

KEITH OF THE BORDER

A TALE OF THE PLAINS

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Illustrations by DEARBORN MELVILL.

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They had covered ten miles of it by daybreak, their ponies traveling heavily, fetlock deep, but could advance no further. With the first tint of rose in the east the brooding storm burst upon them in wild desert fury, the fierce wind buffeting them back, lashing their faces with sharp grit until they were unable to bear the pain. The flying sand smote them in clouds, driven with the speed of bullets. In vain they lay flat, urging their ponies forward; the beasts, maddened and blinded by the merciless lashing of the sand, refused to face the storm. Keith, all sense of direction long since lost, rolled wearily from the saddle, burrowed under the partial shelter of a sand dune, and called upon Neb to follow him. With their hands and feet they made a slight wind-break, dragging the struggling ponies into its protection, and burrowed themselves there, the clouds of sand scurrying over them so thick as to obscure the sky, and rapidly burying them altogether as though in a grave. Within an hour they were compelled to dig themselves out, yet it proved partial escape from the pitiless lashing. The wind howled like unloosed demons, and the air grew cold, adding to the sting of the grit, when some sudden eddy hurried it into their hiding place. To endeavor further travel would mean certain death, for no one could have guided a course for a hundred feet through the tempest, which seemed to suck the very breath away. To the fugitives came this comfort—if they could not advance, then no one else could follow, and the storm was completely blotting out their trail.

It was three o'clock before it died sufficiently down for them to venture out. Even then the air remained full of sand, while constantly shifting ridges made travel difficult. Only grim necessity—the suffering of the ponies for water, and their own need for soon reaching the habitation of man and acquiring food—drove them to the early venture. They must attain the valley of the Salt Fork that night, or else perish in the desert—there remained no other choice. Tying neckerchiefs over their horses' eyes, and lying flat themselves, they succeeded in pressing slowly forward, winding in and out among the shifting dunes, with only the wind to guide them. It was an awful trail, the hoots sinking deep in drifting sand, the struggling ponies becoming so exhausted that their riders finally dismounted, and staggered forward on foot, leading them stumbling blindly after. Once the negro's horse dropped, and had to be lashed to its feet again; once Keith's pony stumbled and fell on him, hurling him face down into the sand, and he would have died there, lacking sufficient strength to lift the dead weight, but for Neb's assistance. As it was he went staggering blindly forward, bruised, and faint from hunger and fatigue. Neither man spoke; they had no breath nor energy left to waste; every ounce of strength needed to be conserved for the battle against nature. They were fighting for life; fighting grimly, almost hopelessly, and alone.

About them night finally closed in, black and starless, yet fortunately with a gradual dying away of the storm. For an hour past they had been struggling on, doubting their direction, wondering dully if they were not lost and merely drifting about in a circle. They had debated this scarcely once, the ponies standing dejectedly, tails to the storm, Neb arguing that the wind still blew from the south, and Keith contending it had shifted into the westward. The white man won his way, and they staggered on uncertain, the negro grasping the first pony's tail to keep from being separated from his companion. Some instinct of the plains must have guided them, for at last they dragged themselves out from the desert, the crunching sand under foot changing into rock, and then to short brittle grass, at which the ponies nibbled eagerly. The slope led gradually downward, the animals scenting water, and struggling to reach it. Scavenging in their saddles, the riders let them go, and they never stopped until belly deep in the stream, their noses buried. The men shivered in their saddles, until, at last satisfied, the ponies consented to be forced back up the bank, where they nibbled at the short tufts of herbage, but in a manner expressive of weariness. Keith flung himself on the ground, every muscle of his body aching, his exposed flesh still smarting from the hail of sand through which they had passed.

He had not the slightest conception as to where they were, except he knew this must be the Salt Fork. Utterly confused by the mass of shifting dunes, through whose intricacies they had somehow found passage, the blackness of the night yielded no clue as to their point of emergence. The volume of water in the stream alone suggested that in their wanderings they must have drifted to the eastward, and come out much lower down than had been originally intended. If so, then they might be almost directly south of Carson City, and in a section

which he was totally unacquainted. One thing was, however, certain—they would be compelled to wait for daylight to ascertain the truth, and decide upon their future movements. There was another barren, sandy stretch of desolation lying between this isolated valley and that of the Canadian, and their horses would never stand to be pushed forward without both rest and food. As to themselves—they had eaten their last crumb long since, but this was not the first time both had known starvation.

Keith arose reluctantly, and removed the saddles from the animals, hobbling them so they could graze at will. Neb was propped up beneath an out-cropping of the bank, which partly protected him from the wind, a mere hulk of a shadow. Keith could not tell whether he slept or not, but made no effort to disturb him. A moment he stared vacantly about into the black silence, and then lay down, pillowing his head upon a saddle. He found it impossible to sleep, the chill of the wind causing him to turn and twist, in vain search after comfort, while unappeased hunger gnawed incessantly. His eyes ranged about over the dull gloom of the skies until they fell again to the earth level, and then he suddenly sat up, half believing himself in a dream—down the stream, how far away he could not judge, there gleamed a steady, yellowish light. It was no flicker of a camp fire, yet remained stationary. Surely no star could be so low and large; nor did he recall any with that peculiarity of color. If such a miracle was possible in the heart of that sandy desert he would have sworn it was a lamp shining through a window. But he had never heard of any settler on the Salt Fork, and almost laughed at the thought, believing for the instant his brain played him some elfish trick. Yet that light was no illusion; he rubbed his eyes, only to see it more clearly, convinced now of its reality. He strode hastily across, and shook Neb into semi-consciousness, dragging him bodily up the bank and pointing down the stream.

"Do you see that?" he inquired anxiously. "There, straight ahead of you!"

The negro stared, shaking with cold, and scarcely able to stand alone.

"Maybe it am de moon, Massa Jack," he muttered, thickly, "or a goblin's lantern. Lawd, I don't jest like de looks ob dat ting."

"Well, I do," and Keith laughed uneasily at the negro's fears. "All I wanted to know was if you saw what I saw. That's a lamp shining through a window, Neb. What in heaven's name it can be doing here I am unable to guess, but I'm going to find out. It means shelter and food, boy, even if we have to fight for it. Come on, the horses are safe, and we'll discover what is behind that light yonder."

CHAPTER VIII.

The Wilderness Cabin.

The light was considerably farther away than they had at first supposed, and as they advanced steadily toward it, the nature of the ground rapidly changed, becoming irregular, and littered with low growing shrubs. In the darkness they stumbled over out-croppings of rock, and after a fall or two, were compelled to move forward with extreme caution. But the mysterious yellow glow continually beckoned, and with new hope animating the hearts of both men, they staggered on, nervously themselves to the effort, and following closely along the bank of the stream.

At last they arrived where they could perceive dimly something of the nature of this unexpected desert oasis.

The light shone forth, piercing the night, through the uncurtained window of a log cabin, which would otherwise have been completely concealed from view by a group of low growing cottonwoods. This was all the black, enshrouding night revealed, and even this was merely made apparent by the yellow illumination of the window. The cabin stood upon an island, a strip of sand, partially covered by water, separating it from the north shore on which they stood. There was no sign of life about the hut, other than the burning lamp, but that alone was sufficient evidence of occupancy. In spite of hunger, and urgent need, Keith hesitated, uncertain as to what they might be called upon to face. Who could be living in this out-of-the-way spot, in the heart of this inhospitable desert? It would be no cattle out-post surely, for there was no surrounding grazing land, while surely no professional hunter would choose such a barren spot for headquarters. Either a hermit, anxious to escape all intercourse with humanity, or some outlaw seeking a place in which to live. To them it would be ideal. Away from all trails, where not even widely roving cattlemen would penetrate, in midst of a desert avoided by Indians because of lack of game—a man might hide here year after year without danger of discovery. Yet such a one would not be likely to welcome their coming, and they were without arms. But Keith was not a man to hesitate long because of possible danger, and he stepped down into the shallow water.

"Come on, Neb," he commanded, "and we'll find out who lives here."

The window faced the west, and he came up the low bank to where the door fronted the north in intense darkness. Under the shadow of the cottonwoods he could see nothing, groping his way, with hands extended. His foot struck a flat stone, and he plunged forward, striking the unlatched door so heavily as to swing it open, and fell partially forward into the room. As he struggled to his knees, Neb's black face peering past him into the lighted interior, he seemed to perceive in one swift, comprehensive glance, every revealed detail. A lamp

burned on a rudely constructed set of drawers near the window, and a wood fire blazed redly in a stone fireplace opposite, the yellow and red lights blending in a peculiar glow of color. Under this radiance were revealed the rough log walls plastered with yellow clay, and hung about with the skins of wild animals, a roughly made table, bare except for a book lying upon it, and a few ordinary appearing boxes, evidently utilized as seats, together with a barrel cut so as to make a comfortable chair. In the back wall was a door, partially open, apparently leading into a second room. That was all, except the woman.

Keith must have perceived all these in that first hurried glance, for they were ever after closely associated together in his mind, yet at the moment he possessed no clear thought of anything except her. She stood directly behind the table, where she must have sprung hastily at the first sound of their approach, clutching at the rude mantel above the fireplace, and staring toward him, her face white, her breath coming in sobs. At first he thought the vision a dream, a delirium born from his long struggle; he could not conceive the possibility of such a presence in this lonely place, and staggering to his feet, gazed wildly, dumbly at the slender, gray clad figure, the almost girlish face under the shadowing dark hair, expecting the marvellous vision to vanish. Surely this could not be real! A woman, and such a woman as this here, and alone, of all places! He staggered from weakness, almost terror, and grasped the table to hold himself erect. The rising wind came swirling in through the open door, causing the fire to send forth spirals of smoke, and he turned, dragging the dazed negro within, and snapping the latch behind him. When he glanced around again he fully believed the vision confronting him would have vanished. But no! there she yet remained, those wide-open, frightened brown eyes, with long lashes half hiding their depths, looking directly into his own; only now she had slightly changed her posture, leaning toward him across the table. Like a flash he comprehended that this was reality—flesh and blood—and, with the swift instinct of a gentleman, his numbed, nerveless fingers jerked off his hat, and he bowed bareheaded before her.

"Pardon me," he said, finding his voice with difficulty. "I fell over the step, but—I didn't expect to find a woman here."

He heard her quick breathing, marked a slight change in the expression of the dark eyes, and caught the glitter of the firelight on a revolver in her lowered hand.

"What did you expect to find?" "I hardly knew," he explained lamely; "we stumbled on this but by accident. I didn't know there was a cabin in all this valley."

"Then you are not here for any purpose?" "To meet with any one?"

"No; we were lost, and had gone into camp up above, when we discovered your light."

"Where do you come from?" Keith hesitated just an instant, yet falsehood was never easy for him, and he saw no occasion for any deceit now.

"Carson City."

"What brought you here?" "We started for the 'Bar X' ranch down below, on the Canadian; got caught in a sand-storm, and then just drifted. I do not know within twenty miles of where we are."

She drew a deep breath of uncontrolled relief.

"Are you alone?" "The negro and I—yes; and you haven't the slightest reason to be afraid of us—we're square."

She looked at him searchingly, and something in Keith's clean-cut face seemed to bring reassurance, confidence in the man.

"I am not afraid," she answered, coming toward him around the short table. "Only it is so lonely here, and you startled me, bursting in without warning. But you look all right, and I am going to believe your story. What is your name?"

"Keith—Jack Keith."

"A cowman?" "A little of everything, I reckon," a touch of returning bitterness in the tone. "A plainsman, who has punched cattle, but my last job was government scout."

"You look as though you might be more than that," she said slowly.

The man flushed, his lips pressing tightly together.

"Well, I—I may have been," he confessed unwillingly. "I started out all right, but somehow I reckon I just went adrift. It's a habit in this country."

Apparently those first words of comment had left her lips unthinkingly, for she made no attempt to reply; merely stood there directly facing him, her clear eyes gazing frankly into his own. He seemed to actually see her now for the first time, fairly—a supple, slender figure, simply dressed, with wonderfully expressive brown eyes, a perfect wealth of dark hair, a clear complexion with slight olive tinge to it, a strong, intelligent face, not strictly beautiful, yet strangely attractive, the forehead low and broad, the nose straight, the lips full and inclined to smile. Suddenly a vague remembrance brought recognition.

"Why, I know you now."

"Indeed!" the single word a note of undisguised surprise.

"Yes; I thought you looked oddly familiar all the time, but couldn't for the life of me connect up. You're Christie Maclaire."

"Am I?" her eyes filled with curiosity.

"You've got a great act, and you can sing too."

She stood in silence, still looking fixedly at him, her bosom rising and falling, her lips parted as if to speak. Apparently she did not know what to do, how to act, and was thinking swiftly.

"Mr. Keith," she said, at last in decision, "I am going to ask you to blot that all out—to forget that you even suspect me of being Christie Maclaire, of the Galety."

"Why, certainly; but would you explain?"

"There is little enough to explain. It is sufficient that I am here alone with you. Whether I wish to or not, I am compelled to trust myself to your protection. You may call me Christie Maclaire, or anything else you please; you may even think me unworthy respect, but you possess the face of a gentleman, and as such I am going to trust you—I must trust you. Will you accept my confidence on these terms?"

Keith did not smile, nor move. Weak from hunger and fatigue, he leaned wearily against the wall. Nevertheless that simple, womanly appeal awoke all that was strong and sacrificing within him, although her words were so unexpected that, for the moment he failed to realize their full purport. Finally he straightened up.

"I—I accept any terms you desire," he gasped weakly, "if—if you will only give one return."

"One return?—what?"

"Food; we have eaten nothing for sixty hours."

Her face, which had been so white, flushed to the hair, her dark eyes softening.

"Why, of course; sit down. I ought to have known from your face. There is plenty here—such as it is—only you must wait a moment."

CHAPTER IX.

The Girl of the Cabin.

He saw Neb drop down before the blazing fireplace, and curl up like a tired dog, and observed her take the lamp, open the door into the other room a trifle, and slip silently out of sight. He remembered staring vaguely about the little room, still illumined by the flames, only half comprehending, and then the reaction from his desperate struggle with the elements overcame all resolution, and he dropped his head forward on the table, and lost consciousness. Her hand upon his shoulder aroused him, startled into wakefulness, yet he scarcely realized the situation.

"I have placed food for the negro beside him," she said quietly, and for the first time Keith detected the soft blur in her speech.

"You are from the South!" he exclaimed, as though it was a discovery.

"Yes—and you?"

"My boyhood began in Virginia—the negro was an old-time slave in our family."

She glanced across at the black, now sitting up and eating voraciously.

"I thought he had once been a slave; one can easily tell that. I did not ask him to sit here because, if you do not object, we will eat here together. I have also been almost as long without food. It was so lonely here, and—I hardly understood my situation—and I simply could not force myself to eat."

He distinguished her words clearly enough, although she spoke low, as if she preferred what was said between them should not reach the ears of the negro, yet somehow, for the moment, they made no adequate impression on him. Like a famished wolf he began on the coarse fare, and for ten minutes hardly lifted his head. Then his eyes chanced to meet hers across the narrow table, and instantly the gentleman reawoke to life.

"I have been a perfect brute," he acknowledged frankly, "with no thought except for myself. Hunger was my master, and I ask your forgiveness, Miss Maclaire."

Her eyes smiled.

"I am so very glad to have any one here—any one—in whom I feel even a little confidence—that nothing else greatly matters. Can you both eat, and listen?"

Keith nodded, his eyes full of interest, searching her face.

"Whoever I may be, Mr. Keith, and really that seems only of small importance, I came to Fort Larned seeking some trace of my only brother, whom we last heard from there, where he had fallen into evil companionship. On the stage trip I was fortunate enough to form an acquaintance with a man who told me he knew where I could meet Fred, but that the boy was hiding because of some trouble he had lately gotten into, and that I should have to proceed very carefully so as not to lead the officers to discover his whereabouts. This gentleman was engaged in some business at Carson City, but he employed a man to bring me to this place, and promised to get Fred, and meet me here the following day. There must have been some failure in the plans, for I have been here entirely alone now for three days. It has been very lonesome, and—I've been a little frightened. Perhaps I ought not to have come, and I am not certain what kind of a place this is. I was so afraid when you came, but I am not afraid now."

"You have no need to be," he said soberly, impressed by the innocent candor of the girl, and feeling thankful that he was present to aid her. "I could not wrong one of the South."

"My father always told me I could trust a Southern gentleman under any circumstances. Mr. Hawley was from my own State, and knew many of our old friends. That was why I felt such unusual confidence in him, although he was but a traveling acquaintance."

"Mr. Hawley?"

"The gentleman whom I met on the stage."



"I—I Accept Any Terms You Desire."

"Oh, yes; you said he was in business in Carson City, but I don't seem to remember any one of that name."

"He was not there permanently; only to complete some business deal."

"And your brother? I may possibly have known him."

She hesitated an instant, her eyes dropping, until completely shaded by the long lashes.

"He—he was rather a wild boy, and ran away from home to enlist in the army. But he got into a bad set, and—and deserted. That was part of the trouble which caused him to hide. He enlisted under the name of Fred Wiloughby. Mr. Hawley told me this much, but I am afraid he did not tell me all."

"And he said you would meet him here?"

Keith gazed about the bare surroundings wonderingly. What was this place, hidden away in the midst of the desert, isolated in a spot where not even Indians roamed. Could it be a secret rendezvous of crime, the headquarters of desperadoes, of cattle rustlers, of the highwaymen of the Sante Fe Trail—a point to which they could ride when hard pressed, certain of hiding here in safety? He began to suspect this, but, if so, who then was this Hawley, and with what object had he sent this girl here? Every way he turned was to confront mystery, to face a new puzzle. Whatever she might be—even the music hall singer he believed—she had been inveigled here innocently enough. Even now she possessed only the most vague suspicion that she had been deceived. The center of the whole plot, if there was a plot, must be Hawley.

"Yes," she replied, "he said that this was one of the stations of a big ranch on which Fred was employed, and that he would certainly be here within a day or two."

"You met Hawley on the stage coach? How did you become acquainted?"

"We were alone for nearly fifty miles," her voice faltering slightly, "and—and he called me what you did."

"Christie Maclaire?"

"Yes; he—he seemed to think he knew me, and I needed help so much that I let him believe so. I thought it could do no harm, and then, when I found he actually knew Fred, I didn't think of anything else, only how fortunate I was to thus meet him. Surely something serious must have happened, or he would have been here before this. Do you—do you suppose there is anything wrong?"

Keith did not smile nor change posture. The more he delved into the matter, the more serious he felt the situation to be. He knew all those ranches lying south on the Canadian, and was aware that this was no out-station. No cattle ever came across that sandy desert unless driven by rustlers, and no honest purpose could account for this isolated hut. There had been frequent robberies along the trail, and he had overheard tales of mysterious disappearances in both Larned and Carson City. Could it be that he had now, accidentally, stumbled upon the rendezvous of the gang? He was not a man easily startled, but this thought sent his heart beating. He knew enough to realize what such a gang would naturally consist of—deserters, outlaws, robbers, both Indians and whites, combined under some desperate leadership. Gazing into the girl's questioning eyes he could scarcely refrain from blurting out all he suspected. Yet why should he? What good could it do? He could not hope to bear her south to the "Bar X" ranch, for the ponies were already too thoroughly exhausted for such a journey; he dared not turn north with her, for that would mean his own arrest, leaving her in worse condition than ever. If he only knew who this man Hawley was, his purpose, and a plan! Yet what protection could he and Neb prove, alone here, and without arms? All this flashed through his mind in an instant, leaving him confused and uncertain.

"I hope not," he managed to say in answer to her query. "But it is rather a strange mix-up all around, and I confess I fall to comprehend its full meaning. It is hardly likely your friends will show up to-night, and by morning perhaps we can decide what is best to do. Let me look around outside a moment."

Her eyes followed him as he stepped through the door into the darkness; then her head dropped into the support of her hands. There was silence except for the crackling of the fire, until Neb moved uneasily. At the sound the girl looked up, seeing clearly the good-natured face of the negro.

"Yo' don't need ber none cry, Missus," he said soberly, "so long as Massa Jack done 'greet' to look after yo'."

"Have—have you known him long?"

"Has I knowed him long, honey? Ebber sence 'fo' de wah. Why I done knowed Massa Jack when he

wan't more'n dat high. Lawd, he sho' was a lively youngster, but mighty good hearted to us niggers."

She hesitated to question a servant, and yet felt she must uncover the truth.

"Who is he? Is he all he claims to be—a Virginia gentleman?"

All the loyalty and pride of slavery days was in Neb.

"He sho' am, Missus; dar ain't nuthin' higher in ol' Virginia dan de Keiths. Dey ain't got much money sence the Yankees come down dar, but dey's quality folks jest de same. I was done born on de ol' Co'nel's plantation, and I reck'n dar wan't no finer man ebber libed. He was done killed in de wah. An' Massa Jack he was a captain; he rode on bossback, an' Lawdy, but he did look scrumptious when he first got his uniform. He done fought all through de wah, an' dey say Ginral Lee done shook hands wid him, an' said how proud he was ter know him. You kin sut'nly tie to Massa Jack, Missus."

Keith gazed about the bare surroundings wonderingly. What was this place, hidden away in the midst of the desert, isolated in a spot where not even Indians roamed. Could it be a secret rendezvous of crime, the headquarters of desperadoes, of cattle rustlers, of the highwaymen of the Sante Fe Trail—a point to which they could ride when hard pressed, certain of hiding here in safety? He began to suspect this, but, if so, who then was this Hawley, and with what object had he sent this girl here? Every way he turned was to confront mystery, to face a new puzzle. Whatever she might be—even the music hall singer he believed—she had been inveigled here innocently enough. Even now she possessed only the most vague suspicion that she had been deceived. The center of the whole plot, if there was a plot, must be Hawley.



He Flung Both Coat and Hat Down With the Intention of Remaining.

The negro's voice had scarcely ceased when Keith came in again, closing the door securely behind him.

"All quiet outside," he announced, speaking with new confidence. "I wanted to get an understanding of the surroundings in case of emergency," he explained, as if in answer to the questioning of the brown eyes gravely uplifted to his face. "I see there is quite a corral at the lower end of this island, safely hidden behind the fringe of cottonwoods. And a log stable back of the house. Is the creek fordable both ways?"

"I think so; the man who brought me here rode away south."

"And are you going to trust yourself to my care?"

She came around the table with hands extended. He took them into his grasp, looking down into her eyes.

"Yes," she said softly, "I am going to trust you, Captain Keith."

He laughed.

"Captain, hey? You must have been talking with that black rascal there."

The swift color flooded her face, but her hands remained imprisoned.

"I just done tol' her who de Keiths was down in ol' Virginia, sah," burst in Neb indignantly. "I sho' don't want nobody to think I go trap'nin' 'round wid any low white trash."

The gray eyes and the brown, gazing into one another, smiled with understanding.

"Oh, well," Keith acknowledged, gently. "I cannot say I am sorry you know something of my past glories; if one can't have a future, it is some source of pride to have a past to remember. But now about the present. We're not much protection to any one, the way we're fixed, as we are unarmed."

"There is a big revolver hanging in a holster in the other room," she answered, "and a short, sawed-off gun of some kind, but I don't know about ammunition."

"May we investigate?"

"Best certainly," and she threw open the intervening door. As the two stepped into the other apartment she held the lamp in aid of their search. "There is the revolver on the wall, and the gun is in the opposite corner. Isn't it strange you should be out in this country without arms?"

Keith glanced up, the revolver in his hands. The radiance of the light was full upon her face, revealing the clearness of her skin, the dark shadows of her lashes. There was the faintest tinge of suspicion to the question, but he answered easily.

"We left Carson in something of a hurry. I'll tell you the story to-morrow."

CHAPTER X.

Mr. Hawley Reveals Himself.

A fragment of candle, stuck tightly into the neck of an empty bottle, appeared on a low shelf, and Keith lighted it, the girl returning the lamp to its former position on the front room table. Investigation revealed a dozen cartridges fitting the revolver, but no ammunition was discovered adapted to the sawed-off gun, which Neb had already appropriated, and was dragging about with him, peering into each black corner in anxious search. The two were still busily employed at this, when to their ears, through the stillness of the night, there came the unexpected noise of splashing in the water without, and then the sound of a horse stumbling as he struck the bank. Quick as a flash Keith closed the intervening door, extinguished the dim flame of the candle, and grasping the startled negro's arm, hustled him into silence.

Crouching close behind the door, through a crack of which the light streamed, yielding slight view of the

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