

(*The Improvement Era*, December 1949)

## Chapter 15

*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 the Mormons persisted in their settlement, in the face of Indian attack and nature.*

The aged bishop came limping alone to meet them. He made no undue haste.

Tired and stooping

from his work, his step was as slow and as deliberate as at other times, his head leaning forward, the wind playing with his gray hair. "He is not afraid," Aunt Mary heard them say one to another.

Calmness and unfaltering trust prevailed in Bishop Nielson's bowed head. He had been in greater perils than this—with the perishing handcart companies on the plains in subzero weather; he had felt the torturing fingers of death and had seen it bear down the loved ones all around him. His resolute escape from its grasp had left him with that splendid calmness known only to those who have contended long and bitterly. His composure was not due to any misunderstanding of the deadly intent this painted mob had in its heart. He knew that the mission faced its supreme moment. The issue of Indian wars for more than thirty years and the welfare of unsuspecting homes far away hung on the success or the failure of this forced contact. The hopes and objectives of toiling years hung on the outcome of this meeting between a crippled, defenseless old man and a hundred armed savages raring to fight. From another direction came Kumen Jones, and together they waited for the mounted mob to deliver the message which was of such tremendous import that it took a hundred men with their most deadly weapons to bring it. They began hissing forth their accumulated wrath, two, three, half a dozen all at once in angry excitement. A Navajo seemingly had been murdered by a Mormon - shot through the heart in the white man's store! Another Navajo was reported to have been compelled to kill the Mormon in self-defense. The Navajos were ready to fight - right now! They were not sheep to be struck down without protest. Their murderous howl swelled in volume as if it were never going to listen for an answer but would imagine its own answer and go into action. How humiliating all this would have been to Tom Holiday or to Jim Joe. The bishop and his interpreter stood unmoved as if they might be waiting for a little gust of wind to die down before proceeding. Observing the calm faces of the two men and looking in vain for them to shout their protest, the din subsided till one of the older men ordered the others to be still. "We are ready to talk with our friends," the bishop announced, through his interpreter, "but friends do not cling

to their guns while they talk. We have no guns. If you want to talk with us, go stand your guns against the wall and then sit with us here in a friendly circle." What a tremendous order for the fight-hungry hundred, hugging their weapons and eager to begin. Yet the quality of courage which could face them with no arms at all, had a strange and unmistakable edge over their dependence on horses and numbers and guns. They could recognize the old man's superior position, and it dampened the spirit of their hostility in spite of themselves. They had less to say, but they still sat doggedly in their saddles. With equal resolution the bishop stood unyielding, one hand resting quietly in the other, and not the least symptom of any compromise. Whenever they became still enough to hear him, he repeated that there would be absolutely no discussion of the affair except in a friendly circle without weapons. He told them he was not there to light nor to take part in any hot argument. That this was the supreme moment of the years, Bishop Nielson sensed with all his being, and stood like a statue while mothers and children waited in torture of uncertainty to know what was going on, what it could mean, and how it was going to turn. No military force could save the situation by any interference now, even if it were coming on the run. Any outside interference would rob the little colony of the thing it had to do; it must save itself if it was to survive. Recognizing that there was something strangely impregnable about the stand the bishop had taken, a few of the older Navajos dismounted, leaned their guns against the log store, and sat cross-legged on the sand in front of the two white men, where the conversation was entirely too low for the ears of the braves still sitting stiffly in their saddles. With growing curiosity to know what was being said, more of them stacked their guns and sat to listen. The conversation in that circle was very earnest as indicated by motions and gestures of all who spoke. What could that old man be saying for himself? The eagerness to know what he was saying brought all the rest of that hundred men down from their horses, and stacking their guns they came as near as possible, to hear every word. "The Mormon captain sent us here to live with you in peace, to tell you a better way than to fight," the bishop repeated through his interpreter, Kumen Jones. "We do not fight; but we belong to the United States government; we pay taxes to it; and if you want to fight, we can send the word, and there will be an army here right away. Do you want to live with us in peace, or do you want to fight?" "No, no!" interrupted the older men, raising their hands in protest, for they could remember Kit Carson and the years of humiliation at Bosque Redondo. The younger men sat unmoved. All they had seen of Uncle Sam was the little detachment of fighting men who had answered Mitchel's call for help, the bold, fresh fellows who had taken such unforgivable liberties with the Navajos. They despised those fellows as crawling snakes, but they had little notion of how many more of them Uncle Sam could send. "Your friend, Old Eye, was not killed by one of our men," declared the bishop, and then he told them how it happened, and told them to ask the Piutes who watched the whole affair. The little town on all sides waited breathlessly for some indication of what was happening in the prolonged conference. The young hotheads of the hundred made hateful charges and accusations, but the calmness of the two white men acted on them as sunshine on a frozen bank. Then some of the older men began to beam in glad

surprise at what they discerned in the bishop's tone-his firm and steady stand for something better. There was in it some unusual charm they had never known before. They repeated his words to the younger men and began to argue for him more determinedly than they had argued against him, while he stood quietly by and watched them champion the cause for which he had been fighting against the tide. The violent storm was passing; the sun was breaking through the dark clouds. Some of the older men jumped up and extended their hands, "Sekiss! Deigese sekissf" (Friend! Friend indeed!) they repeated as they clung to the stiff fingers. Then others of them caught the spirit, thawed out, and shook hands. A wave of good will like a burst of light passed over them; they all crowded forward declaring in positive terms that what the bishop had said was very good. The soul force which had carried Jacob Hamblin's words to the heart of the big chief Barbecenta at Fort Defiance had found its way again through the voice of this old man from Denmark to the hearts of a hundred Navajos painted and ready to fight. This was the stock of fighters who warred with Spain for three hundred years, refusing to be subdued ever when a multitude of their people were butchered in canon de Chelle. This was the people imprisoned for three years, to remember it with bitter resentment and to look daggers at whoever was mean enough to mention it. They had met a new force, a resistless force never to be forgotten, something which their remote ancestors might have known and long since forgotten. It had brought them down from their high horse; it had conquered them with a tender hand whose grip they loved. When some of them offered their hands again and said good-bye, the bishop stopped them, "Don't go now," he said, "stay with us till tomorrow. It is late; you are hungry; some of you have come a long way." "Ha la na sekiss!" some of them broke forth in pleased astonishment. They would stay; they wanted very much to stay. "You can be our guests and eat our food while we tell you more of the kind words the Mormon captain told us to give you," and the bishop asked them to wait till the people could bring them things to eat. He ordered a fat steer for them to butcher; he ordered flour, bacon, and other things from the log store. They built their campfires all over the street, and as they roasted their beef and baked their bread, chatting and laughing as a great company of merry-makers, the gray-haired man from Denmark limped back and forth among them, saying the words and making the pleasing impressions they were to remember always. When they mounted their ponies after breakfast next morning, they insisted on shaking hands again. "We are friends-always friends," they repeated as they rode away. This was victory number one, the dawn of a new and better era, never to slip out of memory in all the thrills and terrors yet awaiting the struggling fort-builders on the bank of the faraway San Juan. The builders of the fort had reached the responsive heart of the wild Navajo. And the wild Navajo, long misunderstood and cruelly punished, had found in this strange people on his border, the important thing for which he had been hunting and hungering without knowing what he wanted till it was forced upon him. That hundred men, with a new story to tell, returned to the reservation breathing glad confidence where mistrust had rankled before. They would never again challenge the Mormons who had sent this colony to their uninviting border. Hamblin was dead, but the pleasing spirit by

which he pleaded for and offered peace, would go on and on. From that day, when a Navajo saw a stranger in Bluff, he would inquire of one of the old settlers whether the new man were a Mormon, or a Beelicon. If he were not a Mormon, they regarded him with the persistent suspicion they held for the white race whom they had been fighting for centuries. Another problem was swelling like a mountain stream after a heavy shower; horse thieves, train robbers, red-handed killers of men and the worst desperados of the western trails following the beaten path through to San Juan. They swarmed to the cow-camps at Blue Mountain, riding banteringly and defiantly with 'a six-shooter on each hip and a Winchester on their saddles. From a dozen states they gathered as by some common impulse, yet so far lack of employment and lack of welcome tended to hold them away from Bluff. But Bluff was not to enjoy its immunity as in the past; a change was already in the offing. The underground trail from Texas, kept always hot by men who were hunting the safety of distance, became so much traveled and so much in demand that a cattle outfit of the Lone Star State came with something less than three thousand head of typical Texas longhorns to make their headquarters in San Juan. Their great bawling herd, a mile long, came straggling down the river through Bluff-yellow cattle, white, black, brindle; all of them starving and hollow from the long trail; all of them coyote-like in form, little better in size. And horns! such a river of horns as you might see in a nightmare-horns reaching out and up, out and up again in fantastic corkscrews. The children of Bluff laughed at the sight of it, but their parents looked on with alarm. The snaky little bulls, narrow and sunburned, could compete successfully for existence with goats on a rock. They were to father the incorrigible "pinion-busters" for which the San Juan rough country would sometime be notorious. This indestructible Texas stock would crowd the Bluff cattle against the rims, starve them to death, and predominate over them by their native toughness. The men who followed that bawling herd, who urged them on with Comanche yells and unspeakable names, who swung their lariats or fired their pistols, were even more unpleasant to see and to hear than the cattle they followed. These cattle had come ostensibly to occupy the vacant sections of the range, but in reality they had come to occupy the range. They drove through town and on down the river ten miles, making their winter camp at the lonely Rincone cabins, left now to neglect and decay. With never a thought for the people who had been toiling for eight years to establish themselves in and make this stubborn solitude a livable place for civilized man, this outfit from Texas appropriated the range in all directions. With their red branding-irons they printed in big letters on the left side of every calf, beginning somewhere behind the ear and stopping somewhere short of the root of the tail: E L K M. That was supposed to make it perfectly clear from the left side of the calf that it belonged to The Elk Mountain Cattle Company. And then to make it clear from the other side of the calf whom it belonged to, they whacked the right ear off close to his head. They foresaw that their program would involve the question of meum and tuum with confusing frequency, and they intended that meum should always be the winner. This Texas outfit came with more uncompromising nerve than the builders of the fort had found before in all their eight years on the front. They had been greatly concerned to retain

enough range from the big expanding L C outfit for the increase of their little herds, and now they were to be crowded into the rocks by this E L K M Company. It was a prospect to inspire anything but good will for the present or hope for the future. When O'Donnel planted himself in their dooryard with his sheep, he was generous enough to leave a possible way of escape, and they bought him out. This Texas outfit had no thought of selling; they had not come to sell but to establish a permanent business, to capitalize on the needs and the services of desperate men coming from everywhere. The fellows who came on the run with just one thought in their distracted minds: to keep out of sight, to dodge starvation till the smoke of their mischief could blow away would give the Texas outfit their services; in fact, they would give anything they had to be kept from arrest, to be safely concealed or directed beyond the reach of the law. A big adjunct to this cattle business would be a thriving hotel or roost for men who found it necessary to depart suddenly from Texas or from any one of a dozen other states or territories. This shelter for buzzards at Rincone was advertised in the underworld as the surest of all retreats, a stopping place with competent guides, shrewd spotters, and a thousand impenetrable dens in which to hide. No warrant of arrest had ever been served here, and any man who could ride a horse could get at least his board. Responding to this unusual prospect, great flakes of human scum came floating in from every direction. Some of them arrived by pre-arrangement in the nighttime, held whispered confabs with some trusted ally, and rode on in the darkness. Bluff and its cattle had to take what this swaggering Texas outfit left them – there was nothing else to do. It was only by keeping a sharp lookout and making aggressive claims that the people of Bluff kept from being wiped off the map. It was imperative that they have one or more of their number riding the range all the time, and they had to ride and camp and associate on more or less equal terms with the vitiated hands of the Texas outfit and the L C outfit, who were receiving five or ten dollars a month, or possibly only their board for their services. The newcomers aspired to set the pace for everything in San Juan. industrial, civic, and social, not omitting the dances and the ward gatherings in the log meetinghouse, where they were as welcome as an invasion of skunks. Once when a dance was ready to begin, they arrived on the lope at the door, a jumble of chaps spurs, red bandanas, and wide hats. They trailed in through the doorway as fresh and as much at home as if each one had received a written invitation. They carried their six-shooters on their hips, wore their lung spurs. The appearance of this self-invited gang brought the party to an astonished halt, men drew protectingly to their wives, boys to their sweethearts. It simply wouldn't do. Every man and boy with the courage and purpose of the fort in his veins resolved it should not be tolerated. Bluff might be the back of the backwoods, and its social customs might be ten years out of date, but the standard was not to be compromised, The womanhood of the fort was as free of stain as the desert flowers around it, and the spirit of the fort resolved that the birds of the underworld should not compromise the sacred standards by taking part as equals in that party. But what was to be done? These desperate fellows would be furious at any public show of disapproval - they might make serious trouble, now or in the future. Let them think as they pleased and do their worst;

this was no place for compromise; the fortitude which could face a hundred bloodthirsty Navajos to save the lives of the community could face any lean-brained challenge to its cherished standards. The floor manager, for no dance went on in Bluff without a supervisor who had standards and backbone, approached the most prominent figures of the gang, and told them quietly that their participation in the activities of the evening would not be tolerated. As the word was passed among them, they exchanged questioning glances and glared with indecision at the silent, waiting crowd. Some of them seemed to blush, but others longed for the courage to do something spectacular. The wild elements of their resentment sputtered and hung fire as something about to explode. After whispering back and forth in confusion, they turned and went swaggering towards the door, the tread of their heavy boots resounding like hoofs on the silence. Reaching the outside they mounted in jostling haste, jingle and rattle of stirrup and squeak of leather, and lighting astride their horses they headed away on the keen jump, firing their pistols, and piercing the night with hideous yells. The spirit of dancing had gone from the log meetinghouse-everyone paused indignantly as the roar of the coarse insult reached their ears. The firm stuff which had stopped the intruders and turned them back, raced after them in the night and warned them never to try that shooting act in the streets of Bluff again. Just what would happen if they did, they were left to guess, or learn by experience if they had to know. They cursed and mumbled, but were left to think it over and use their best judgement.