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THE LIONS OF THE LORD

A TALE OF THE OLD WEST

BY HARRY LEON WILSON, AUTHOR OF THE SPENDERS

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CHAPTER XX.

The Picture in the Sky.

If something of the peace of the night silence came to him as he rode, he counted it only the peace of surrender and despair. He knew now that he had been cheated of all his great long-nursed hopes of some superior exaltation. Nor this only; for he had sinned unforgivably and incurred perdition. He who had fasted, prayed, and endured, waiting for his Witness, for the spreading of the heavens and the glory of the open vision, had overreached himself and was cast down.

When at last he slowed his horse to a walk, it was the spring of the day. The moon had gone, and over on his left a soft grayness began to show above the line of the hills. The light grew until it glowed with the fire of opals; through the treetops ran little stirs of wakefulness, and all about him were faint, furtive rustlings and whispers of the new day. Then in this glorified dusk of the dawn a squirrel loosed his bark of alarm, a crested jay screamed in answer, and he knew his hour of atonement was come.

He pressed forward again toward the desert, eager to be on with it. The page with the wash of blood across it seemed to take on a new vividness in the stronger light. Under the stain, the letters of the words were magnified before his mind,—"And as ye would that men should do to you—" It seemed to him that the blood through which they came heated the words so that they burned his eyes.

An hour after daybreak the trail led him down out of the hills by a little watercourse to the edge of the desert. Along the sides of this the chaparral grew thickly, and the spring by which he halted made a little spot of green at the edge of the gray. But out in front of him was the infinite stretch of death, far sweeps of wind-furrowed sand burning under a sun made sullen red by the clouds of fine dust in the air. Sparsely over the dull surface grew the few shrubs that could survive the heat and dryness,—stunted, unlovely things of burr, spine, thorn, or saw-edged leaf,—all bent one ways by the sand blown against them,—bristling cactus and crouching mesquite bushes.

In the vast open of the blue above, a vulture wheeled with sinister alertness; and far out among the dwarfed growing things a coyote skulked knowingly. The weird, phantom-like beauty of it stole upon him, torn as he was, while he looked over the dry, flat reaches. It was a good place to die in, this lifeless waste languishing under an angry sun.

At last he gave his horse water, tied the bridlerein to the horn of the saddle, headed him back over the trail to the valley and turned him loose. Then, after a long look toward the saving green of the hills, he started off through the yielding sand, his face white and haggard but hard-set. He was already weakening by fasting and loss of sleep, and the heat and dryness soon told upon him as the chill was warmed from the morning air.

When he had walked an hour, he felt he must stop, at least to rest. He looked back to see how far he had come. He was disappointed by the nearness of the hills; they seemed but a stone's throw away. If delirium came now he would probably wander back to the water.

He walked another hour, then turned, and was again disappointed—it was such a little distance; yet he knew now he must be too far out to find his way back when the madness came. So it was with a little sigh of contentment that he lay down to rest or to take what might come.

He was quite broken. Not since the long-gone night on the river-flat across from Nauvoo had tears wet his eyes. But they fell now, and from sheer, helpless grief he wept. And then for the first time in two days he prayed—this time the prayer of the publican:—

"God be merciful to me, a sinner."

Over and over he said the words, chokingly, watering the hot sands with his tears. When the paroxysm had passed, it left him, weak and prone, still faintly crying his prayer into the sand, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

When he had said over the words as long as his parched throat would let him, he became quiet. To his amazement, some new, strange peace had filled him. He took it for the peace of death. He was glad to think it was coming so gently—like a kind mother soothing him to his last sleep.

His head on his arm, his whole tired body relaxing in this new restfulness, he opened his eyes and looked off to the south, idly scanning the horizon, his eyes level with the sandy plain. Then something made him sit quickly up and stare intently, his bared head craning forward. To the south, lying low, a mass of light clouds, volatile, changing with opalescent lights as he looked. A little to the left of these clouds, while his head was on the sand, he thought his eyes had detected certain squared lines.

Now he scanned the spot with a feverish eagerness. At first there was only the endless empty blue. Then, when his wonder was quite dead and he was about to lie down, there came a miracle of miracles,—a vision in the clear blue of the sky. And this time the lines were coherent. He, the dying sinner, had caught, clearly and positively for one awful second in that sky, the flashing impression of a cross. It faded as soon as it came, vanished while he gazed, leaving him in gasping, fainting wonder at the marvel.

And then, before he could think or question himself, the sky once more yielded its vision; again that image of a cross stayed for a second in his eyes, and this time he thought there were figures about it. Some picture was trying to show itself to him. Still reaching his body forward, gazing fearfully, his aroused body pulsing swiftly to the wonder of the thing, he began to pray again, striving to keep his excitement under.

"O God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

Slowly at first, it grew before his fixed eyes, then quickly, so that at the last there was a complete picture where but an instant before had been but a meaningless mass of line and color. Set on a hill were many low, square, flat-topped houses, brown in color against the gray ground about them. In front of these houses was a larger structure of the same material, a church-like building such as he had once seen in a picture, with a wooden cross at the top. In an open square before this church were many moving persons strangely garbed, seeming to be Indians. They surged for a moment about the door of the church, then parted to either side as if in answer to a signal, and he saw a procession of the same people coming with bowed heads, scourging themselves with short whips and thorned branches. Ar their head walked a brown-cowled monk, holding aloft before him a small cross, attached by a chain to his waist. As he led the procession forward, another crowd, some of them being other brown-cowled monks, parted before the church door, and there, clearly before his wondering eyes was erected a great cross upon which he saw the crucified Savior.

He saw those in the procession form about the cross and fling themselves upon the ground before it, while all the others round about knelt. He saw the monk, standing alone, raise the smaller cross in his hands above them, as if in blessing. High above it all, he saw the Crucified One, the head lying over on the shoulder.

He sank back on the sands in an ecstasy. His Witness had come—not as he thought it would, in a moment of spiritual uplift; but when he had been sunk by his own sin to fearful depths. Nor had it brought any message of glory for himself, of gifts or powers. Only the mission of suffering and service and suffering again at the end. But it was enough.

How long he lay in the joy of the realization he never knew, but sleep or faintness at last overcame him.

He was revived by the sharp chill of night, and sat up to find his mind clear, alert, and active with new purposes. He had suffered greatly from thirst, so that when he tried to say a prayer of thanksgiving he could not move his swollen tongue. He was weakened, too, but the freezing cold of the desert night aroused all his latent force. He struggled to his feet, and laid a course by the light of the moon back to the spring he had left in the morning. How he reached the hills again he never knew, nor how he made his way over them and back to the settlement. But there he lay sick for many days, his mind, when he felt it at all, tossing idly upon the great sustaining consciousness of that vision in the desert.

The day which he next remembered clearly, and from which he dated his new life, was one when he was back in the Meadows. He had ridden there in the first vagueness and weakness of his recovery, without purpose, yet feeling that he must go. What he found there made him believe he had been led to the spot. Stark against the glow of the western sky as he rode up, was a huge cross. He stopped, staring in wonder, beliving it to be another vision; but it stayed before him, rigid, bare, and uncompromising. He lft his horse and climbed up to it. At its base was piled a cairn of stones, and against this was a slab with an inscription:—

"Here 120 Men, Women, and Children Were Massacred in Cold Blood Early in September, 1857."

On the cross itself was carved in deep letters:—

"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

He fell on his knees at the foot and prayed, not weeping nor in any fever of fear, but as one knowing his sin and the sin of his Church. The burden of his prayer was, "O God, my own sin cannot be forgiven—I know it well—but let me atone for the sins of this people and let me guide them aright. Let me die on this cross a hundred deaths for each life they took out, or as many more as shall be needed to save them."

He was strong in his faith again, conscious that he himself was lost, but burning to save others, and hopeful, too, for he believed that a miracle had been vouchsafed to him in the desrt.

Nor would the good padre, at the head of his procession of penitents in his little mission out across the desert, have doubted less that it was a miracle than did this unhappy apostle of Joseph Smith, had he known the circumstance of its timeliness; albeit he had become familiar with such phenomena of light and air in the desert.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Sinner Chastens Himself.

How to offer the greatest sacrifice—how to do the greatest service—these had become his problems. He concerned himself no longer with his own exaltation either in this world or the world to come.

He resolved to stay south, fearing vaguely that in the north he would be in conflict with the priesthood. He knew not how; he felt that he was still sound in his faith, but he felt, too, some undefined antagonism between himself and those who preached in the tabernacle. For his home he chose the settlement of Amalon, set in a rich little valley betwen the shoulders of the Pine mountains.

Late in October there was finished for him on the outer edge of the town, near the bank of a little hill-born stream, a roomy log-house, mud-chinked, with a water-tight roof of spruce shakes and a floor of whipsawed plank,—a residence fit for one of the foremost teachers in the Church, an Elder after the Order of Melchisedek, an eloquent preacher and one true to the blessed Gods. At one end of the cabin, a small room was partitioned off and a bunk built in it. A chair and a water-basin on a block comprised its furniture. This room he reserved for himself.

As to the rest of the house, his ideas were at first cloudy. He knew only that he wished to serve. Gradually, however, as his mind worked over the problem, the answer came with considerable clearness. He thought about it much on his way north, for he was obliged to make a trip to Salt Lake City to secure supplies for the winter, some needed articles of furniture for the house, and his wagons and stock.

He was helped in his thinking on a day early in the journey. Near a squalid hut on the outskirts of Cedar City he noticed a woman staggering under an armful of wood. She was bareheaded, with hair disordered, her cheeks hollowed, and her skin yellow and bloodless. He remembered the tale he had heard when he came down. He thought she must be that wife of Bishop Snow who had been put away. He rode up to the cabin as the woman threw her wood inside. She was weak and wretched-looking in the extreme.

"I am Elder Rae. I want to know if you would care to go to Amalon with me when I come back. If you do, you can have a home there as long as you like. It would be easier for you than here."

She had looked up quickly at him in much embarrassment. She smiled a little when he had finished.

"I'm not much good to work, but I think I'd get stronger if I had plenty to eat. I used to be right strong and well."

"I shall be along with my wagons in two weeks or a little more. If you will go with me then I would like to have you. Here, here is money to buy you food until I come."

"You've heard of me, have you—that I'm a divorced woman"

"Yes, I know."

She looked down at the ground a moment, pondering, then up at him with sudden resolution.

"I can't work hard and—I'm not—pretty any longer—why do you want to marry me?"

Her question made him the more embarrassed of the two, and she saw as much, but she could not tell why it was.

"Why," he stammered, "why,—you see—but never mind. I must hurry on now. In about two weeks—" And he put the spurs so viciously to his horse that he was nearly unseated by the startled animal's leap.

Off on the open road again he thought it out. Marriage had not been in his mind when he spoke to the woman. He had meant only to give her a home. But to her the idea had come naturally from his words, and he began to see that it was, indeed, not an unnatural thing to do. He dwelt long on this new idea, picturing at intervals the woman's lack of any charm or beauty, her painful emaciation, her weakness.

As he entered Brigham's office in Salt Lake City some days later, there passed out by the same door a woman whom he seemed dimly to remember. The left half of her face was disfigured by a huge flaming scar, and he saw that she had but one hand.

"Who was that woman?" he asked Brigham, after they had chatted a little of other matters.

"That's poor Christina Lund. You ought to remember her. She was in your hand-cart party. She's having a pretty hard time of it. You see, she froze off one hand, so now she can't work much, and then she froze her face, so she ain't much for looks any longer—in fact, I wouldn't say Christina was much to start with, judging from the half of her face that's still good—and so, of course, she hasn't been able to marry. The Church helps her a little now and then, but what troubles her most is that she'll lose her glory if she ain't married. You see, she ain't a worker and she ain't handsome, so who's going to have her sealed to him?"

"I remember her now. She pushed the cart with her father in it from the Platte crossing, at Fort Laramie, clear over to Echo canyon, when all the fingers of one hand came off on the bar of the cart one afternoon; and then her hand had to be amputated. Brother Brigham, she shouldn't be cheated of her place in the Kingdom."

"Well, she ain't capable, and she ain't a pretty person, so what can she do?"

"I believe if the Lord is willing I will have her sealed to me."

"It will be your own doings, Brother Rae. I wouldn't take it on myself to counsel that woman to anybody."

"I feel I must do it, Brother Brigham."

"Well, so be it if you say. She can be sealed to you and be a star in your crown forever. But I hope, now that you've begun to build up your kingdom, you'll do a little better, next time. There's a lot of pretty good-looking young women came in with a party yesterday—"

"All in good time, Brother Brigham! If you're willing, I'll pick up my second on the way south."

"Well, well, now that's good!" and the broad face of Brigham glowed with friendly enthusiasm. "You know I'd suspicioned more than once that you wasn't overly strong on the doctrinal point of celestial marriage. I hope your second, Brother Joel, is a little fancier than this one."

"She'll be a better worker," he replied.

"Well, they're the most satisfactory in the long run. I've found that out myself. At any rate, it's best to lay the foundations of your kingdom with workers, the plainer the better. After that, a man can afford something in the ornamental line now and then. Now, I'll send for Christina and tell her what luck she's in. She hasn't had her endowments yet, so you might as well go through those with her. Be at the endowment-house at five in the morning."

And so it befell that Joel Rae, Elder after the Order of Melchisedek, and Christina Lund, spinster, native of Denmark, were on the following day, after the endowment-rites had been administered, married for time and eternity.

From the altar they went to the wagons and began their journey south. Christina came out of the endowment-house, glowing, as to one side of her face. She was, also, in a state of daze that left her able to say but little. Proud and happy and silent, her sole remark, the first day of the trip, was: "Brigham—now—he make such a lovely, bee-yoo-tiful God in heaven!"

To be Continued.

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