

(The Improvement Era, February 1950)

Chapter 18

Bluff listened with tingling ears: the log meetinghouse at Monticello had been the scene of a pioneer dance, the anniversary of the arrival of the Saints in Salt Lake Valley more than forty years before. That past event was very significant to the brave pioneers in their isolation at Blue Mountain - they had featured it in a parade; they had sung about it, listened to an enthusiastic oration; and now they were dancing in the midst of their hardships as their ancestors had danced on the plains en route from the eastern states. To the bad men of the hills, that celebration with its well-executed program of order looked too much like the coming of the hated law. Their dominant impulse was to spoil and devour it, to ride over it, trample it underfoot. With no courage and no excuse to make an aggressive beginning on such a harmless gathering, they smothered with whiskey what little intelligence was still functioning in their vitiated brains, and headed for the dance. A fellow with red eyes and flushed face staggered into the hall and, seeing that his presence was not relished, he drew his gun and ordered everybody outside. There in the moonlight he harangued and threatened them, declaring in awful words he would kill anyone trying to leave the crowd. His close friend tried to reason with him. "Listen, Tom," pleaded Joe, "Nobody here wants to hurt you." But Tom ordered Joe not to come a step nearer. "See, Tom, I have no gun," Joe went on, confident he could get him to release the terrified crowd with its innocent people, its women and girls, on whom this was a most cowardly imposition. The thing that makes a man better than a brute was missing from Tom's disordered brain. He growled another order to come no nearer or be shot through, but Joe still counted on their friendship and acquaintance of the years and tried to make his reasons clear while the crowd caught its breath in suspense. A terrible figure, Tom stood there in the moonlight gesticulating with his glittering pistol, shouting his incoherent threats and orders, while the dancers in gay attire watched him as a master tragedian on a stage. Yet this was no drama of things pretended, but a life-crisis of stern reality. With gasps and screams they saw the madman turn his gun on his trusting friend and shoot him to death before their eyes. Into the cries of hysteria and fright, broke the loud boom of a big gun from another quarter, a shriek, a hush, and words whispered quickly by white lips, "They've killed Aunt Jane!" A man intending to shoot the murderer and release the crowd had fired accidentally and shot Mrs. Jane Walton near the heart. She had barely time to turn to her son and tell him she was hurt before she fell dead in his arms. Confusion and consternation reigned while the frenzied Tom mounted his waiting horse and dashed away. The quick beat of his hoofs died in the distant night, and he was gone. Ready confederates covered his retreat, gave him full protection of their empire, and he was never brought to judgment, punishment, or even trial. Major problem three towered big in fiendish majesty over the people who marched with bowed heads in that slow funeral procession. The people of Monticello had few cattle and no respected rights on the range. The hills

swarmed with "rustlers" waiting for any horse or cow left out of sight. One fellow starting with half a dozen cows made a remarkable record the first season--one of his cows had thirty-five calves! He had an ingenious trick of making a calf lead willingly behind his horse, and every calf he found old enough to live without its another, he led away to be adopted into the numerous family of one of his prolific cows in his hideout down among the gulches. The Texas outfit with their scrawny livestock, every animal displaying the imposing placard: E L K M, on a thousand hills had made aggressive claim to the best springs on the mountain and the best water holes on the winter range. Hot on the trail one day came an officer from Texas - he had traced his man here, but whether the man was still here peeping from cover

or whether he had gone on, the officer could not find out. The outlaw had vanished among the devious hallways of Hotel De Rincone and was not to be found. What were the eager officer and his deputies to do? When they had investigated, they discerned that the only safe thing to do was to go back at once empty-handed to Texas. They went. An empire was forming in San Juan County, Utah: a pirate's empire with one capital at Rincone and another at the base of Blue Mountain. It was building and growing strong with the dangerous material chased out of the surrounding states and territories. Every day on jaded horses, new subjects arrived at this, the most faraway and the safest retreat from law in all the southwest. Other officers carne with lathering horses on hot trails to San Juan and headed down the river. What was the use? They had chased the rat down a hole, and if they ventured into that hole, they would never come out. They knew that much by the looks and the squeaks of the rats playing and watching there on the surface. All that remained for them was to go back in disgust to Texas, to New Mexico, or Arizona, without bringing back a much-wanted desperado. All through the western states people heard and believed that there was what they called a "Robber's Roost," an organized gang of outlaws with a headquarters somewhere in southeastern Utah. They were known to have a rendezvous at different places of remoteness in Wyoming, Colorado, and other states and territories, but their active operations in the region of Henry Mountains gave the impression that their center of activity was somewhere in the broken county north of there, possibly on the Dirty Devil or the lower San Rafael Mail service of that day was slow and infrequent. telephone non-existent, and false reports taught men to discredit nine-tenths of what they heard. The public was not ready to believe that San Juan County, Utah was the inner and untouchable sanctuary of a far-reaching system, and that all underground railroads and blind trails led, as necessity demanded, to these impregnable rocks where no arrest had ever been made. In desperation the people of Bluff sought out the owners of the E L K M cattle and asked them to quote a price, but they only smiled in smug amusement. Sell out their hotel? Not on your life-it was the waiting heir to all of San Juan County. Bluff was to be absorbed as one of its lesser assets. Things looked bad, and a dark shape was appearing on the distant horizon which threatened in its development to sweep the whole troubled region. A bill had been introduced in Congress providing that San Juan County should be given as

a reservation to the Piutes and that all white settlers and stockmen be moved out.

The Piutes had long since been appointed a reservation in Colorado, and had been ordered and then urged to go there. To the orders and to the urges they made flat and uncompromising refusal. They had also invited the Utes from their Colorado reservation to come and join them, and it had seemed about as much as the government could do by threats, and by sending special committees and army officers to San Juan, to induce the runaway Utes to return home. And now, after the seeming inability of Uncle Sam to get the Piutes to take his orders, he seemed to be obsequiously proposing to give official approval of their doing just as they pleased. The Piutes smiled exultantly when they heard of this extraordinary proposition, and selected the homes in Bluff and in Monticello which they would occupy when the settlers were kicked out, and they boasted of how they would run things in the undisturbed ways of their ancestors.

Somebody took pains to keep them informed, or misinformed, about this pending bill, making them worse neighbors than they had been before. A year passed—two years. The Texas outfit refused to talk sale. Why should they? Every month saw them more firmly established and better known to their profitable customers of the "underground" from half a dozen states and territories. Their business looked better all the time. The builders of the fort saw in it a picture dark indeed. They had won the Navajos, and among them they had found many pleasant acquaintances. Yet the Navajos, however valuable their good will and their confidence, represented but the first of the three major problems set for the mission to solve. Yet by some unfaltering intuition of fidelity the people clung to their two forts, cherishing their promise of ultimate triumph. They toiled on for their livelihood and ate their humble bread under the humiliating leer of cowpuncher-thieves who rode arrogantly about on their stolen horses, with their wide hats cocked banteringly on one side, and their flaming bandanas in jaunty style around their necks. The day of the desperado cowpuncher was nearer to its close than anyone imagined. When the pendulum of human fortune has swung as

far as it can to the right, it must swing back to the left. That pendulum had reached its ultimate limit on one side in San Juan, and a change was inevitable. Two daring robbers held up and stripped a Denver and Rio Grande train and then sank from sight in eastern Utah. State Marshal Joe Bush took up the tracks and followed them beyond the watching eyes of the waiting world into the remote and obscure San Juan. At Bluff, Bush called for men to go with him, yet he wanted more than men: he wanted a strategist to outwit the smooth thing which had cheated every officer who followed a criminal into San Juan. Somebody awakened that day to the greater meaning of Bluff's victory over Problem One, the winning of the Navajos. Kumen Jones had cherished the hope that Jim Joe would sometime help to save his own people and to save the Mormons as well. So he proposed to Joe Bush that the hunt be turned over to Jim Joe. Jim grasped the idea in a second. When he and his sleuths cut across the wide region at the mouth of Chinalee, they picked up the tracks of the robbers, and led

the marshal over them as fast as any bloodhounds could have gone. Astonished to see horsemen coming over the sand behind them, the robbers climbed up into the rocks where all who followed them would have to pass single file between two great boulders, where one man with enough ammunition could dispose of a regiment. Jim knew just which men to move and which to reserve. Stringing his sleuths out on the trail behind him to advertise their numbers for the benefit of the men up in the rocks, he figured that he had told the robbers in the plainest words, "Shoot a Nava Navajo in this reservation, and your cake is dough, and you know it." Then he climbed right up that narrow trail, stalked boldly between the big boulders, and called to Joe Bush to come on without fear. He marched up to the robbers with a boldness that changed their blood into streams of ice, and all the time he held his gun leveled upon them with uncompromising purpose, and called back over his shoulder to the marshal asking. "Shootey? Killey?" (Shall I shoot 'em? Shall I kill 'em!) But the robbers, reaching frantically for the sky, made it very clear they would not have to be killed nor to be shot; they wouldn't so much as hurt a little chicken. They wanted very much to live, and they stood with ashen faces and trembling hands while Bush put irons on their wrists and their ankles and had them march meekly down out of the rocks. He took them back up out of the rathole: he took them away out of San Juan. Gunmen of the underground had been arrested beyond Rincone—they had been taken away out of the country and brought to trial. The Navajos and the Mormons had become allies---hat would it mean? The builders of the fort took heart. They told Bush about the cattle rustling. When he returned from the north, Bush rounded up the rustlers. After this, the very mention of the name Jim Joe was welcome. If Kumen Jones had never done anything more in San Juan than to discover and get response from this magnificent Navajo, he would still be one of the most important builders of the country. Instead of fearing the Navajos any more, the builders of the fort doted on them, felt more secure because of them. The E L K M company could depend no more on finding men to work for their board or ten dollars a month. Times had taken a terrible change; their hotel business was shot through, and the owners of the Texas outfit began to think that possibly they could do better somewhere else. They offered to sell. The figure they quoted was a big one. Bishop Nielson took the matter home with him for the most careful consideration, and when he came limping back next morning, he told them to buy. The deal was closed. The last of the Texas outfit rode away; the echoes of their offensive operations died in the cliffs; the wind blew their tracks from the trails; and a sweet hush settled down on the hills and the camps where they had been. From the sources of unexplainable fortune, a new element entered forcefully onto the scene. It was drouth, more blighting and more persistent than anything of its kind they had known in San Juan. The old-time rains which brought the big floods and made big grass on the hills seemed to be a thing of the past.