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Chapter 6

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 attacks and nature.

No mail - no tidings from the world beyond their silent wilderness. What had become of Brother Smith and his horsemen? What could have happened in the faraway settlements of southwestern Utah that no one came as promised? They could only guess with uncomfortable misgivings. They knew only that they had been left to hold the important fort on the new firing line, that they were enlisted in the great cause of preventing war from being carried into the settlements, and they trusted that the great Providence which had preserved their people from many perils through the last fifty years would not fail to care for them.

After a long time a rumor reached Tuba City that the two families had been massacred. It came to the ears of Thales Haskell, and his great heart leaped with anguish. Taking up their dim wagon tracks across the reservation, he determined to know whether the report were true, and to see if there remained anything he could do. When he saw the smoke curling, from their chimneys, he sighed in relief, "Thank God, they are still alive!" When the scouts left Cedar City in April, they traveled southeast and east and then northeast in a great half circle four hundred fifty or more miles long, taking them into Arizona and back again into Utah. When they returned, they traveled north, northwest, southwest, and south, completing a great circle nine hundred or more miles in circumference. From Montezuma they wrangled their wagon and four-horse team over gulches and canyons and rocks for a full hundred miles northward across what was to become San Juan County, a region as extensive as the state of New Jersey. At Blue Mountain they found two big cattle outfits, each with a formidable gang of cowpunchers, and every man carried a six-shooter on both hips besides a long gun under his saddle fender. The cattle owners found it good policy to employ these fellows whenever possible, even though they paid them no more than their board. It was never safe to ask these cowpunchers whence they came and why, whether their names were really Shorty or Red as they were known. They had fled to this remote corner to lie low till the echoes of their depredations should die away, and they were glad to find any activity to relieve the monotony and keep them from starving. Many of them made their initial appearance in the morning,

having arrived from nowhere in the darkness of the previous night. Also, many of them who appeared calm and contented in the evening were nowhere to be found next day. This was the devil-inspired breed to torment the men and women who built San Juan. The scouts regarded them narrowly, trying still to hope for the best, but feeling sure these white men fleeing redhanded from justice, were more to be dreaded than both the native tribes. The captain and his men snaked their wagon down over jungle and boulders on what is now Peter's Hill. They passed the old fort at what was to become Moab and forded the Colorado at the mouth of Courthouse Wash. They forded Green River, and heading south through Castle Valley arrived at Cedar City in October.

The Church with great care had selected sixty or more families to carry out the hazardous mission, and called them to be ready to start as soon as the returning scouts should tell them where to go. When they heard that Montezuma was directly eastward across the big circle around which the scouts had traveled, they resolved to approach it by way of the diameter of the circle, which could not be more than three hundred miles, instead of going by the circumference. It could not take more than three or four weeks, and they would be at their destination and housed before the worst of the winter. No one knew of a white man or anybody else who had ever traveled across that circle nor very deeply into it, but what the difference? The Mormons had found their way across the continent, and never yet a part of the earth's surface through which resolute men could not discover or make a passage. They took it for granted that no such place would ever be found. This select company, poised on the brink of unsuspected distance and difficulty, was about to assume without realizing it, a great part of the evils which had vexed the territory of Utah for thirty years. In whatever refuge these people might build in the distant wilderness, Utah's most annoying Indian troubles were to be focused on them. Some of them had fought in the Walker War and the Black Hawk War, while their helpless ones were safely in shelter behind them, but now they were asked to take their wives and their children and sit down with pleading at the doors of the unconquered Navajos, to placate the incorrigible Piutes, and to convert or to subdue a stream of desperate fugitives from all over the wild west. They started in November, with about eighty wagons drawn by horses and oxen, a sprawling company strung along the road seventy-five or a hundred miles, with little herds of loose stock at infrequent intervals. O how trusting their notion of the country through which they were to fight their way! Nobody imagined a place where the ancient Cyclops had ripped up the earth's massive crust and stood the ponderous slabs on edge, forming a region of extravagant contour to baffle human fancy and challenge any kind of travel but that of an airplane. No white man had ever inspected its heights and depths, its bald domes, its vertical surfaces reaching to the sky. The few adventurers who had touched on its ragged edges had failed to read on a thousand towering walls. "Wagons strictly prohibited." All the same they moved off in a long string like migrating ants, holding to their eastward direction as nearly as cliffs and mountains would permit. From Escalante, the last point to which wagons had traveled, their slow moving wheels rumbled off down Potato Valley, as they

called it, away over Escalante Mountain and down into the desert east of Kaiparowitz Plateau.

The six weeks' provisions which had been expected to last them till they reached Montezuma, were getting woefully low by Christmas, so they began parching and eating the corn they had brought along for their oxen and horses. They took these animals away to some distant benches and shelves of dry sand grass, and thus relieved of a lot of daily drudgery, each group of camps set up its social center. "It's a good thing for Utah we had all that unexpected experience and delay in getting into San Juan," said Kumen Jones, one of the scouts and later one of the company. "If we hadn't had that special introduction and been made tired enough to stop at the first possible chance, we never would have stopped in San Juan at all. I'm sure the Church never could have rounded up another company like it, and there would have been no San Juan Mission." Three hundred miles in six months amounts to somewhat less than two miles a day, and this snail's pace accomplished only by tremendous exertion was but one phase of the essential preliminary. Bumping and grinding slowly off over the naked sandstone on the east side of the Colorado River they followed the trail of the four scouts down over Slick Rock, across the gulch by the lake, out through the high pass at Clay Hill, and into the forest of pinions and cedars through the mud and slush of early spring. Where were they in this no man's land? It seemed like a weird dream. One day in a narrow opening of the trees near Elk Mountain, an old Piute rode out of the forest and drew up in utter amazement-his wrinkled old face sagged absently as he contemplated the long string of wagons grinding along through the sagebrush. He wanted to know where they came from, and where in the name of reason they had crossed the Colorado River. Platte Lyman marked out a map on the ground, and indicated the place of Hole-in-the-Rock. The old brave shook his head in disgust. "You lie!" he grunted in his native tongue, "You did not come that way-you could not come that way. No place there for a wagon to come." "I think the old brave knew more about it than we knew," commented Platte Lyman. "There is no place there for a wagon."

The junction of the reef and the river formed a corner, an almost impassable corner, still known as Rincone. The tribulations with which they got out of it are still to be read in a long rude scar up the steep face of the rock. It was all that "Uncle Ben" and his road crew could do at this impoverished stage of the game to cut jagged groove in the rock for the upper wheel, and prop up enough rocks for the lower wheel to keep the wagons from turning over sidewise. As they bumped slowly and fitfully up this which is still known as San Juan Hill the hard rock was stained with blood from the feet and knees of many a horse and ox. The parched corn which saved the people from starving had left their teams thin and staggering. It was weeks before the last wagons struggled painfully to the top of San Juan Hill. The fact is, some of them have not got there yet, and that dim road behind them is still punctuated for more than a hundred miles by crumbling skeletons and broken wagons. On Slick Rock and in solitary places northeast of there, weather-beaten wheels half-buried in the sand, bear mute

evidence of that pilgrim company more than three score years ago. Ten miles east of San Juan Hill, on the sixth of April, 1880, the lead outfits of the procession found a little grass on a river bottom and stopped. Pulled the harnesses from their starving teams, and sat down to rest and think. It was still fifteen miles to the appointed place where Davis and Harriman waited eagerly for their arrival, but weariness had become it determining factor. Some strange working of destiny by simple means, was making a permanent and far-reaching change in the nature of the mission. Exhausted teams, broken-down wagons, empty grub boxes, the intensified longing in the human heart to stop and build the dear shelter called home; all these combined to make a change in the original program. Whether, but for this confirmed weariness and unfitness to go on, they would have traveled right on up the river past Montezuma and off to places more inviting is still a question. As it was, fully half the company dragged on again as soon as they could move, but they passed Montezuma with hardly a look and went hunting for some more pleasant location in New Mexico and Colorado. Most of them made no permanent stops till they got back to their old homes in western Utah. In this Gideon's army, melting away before the fight began, a few remembered still the great trust reposed in them, and cherished the hope of relieving Utah of the troubles which had been coming from this dreaded corner. Having stopped at this first grassy bottom by the mouth of what they called Cottonwood and being unfit to go on, they caught the gripping notion of staying right there to hoist there the essential lightning rod and begin the fight. Two or three families joined Davis and Harriman; twenty-five families stopped by the mouth of Cottonwood and called it Bluff. It is Bluff still after these many years. Yet Bluff was not at all to one side of the turbulent crossing as Captain Smith and his men had intended. It was exactly where the two tribes clashed most often. It was right at the crossroads for the string of fugitives from east and west, from north and south. Like an unsheltered pine on a mountain peak, it stood where it could not miss the fury of the storm. The general contour of the country deflected the stream of all but those with characters of steel from this very point. Yet the years were to prove this the place best suited to the peculiar warfare they had been sent to wage on the three major evils. The years were to see the old San Juan reach out in its wrath and cut away every other bottom along its banks for thirty miles up and down the river. Just why it should spare the limited area at the mouth of Cottonwood where the wayworn travelers stopped is one of the singular phases of this singular enterprise. Sometime in the previous century the river had had its bed where Bluff stood, but it refrained now from that old bed with unaccountable self-denial. Out of the sixty families called, the few who stopped at Bluff were somehow like the strong essence of a solution boiled down, and they faced the formidable business of entrenching themselves between the comfortable towns they had left behind, and the sources from which those towns had long been threatened.

Now that the long talked-of place for the big project had been selected, dignified with a name, and accepted by the faithful few as the strategic point in which to make their heroic stand, Bluff tried to meet at once a formidable swarm of pressing necessities. Their long wanderings had brought them into quite a new

world, pretty much "without form and void," being so nearly detached from all other bases and sources of supply, of information, and possible help whatever the emergency. Their nearest known distributing point, for small quantities, would take a month or six weeks for the round trip. They had no sawmill, no gristmill, no doctor, no merchant, no specialist of any kind. They were surrounded by creation in the raw and must set their own precedents, provide for all their needs. Valuing a man's time at a dollar and a half a day, they had spent \$4,800 in labor on their road into the country, and in answer to Silas S. Smith's plea for an appropriation, it was reported that the Territorial Legislature would recognize forty percent of that amount. That much-hoped-for cash recognition seems to have been indefinitely delayed or entirely forgotten, and as Charles E. Walton expressed it, money was a strictly cash article in Bluff. Death had not entered their camps all the long months of winter and hardship on the road; no one had been seriously sick, though two babies had been born near the river, both of them to live and thrive as real children of the desert. Yet the company had no more than stopped at what was to become Bluff when death claimed old Roswell Stevens, a veteran of the Mormon Battalion. There was no lumber within a hundred miles, so from his old wagonbox, scarred and worn, they made a coffin and selected a place for a cemetery. This ready resourcefulness of theirs to meet perplexing situations was taxed by the need of many things. Where should they begin? The task lay shapeless and endless all around them. The Indians from all around, many of the Navajos clad in nothing but a G string, came with fawning smiles and curious eyes to carry away everything on which they could lay their sly hands. The Navajo or Piute not skilled in the essential art of theft, was regarded by his people as slow and stupid. The loss of shoes, knives and forks, dishes, clothing, ropes, axes, or any of the limited supplies and utensils carried away from the camps, amounted to little as compared with the disappearance of teams, cattle, and the dear old cow on which the children depended for their most precious item of food.

The people met under a giant cottonwood known and loved for thirty years as "The Old Swing Tree." They organized a Sunday School; they divided the land; they took stock of their most urgent obligations and assigned to each man the part he was to take. One of the first indispensables was flour; it would have to be brought at once from Escalante, the point to which they had ordered it delivered the previous fall, the flour of which they were so sorely in need at Hole-in-the-Rock. It was dismally more than two hundred miles to Escalante, but over that unparalleled country, and over that insufferable road, the difficulty and the time involved in covering the two hundred miles with a pony team and an old-time wagon, made Escalante more distant from Bluff than London is distant today from Salt Lake City. Persuading four horses to scramble in any kind of order up through that chute at Hole-in the-Rock and at the same time to drag an empty wagon behind them, was a feat of fine engineering for the crack teamsters of 1880. Just how far these new San Juaners had moved away from all the rest of creation was to be impressed upon them by a weary string of unforgettable experiences. It was to become clear to them that Bluff was one of the most

remote communities of civilized men in the United States. A few ranchers on Marcos Creek in Colorado were their nearest white neighbors. Somewhere in the mountains distantly beyond Mancos was a military post, the nearest of its kind from which help could be called in case of trouble. Yet within rifle range across the river from Bluff was the Navajo reservation with its fifteen thousand or more impoverished savages, eking a scanty living from the, sterile sandhills, or stealing it from the outside. To the east and north and west of Bluff roamed the surly Piutes with crisp contempt for white man's law, and for all other law. And then there were those ubiquitous evil birds of passage flying singly or in pairs from the reach of the law in their own country to hide in and make this wilderness a perilous place for life and property. San Juan, one of the most faraway, and for that reason the safest place in all the west for fugitives from justice, was the popular paradise for bad men from everywhere.

The little colony, like a lamb in a pack of wolves, struggled to get on its feet and look these evils in the face. It knew that in an hour it could become a blotch of blood and ashes, and that its murderers could be far away in their most secure retreat for weeks or months before the report of their massacre crawled on slow and uncertain feet to some responsible point on the outside, for the outside then, in point of time as we reckon time today, was thousands of miles distant. The colony had to build homes and make fences; it had to plow at once if it was to raise any garden or produce any feed for livestock that year; and it had to survey and snake a ditch to take water from the river. That ditch had to be dug in the sand, the San Juan sand which was to astonish the people with its treachery. But they suspected nothing then, and fell to work as men who have trusted the earth and found it true. From their regular meetings under the old swing tree, they moved to a roomy bowery made of leafy cottonwood limbs, keeping always carefully organized to make the most of their time. Improvising houses from the crooked, twisted cottonwood logs would have been puzzling enough, even with a few cards for the windows and doors, but with no lumber at all it was a conundrum. So they got out an old whipsaw, dug a pit, and began making green cottonwood lumber. That lumber had to be nailed down solid the minute it came from the saw or it would writhe itself into the Nape of a ram's horn. While some of them toiled on that ditch in the sand like so many ants, others hauled fencing and house-logs, as necessity for many things increased its heavy weight upon them. Some of the already dilapidated wagons sent to Escalante for flour went to pieces in their merciless jolting over the solid rock, and one of them keeled end over end down one of those "slantindiclar" surfaces, scattering its precious cargo in a sickening cloud of white dust in the depths below. It was imperative that some of the men leave the work at Bluff to others and hunt jobs of freighting or delivering railroad ties in the distant mountains of Colorado. And how should they send or receive mail in Bluff? What address should they give, for the luxury of a post office was but a distant possibility? They sent letters with the teams to Escalante, and six weeks later they received mail which had been waiting there since the fall before. When stark need forced some of them to go hunting work in Colorado, they sent letters to be posted at Mancos, and ordered their mail there

from the outside, hoping to have it brought in by chance freight teams at irregular intervals.