way in the nighttime. They knew it so well and resorted to it with such telling frequency, they would have stripped the colony to the bone if they had not been checked every so often by some thought-provoking event. When Navajo Frank's splendid figure caved in, when Norgwinup's two roughnecks met sudden and mysterious death, and a dozen other thieves came to their disastrous and unaccountable ending, the industry of something-for-nothing suffered a sharp setback. It took almost a year for it to start back on the road to normalcy, and Haskell had to repeat his warning to maintain half-livable conditions. Mike, with the wide mouth and the Berkshire-boar neck, was a would-be chief. He carried the proud distinction, no matter who the real killer might have been, of having come away with the outfits of Mitchel and Myric while they lay in two red heaps behind him. His ravenous appetite was in sharp competition with his dignity as chief when he ate the long slices of bread and molasses at Kigaly, and then went to pacify the rest of the gang. From his habit of following blind trails and making his major movements in the night, he became a wool merchant, coming in every day to the San Juan Co-op with a blanket full of wool which, when they had weighed it and paid for it, they dumped with other wool in their log warehouse. But somehow, Mike's wool did not increase the amount, and the store manager, Lem Redd, was puzzled to know how it could be. His observations led him to set a wolf trap in the wool

under what appeared to be a loose chinking in the wall. Next morning Mike stood there with his arm through a hole in the wall where the chinking had been removed, and he was very much at a loss for words to explain the wherefore. When Lem Redd opened the hard jaws of that trap, Mike hurried away with his swollen fingers into retirement. He had no wish to advertise just how ignominiously his racket had failed. Yet he who had ever made such vain proclamations of his exploits, could not keep his part in this fool's game from the listening ears of his rival chieftains. They gathered to his retreat and viewed him with depreciative eyes—he had been caught in a trap the same as a coyote. It was too much for his outraged pride—he, the imperious killer! The consumer of abundant bread and molasses while the dupes of his tribe waited on empty stomachs for his brave command to hostile action! "Wait till they pay for this insult!" he roared, "If they refuse the money—" he struck his right fist into his left hand and then drew his fingers across his throat in terrible gesture, "I'll wear their scalps on my belt! They can't do this to me!" Terrible words. Maybe Mike was still the great fury they had taken him to be; maybe he was even more. Like a roaring lion he came to Bluff, and with terrible visage he demanded a thousand dollars indemnity. It was to be forthcoming at once – something terrible would happen if they delayed the payment. He went from house to house growing more eloquent and more awful with his story as he repeated it, and some of the women became alarmed at his threats. He met Haskell. The old interpreter's predictions of evil had nettled Mike when they were made, and he had discounted their unfailing fulfillment. Misfortunes had come to some of the trouble-makers, but it was accidental; they had not come and would not come to Mike, yet his jaw dropped lower and lower as Haskell recounted to him just what happened and how. "Wasn't Hatch shot to death in a card game on Peter's Hill?" Haskell demanded, and Mike admitted in a low grunt that it was so. "Wasn't Tuvagutts killed by lightning on the jump near the Cribs?" Mike hung his head still lower. He remembered it. "Where's Sanop's oldest boy?" and Haskell's black eyes were boring right into Mike's tortured soul, "Yes, you do know—you know he died in prison. And you know his brother was killed by some of your people in the big rocks south of McElmo. Norgwinup's boys doubled up and died like poisoned rats; Bob died; Grasshopper was killed. They were thieves, every one of them, just like you, and in a little while you are going to follow them." These things had not happened at once, but they had come since Haskell sounded his solemn warning. Mike knew about every one of them, and he stood speechless in dread contemplation. "You won't have use for any thousand dollars," Haskell pursued, intensifying Mike's terror of impending doom. "Dead men let the money fall out of their fingers." Without another word the old man turned away, and Mike gazed despairingly after him while he licked his wide lips and closed his mouth with emotions baffling to his speech. Sometime before the light of the following morning, he followed a blind trail on the slope towards Navajo Mountain.

The store which William Hyde began at Rincone, ten miles down the river from Bluff, had been slowly growing in prosperity in spite of Erastus Snow's ban on isolated dwellings. Amass Barton married William Hyde's daughter, Parthenia,

and became interested in the store. In 1885, Barton became the owner of the store; at least he became the manager and the clerk, and he moved there with his wife and child to attend to the business. In taking this dangerous step Barton was not acting in defiance of any standard set up for the safety of the colony. From becoming interested in a small way, he had assumed one obligation after another until it seemed only sane and sensible to go there and give his investment personal attention. Also he may have considered it no longer necessary for the people to huddle together, since they had seen fit to move out of the fort. Barton was a man of unusual strength and energy, large and magnetic, a talented builder and mechanic, and just the kind of man to develop a new country. With untiring effort he built a neat, commodious home from the crooked logs he could find along the river, and he made an attractive store building, warehouse, blacksmith shop, and other substantial conveniences. He devised a treadmill in which he had a donkey lift water from the river for his well-kept garden. Rincon, in Spanish, means "corner." This corner is formed by the right-angle junction of Comb Reef with the gorge of the San Juan River. It is the corner from which the travel-worn company from Hole-in-the-Rock had so much trouble getting out in the spring of 1880. Barton's operations in this cliff-bound rincón began to make the very name a suggestion of neatness and beauty, for at his artistic touch the junction presented a unique and pleasing contrast to the bald, gray cliffs all around. His store like others of its kind, ran a pawn business instead of a credit account. A Navajo could pawn a gun, saddle, or anything else at a stipulated value, and draw goods up to that limit. The pawn could be renewed with a stipulated deposit, but anything left after a given amount of time was forfeited. The system was rich with possibilities of unpleasant misunderstandings even with good Indians, but with bad Indians it was a handy leverage for all kinds of mischief. A Navajo known as Old Eye, from having lost one eye when a flying gad struck him several years before, had worked often for Barton at Rincone, and had often looked longingly at the display of attractive goods in the store. When he went back to his little sheep herd in the reservation, he somehow evolved the wild notion of carrying the goods away from the store. This idea was no doubt inflamed, if not really suggested in the first place, by a certain young bully with a bad face, who was keen for the venture. Rincone was remote and unprotected, and they could get far away before anyone came after them. Better still, they could do it in such a way that they would seem to be justified. However, that robbery notion got such a hold on Old Eye, who had been a friend to Barton from the day of their first acquaintance, he planned with the young bully to rob the store, and their plan looked neater in anticipation than it ever looked as a fact.

It was early one morning in May that the two Navajos came up from the river to Barton's place on the shelf and asked him to go with them into the store. Old Eye said he wanted to redeem some jewelry which had been pawned there by his squaw. The bully accompanied him, and when they got in the store, Old Eye demanded the return of the jewelry, offering for it nothing as a renewal of the

pawn but a broken pistol of small or doubtful value, which Barton refused. Precedent had given the store-man full right to refuse anything offered in exchange, but Old Eye was vitiated with eagerness for the robbery and had lost the good will of their former associations. Being in prearranged accord with his companion of the bad face, he objected hatefully to all of Barton's offers, while the young fellow waited silently for the situation to develop as planned. Barton detected something very wrong, but he knew no fear, and he never became a victim to excitement. The disagreement was still but an unpleasant simmer when Mrs. Barton called him to breakfast, and the storeman, following his custom took his two customers to eat with him. When they had satisfied their appetites, they returned with him to the store and renewed their contention where they had laid it down. Becoming aware that the trouble in the store was reaching a dangerously high pitch, Mrs. Barton went over and asked what she could do to help. She had recently become mother of her second child and was hardly fit to be out of bed, and her husband was annoyed that she should walk so far, so he assured her he was perfectly able to handle the situation, and he asked her to go back to the house. She returned as directed, but she still watched and listened, and she knew also by her keen instinct that something terrible was about to happen in the store. Concealing a pistol under her apron, she went again - matters were even worse than she had expected, yet she knew the sight of that pistol would do no good unless she used it at once with deadly accuracy. She hesitated, and then ran back in desperation to the house where her mother, Mrs. Hyde, waited with the two small children. Barton had tried to put the two fellows out of the store, a task to which he was fully equal physically, but the bully, with treacherous preparation, had lassoed him around the neck, jerked him down on the counter, and was choking him to unconsciousness. When the terrified women heard a shot, Mrs. Hyde ran to see what had happened. They had dragged Barton over the counter and into the doorway where he lay unconscious, face downward, and Old Eye jumped astride his back to hold him while the bully got a pistol into action. The shot the women had heard had apparently gone wild, and the bully was in a state of great excitement. Mrs. Hyde's appearance upset him all the more, and raising the pistol quickly, he fired, missing his mark again, but hitting Old Eye near the heart. Old Eye jumped from Barton's back and ran round to the back of the store building where as subsequent events proved, he dropped dead. Although the bully had slackened his rope to use the pistol, Barton had not recovered from the choking to know he was free to move, or to realize what was going on. Seeing his terrible blunder, the bully thrust his pistol against Barton's head and fired, and was about to fire again when Mrs. Hyde pushed him away. At this he rushed around the store building to see what had happened to his one-eyed companion, and what he found made him more a fiend than before. Returning with frantic stride, he thrust the old lady roughly away, and shot 'the prostrate man again in the crown of the head. The mischief was done! The report in the reservation would be like a blaze in the dry grass. The bully shouldered the body of his companion and staggered with it down from the shelf to a boat at the water's edge. Getting the corpse to the south side he dumped it on the sand and ran, to disappear in a grove of cottonwoods. He would of course report to his

people that the Mormon storeman had murdered Old Eye. Old Cheepoots and other Piutes had watched the whole affair without taking any part, and to them, the desperate Mrs. Barton and her mother turned for help. With her two babies, the youngest little more than a week old, they were there alone at the mercy of the soon-to-be enraged nation of Navajos. Their nearest friends, very few in number, and with no power to meet a horde of furious savages, were up the river at Bluff, ten miles away - ten long miles over rocks and sand to her nearest friends, and indefinitely farther to any adequate help! It would take at least ten days to bring a force to protect her and the little town which would now be equally in danger. Mrs. Barton gave Old Cheepoots fifteen dollars to ride like mad with a note to Bluff-to ride faster than he had ever ridden before. The old Indian took the money, sprang to the back of his cayuse, and vanished. The women got the other Piutes to help carry Barton to the house and lay him on a couch under a shed by the door. He was not dead; he seemed to be partly conscious, but the bullets entering the back of his head had lodged behind his eyes and made him blind. The women gazed often in anguish of suspense at that boat across the river, and sent their despairing glance hopefully to the sandhills where Old Cheepoots had disappeared. But why begin looking there so soon? He couldn't yet have got a mile away and would be picking his way along the dangerous trail over the cliff above the river. Their fate was in his hands, hanging on his honor-Piute honor. Possibly that was an attribute of minus quantity. He had his money, and he might go as slowly as he pleased or not go at all, feeling sure that no one would be left at Rincone to accuse or blame him. Possibly his cayuse would fall headlong in its inordinate haste and break its legs among the big rocks. Possibly their fate was hanging on a race between that red-handed bully, and the best old Cheepoots could get out of his thin yellow pony. The old man might run his horse to death and still fail to have someone at Rincone before the women and babies would be butchered. In one of their fearful glances at the boat and at the cottonwoods where the bully disappeared, they saw six tall Navajos coming with rapid stride. Their step suggested anger, violence. With but a passing glance at the prostrate body of Old Eye, they quickened their movements, piled into the boat, rowed with quick stroke of oar to the north bank and headed up the hill to the stricken home where the agonized women waited. Could it be possible that help from Bluff was anywhere near to save them? No, thinking about it calmly, they knew the old man could be no more than half-way at best.