

Cimarron

By
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(Continued From Last Week)



It Was a Hard Trip for the Child.

The wagons, packed, stood waiting before the Venables house. Perhaps never in the history of the settling of the West did a woman go a-pioneering in such a costume. Sabra had driven horses all her life; so now she stepped lightly from ground to hub, from hub to wheel top, perched herself on the high wagon seat and gathered up the reins with deftness and outward composure. Her eyes were enormous, her pale face paler. Yancey had swung Cim up to the calico-cushioned seat beside Sabra. His short legs, in their copper-toed boots, stuck straight out in front of him. His dark eyes were huge with excitement. "Why don't we go?" he demanded, over and over, in something like a scream. He shouted to the horses as he had heard teamsters do. "Giddap in 'ere; Gec-op! 'Giang!" His grandmother and grandfather, gazing up with sudden agony in their faces at sight of this little expedition actually facing forth so absurdly into the unknown, had ceased to exist for Cim. As Sabra drove one wagon and Yancey the other, the boy pivoted between them through the long drive, spending the morning in the seat beside his mother, the afternoon beside his father, with intervals of napping curled up on the bedding at the back of the wagon.

Now, with a lurch and a rattle and a great clatter of hoofs the two wagons were off. They had made an early start. By ten the boy's eyes were heavy with sleep. Sabra coaxed him to curl up on the wagon seat, his head in her lap. She held the reins in one hand; one arm was about the child. It was hot and still and drowsy. Noon came with surprising swiftness. They had brought along a precious keg of water and a food supply sufficient, they thought, to last through most of the trip—salt pork, mince and apple pies, bread, doughnuts—but their appetites were enormous. At midday they stopped and ate in the shade. Sabra prepared the meal while Yancey tended the horses. Cim, wide awake now and refreshed, ate largely with them of the fried salt pork and potatoes, the hard-boiled eggs, the mince pie. It was all very easy and comfortable and relaxed. Short as the morning had been, the afternoon stretched out, somehow, endless. Sabra began to be horribly tired, cramped. The boy whimpered. It was mid-afternoon and hot; it was late afternoon; then the brilliant western sunset began to paint the sky. Yancey, in the wagon ahead, drew up, gazed about, got out, tied his team to one of a clump of cottonwoods.

"We'll camp here," he called to Sabra and came toward her wagon, prepared to lit her down, and the boy. She was stiff, utterly weary. She stared down at him, dully, then around the landscape.

"Camp?"

"Yes. For the night. Come, Cim." He lifted the boy down with a great swoop.

"You mean for the night? Sleep here?"

He was quite matter-of-fact. "Yes. It's a good place. Water and trees. I'll have a fire before you can say Jack Robinson. Where'd you think you were going to sleep? Back home?"

Somehow she had not thought. She had not believed it. To sleep out of doors like this, in the open, with only a wagon top as roof! All her neat conventional life she had spent in a four-poster bed with a chatted Swiss canopy and net curtains and linen sheets that smelled sweetly of the sun and the air.

Yancey began to make camp. Already the duties of this new manner of living had become familiar. There was wood to gather, a fire to start, water to be boiled. Cim, very wide awake now, trotted after his father, after his mother. Meat began to sizzle appetizingly in the pan. The exquisite scent of coffee revived them with its promise of stimulation.

"That roll of carpet," called Sabra, busy at the fire, to Yancey at the wagon. "Under the seat, I want Cim to sit on it. . . . ground may be damp."

A sudden shout from Yancey. A squeal of terror from the bundle of carpeting in his arms—a bundle that suddenly was alive and wriggling. Yancey dropped it with an oath. The bundle lay on the ground a moment, heaving, then it began to unroll itself while the three regarded it with starting eyes. A black paw, a woolly head, a face all open mouth and whites of eyes. Black Isalah. He had found a way to come with them to the Indian territory.

By noon next day they were wondering how they had got on at all without him. He gathered wood. He

wagon. "Wagon?" She ran to the other wagon, peered inside, called. He was not there.

Together they looked under the wagons, behind the trees. "Cim! Cim! Cimarron Cravat, if you are hiding I shall punish you if you don't come out this minute." A shrill note of terror crept into her voice. She began to scream his name, her voice cracking grotesquely. "Cim! Cim!" She prayed as she ran, mumbly. "O God, help me find him. O God, don't let anything happen to him. Dear God, help me find him—Cim! Cim! Cim!"

She came to a little mound that dipped suddenly and unexpectedly to a draw. And there, in a hollow, she came upon him, seated before a cave in the side of the hill, the front and roof ingeniously timbered to make a log cabin. One might pass within five feet of it and never find it. Four men were seated about the doorstep outside the rude cabin. Cim was perched on the knee of one of them, who was cracking nuts for him. They were laughing and talking and munching nuts and having altogether a delightful time of it. Sabra's knees suddenly became weak. She was trembling. She stumbled as she ran toward him. Her face worked queerly. The men sprang up, their hands at their hips. "The man is cracking nuts for me," remarked Cim, sociably, and not especially glad to see her.

The man on whose knee he sat was a slim young fellow with a sandy mustache and a red handkerchief knotted cowboy fashion around his throat. He put the boy down gently as Sabra came up, and rose with a kind of easy grace.

"You ran away—you—was hunted every—Cim—" she stammered, and burst into tears of mingled anger and relief.

The slim young man seemed the spokesman, though the other three were obviously older than he.

"Why, I'm real sorry you was distressed, ma'am. We was going to bring the boy back safe enough. He wandered down here lookin' for his pa, he said." He was standing with one hand resting lightly, tenderly, on Cim's head, and looking down at Sabra with a smile of utter sweetness. His was the soft-spoken, almost caressing voice of the southwestern cowboy and ranger. At this Sabra's anger, born of fright, vanished. Besides, he was so young—seemingly more than a boy.

"Well," she explained, a little sheepishly, "I was worried. . . . My husband went off on the track of a deer . . . hours ago . . . he hasn't come back . . . then when Cim . . . I came out and he was gone. . . . I was so—so terribly."

"Won't you sit and rest yourself, ma'am?" suggested the spokesman. The words were hospitable enough, yet there was that in the boy's tone which conveyed to Sabra the suggestion that she and Cim had better be gone. She took Cim's hand. Now that her fright was past she thought she must have looked very silly running down the draw with her tears and her pigtail and her screaming. She thanked them, using a little southern charm and southern drawl, which she often legitimately borrowed from the ancestral Venables for special occasions such as this.

"I'm v'ry grateful to you-all," she now said. "You've been mighty kind. If you would just drop around to our camp I'm sure my husband would be delighted to meet you."

The young man smiled more sweetly than ever, and the others looked at him, an inexpressible glint of humor in their weather-beaten faces.

"I sure thank you, ma'am. We're movin' on, my friends here and me. Pronto. Floyd, how about you getting a piece of deer meat for the lady, seeing she's been cheated of her supper. Now, if you and the little fella don't mind sittin' up behind and before, why, I'll take you back a ways. You probably run further than you expected, ma'am, scared as you was." She had, as a matter of fact, in her terror, run almost half a mile from camp.

He mounted first. His method of accomplishing this was something of a miracle. At one moment the horse was standing ready and he was at its side. The next there was a flash, and he was on its back. It was like an optical illusion in which he seemed to have been drawn to the saddle as a needle flies to the magnet. Cim he drew up to the pommel, holding him with one hand; Sabra, perched on the horse's rump, clung with both arms round the lad's slim waist. Something of a horsewoman, she noticed his fine Mexican saddle, studded with silver. From the sides of the saddle hung hair-covered pockets whose bulges were the outline of a gun. A slicker such as is carried by those who ride the trails made a compact ship-shape roll behind the saddle. Suddenly she noticed that the young rider wore gloves. The sight of them made her vaguely uneasy, as though some memory had been stirred. She had never seen a plainsman wearing gloves. It was absurd, somehow.

A hundred feet or so from the camp he reined in his horse abruptly, half turned in his saddle, and with his free hand swung Sabra gently to the ground, leaning far from his saddle and keeping a firm hold on Cim and reins as he did so. He placed the child in her upraised arms, wheeled, and was gone before she could open her lips to frame a word of thanks. The piece of deer meat, neatly wrapped, lay on the ground at her feet. She stood staring after the galloping figure, dumbly. She took Cim's hand. Together they ran toward the camp. Isalah had a fire going, a pot of coffee bubbling. His greeting to Cim was sternly admonitory. Ten minutes later Yancey galloped in, empty

handed.

"What a chase he led me! Twice I thought I had him. I'd have run him into Texas if I hadn't thought you'd be—"

Sabra, for the first time since her marriage, felt superior to him; was impatient of his tale of prowess. She had her own story to tell, spiced with indignation. ". . . and just when I was ready to die with fright, there he was, talking to those four men, and sitting on the knee of one of them as though he'd known him all his life, eating nuts."

Yancey seemed less interested in the part that she and Cim had played in the adventure than in the appearance and behavior of the four men in the draw, and especially the charming young man who had so gallantly brought them back.

"Thin faced, was he? And a youngster? About nineteen or twenty? What else?"

"Oh, a low voice, and kind of sweet, as though he sang tenor. And his teeth—"

Yancey interrupted. "Long, weren't they? The two at the side, I mean. Like a wolf's?"

"Yes. How did you— Do you know him?"

"Sort of," Yancey answered thoughtfully.

Sabra was piqued. "It was lucky for us it was some one who knows you, probably. Because you don't seem to care much about what happened to us—what might have happened."

"You said you wanted to go a-pioneering."

"Well?"

"This is it. Sit that fire, Isalah. Sabra, get that meat a-fizzling. Because we're moving on."

"Now? Tonight? But it's late. I thought we were camping here for the night."

"We'll eat and get going. Moonlight tonight. I don't just like it here. There's been a lot of time lost this afternoon. We'll push on. In another day or so, with luck, we'll be in Osage, snug and safe."

They ate hurriedly. Yancey seemed restless, anxious to be off.

They jolted on. Cim slept, a little ball of weariness, in the back of the wagon. Isalah dozed beside Sabra. She must have dozed off, for suddenly the sun's rays were sharply slanted, and she shivered with the cool of the prairie night air. Voices had awakened her. Three horsemen had dashed out of a little copse and stood in the path of Yancey's lead wagon. They were heavily armed. Their faces were grim. All three wore the badge of United States marshals, but there was about them something that announced this even before the eye was caught by their badge of office. The leader addressed Yancey, his voice mild, even gentle.

"Howdy."

"Howdy."

"Where you bound for, partner?"

"Osage."

The questioner's hand rested lightly on the butt of the six-shooter at his

waist. "What might your name be?"

"Cravat—Yancey Cravat."

The spokesman's face lighted up with the slow, incredulous smile of a delighted child. "I'll be doggone!" He turned his slow grin on the man at his right, on the man at his left. "Yancey Cravat!" he said again, as though they had not heard. "I sure am pleased to make your acquaintance. Heard about you till I feel like I knew you."

"Why, thanks," replied Yancey, unusually modest and laconic. Sabra knew then that Yancey was playing one of his roles. He would talk as they talked. Be one of them.

"Aim'n to make quite a stay in Osage?"

"Aim to live there."

"Go on! I've a notion to swear you in as deputy marshal right now, darned if I ain't. Citizens like you is what we need, and no mistake. Lawy'in'?"

"I'm planning to take up my law practice in Osage, yes," Yancey answered, "and start a newspaper as well."

The three looked a little perturbed at this. They glanced at each other, then at Yancey, then away, uncomfortably. "Oh, newspaper, huh?" There was little enthusiasm in the marshal's voice. "Well, we did have a newspaper there for a little while in Osage, 'bout a week."

"A daily?"

"A weekly."

There was something sinister in this. "What became of it?"

"Well, seems the editor—name of Pegler—died."

"Who killed him?"

A little shadow of pained surprise passed over the features of the marshal. "He was just found dead one morning on the banks of the Canadian. Bullet wounds. But bullets is all pretty much alike, out here. He might 'a' killed himself, plumb discouraged."

The silence fell again. Yancey broke it. "The first edition of the Oklahoma Wigwag will be off the press two weeks from tomorrow."

He gathered up the reins as though to end this chance meeting, however agreeable. "Well, gentlemen, good-evening. Glad to have met you."

The three did not budge. "What we stopped to ask you," said the spokesman, in his gentle drawl, "was, did you happen to glimpse four men anywhere on the road? They're nesting somewhere in here, the Kid and his gang. Stole four horses, robbed the bank at Red Fork, shot the cashier, and lit out for the prairie. Light complexioned, all of 'em. The Kid is a slim young fella, light hair, red handkerchief, soft spoken, and rides with gloves on. But then you know what he's like, Cravat, well's I do."

Yancey nodded in agreement. "Everybody's heard of the Kid. No, sir, I haven't seen him. Haven't seen anybody the last three days but a Kaw on a pony and a bunch of dirty Cheyennes in a wagon. Funny thing, I never yet knew a bad man who wasn't light complexioned—or, anyway, blue or gray eyes."

(Continued Next Week)

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