

NAT WOLFE
OR
THE GOLD HUNTERS

A ROMANCE OF PIKE'S PEAK AND NEW YORK.

BY MRS. M.V. VICTOR

CHAPTER I.

THE RESCUE.

"Their black hair, thick and lowering,
Above their wild eyes hung,
And about their frowning foreheads
Like wreaths of night-shade clung.
'The bisons! ho, the bisons!'
They cried and answered back.
The frightened creatures stood aghast
To see them on their track."

WITH rifle on shoulder and knife in belt, Nat Wolfe rode along carelessly, for it was midday, and the country was open. That caution which ten years of uncivilized life had taught him never entirely slumbered, and he gave a sharp glance ahead, when, upon turning a low bluff rising out of the plain just here, he descried travelers in advance of him. A moment assured him that they were a family of emigrants making their toilsome way to Pike's Peak. He had seen hundreds of such during the season; had sometimes aided them in cases of sickness and famine; and had cursed in his heart the folly of those men who had brought with them their women and children to share in the hardships of the journey.

The party he now observed was only one of multitudes presenting the same general features. There was a stout wagon, drawn by three pairs of lean oxen at a slow and lumbering pace—probably the last wagon of a train, as it was seldom that a family ventured upon crossing the plains alone. If so, the train was out of sight

along the track, which here becomes less monotonous, winding among the bluffs and along the shallow bed of a river, in which, at present, no water was visible. The driver had attempted to lessen the difficult task of his team while ascending a long swell of ground, the heavy wheels of the wagon cutting deep in the sand, by dislodging the two women and three children from their seats in the conveyance. The sun was hot, the air languid, and there were no cool shadows of trees to break the heat and glare of the way. The two elder children, who were boys, ran on with spirit, but a four-year-old girl lagged behind and cried, while the women toiled on with listless, dragging steps. As Nat watched them, one of them stooped and took the poor little child on her back.

"It's too bad!" muttered he, spurring his horse forward.

The whole family looked back anxiously when they heard the clatter of horse's hoofs, the driver involuntarily reaching for his rifle, as the route was one of frequent danger and dread.

"Halloo, madam, let me carry your cub for you," called Nat riding up and lifting the child from the bent back to the neck of his strong animal.

There was a kindness in his voice which dispelled fear, even that of the shy little creature in his arm.

"Thank you, sir."

He looked down at the speaker curiously, for her tone and manner were unexpected. She was a girl, of not more than seventeen, slender, and with a face too quickly hidden again by the drooping and uncomely sun-bonnet, for him to realize fully its peculiar and melancholy beauty.

Nat Wolfe was a hater of Indians and hunter of bison, not a lady's man; so he rode in advance of the slouched sun-bonnet to the side of the wagon.

"Another fool!" was his curt, sarcastic greeting.

"I begin to think so myself," answered the emigrant, whose hollow cheeks and emaciated frame gave force to his disconsolate words. It was evident he had been sick on the way.

"Pike's Peak, I s'pose?"

"Yes."

"You're late in the season."

"Was down with the fever back to Pipe's Creek; kept us two weeks."

"Where's your company?"

"Just ahead. They're to stop at that little strip of cottonwoods we're coming to, for dinner. I hope they've found water for the cattle."

"Not a drop. You'll have to press on smartly if you reach water this evening. The nearest, on this trail, is fifteen miles beyond. I was over the route yesterday."

"Sho! the teams'll have a tough pull through this sand; they'd be glad of a drink now."

"What possessed you to bring this little thing along with you, stranger? It's bad enough for men, let alone wives and babies."

"That's so. But fact is, Meranda's got tol'able used to follering me about. When I fust went out to Indiana I left her to home in York,

and she won't never be left behind sence. She's emigrated to Missouri with me, and two years ago to eastern Kansas, and now we're a-marching for the mines."

"Marching for the poor-house," growled Nat. "I'm a 'rolling stone' myself, but then I ain't a family man, and have a right to do as I please."

"Well, the fact is, things hain't prospered with us as they seem to with some people. We've had bad luck."

"And always will, I reckon," again muttered Nat, taking in at a shrewd glance the whole air of the man.

They had now reached the summit of the bluff, and at its foot, on the other side, along the edge of the stunted strip of wood which there freshened the eye, was drawn up the emigrant-train for a brief rest. The cattle were not unyoked, nor were there any fires kindled. The men were eating their cold bacon and hard bread, some lounging on the ground and some in their wagons. Only one woman was visible among the party of thirty or forty men, besides the two now trudging along by the last wagon. Nat did not resign the little girl until they came to the halting-place, when her father came and lifted her down.

"Won't you take a bite with us?" he asked, in return for Nat's civility.

"Obliged to you, stranger; but I've got a bit of dried buffalo in my pocket, and a biscuit."

Before dismounting and tying his horse to the low branches of a cottonwood, the hunter rode along the line of wagons to see if he knew any of the party. He had lived so long in that region that he

was widely known, having a fame of his own which just suited his peculiar ambition, and which he would not have exchanged for that of General or Senator. So, although he was acquainted with none of the faces here, he was recognized by several, who greeted him heartily, and passed his name from lip to lip. The emigrants could not but feel braver and in better spirits when they heard that Nat Wolfe was among them.

As he lounged under a tree, against which he had carefully rested his rifle, cutting off bits of dried meat with the knife from his belt, he was surrounded by eager inquiries, asking after the route—with which they knew him to be familiar—about the water, the feed, the Indians, the streams, the storms, etc. While he talked, his eyes were constantly wandering to the little spot of shadow where the young girl was sitting, patiently feeding the little one, but seeming to eat nothing herself. She had thrown aside her bonnet to catch a breath of the light breeze springing up on the plains; her eyes were fixed afar off, on the heads of bison dotting the vast, monotonous desert, or the horizon, which ringed it in—except for the care of the child, she hardly took an interest in the scene more immediately about her. Whether it was the beauty of her face or its sad patience which touched him, Nat did not inquire of himself; he only wondered who she was and what she was doing in such a place. He could trace no resemblance between her and the thin, sun-burned, care-worn-looking woman by her side, the mother of the children, but evidently not of the young girl. They surely could not be sisters, for they were too unlike.

Neither the fierce sun, nor the fiercer wind of the prairies had spoiled the rich, dark hue of her skin, a clear olive on brow and temples, melting into a glow on either cheek. The melancholy eyes were large and dark, and floating in liquid fire—a fire that,

however slumbering and repressed, seemed made to flash forth laughter and love. Her hair, instead of being neglected, as her present mode of life would have excused, or "done up," frontier-fashion, in a rude knot, was woven in glossy braids, wound tastefully about her head. The faded calico dress, awkwardly fitted as it was, could not conceal the rounded outlines of her form, any more than the coarse shoes and the wearisome journey could deprive her movements of their natural grace.

"See if he won't take a drink of this cold coffee, Elizabeth; it'll fresh him up more than whisky," spoke the older woman, pouring out a draught into a tin-cup, and giving it to the girl, who rose and approached Nat with the simple offering which testified their gratitude for the trifling kindness he had done them.

Too young and innocent to feel the full awkwardness of her position, in the midst of so many rough men, yet with a demeanor of shrinking modesty, she passed through the crowd surrounding the hunter, and gave him the cup.

"Thank you, child. It's just what I wanted to top off this salt meat," and drinking the beverage, Nat returned the cup to her hand with a smile which brought the flush to her cheeks.

"Pretty girl that," remarked one, as she retreated quickly.

"Yes," replied Nat, gravely, "and I wish she were where she ought to be, instead of in such company as this."

"So do we all," said another, warmly. "There's none of us would harm a hair of her head—and if we did, that uncle of hers would teach us better manners. He sets more store by her than by his own children, I do believe."

"Bosh! he hain't got spirit enough to take care of his own women-folks," added a third.

"So she's his niece?" queried Nat.

As he threw another admiring glance toward the maiden, he met one as admiring in return. Safe beside her aunt, she was regarding him shyly, and with something of interest lighting up the apathy of her expression.

There were not many who could first see Nat Wolfe without being attracted to give him another look. He had an air of absolute self-reliance, in which there was not a shadow of bravado; it was the coolness of often-tested strength and courage; his piercing eyes read every thing at a glance. Over six feet two in height, he was so lithe and symmetrical that he did not appear as large as he really was. His unshorn hair and beard, and his hunter's dress, gave a roughness to his appearance which was at least both picturesque and appropriate. Nat Wolfe would not have been himself, without the long boots drawn over the doeskin pants, the blue shirt, the leather belt, the brace of revolvers, the knife and the rifle which formed his daily costume. Perhaps a rifle can not properly be called an article of costume; but Nat's was to him like his good right arm—eating, sleeping, on foot or in saddle, it never left his side.

The smile he had given the girl was enough to make her look back at him kindly; it was a smile which he kept for children and helpless things, and all the brighter for being rare.

"You'd better be pushing on, men; it's fifteen miles to the first drop of water; it'll be ten o'clock to-night before your teams can reach it, if you urge them to do their best."

"I'm thinkin' we had," responded the leader of the train. "Goin' to ride our way, Wolfe?"

"Well, yes, I'm bound your way, at present. I'd thought to make forty miles before midnight, but I don't know that it matters. Maybe I'll keep 'long-side for a while."

The cold provisions were returned to their boxes, the women and children climbed to their places, the drivers flourished their heavy whips and shouted and swore at the patient oxen. As usual, Timothy Wright was the last to get started; and his niece Elizabeth, as she sat under the tent-like cover of the wagon, looked out forlornly on the winding array, tired of every thing but of seeing the strange horseman riding at the head of the company, and wishing he would stay with them forever.

Yes, forever! that did not seem too long to say, for she was sure the journey was endless—there was no limit to any thing more—the earth was like the sky, the desert was illimitable; she should never get away from that dreary caravan, never see trees or mountains again; the cattle would never crawl over all that heavy sand, they would never reach the far-distant Pike's Peak—never see the gold glittering in heaps all over it—thus the sad thoughts drifted through her mind as the sand drifted before the afternoon breeze.

Several times in the course of the afternoon, she crept out of the slow-moving wagon and walked by its side. The prairie was cut up by deep gullies worn by the spring freshets, and when the great wheels went jolting down these, it was pleasanter to be out of the wagon than in it. Although the track was sandy along which they wound, there was still a scanty covering of short grass struggling up through the arid soil, and occasional fringes of stunted

cottonwood along the banks of empty streams—mere brush—trees she would not call them who remembered the magnificent forests of the home of her youth.

"Blast it! I've broke an axle!" exclaimed Timothy Wright, as the wheels went down a steep rut with a dangerous jerk, and stuck there. "The whole lot's gone over safe but me. Of course if there's trouble, it'll fall to me."

"It's our luck, Tim," said his wife, despondently.

"That's so. Every thing goes against us. Hello! hello there! They don't hear me, they're so far ahead. You run on, Elizabeth, and holler as loud as you can. It couldn't be worse than to happen just now," he continued, in a complaining tone, as he went to work to unstrap the extra pair of axletrees which each wagon carried in case of just such accidents.

"It'll put us back so we won't get to camp before midnight. Blast it, it's just my luck."

In the mean time Elizabeth ran on to attract the attention of the party and obtain help in repairing the damage. She was fleet of foot than the lumbering oxen, and the train was not more than a quarter of a mile in advance. She expected every moment when some one, chancing to look back, would comprehend the state of affairs and stop.

Suddenly she discovered that the train was thrown into confusion. At first she could perceive no reason, but a sound as of rumbling thunder drew her attention toward the south. A vast herd of bison had come into view, rushing up from a valley which had concealed them, and pouring down impetuously directly across the track of

the train. They had encountered many of these herds during the last few days, had passed around and even close beside them; but this vast army had been frightened by some real or suspected danger, and the electric thrill of terror which flashed through their palpitating breasts made them blind to the obstacles in front of them. On they came by thousands, darkening the plain, shaking the earth, threatening to annihilate cattle, goods and men. To attempt to oppose their resistless numbers would have been like flinging feathers in the face of a whirlwind. Forward they swept, near and nearer, and for a few moments it seemed as if all were lost; the men did the only thing they could do to save themselves—they fired their rifles as rapidly as possible in the face of the enemy. The flash of fire-arms, and perhaps some of the shots taking effect, saved the train from destruction; the immense horde swerved slightly to one side, and swept on more madly than ever, just grazing the last one of the teams, bearing down the wagon and trampling the cattle underfoot, but only stunning the driver, who was saved by the wagon falling over him.

And now the path of the bison was toward the unprotected girl, standing motionless with fright, her eyes fixed upon the mighty sea of brutal life rushing down upon her, terrible and tumultuous. It was as well for her to remain riveted by terror as to flee, for flight could be of no avail—she could never outstrip that long wall darkening down upon her. She felt, through all the cruel pangs of anticipation, their hoofs trampling her young life into nothingness.

Then there came flying along in front of that rushing host a horse and rider. While the horseman had to sweep almost the whole line of the bison, they were galloping directly forward toward the girl, and it was a question of fearful interest to the lookers on as to

which would reach her first—or whether he and his animal, as well as the hapless maiden, would not be overwhelmed.

As for her, she did not see him, or if she did, terror had so paralyzed her that she did not distinguish him from the multitude. Their hot breath already blasted her, when she felt herself caught up, and unable any longer to realize the truth, she gave a wild shriek and became lost to further consciousness of her situation.

When they saw Nat Wolfe stoop and swing the girl lightly up across the neck of his horse, the gazing emigrants in the distance gave an irrepressible shout, and again became breathless and silent, watching the further progress of events; for the herd had gained on the steed during the momentary halt, and being doubly freighted, the noble beast could not now run with his usual swiftness. A passion of terror had taken possession of him also, as he felt himself encumbered, and the bisons pressing upon him. He reared and whirled about madly, threatening to run upon destruction, instead of away from it. His owner bent and seemed to utter a word in his ear at which he sprung forward, as if carrying no weight at all straight as an arrow from the shaft, quite in advance of the bellowing monsters throwing up the sand in clouds along their way.

Suddenly horse and riders went down into a ravine and were lost to sight, and the next moment the whole excited herd poured over like a torrent, and were seen thundering down the empty river-bed and speeding over the valley. As soon as the bisons had passed, the men started to ascertain the fate of the two human beings probably crushed to death in the river-bed. As they reached the edge of the ravine and looked eagerly over, Nat Wolfe crawled out from the shelter of the shelving ledge on which they stood, shaking the dirt and pebbles from his hair and garments.

"Hello," cried he, cheerfully. "All right. Hold on, till I hand up the girl," and he lifted her, just struggling back to consciousness, up to the ready arms held out for her; then, finding a rift which afforded him a foothold, he swung himself lightly after her.

"Well, I declare for't, Lizzie, you had a narrow escape—you're as white as a sheet," cried her uncle, reaching the scene just as she attempted to stand alone. "I don't wonder you're all in a tremble. Miranda's so scart she hadn't strength to walk. We thought you was gone for certain—and we didn't know but we was too. Them brutes came nigh to giving us a brush—we just escaped by the skin of our teeth. How on earth, stranger, did you manage to get out of the way?"

"By the merest chance. You see when we went down, my horse stumbled and fell—but I was too quick for him—I come down on my feet with the girl under my arms. It occurred to me, quick as a flash, that our only hope was to press close against the shelter of the bank and let them go over us. And over us they went in a manner not the pleasantest. I was afraid the shelving earth above would give way on us, the gravel and dirt rattled down so furiously. But here we are, safe and sound, aren't we?"

The light and color sprung to Elizabeth's face, as he turned to her with a careless laugh; she essayed to say something, to thank him for saving her, at the risk of his own life, from a terrible death, but her lips trembled and the words would not come. Nat liked to do brave deeds better than he liked to be embarrassed by thanks; he turned quickly from the glowing face, and looked after the distant herd.

"Poor Kit," said he, "I hope he has escaped as well as his master. I'd hate to lose that horse. He and I are one and inseparable. This isn't the first danger he's carried me safely out of."

"What do you think has happened to him?"

"Well, he regained his feet before the buffalo came over. I think like as not he held his own—just as the wise ones do—kept with the crowd and said nothing."

"It's a chance, then, if you ever see him again."

"Don't you believe it—if he hadn't known more than common folks, I wouldn't have named him Kit Carson. When he gets out of his difficulty, he'll make his way back here. I'll stay here all night if he don't get back before dark."

"And that puts me in mind that I'm like to be kept awhile too," said Wright. "I was just sending my niece forward for help, when that stampede of buffaloes took place. I've broke an axle."

"Let's set to work and repair damages then, if we don't want the cattle to go thirsty to-night. By the time we're ready for a start, I hope your horse will stray along, Wolfe."

"If he don't you needn't mind me. We'll overtake you soon enough if he does get back. And if he *don't*, I've spent many a night in worse places than this."

"P'raps part of us better go on," suggested one of the emigrants. "We can choose the camp, build the fire, and be getting things comfortable for the rest. It's like we'll kill a buffalo, and have a j'int roasted by the time you come up."

"I'd advise you not to part your forces," said Nat, quietly. "There's Indians about, and they're not particularly friendly. But don't be frightened, child," he added, as he saw Elizabeth grow pale again. "I don't think they'll venture upon any thing worse than begging. They're a set of thieves and beggars."

"If there's any thing in the world I mortally dread, it's Indians," she answered, in a low voice.

"These Indians are not the kind you read about—fierce warriors hanging to their horses' sides and hurling their poisoned arrows—they're a sneaking and dirty set of rascals who'd murder you if they dared. But they won't dare. They're afraid of Uncle Sam—and your party is too large and too well armed."

The men hastened away to see about the broken axle, while the young girl lingered a moment, looking at Nat wistfully.

"But you," said she, "will not you be afraid to stay here alone all night, waiting for your horse?"

"Afraid?"

A curious smile flashed over the hunter's face as he echoed the word; she read its meaning, blushed, and continued:

"Ah! I know you are afraid of nothing. Yet harm *might* happen to you; and I should not like you to suffer from an accident which comes upon you by saving my life."

"Don't think of it then. I live out-of-doors. I've slept a hundred nights on the open prairie as many miles from any white man. Good-by, little girl. I'm off after them buffaloes. I'll have the satisfaction of killing two or three of them in return for the fright

they gave you; and I may find my horse quicker by following 'em up. Tell your people I've concluded to go after 'em. If I have good luck, I'll reach your camp yet to-night." So saying, Nat Wolfe swung his rifle to his shoulder, leaped down the bank, and started off with long strides across the lower plain.

An hour's hurried labor sufficed to repair the damaged wagon and replace the load; the emigrant train resumed its creeping pace, its weary company finding something new to think and talk about in the appearance of the hunter among them and the succeeding adventure. As it grew dark, they kept a sharp look-out, having examined their fire-arms and put them in order, the statement of Nat as to Indians in the vicinity giving them some uneasiness.

A new moon, sinking in the western sky, threw a melancholy light over the wide desert, enabling the drivers to keep the trail and push on for the water which they were assured was not far away. The heat of the day gave place to chilling winds, causing the wife and child of Timothy Wright to shrink down to the bottom of the wagon and wrap themselves in blankets. But Elizabeth sat by her uncle's side, hugging her shawl close about her, and looking out at the moon with a tired, home-sick face.

"I guess you wish you was back to Missouri," he said, looking around at her, and speaking as if her looks were a reproach to himself.

"I don't know, uncle. I didn't like Missouri very well, either."

"It was unlucky, our settling where the fever and ague was the thickest. I'd a' done well there, if we hadn't been sick so much. And then Kansas was a poorly country whar' we tried it—the drought just discouraged me about that. It's mighty unpleasant for a young

thing like you to be jolting along away out to Pike's Peak. But if we once get there, the worst'll be over; we'll see good times. You shall have a silk frock this time next year, Lizzie."

"I hope the gold will come as easy as you think, uncle. Those people whom we met, day before yesterday, coming back from the mines, didn't tell us much to brighten up our spirits."

"Well, I will say I was rather set back by their story. 'Twon't do any good to get discouraged now, though: we haven't provisions enough to carry us back, nor money to buy 'em. We must go ahead and make the best of it. Some folks may have better luck than others. I expect we shall just pick up the biggest kind of nuggets."

"You say you're not one of the lucky kind," she answered, smiling forlornly.

"It's a long lane that has no turn'—maybe I'm coming to the turn now. How's the young ones getting along, wife?"

"They're sound asleep, poor things, without supper."

"There's a fire ahead," spoke Elizabeth; "perhaps it's an Indian camp."

"Nothin' of the kind, Miss," answered a person who had been standing on the track, waiting for them to come up. "I run ahead and took a squint, while the teams waited; it's our campin' ground, and there's another lot of travelers in before us—a train most as large as our own. They'll be glad of our company, and we'll be glad of theirs. Hope you don't feel none the wuss from your scare to-day, Miss?"

"Oh no, not a bit the worse, thank you."

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