

The Fort on the Firing Line

The Improvement Era, October 1948)

Chapter XVII

Two nights later, they stood around a campfire at Rincone, their thoughts about that dance still echoing in boasts and protests.

“We let ‘em down easy that time,” one of them repeated, “but when they insult us again, we’ll shoot out every lamp in the hall.

Kumen Jones had been riding with them that day in the interest of the Bluff cattle, and he listened till the babble of brave words died down like a falling wind. “Look here, you fellows,” he broke forth, “do you think your brave yells and your shooting frightened any man in Bluff? It may have startled nervous women and timid children. Everybody else that heard it felt nothing but disgust.”

They opened their eyes at him in quick astonishment.

You call yourselves brave men,” he went on. “It takes your kind of bravery to frighten the weak and the helpless. If ever I saw a bunch of cowards, it’s right here.”

An indignant hush settled on the circle in the glow of that fire and they searched one another’s faces as if to demand, “Are we going to stand for that?” If they were not going to take it and call it good, then they had to have among them at least one man with the sand to say so, that the others might muster the fortitude to endorse his objection. But the courage which rests on its own honest feet is very different from the kind which hangs for dear life to a gun.

Kumen Jones, unarmed and unafraid, stood there before them with more security of position than any one of the blustering gang who had substituted a gun for the grit which was not to be found in his anemic anatomy.

“Every man and boy in Buff,” Jones went on without fear of being answered, “who heard you shooting so heroically there in the night to torture sick folk and children had just one impulse, and that was to get his gun and shoot straight at you. You can thank your good fortune they had better hold of themselves than you have of yourselves or that is exactly what they would have done.”

They looked daggers at him in disarmed hesitation, and he met their look without blinking. They had their glittering six-shooters on their hips, the brave six-shooters which soothe the coward’s yellow nerves and bolster him in the cheapest kind of lie about his own pusillanimous self. If Jones had only had a gun, it would have given them excuse to act, but he had no gun, and they hated themselves and each other because they had to listen to him in silence.

Among that nonplused gang, glaring through the firelight at their solitary accuser, was a little fellow with a sense of humor, and with the courage to speak. "Well, sir, Mr. Jones" he admitted reflectively, "I think you have it doped out about right. No man's goin' to get any kick out of scarin' sick women and little kids."

No other one around that fire indulged another brave gesture. They conferred in low tones as they scattered off to their blankets. They had sought the sheltering walls of San Juan to escape the laws of the United States, and they could not permit a little backwoods town to force any of its discipline upon them, even for the brief time they might want to stay. If they couldn't be the lions in that log meetinghouse and carry on like a stampede of steers down a box canyon, then they would have a dance of their own and set a style so dashing it would have to become the rule.

When they stayed in Bluff, they ate at the home of Grandfather John Allan and made his place their headquarters. They decided to stage their dance in his dooryard. He was old and stooped and wary with the weight of strenuous years; surely he would have no temperament to object, even if he failed to see that objecting would injure his hotel business.

But John Allan, however stooped and jaded, had the fighting fire of old Scotch clans in his blood, and when he saw that dance getting up steam in his dooryard, he rushed out there like a roaring lion. The old man had no gun; he was small in stature. His hands were stiff and bony and laced over the back with big blue veins like ropes, but his words in broad Scotch left no one in doubt about what he meant.

"Gang till the street!" he ordered, "I'll no bear it a minute!"

That dance bogged down right there in muttering surprise.

But at the foot of the mountain the lawless group was taking its own gait, with mocking contempt for the hands reaching in futility from the distant outside where men had highways, railroads, telegraphs, and a degree of order.

The Church Authorities, in their solicitude for the mission and its difficult problems, called the bishop of Huntsville, Francis A. Hammond, to preside over San Juan Stake. Coming at once, he took studious account of the distressing situation and discerned that of the three major labors assigned to the mission, the first, the winning of the Navajos, had in a great measure been accomplished. It was hardly thinkable that this could have been done if Bluff had not been in such close proximity to its first problem. It seemed therefore probable that the building of other outposts near to problem two and problem three might be the best way to their solution.

President Hammond went with a pack outfit, taking some of the leading men of the colony with him, and explored along the eastern side of the big San Juan territory, looking for strategic places for outposts. He proposed that they build one post on White Mesa, east of the Piute stronghold in the Little Valleys and another post at the base of the Blue Mountain where the pirate empire was taking more definite shape every day. Building and manning the two posts at one time proved to be more than the colony was prepared to do; in fact, the prospect of undertaking a start among that horde of roaring outlaws at the base of the mountain was sufficiently terrifying of itself, and White Mesa was for the time being forgotten.

The new outpost in a beautiful prairie stretch east of the mountain was named Monticello. To the matter-of-fact mind it was folly, pure and simple, “a gleam of hope in a maze of danger,” a little squad of mice appointed to teach the cat better manners. Yet the new warfare could not be safely appraised by the old standards—it was built on the unpredictable possibilities of what faith can do—faith, that impelling power so generally discounted in the human soul which bears it on to its noblest achievements.

When the president called men to go and dig in and establish themselves at Monticello, they gathered up such equipment as they could prepare and started, Frederic I. Jones in the lead, with Charles E. Walton, Benjamin Perkins, Samuel Wood, Nephi Bailey, and others in the procession. They face difficulty and danger from the very first day of their beginning, for Monticello had to fight its own battles, stand on its own feet, and carry on if it was to survive the herd of ruffians waiting and resolved to ride over it roughshod. That much was clearly understood by the brave men and women who answered the call. By their magic of unusual diplomacy they were supposed to bring law and order into that howling chaos.

A winding wagon track over sandhills and rocks, through stretches of sagebrush and across precipitous canyons, extended through the fifty miles of solitude between Bluff and Monticello. Communication between the two places was infrequent and uncertain, and although they cooperated as best they could, each center was still in a remote world of its own.

The cowpunchers east of Blue Mountain regarded the building of Monticello as an unwarranted invasion of their territory; the log houses and pole fences built on their trails, a violation of their fixed rights. In answer to the first objection to their impudent ways, they raced back and forth through the streets firing their pistols in quick staccato and sending their gorilla yells to die away on the prairie. They never missed a chance to show how quick they were on “the draw,” flashing their guns into action with every chance of making a display and emptying every chamber in a noisy twinkling. They drove away horses and cattle; they carried off saddles, bedding, guns, anything they could reach, mainly to discourage the spectre of law, incidentally for the amusement of gain. They got away with much

of the first crop of grain raised at Monticello. The big objective of these new builders was to establish law, but for the present they had difficulty enough in holding their own and surviving.

All the cattle companies in the county could not employ, even for their board, a tenth of the birds of passage around the mountain, yet not one of them went hungry or without a horse and outfit. They lived fat and flourished, and their numbers increased. Sarah Jane Rogerson, one of the plucky women who faced the perils of early Monticello, relates that one night when the cowpunchers "shot up" the town, she counted seventy-five of them by the light of their guns as their horses jumped single file over a ditch on the public square.

They had come to this rendezvous from states as far way as Kansas and Washington. With their spotters and bribe-takers and their alliance with the system at Rincone, they felt a degree of security and intended to preserve a maze of confusion from which officers of the law would be glad to get away alive. They abolished government so completely there was nothing to hinder them from killing each other on suspicion for the fun of it, and the fellow fawning at a man's elbow was often more to be feared than an officer sniffing on his trail. They fought out their differences to the death, no one to pity the victim or punish the victor. Just how many of their numbers they eliminated in their camps and secret places is but a guess. And it could not be related that they were followed by any penalties of the law. About that time in a perfunctory court procedure one of the jurors assured his friends, "Whoever comes before this jury is innocent."

Mons Peterson's little store in the corner of town had recently shipped in a few bottles of liquor to be used in cases of sickness. The cowpunchers had heard of it, had insisted on sampling it, and had fumed and cursed when Peterson refused. They would sample it now, regardless.

Straight to Person's store the whole howling gang of renegades rode whip and spur, ordered the flasks from their hiding place and passed them around with lavish hand. They were already well loaded with liquor they had brought to the ranch, and Peterson's medicine left them fully primed for the big demonstration.

It began with a jargon of yells and shots in the air as they stood there in the storeman's dooryard, for his store was his home, and he had rushed his family away when he saw what was coming. The renegades began shooting every can of fruit, every can of corned beef, every can of baking powder, anything and everything they found on the shelves of the store; they took hundred pound sacks of sugar to the door, slit them from end to end with their knives, and scattered the sugar all over the yard. They did the same with salt, grain, flour, everything in sacks. They threw slabs of bacon in the air and shot them and ransacked the store for anything else on which to dissipate their exploding energy.

One of them ran with a bolt of calico out to his waiting horse, wrapped the loose end of the bolt to the horn of his saddle, and dashed up the street, while the bolt unrolled to flutter like a long ribbon on the wind behind him. Others followed; it was too smart a trick for one man to monopolize; and the bright colors rippled in long banners or caught on the pole fences at the corners of the streets as these madmen raced up one side and down the other, skinning their throats to make all the noise possible.

They raised their Comanche voices in echoing exultation. They fired their brave six-shooters.

The people of the town stayed behind their log walls, praying that no stray bullet would find them. To some of them it was terrible, and among those who suffered in helplessness was the sick wife of Bishop F.I. Jones, who had for some time been confined to her bed and lay now in anguish of suspense lest someone would be hurt. The bishop waited there with her, chafing under his conscientious scruples which held him from answering the outrage as his nature demanded.

In the evening, as many of the cowpunchers as could still ride returned to Peterson's store and, bringing in all the horses that could get through the doorway, fed them hay and grain on the counter, and spreading whatever they could find in the way of blankets on the floor, they sank down to sleep in the part of the house where Peterson and his family had been living.

Returning fitfully back to consciousness at a late hour next morning, and sitting up on the hard floor to rub their eyes, one of them remarked that the cast-iron kettle on the stove was the only thing in the place which had not been shot, and a fellow snatched up his gun and blew it to bits.

They had pulled off a whale of a party; Blue Mountain had seen nothing like it ever before; and as they rode away in the middle of the forenoon, they agreed it would not be the last of its kind.

The fortunes of the struggling outpost at Monticello were vital to the people at Bluff as part of their own mission. The two places kept as closely in touch as distance and the ruggedness of the country would permit, the quickest communication being the time it took a good horse to run fifty miles.

One July morning, with the first nimbus of day appearing over the cliffs east of Bluff, a rider came on a fagging trot from the mouth of Cow Canyon, his horse covered with lather and ready to drop. He had come since midnight from Monticello, and he had a story to tell about wild men and whiskey, the most dreadful of all combinations.