

C.T. Baker

THE CAPTIVE

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I, John Thomas, found myself in somewhat of a pickle. As I came over a sharp rise in the terrain, I ran smack dab into a small bunch of Comanches; it must have been a war party heading home after a raid. There must have been at least eight of those red heathens and they had a couple of captives too.

Needless to say, I didn't stay around long enough to make the introductions, once the surprise was over. No sir, I took out of there like the devil himself was after me. As fast as I was going, I do believe those red devils were gaining on me. They had arrows raining all around me. I turned and fired, and was rewarded when an Indian slid off the back of his pony.

I was pushing old Tony, my gelding, as hard as he'd go, but my heels just wouldn't quit drumming against his sides trying to get more speed out of him. I fired again, but my shot was low and I hit his pony, spilling the warrior. I was sure hoping that maybe that fellow might have at least the common decency to get his neck broken. But I didn't have the time to tarry because those bucks were getting closer all the time.

By my figuring, there were two down and maybe six more to go, that is if I didn't miscount when I ran into them. But that was just a quick appraisal, 'cause once you run upon some of those fierce, ugly varmints, then you'd know why I didn't introduce myself to them.

One of those Comanche bucks was coming up even with me on my right, our horses were running neck and neck. I could tell that he was edging over closer to me all the while.

Out of the corner of my other eye, I caught movement on my left. I turned my head slightly, and darned, if another one of those rascals wasn't edging up close on the other side of me. This buck was even closer than the other one. Well sir, I just aimed that old hog-leg of mine and fired. The look on that old boy's face was sure one to scare hell out of his beloved mother. And just thinking about going over to the happy hunting-ground looking like that would send shivers over a body.

Smiling, I turned that old Colt towards the other one and let the hammer fall. The explosion that came from the end of that old sucker sure made her buck in my hand. That Comanche warrior was blown off his horse as if he had hit a limb and got knocked off his pony's back.

“That was four down,” I stated to myself. Now if I could just manage to get the rest of them.

I know that my luck wasn't holding out when an arrow finally found it's mark and old Tony went down rolling ass-over-teakettle. Shaking my feet free from the stirrups, I hit the ground running all out.

Scared. Hell yea! Here I was heading towards a great big old rock and my feet just kept on pumping.

How I managed to stop before I was scheduled for impact, I don't know, but I did. Sweat popped out on my face as I thought about me being part of the scenery permanently. How I managed to keep a hold of my pistol, I don't know either, but I did. I hadn't realized how tight a grip I had on it until I loosened my fingers and they began to cramp up. My saddlebags, canteen, and Henry rifle were laying there still attached to my saddle. I needed all three if I was going to survive this dilemma. Especially my saddlebags because my extra shells and food were there, and my water was in the canteen.

Quickly I started hot footing it back to my fallen gelding to retrieve my belongings. It all happened so quickly. There I was a needing my stuff with no one in sight and then as if by magic this big old ugly Comanche appeared just beyond my dead horse. We shot at the same time; he missed, but I didn't . The chunk of lead I sent his way hit him between the eyes blowing him and the back of his head off. His brains splattering all over the rocks and ground behind him.

Grabbing on to my belongings, I started running to the safety of some rocks up along side of this old mountain. Well, maybe not really a mountain, but it was a large hill with rocks and boulders strewn all about. I was in the foot hills of the Rocky Mountains, that I was sure of, but just where I didn't know.

Suddenly my foot slipped on some loose gravel and I went to my knees. Lucky for me I did, 'cause a bullet whizzed by my head not missing but a hair. I could feel the heat and the wind off of that sucker.

When I found purchase, I was off again scrambling up that hill to some fair size rocks.

As soon as I had taken to the rocks, they did too. I guess they were kind of leery of me. I'd done killed about five of them and they must have been deciding whose medicine was stronger, mine or theirs.

Some people that don't know Indians will tell you that they will not fight on foot. Well, I'm here to tell you, don't you go believing none of that hog-wash. An Indian will fight you any way he can if he thinks there's a chance he might win. Fair play never entered into any heathen's mind.

My patience was finally rewarded as I saw one of the red devils slide on his belly between two small boulders. I raised my rifle and squeezed the trigger. My lead falling short kicking fragments of dust, rocks, and what all into the brave's face, I was rewarded with a screaming yelp. The Indian stood up

and started to scramble away, but I drilled him right between the shoulder blades. He never moved no more.

Gathering my wits about me, and making myself as small as I possibly could, I moved from boulder to boulder on up the side of the hill. For some reason or another, I didn't draw anymore fire from the Comanches. Had they figured their losses too high or were they biding their time waiting for dark to come?

Thinking back, had I killed five or was it six? Had there been more warriors in that war party than I thought? Those two captives, were they men, women or were they even captives? What had happened to them? It didn't seem to me that the Indians would kill them, especially if they weren't through using them for their own pleasure, would they?

I almost made it to the top of the hill, when this burly warrior came out of nowhere with his knife posed to strike and landed on top of me. I had only time enough to shift my body's position before the blade sunk deep into the fleshy part of my shoulder. Darkness almost came over me as the nerve shattering pain coursed through my body. Sweat popped out on my brow stinging my eyes, I could hardly think for the blinking pain. Somehow, during the time of the Indian's falling on me and his knife plunging into my shoulder, I managed to roll over backwards and by using my feet sent the warrior flying over my head. I tried to move but couldn't, then I was in a void of darkness.

Susan, my sister, and I had sold everything we owned to make this trip west. She had been so happy when a stranger came by the hard scrabble farm in Cross Valley, Tennessee, where we lived. The soil was so thin that the seed generally washed down the valley during a hard rain.

The stranger painted the west as a dangerous, but romantic place. The dangers were the Indians and the elements of nature. The romanticism was the vast country itself filled with almost every kind of wildflowers imaginable. The wild game were plentiful and at every stream or water hole the fish would jump out of the water right into you frying pan. In Northern California and Oregon the trees were so big that it would take all day just to walk around one and the soil so black and rich that all you had to do was throw some seeds out and in a day or two the plants would be up knee high. That fellow sure was a talker and he had Susan hooked all the way.

Susan was so taken up with all this talk that nothing would do but for us to sell out and get underway. The farm like I said was so worn out many generations ago and didn't fetch much. We scraped everything we had together along with that last batch of moonshine I had made, which I sold to Major Zackery Holiday. We got us a wagon with six head of oxen and a lanky old sorrel gelding.

Traveling was slow, but steady. After enduring the first week, we seemed to settle into a regular routine, and began to make ten to fifteen miles most days. We probably could have made more miles if I'd have pushed, but the oxen were kind of on the lean side, so we gave them plenty of time to graze after we made camp.

When we came to the bigger towns that afforded good campsites and graze, we'd stop for a day or two. I'd set about looking for odd jobs to help ease the drain on what little money we had. I was right handy fixing all sorts of things from shoeing animals to digging privy holes. I was especially good at fixing up old firearms.

In Memphis, Tennessee we spent two weeks and camped alongside a small stream called Cowlick Creek, which flowed into the, Big Muddy, Mississippi River. The grass was knee high and I set up camp. Susan stayed behind while I went on down to the livery stable and talked to the holster, Tom Baldwin. He pointed to a corral that was full of horses and mules. Tom gave me two- bits, a quarter, a head and he'd furnish all the tools, nails, shoes, and forge.

It took me the rest of that day and part of the next to muster out the twenty-five head of stock. Mopping my brow the holster told me where I might find several odd jobs that needed doing.

We left Memphis a couple of weeks later somewhat richer than I had been before I reached there. Why, I'd even been able to let Susan get a few of those frilly girl things that they all set store by. Now mind you, Susan was not one to be extravagating on herself. I had to nudge her a time or two to get her in the mood.

Our next stop was in Independence, Missouri. We joined a good size group of folks camping along the Missouri River. I felt sure Susan would be safe enough there amongst all them family women. This would give me time enough to mosey around town looking for a few odd jobs that would help tide us over until the wagon train left on July 10th. It was a little more than two weeks off and I felt sure that I'd be able to make enough to provision us for the trip to Oregon.

Joining the train had set us back two hundred dollars and I had to try to regain some of that. I'd taken odd jobs for most of a week and not even put a dent in regaining my train fare tack.

I was passing by a saloon one night on my way back to camp and decided to go in and have a beer. Wherever men gather, one can always count on there being talk and most of the talk usually centers around politics, weather, and work. A man has picked up a many a good job listening in a place like this.

The beer was good and I noticed several poker games going on in there. Now, I'm not much on gambling, but my old daddy had shown me enough about cards to allow me to take care of myself. After a while I saw a cowboy get up and head out the door. So I kind of moseyed over that way and asked if I could sit in on a few hands.

Well sir, those old boys just knew that they had them a sucker. But luck ran my way. At first I lost a few hands just to keep things interesting. However, as I warmed to the cards and studied the faces of my opponents, I started winning. I still lost a pot now and again, but come to closing time, I had won my two hundred back plus some. Now, these fellows were some kind of sore that a nobody could come into their town and do them this away.

I was the last one to leave out of the saloon with having to straighten out my money and all. I was feeling pretty good about my run of luck and was anxious to get back to camp and share my happiness with Susan.

But those old boys seemed to have other thoughts on the matter and set a trap for me on the outskirts of town.

As I walked along the dirt road, I was weary but yet I was keeping a watchful eye open. Which was my nature to do so. More than one man had been dry-gulched with less money in their pockets than I had. About half way back to camp was a thicket and that was where they were waiting for me. Two of them came at me from the front with guns drawn and one was trying to slip up behind me. Well sir, I'm not one to go up against those kind of odds normally, but I needed that money in my pocket to take care of Sis while we made the trek west.

Well, I just slipped my hand back behind me, while they commenced to talking, thinking I had no way of defending myself, and drew that old hog-leg of a Walker Colt from my waistband. I never pulled a

weapon on nary a soul unless I intended on using it. It all happened so quick that it startled those fellows. My first shot hit the man on my right in the shoulder breaking his collar bone.

The man on the left seemed to have lost all stomach for this farce, dropping his gun and running back through the thicket, stumbling as he went.

As the man behind me raised his pistol to crack me across the skull, I turned and gave him a disadvantage. My own pistol came down along side of his head, dropping the man like a sack of taters. The man that I had wounded began to moan, drawing my attention back to him. His weapon lay in the dirt a few feet away from him, but it was not any danger to me, as he rolled around on the ground holding his arm shouting, "Sweet Mother of Jesus."

After kicking the pistol over in the ditch I told him, "It's a mite late to be calling upon the Maker like that. You should have thought about Him before you all commenced to come after me. Now get up on those two feet, before I change my mind, and get out of my sight. You can tell those others that were with you that if I see hide or hair of any of you, I'll kill all of you. Do I make myself clear, Mister?"

"You're a hard man," the wounded fellow said.

"If you ever see me again feller, I'll show you just what hard is."

When I reached camp there were a few people that were up tending to their fires. Normally my sister would be up wondering where I'd been off to, but I didn't see any sign of her.

I got the fire going and put the coffee water on to boil. Then I went to the back of the wagon and spoke softly not wanting to disturb anyone else, "Sis, it's time you rolled out. I've got the water close to the fire so's you won't have to go to the creak. I'm going on down and water the stock before breakfast."

Sis and I traveled fairly light. We had no furniture, just a trunk, with a few odds and ends. The trunk held our clothes, what there was of them. So when Sis ran into a young couple wanting to go west but didn't have the means, she offered to let them travel with us. I even thought this was a turn for the good. There'd be two men and two women to share the work and the young women would be good company for each other. So I agreed with Sis, since I'd never been able to refuse her much, especially since Ma had died when she was just a little tike. The couple, Mary and Jasper Jones, was staying at a rundown old shack close to town until the time came for the train to pull out. Most of their stuff was already at the wagon.

When I came back to the wagon, Susan was nowhere to be seen. I figured that she may have fallen back to sleep, since there was no hurry to go anywhere. I went to the back of the wagon and said, "Time to get up lazy bones." When I didn't hear her stir, I opened the curtain and looked inside. All our stuff in the wagon lay in shambles as if someone was hurriedly searching for something. Plus Susan was not in there.

I went around to the camps questioning our closest neighbors but nobody seemed to have seen nor heard a thing. I went back out to where my stock was, as I needed to retrieve my horse just in case I had use for him later. I came across one of the Hanson boy, he was maybe twelve or so, and I asked him, "Say, Billy, ain't it? Have you seen my sister lately?"

"Yea, I seen her late last night. I had to go to the bushes and I seen her leaving with those two ruff-looking fellers that's been staying in that old shack on the other side of the creek."

"You sure it was her, Billy?" I asked.

"Yea , I'm sure", the boy said.

I made for my horse, I didn't even take the time to saddle him. I just leaped upon his back and went calling upon those two no-accounts. When I got there the door was standing partly ajar and no one seemed to be around. Even the corral was empty. A quick look inside told me that these galoots left in a hurry. There were old clothes and bedding lying around in a state of disarray. There were also several whiskey bottles scattered around the room and the smell of sweat, leather, feces and no telling what else was strong. The best thing that could happen to that old shack was to burn the place down.

Looking carefully around the shack and the corrals, I studied the ground for tracks. It took me a while, but I managed to find three separate sets of tracks clear enough that I could recognize later out on the trail. How much of a head start they had I didn't know , but aimed to lessen that distance before this day ended.

After saddling my horse and gathering up enough grub, such as utensils I would need along with my rifle, I went in search of the Jones'. I let Jasper and Mary know what had happened to Susan and what I intended to do. I made a deal with them to take the oxen and wagon and go on west, telling them that after I found Susan, we'd catch up to them later. They agreed.

The tracks I'd be following were headed west. I had dogged their trail for nearly two weeks, being no more than a day and a half behind them.

Now here I was in a life and death battle with a bunch of Comanche warriors. My head began to throb even before I opened my eyes. How long I'd been unconscious, I didn't know. I laid there trying to settle my head as it kept whirling around and around.

I finally managed to roll over on my side to get a better look around me. I was still in the foothills of the Rockies. I had to open and shut my eyes several times to clear my vision enough to see. The warrior was still there where he had fallen.

How long I had been out I do not know, but the sun was half-way down in the west, so it had been a few hours.

My shirt front was soaked with blood, where the warrior had stabbed me. When i finally managed to get my shirt open so I could see the damage, it was still oozing a pinkish drainage. However, the main flow had clotted itself. All I had to do now was not to do anything to make it start bleeding again.

I stuffed my handkerchief into my shirt to cover the wound the best that I could. The wound needed cleaning, but I dare not build a fire to heat water, for fear of being spotted. There may be more of these red heathens hanging around waiting for me to do something stupid.

I needed a place to hide up until I could sort things out and I'd have to scout around some to see if there were any more Indians. I stumbled onto a place where I could look all around. If anyone came towards me I'd see them. As I was studying the landscape, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. After watching in that general direction for a while, a spotted pony appeared, casually grazing on the sparse tufts of grass among the rocks.

Holding my hurt arm in close to my body so as not to jar it no more than necessary, I grabbed my gear and started down the hill towards the pony. My senses were keen to any sound out of the ordinary.

It took me the better part of an hour to maneuver down to the pony, but I made it. Surprisingly enough the pony stayed still while I caught it.

I was leading the little stallion back to where my old gelding lay when I heard what sounded like someone, a woman trying to scream around a mouthful of gag.

Holding my pistol in my good hand I worked my way towards the sound slowly. If there was any funny business, I aimed to shoot first and ask questions later.

It was close, just around the corner and up in the rocks a little ways, I found the source of the noise. There Susan was trying to scream, tears rolling down her cheeks and a look on her face telling me just how terrified she was.

I reached her in just a few steps and cut her loose. She grabbed at me holding me close to her.

“John, I knew you'd come. I told them what you'd do when you found them.”

“Shsss, I'm here. Let me get you out of here before they find us.”

“John, cut Morning Flower loose,” Susan said.

“Morning Flower,” I said, startled. I had been so wrapped up in trying to get Susan settled down that I had forgotten that I'd seen two captives.

Morning Slower was sitting there, bound much in the same way Susan had been. One look at that Indian girl, and I almost forgot about the possible danger that maybe lurking nearby.

I sliced through the rawhide strip that bound her and was rewarded with the look of relief in her eyes.

Morning Flower had a graceful build, stood about five feet-one inch tall and had the blackest eyes I'd ever saw.

I snapped back to the situation I was in, and aware that there was maybe more danger hanging around, I looked around for the paint stallion and saw that he had rejoined his friends close by where they had been tethered by the Comanche warriors. Retrieving the stallion and two other ponies, I threw my saddle on an Iron Grey gelding that seemed to be the more gentle of the three.

Morning Flower noticed that my wound had opened up again and insisted that she tend it, and I let her. Now that I'd found Susan again I didn't want to run the risk of b bleeding to death. Morning Flower made a poultice of mud, and herbs that she found nearby. She packed my wound and tied a makeshift bandage around it.

Morning Flower rode the Indian version of a saddle while Susan the most inexperienced rider used my saddle. We had covered no more than a mile when all of a sudden we were surrounded by at

least twenty warriors. I started to draw my pistol, which was a fool-hearted thing to do, when Morning Flower stayed my hand. Then she said in a loud clear voice, "These are my people." Morning Flower rode up to one of the Cheyenne warrior's and conversed for a long time in the guttural language of her people. "Follow," she said, "they no harm you."

Some of the braves broke off and went back to the scene of the battle I had with the Comanches, while the others fell in around us as we headed back to their camp.

We stayed in the Cheyenne vamp for two weeks while Morning Flower tended to my wound each day. I knew that it would be hard to say goodbye to her but my loyalties lay to my sister and seeing her to a new home in Oregon.

On the morning Susan and I were to depart, white Elk, Morning Flower's father, came up to me and said, "You are welcome in my camp anytime." It had probably been the longest speech that old boy had made in English in a long time.

"Thank you White Elk, but I must go back to my people and see that my sister has a home in the hew land we are heading for." He then gave me a necklace to protect me from other Cheyenne and their allies.

Susan, teary eyed, climbed upon her horse and we departed from the Cheyenne camp. I looked back once and saw Morning Flower still standing there rooted to the spot watching us until we were out of sight. I waved back but I guess we were too far out for her to see.

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