

EXCERPT NO. 2 OF
AFOOT, A TALE OF THE GREAT
DAKOTA TURKEY DRIVE



THIRTEEN

Cleanliness

That night we camped on the edge of a flat plain where we could see for miles in every direction. The buffalo hunters said they'd take turns keeping a night watch. All of us were pretty jumpy from being shot at earlier in the day.

The hunter who called himself Jefferson Colt asked me how old I was at supper and I told him I'd be fourteen in November.

"Thirteen? You mean to say you're thirteen? You're awful big for thirteen. You sure you ain't fifteen or sixteen?"

It was true that I could look down on the short bantam-weight hunter, Mr. Sharps. The last year I was in school, I was the tallest boy in my class, but there were others who were stronger and could run faster.

"What are you doin' out here?" he asked loudly. "You runnin' away from home?"

I didn't like his attitude. And I didn't want to answer his questions because he would make a joke of anything he learned about me. So I decided to ignore him and his bad manners. I went back work, stirring batter for cornbread.

"Boy! Don't turn your back on me! I asked you a question!" He stepped up behind me, grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. Gripping the front of my jacket, he pulled me

into his face.

“Let go,” I said, a little scared.

Appearing in the nick of time, Rufus seized one of Mr. Colt’s arms and jerked him around as though he were a rag doll. The young hunter let out a painful yelp.

“You ain’t paid to pick on the cook,” Rufus said coldly. “Just back off and leave ‘im be.”

The Bostonians were watching through their eye-magnifying peepers in horror. The other buffalo hunters began laughing loudly. Put out by what had happened, Mr. Colt stalked off to the hunter’s wagon to sulk, I figured. One thing was sure: Rufus had a new enemy.

By now my dislike for the buffalo hunters was growing. Although they were closed-mouthed about their own private matters, their strong Southern accent suggested they had all been soldiers in the Confederate Army. Rufus—who came from Missouri—was the only other Southerner on the crew. Bill, of course, wore his faded Union army pants with yellow stripes on the legs that were in tatters and a once-dark blue coat that was nearly gray from fading and dust. The Bostonians kept still, so there was no telling where their sympathies were. But, being New Englanders, I assumed they had favored the Union.

Father once said that for many soldiers, the War Between the States would never end, no matter how many years passed. Hatred of the enemy for what they had done to each other would not let them forget and forgive, regardless of any surrender or reconstruction. Father had been an infantryman in the Illinois Seventy-sixth Regiment. All he would say about the war was that it was unspeakably horrible.

I suspected the Four Buffalo Hunters still

carried hard feelings, even though the war had ended thirteen years earlier. Sometimes the others called Mr. Winchester "Colonel." Was it because he had been a colonel in the Confederate army or just because he was the boss of the four of them?

They had noticed Bill's threadbare uniform and commented to each other in low voices. I expected them to poke fun at Bill because he never spoke and rarely showed signs of listening. But they respected him, which I was glad to see.

Our procession changed with the new armed guards. One rode with Rufus in the big wagon, leading the drive. Another went on horseback, cradling his heavy rifle in his lap. The other two rode in their own wagon, behind the flock. All four constantly searched the horizon and nearer points for any sign of unwelcome visitors.

The hunter on horseback liked to rove, more or less circling the whole drive every hour or two. That bothered Bill, of course, who was used to doing the same thing himself. Not knowing quite what to do, he tried to stay on the opposite side of the flock from the mounted buffalo hunter.

Once I noticed that something had caught Bill's attention and he rode his mule a short distance to have a closer look. From there, he rode in a wide circle around the flock. His wandering made me nervous for two reasons. One, he wasn't protected when off by himself. And two, I was afraid he'd stumble onto other victims rotting on the prairie.

Mid-morning came and we paused to graze the bulls and give the turkeys a little corn. The mounted buffalo hunter just then was Mr. Springfield, who said he'd ride ahead to scout the road. Just before we began moving again, he returned and reported he

had seen riders off to the northwest. He judged them to be Indians of some kind. That news brought a torrent of cussing from Rufus, but he gave the order to move ahead, anyway.

By now the day had turned pleasantly sunny and too warm for winter clothes. I had peeled off my jacket when we stopped earlier and stowed it in the small wagon. The turkeys lolled along slowly.

The big turkey I called Buzzard had singled out a scrawny bird to pick on and kept chasing it around through the flock. Watching this distracted me for perhaps a half hour. The next time I looked around, I noticed that Bill was gone.

“Hey, where’s Bill?” I shouted.

“Who?” the older Bostonian asked.

“Bill, the old soldier. He’s gone.”

Word was passed quickly to the big wagon. Rufus called a halt and berated us for not watching better. Suddenly, he was frantic. Right away, he barked at two buffalo hunters to go out in different directions to find the missing drover. They refused.

Rufus then turned to the Bostonians. From the look on his face, you could see he knew it was pointless to ask them to risk searching the prairie. They’d probably get lost themselves.

Now Rufus seemed completely confused and panicky. This great, noisy hulk of a man had suddenly turned into a big child.

“Get me a horse and I’ll go find him,” I said. “He can’t be far.”

The buffalo hunters scoffed at my offer, saying I’d be crazy to go.

“I’d go with you, but...” Mr. Brady, the uncle, made the excuse that his spine troubled him after riding hard. However, he offered me his horse if I wanted it.

“I don’t know,” Rufus said in a troubled

voice.

Standing around fretting wasn't helping Bill any. I took the reins of Mr. Brady's horse, mounted, and rode back down the trail, trying to remember where we were exactly when Bill wandered out to look at something in the distance. Off to the left, I saw a dark object that turned out to be a low bush. In the grass I could see the faint tracks of a large animal, which I guessed was Bill's mule. They led up a low rise and into a shallow draw beyond. At the upper end of the draw was a small thicket of junipers.

Going there meant exposing myself to a possible ambush, if hostiles were hiding there. The horse I had was old and in bad shape, so there'd be no escape.

But if Bill was in that thicket and I didn't bring him back, I might be to blame for his being lost forever. Nervously, I prodded the old gelding into a trot toward the small grove of evergreens. As I got closer, a movement in the trees gave me a sudden start. I slowed the horse to a walk, watching the trees with wide eyes. At the last moment, I saw that the animal was Bill's mule, tied to a dead branch of one of the junipers.

Dismounting, I tiptoed forward to see what Bill was doing. Was I surprised when I found him sitting in a small pool of water, taking a bath! A spring bubbled out of the head of the draw, providing moisture for the small bunch of trees that formed a perfect screen for bathing. It was strange to see skinny old Bill sitting in a few inches of water. His hands and face were tanned a rich brown, but all the rest of him was as pale as Swiss cheese.

"Bill!" I yelled.

He jumped about a mile and plopped back down in the water with a splash. Instantly,

his face turned bright red. Even the back of his neck blushed.

“Rufus was scared you got waylaid. Finish up quick and let’s get out of here.” I went back to Mr. Brady’s horse and waited.

In a couple of minutes, Bill came out, buttoning up his old coat. Riding at a lope, it took us almost a half-hour to get back to the drive.

Rufus had regained his bluster and was fuming about lost time when we arrived. Again, he cursed out the turkeys for bringing him such misery and ordered us to move on. His behavior was sure confusing. One moment he was paralyzed with fear and worry about Bill; the next he acted like he never cared about the old soldier. Rufus never asked where I found him, what he was doing or anything. And, of course, he never thanked me, either.

That night, after supper, the boss came back to the fire to refill his coffee cup and sheepishly poured in a dollop of whiskey, without saying a word to me. He was starting to waddle back to the big wagon when I asked him to stay and talk to me.

“Yeah, whatta ya want?” He slurped up a mouthful of coffee and swallowed it with a froggy sound.

“I want to know about Bill.”

“He ain’t your business.”

“*He is, too,*” I said impatiently. “I was the only one who would go look for him. I deserve to know who he is.”

Rufus stared at the fire a long time. “Wull, mebbe you do.”

Anger came into his eyes, enough to scare me a little.

“Bill is my brother. William Washington Peach. When we were boys, he was our great hope. He was to be the lawyer, our brother

Ned the doctor and me the dentist.”

That was a laugh—Rufus Peach yanking out people’s teeth? And terrifying children and lady patients with his rowdy cussing? But the sad sound of his voice stilled any snicker I might have had.

“Bill was readin’ the law with an attorney in Springfield. When he got to lawyerin’, he was going to put Ned and me through college. Then the war came. Missouri was a slave state, but we were poor and never had any slaves, never believed it was right. So Bill went up to Iowa and joined a cavalry outfit. By the time he was twenty-three, they made him a major. He was a great soldier.”

This part was really hard for Rufus to tell.

“In ’64 he was being transferred to a different company. A bunch of Rebs captured him on the road and he spent the rest of the war in a prison in Mississippi. He got the malaria there, but he wouldn’t let it kill him.

“When Union forces opened that prison, they put most of the men on a steamboat called the *Sultana* to get them home as fast as they could. Well, they were pushing that ol’ boat too hard and she blew up just above Memphis. Killed more than eighteen hundred men.”

Rufus sat silent for a long time.

“It blew up Bill’s mind, too. He ain’t never said a word in the thirteen years since. Sometimes I wish—for his sake—it had took him, too. Instead of leaving him nothin’ but a shadow of a man.” By now, Rufus’s eyes were red and watery.

“And you’ve taken care of him all that time?”

“Naw. He lived with Ned on the farm until a couple of years ago. Then Ned died of the cholera and his wife sold the farm. That’s when I took Bill. All our big plans just dried

up.”

He tossed down the rest of his coffee, wiped his nose with the back of his hand, and went back to the big wagon.

Rufus didn't tell me to keep the story of Bill to myself, but that seemed best. Just when I thought Rufus was a hopeless bully, I saw that he did have a heart. And that caring for his invalid brother put a great burden on him.

At breakfast the next morning, Jefferson Colt, the young buffalo hunter with such a high opinion of himself, teased me about having to walk all the time.

“I don't have a horse.”

“Don't sass me!” he growled.

I wasn't trying to be fresh. I had simply stated the obvious. “I don't have money to buy a horse right now,” I retorted.

“Leave the kid alone,” Mr. Winchester, the boss buffalo hunter ordered. “After all, he's the one that brought back the dummy.”

Rufus was just finishing his food when the hunter made that remark. Furious, he hurled his tin plate to the ground. He glared a hole in the back of Mr. Winchester's shirt, but the hunter never knew it. After a moment, Rufus picked up his plate. I think he would have walloped Mr. Winchester, but he knew the other buffalo hunters would join the fracas and the rest of us wouldn't. So, he thought better of it.

To hide the scowl on his face, Rufus turned away and went to yoke the bulls. If someone made another crack like that, I was sure he wouldn't let it go.



**End of Excerpt No. 2 of
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