

The Horse Tamer's Challenge

THE HORSE TAMER'S CHALLENGE

A Romance of the Old West

Copyright 2009 By G.K. AALBORG

Five Star / Gale / Cengage

ISBN# 978-1-59414-742-5

Publication Date: February/09

MONTANA TERRITORY: 1876

The ancient Indian trail twisted like a faulty memory along the contours of the high country, visible much of the time only as a shadowy trick of the light. But to Lucas Swallow, the tall rider on the blue roan Appaloosa stallion, the trail was almost as obvious as the coach road below.

Still, it was the stallion who caught the sign of recent travel on the ancients' track. The stallion *whuffled* and shook its head at the scent. Muscular thighs clamped against its ribs as the rider steadied it with a whispered, guttural command that was immediately followed by an even quieter hiss of surprise when he saw what the horse had smelled.

Blood! And fresh ... this morning. Thick, viscous clots of blood, imperfectly covered by a hasty attempt to disguise the traveler's passage. The blood brought the rest into focus for eyes long trained in the art of reading sign.

One man, badly injured but still mentally alert enough to try and hide his trail; a man experienced in wilderness travel; a man wearing moccasins, or what was left of them, but no Indian, and no longer young. As the rider carefully guided his sure-footed, mountain-bred horse along the almost invisible trail, his eyes read the signs before him with growing certainty. The man he tracked was doing his very best, and it was a damned good best, to hide all signs of his passage. Was he fleeing somebody? Something? Whatever, he'd been successful thus far. There was no sign of any pursuit ... yet.

That thought caused the rider to shift his weight and guide his stallion uphill, away from the track and into cover. He sat there, silent, his eyes patiently scanning the countryside, his ears tuned for any foreign sound, before he finally returned to the trail, which he then followed until it swung round a hillside and brought the coach road below into view. He was moving into cover again when the sound of a

whiplash drew a snort of surprise from his horse.

The rider was equally surprised, but less alarmed. He knew the difference between a cracking whip and an exploding firearm, and the whip wasn't close enough to offer any threat. Nor was the voice that followed the whip, even though the pure air of the high country made the voice as clear to the rider as if he'd been down there beside the speaker, several hundred feet below.

Crack!

“You are a fool and a damned coward, Turner.”

Crack!

“If Otis Bennett wasn't so near to dying, he'd not only horsewhip you, he'd shoot you for the cowardly, mangy dog you are!”

Crack!

The rider had only to move his mount a few yards forward to get an unobstructed view of the scene before him, and again he hissed with surprise.

“And if you dare lay so much as a finger on one of these horses, Mr. Turner, I'll shoot you myself!”

Crack!

This assault gained a reply, albeit a whiny, cringing one, from the obvious victim of the affair, a hulking, bearded teamster who was at least twice the size of the tall, lanky, but obviously female figure. She wielded her whip with surprising skill in an aura of anger as vivid and tangible as the roughness of her voice.

But the teamster's reply was overridden by the woman's voice as she flung down the whip and replaced it in her hands with a rifle.

“You can go to Helena or go to Hell, Mr. Turner,” she retorted, and her voice fairly dripped with anger and contempt. “But by all that's holy, you'll go on your own and you'll go without being paid. You contracted to drive this team to Helena, and if you're too much of a sniveling coward to fulfill that contract, it might as well be Hell for all I care!”

The rider on the slope watched a younger woman step into view. A young and beautiful woman—that much was clear even from the distance. A woman whose mane of auburn hair flowed like sunset fire down her back. Her softer voice didn't carry well enough for him to hear what she said, but the gestures of the slat-thin woman with the rifle made it easy to follow what was transpiring, and *her* words sizzled in the high country air.

“He isn't worth a bullet,” she spat, her voice still acid with contempt as she spoke to the redhead. “And he isn't worth feeding, either. I won't have him around, and that's that. I am quite capable of driving your wagon myself and I will, but not until we've tended to your father. Turner can go to blazes, provided he damned well walks, and if the rest of you want to leave us here, then go ahead and do it.”

She shook the rifle at the still-departing teamster, then swung back to where the rest of the party waited in the shade, many of them clearly undecided about the issue they now faced. As the rider watched, even that situation became obvious. The group halted on the coach road was a mixed party of miners—probably headed east toward Helena and the new diggings farther east in the Black Hills—and immigrants heading ... somewhere, for reasons that likely made sense only to them.

The rider sat silent on his big stallion, knowing himself invisible, his faded, travel-stained clothes blending easily with the underbrush. He wore buckskin, although his flat-crowned black hat was felt, and both he and the horse wore nothing that would catch the eye—no shiny metallic objects, nothing that jingled or rattled. The horse wore a hackamore of soft, smoke-tanned leather. The saddle was hand-made in the Spanish mold, but without the traditional silverwork.

He, himself, was tall and lean as a winter wolf, with darkly tanned skin. His eyes, a pale ice-green color, narrowed as he continued to watch the proceedings below.

The mining contingent, which included the disgraced teamster, seemed intent on leaving the red-haired woman and her injured father. The emigrants were obviously disposed to stay and offer, if nothing else, assistance in burying the man. The older woman who had intervened seemed important among them, and she was on the side of the redhead.

Turning his horse, the rider began to move back along the trail, pondering as he backtracked. Had

the blood been left by the redhead's father? Certainly by a man who, from his tracks, was skilled in wilderness lore; a tough, cunning and experienced plainsman who had escaped ... what?

“Something bad enough to near kill him,” the rider muttered to his stallion. “And something to make me curious enough to go looking and see what. They aren't expecting us in Helena for a day or two, but somehow I don't think it'll take that long, even being as careful as we'd better be.”

And careful he was, as he painstakingly unraveled the injured man's back trail. Alert to every sound, every movement, he held to deep cover and kept as tight a rein on his impatience as he did on his Appaloosa stallion.

The horse, actually, was easier to curb. There was something about the red-headed woman that prodded at his subconscious, and it was more than her obvious attractiveness. Something ... that hair ... the color of a mountain sunset...

Whatever it was, it eluded him and disturbed his concentration at the same time. But the effect only made him more alert than usual.

“Lord, but I hate this country, Mattie,” Rebecca Susan Bennett sighed, as the miners straggled out of sight around the first bend of the road. “It’s no place for decent folk, no place for anything except Indians and wild animals and things that kill and maim and torture.” Her mother’s voice, though Rebecca didn’t consciously realize it nor recognize her mother’s words. She’d grown up with them, absorbed them without thought or question.

She’d been brought up to hate the West and anything to do with it, an attitude easily maintained by her memories of the childhood wagon train episode in which her father had been scalped and almost killed, and her twin sister Amy stolen by Indians. She had been hustled back East by her mother, whose attitudes had colored Rebecca’s every conception.

But here she was, lured after her mother’s death by a father she loved—a father insistent on making one last attempt to find his missing daughter. Rebecca’s sister. She’d been unable to refuse him. How could she? But she’d *wanted* to, despite a conscience that demanded otherwise. Amy couldn’t possibly still be alive, and even if she was...

Now that the crisis with the recalcitrant teamster was over, Rebecca was showing the strain. Her fingers shook and her eyes were bright with more than anger. Not fear, or at least not the expectable fear of unseen Indians, but fear of something else. No, she found herself thinking ... just a vague sense of uneasiness.

Even as she spoke, she darted quick glances at the surrounding hills, unable to shake off the certainty, not of being watched exactly, but of having stirred some ... awareness ... out there in the wild country. And there was no real reason for the feeling. She hadn’t felt it when her father crawled into camp earlier that day. It had come upon her only in the last few minutes, like a sun-shadow or an attack of conscience.

She shivered, feeling the goose bumps creeping along her arms. Childhood memories and her mother's acid recall flooded unbidden to her mind, where they fought with adult logic and did nothing to cure her unease. She reached up to touch the bear-claw pendant, her talisman. Seeking comfort.

"It does seem as if everything that walks, crawls or flies is out to get you," said Mattie. She was a tall woman in her early forties, gaunt to the point of emaciation, and her now-soft voice belied the rawhide toughness for which Rebecca had admired Matilda Holmes ever since their first meeting. Thrice widowed and childless despite her first marriage at the age of sixteen, Mattie was as tough as the wilderness around them.

"Nothing wrong with the country," she continued in a voice that was hardly past a whisper. "It's the people. Although I guess the country is what makes some of them what they are. It's no place for weaklings, and that's sure."

"It's no place for civilized people at all!" Rebecca turned away so that neither her friend nor anyone else could see the tears that now threatened. The burly teamster's reaction to her father's injuries—an immediate diatribe about Indians and their dangers, used as an excuse to try and abscond with one of the Bennett wagons and stock—had thrown her off balance. As had the blunt, inhumane response of the miners who formed such a large portion of the expedition.

Maybe Indians, maybe not; to the miners it made no difference. Otis Bennett had been tortured, almost to his death. It was a known risk, a gamble he'd lost. Nothing to do with them. They were headed for the gold fields and her father's problems were his own ... and hers.

"You've got to see their viewpoint," a matter-of-fact Mattie Holmes had said in a bid to try and explain to Rebecca the tenuous links that could so lightly bind travelers in the vastness of the West. "They'd have helped defend him if they'd known he was being attacked. But it's done, and they reckon it's not their fault, so why should they lose traveling time just to end up burying him anyway?"

"It was *their* bellies he was trying to fill," Rebecca had replied. "If he hadn't gone hunting yesterday to get meat for the camp, he wouldn't have been attacked. He'd have been here where he should have been."

“Men like your father don’t hold to most folks’ rules. He knew the risks and I reckon even if he’d known for sure there were Indians or ... whoever ... out there laying for him, he’d have gone anyway. Sure we needed the meat, but it’s not that far to Helena. We could have got by without. Your father hunted because he wanted to get away from being with folks for a while. Too many people around made him testy and irritable. You know that, child.”

Despite her initial denial, Rebecca did know it. She also knew that her father was, in the eyes of many people, as crazy as a loon on his good days and worse on his bad ones. Most old trappers and mountain men were. Their oddness came from being alone for so long that they forgot what civilized society was all about, if they’d ever understood it in the first place.

Otis Bennett had wandered the western mountains for as long as Rebecca could remember, and his occasional brief visits “home” to the civilization he’d rejected had inevitably ended sooner than planned. Without fail, he’d start feeling cooped up, edgy, suspicious. Downright peculiar. Exposure to his wife didn’t help.

Given his druthers, Father would have made their passage to Helena without company. He’d have preferred the isolated Indian and renegade-infested country to the crowds of miners and settlers he despised.

“They’s too dang many of ’em, Becky,” he’d said a dozen times. “Swarming over the country like locusts, they are, ruining it. Most of them shouldn’t be here. It’s no place for ’em. This country’s too tough. It chews ’em up and spits ’em out like so much rotten meat. If the Injuns don’t get ’em, the country will. But they’ll keep coming. It be human nature, I reckon, but there’s nothing in it I like. ’Cepting of course that there’s safety in numbers, and I reckon to see us safely to Helena in time to meet Cope, like I promised. ’Sides, with these wagons we’re forced to the road anyway.”

So they’d joined the mixed party of emigrants and miners, even though, from the first moment, Otis Bennett had retreated into a shell of obstinate surliness and suspicion that encompassed virtually all of their traveling companions. He made it only too clear that he was joining them for his convenience, not theirs, and as a result had made few friends, despite his ability to keep them in meat even while passing

through country most men would have thought to be hunted out.

But he'd brought no meat from yesterday's hunt. Only his own tortured, bloody carcass, an incoherent nightmare that had crawled into camp just past dawning, barely recognizable as human, raving in shattered syllables not one of them could understand.

Turner, with plenty of backup from the miners, had immediately begun fomenting panic about Indians, though it was clear enough to Rebecca he was only using the excuse to try and make off with far more than he was owed for having driven their wagon this far. Helena was within easy reach, and the teamster, while far from brilliant, had an eye for the main chance.

Well, let him go and good riddance, she thought. She had other things to worry about. Her father was dying—not even such a tough old mountain man could survive the tortures he'd endured—but damned if she'd let him die without doing all she could to save him.

It took Otis Bennett three days to die, and for almost all of it he was insane, or close to it. Rebecca got very little sleep and even less peace of mind. The firelight brought forth memories from her childhood, some pleasant, others less so.

Like when her father had returned from the West, and stayed home a full month to the day, almost a record for him. Most of the time, he spent lounging on the porch of the family's modest home, recounting his adventures to a less than enthusiastic wife and two spellbound children.

He told them of the vastness of the Western plains, the splendor of the Shining Mountains and the vast rivers that plunged to the Western sea, rivers with gold as bright as the dreams of the thousands who flocked to find it. But it was his tale of the hidden canyon and the bear-savaged Métis boy that captured the imaginations of his two girls. Especially Rebecca...

The last Spaniard died alone, but rich.

A Franciscan friar, he was close to his God but almost a year's hard travel from the nearest of his religious brethren, who were in Santa Fe, 1800 kilometers as the crow flies to the south and east. Black-robed or not, the friar was no crow. He and his soldier companions had traveled more than twice that distance in their wandering search for the gold they'd finally found. When winter prowled south along the mountains like a rabid wolf, driving away the game and making travel impossible, the gold they had smelted couldn't feed them. The friar was the strongest, so he died last and therefore alone, but he died of the same natural causes that had inexorably taken his companions. He starved.

The place of his death had no name. It was a high, tiny valley on an unnamed tributary of an unnamed creek, merely one of a myriad of mountain meadows nearly a mile above sea level in what would someday be called the Rocky Mountains of Canada.

The friar and his party, driven to the high, hidden valley in their need to escape the notice of a roving Peigan war party, were almost certainly the first white men to see the valley, and the last for more than two hundred years, by which time the only evidence of their visit was the arrastre in which they had crushed the ore, the crude smelter they had used to melt and mold their gleaming treasure, and the good friar's silver crucifix. And, of course, the rough ingots of almost pure gold for which they had died. Dozens of ingots, enough to have overloaded the Spanish mules, had they survived that tragic winter and the appetites of the foolish men who had brought them so far north to die.

Metal tools and accouterments rusted. Porcupines and other rodents gnawed away wood and leather. And all manner of scavengers laid waste the bones of man and mule alike before the harsh mountain climate completed the destruction. The friar's crucifix, hand-fashioned of pure Mexican silver, somehow ended up at the entrance to the shallow mine shaft where the gold had been stored, uniquely

placed to catch a ray of evening sunlight when Otis Bennett scrambled into the hidden valley.

He was trying, as the Spaniards had done, to avoid a roving party of Indians. And, like the Spaniards, he was looking for gold. Otis had become separated almost a week earlier from his party, a group who'd already spent half of 1859 on the long overland trek from Upper Canada, headed for the British Columbia gold fields. He wasn't exactly lost, but he was in trouble and he knew it.

Unlike the Spaniards, Otis had no mules. He didn't even have a horse, his having spooked and thrown him two days before and then compounded the offense by running off to leave him with only the clothes on his back, his knife, and his Hawken plains rifle.

Also, unlike the Spaniards, he didn't starve in the valley. He was able to club an incautious porcupine on his second day and cook it over a very small, very carefully hidden fire. But he took none of the Spanish gold with him when he left, having no way to sensibly carry even one of the heavy, crudely smelted ingots. He did, however, take the silver crucifix, and the secret of the gold's location.

Two days later he set out afoot, and the day after that, he found the wounded Métis boy with eyes the pale, pale green of winter ice, and hands that could carve beauty into what had almost killed him.

* * * * *

Rebecca's mother, Pauline, had wished Otis would stop filling the children's heads with such tales, especially when he spoke of them all going West in search of "his" golden valley and perhaps a new life by the western ocean. St. Louis was, in her opinion, already too far west, too close to the fierce, untamed frontier she feared as much as her husband loved it.

She'd raised her first objections immediately, then piled caution upon concern upon worry until she could raise a litany of objection whenever Otis brought up the subject. Indeed, she had raised such a mountain of denial and opposition that it overshadowed the far more immediate—and equally dangerous—outbreak of the War Between the States. Otis enlisted almost immediately, this time heading in the wrong direction, for him, and seeking not gold but glory.

His leaving provoked a confusion of memories, no less clear now to Rebecca, in hindsight.

The morning of his departure, smartly dressed in a new blue uniform but riding the same scrubby nag which had carried him out of the West, he paused long enough to bestow hugs and presents upon his two daughters.

He hung a bear claw mounted on a silver chain, around Amy's neck, and a friar's crucifix around Becky's.

"This is to help you remember me, although I doubt I'll be gone so long this time. Now go play while I say good-bye to your mother."

Rebecca's response was typical, spoken as tears streaked her cheeks. "Be careful, Daddy. Come back safe."

Amy had no tears when she fiercely demanded, "Kill all the rebels, Daddy."

She also had no tears when she confronted her twin in the back yard. She had removed the bear claw from her neck and held it at arm's length, her lips pursed in a sneer of disgust.

"I'm the oldest; I get to choose."

Becky was still upset by their father's departure; she didn't want a fight. But ... "Daddy gave this to me ..." she began.

Amy grabbed at the crucifix, dragging Rebecca to her knees before finally wrenching the chain free. She wasn't gentle; didn't intend to be, and when the chain snagged in Becky's fiery hair and brought a squeal of pain, she laughed.

"You're such a baby, Becky Sue."

She placed the crucifix carefully around her own neck, then dismissively flung the bear claw into her sister's face, causing even more tears.

"Bears are baaaad," she sneered, and scampered off to see if her father had gone yet.

He had, but it was far from the brief sojourn he and so many others expected when they set out to fight the War Between the States. More than five years passed before he saw St. Louis and his family again, and he stayed only long enough to sell up, pile them into a wagon, and set off in search of a new future in the West.

Pauline Bennett objected, of course, but as well try to harness the wind as dissuade Otis from his chosen path. He had returned from the war changed, hardened in many ways, and more fixed in his ideas. He acknowledged her objections, but ignored them, as he did her incessant fears for their safety in the wilderness ahead.