

REDLAW, THE HALF-BREED
OR
THE TANGLED TRAIL

A TALE OF THE SETTLEMENTS

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CHAPTER I. THE HIDDEN VOICE.

"Well, gentlemen, I propose we get to business. I for one have no time to waste, and there are plenty of us present for a beginning," and the speaker glanced approvingly around the room.

He was a tall, powerfully-built man, aged probably forty-five years, of a rugged, yet intelligent and almost handsome cast of features; while the rough "home-made" garments that he wore disguised without hiding the splendid contour of his form. There was the slightest possible tinge of the "brogue" to his speech, that would have told a close observer the land of his nativity.

"I second the motion," piped out a shrill, quavering voice, as a tall, skeleton-like body abruptly shot up to its full height, and then sunk down with a jar upon his stool, as all eyes were turned upon the speaker, while he vehemently scrubbed at his face with an enormous yellow cotton handkerchief, to hide the confusion he felt at thus "speaking out in meeting."

"Thank you, friend Hannibal Hooker," bowed the first speaker. "But first we will have something to—Landlord! Jim Henderson, I say!" roared out he who appeared to take the lead in the meeting, bringing down his huge sun-embrowned, toil-hardened fist upon the table before him, with such force, that it

seemed as if the deal would split, while Hannibal Hooker convulsively leaped from his stool with a faint squeak.

"Thunder 'n' lightnin', Cap'n Neil," uttered a deep, rumbling voice, as the door opened and a man thrust his head through the aperture, "am I deaf, thet you need to t'ar the house down? What d'ye want?" and he entered the room.

It was like a mouse with a lion's voice. Scarcely five feet and built in proportion, the new-comer spoke with a voice such as we imagine the giant Magog to have used, it was so full deep and sonorous. But, if not consistent with his body, it was with his heart, for "Honest Jim Henderson" was a by-word, for use to typify truth and fidelity, among his neighbors.

"Bring us something hot and hearty, *avic*, for our throats will need wetting before we get through," responded he whom the landlord called Captain Neil.

"I protest, gentlemen! I protest most emphatically against this proceeding!" exclaimed a short, rotund personage, bouncing upon his chair the better to be observed. "Must we depend upon intoxicating liquors to enable us to form our plans? I say no, a thousand times no! With such supports, our downfall—"

What the conclusion of this worthy personage's speech was, is lost to posterity, for by some mischance—it *was* said, by the adroit trip of a neighbor's *foot*—the stool upon which he stood was overturned, and the little fat fellow plunged headlong beneath the table, giving utterance to a series of grunts and snorts that in no wise tended to quell the shouts of merriment at his mishap.

"There, brother Bacon," laughed the leader, "is a flat contradiction to your argument. You fall by opposing it; we will stand with its aid. So, Henderson, look lively man, for it's getting well along, and I am in haste."

The worthy brother made no further objection, and when the punch was brought in, by mere legerdemain, a cup filled with the steaming beverage found itself tightly clasped in his chubby hand, and ten minutes later was empty. Then Captain Neil stood up and spoke.

"My friends and neighbors: Most of you know what is our purpose in gathering here to-night, but as a few may not, I will briefly state the facts. You all know that for nearly a year past we have been troubled with floods of counterfeit money, and with losing our stock. How this is done so secretly, and who by, is yet for us to learn. But one thing is certain: unless we *do* find out, and that soon, we may as well sell out for what we can get, and leave the country.

"Not one, so far as I can tell, among us all, but have suffered in both ways; for my part, I am five thousand dollars poorer to-night than I was five months since. Now, must this state of affairs continue? I, for one, say *no!*—a thousand times no; and if need be, will spend every moment of my time for the purpose of ferreting out these scoundrels.

"But to come to the point: what I have to propose is this: We must organize a band—a *vigilance committee*. Do you know what that means? They had one in Kentucky—they had one in Arkansas; we must have one in Kansas! Judge Lynch has

jurisdiction *here* as well as elsewhere, and it is to him we must turn, since the law of the land is powerless to protect us!

"All who are now present we can trust, I believe, and there are others who can be admitted. But you must act cautiously, and know every man well before he becomes a member. One traitor among us would counteract all the good that others might do. But all this you know as well as I; and those who wish to speak, or who have any plan to propose, will now be heard," concluded Neil McGuire, as he resumed his seat, and filled the well-blackened corn-cob pipe that lay before him.

Several of the members delivered their opinions upon the subject, all agreeing with their leader that something must be done; the only thing in doubt, appeared to be in deciding what that thing should be. It was while the debate was at its height, that loud, excited voices were heard in the bar-room without, followed by the sounds of a scuffle, with a rattle of overturned chairs and tables.

Then the connecting door was violently thrust open, without the trouble being taken of lifting the latch, and a man stood upon the threshold, keenly scrutinizing the scene before him. A man we said, but it might well have been, a remarkable man.

So tall that the hair of his uncovered head touched the top of the doorway, and yet so perfectly proportioned that had it not been for the standard to compare by, he would not have seemed over six feet, if so much. The hands that grasped the sides of the doorway were large and muscular, but as fine and white as a lady's; and from the position, great masses of

swelling muscle could be seen distending the light material of his sack coat, upon the arms.

His face was of a massive style of beauty, and yet not without delicate lines and touches. The keen blue eyes were large and frank-looking, usually having a genial, good-humored tone about them that instinctively attracted the beholder; but which had now given place to a cold, steel-like glitter that warned how dangerous it might be to cross his mood.

In age he appeared about thirty, and but for the long, flowing mustache and beard of a soft flaxen color, one would have taken him for half a decade less. After a few moments' silence the intruder spoke, in a full, clear tone that would have been musical had it not been for the metallic ring, occasioned by his anger or excitement.

"Gentlemen, I must beg your indulgence for interrupting your council so abruptly, but "Honest Jim" Blockhead yonder denied me admittance; and as I was in no mood for arguing the case, I fear I gave the fellow a broken head, and took the liberty of introducing myself."

"You say right," responded Neil McGuire, in a stern tone, as he confronted the stranger, "it *is* a liberty. We were engaged upon private business, that does not concern you in the least, and—"

"Pardon, my dear sir," interrupted the stranger, "and allow me to correct you. The business you were upon *does* concern me, and I doubt if one man present is more deeply interested in its success than myself," he added, in a conciliatory tone, that was

flatly contradicted by the glitter of his eyes at the manner of McGuire.

"Perhaps you will tell me where you got your knowledge of what we were consulting upon, and your reasons for this intrusion," coldly returned the latter.

"It is easily done," quoth the stranger, as he advanced to the table and coolly filling a pint cup with the punch, drained it at a draught, not heeding the scowls of those around him, "and shall be as you say. In the first place, you are organizing a league to put down the horse-thieves and counterfeiterers that infest us."

"Go on," was the cold reply.

"You are prudent, and I don't blame you. Who knows but what I am a spy, or person in the interest of those same scoundrels?" laughed the intruder.

"Just so; who *does* know?" chimed in a voice from among the crowd.

The man sprang to his feet and glared in the direction of the voice, but every face wore an expression of astonishment, while each man glanced around him as if to discover the speaker.

"If the fellow who spoke thus will be honest enough to show his face, perhaps he will learn who and what Clay Poynter is. I would give—"

"How much—in *counterfeit money*?" squeaked a shrill treble from another part of the room, toward which Poynter turned in a frenzy of rage and fury.

"Peace, gentlemen!" ordered McGuire, thumping upon the table to give emphasis to his words. "We are not here for squabbling, but upon serious business. Mr. Poynter is a gentleman. Let him proceed."

"Gentlemen, it is true I am a comparative stranger among you, but, for all that, you have no occasion to insult me. I will give a hundred dollars to the man that will point me out the scoundrel who spoke those words!"

"Which will only cost you sixteen dollars!" added another voice—alluding to the general price paid for counterfeit money since the days of Sturdevant—sounding from close behind him who had called himself Clay Poynter.

The latter swiftly turned, hissing out a bitter oath, with right arm drawn back to deal a fearful blow upon his insulter, *but no person was there!* The space behind him had been unoccupied since his entrance. Poynter staggered back against the table with a half-startled, half-puzzled look upon his features; but this he soon banished, and with a somewhat constrained voice, said:

"Really, the devil seems to be at work here to-night, and has selected me for his mark!"

"Never fear; he will not claim you yet. The mortgage has several weeks yet to run," again added the strange voice.

"Come—come!" impatiently cried McGuire, "this is all nonsense. Please go on with your explanation, Mr. Poynter."

"Well, I learned that you were about to organize a vigilance committee, and thought I would present my name for a membership. So I rode over from my house, and as I passed the ford at the creek, I was knocked from the saddle, and when I recovered, I was robbed of my horse as well as watch and a large sum of money."

"Ho, ho! the robber robbed!" croaked the mysterious voice, and the cry appeared to float around the room above the company's heads, most of whom were deathly pale, while anxious, apprehensive glances ran from one to another. "Ho, ho! the robber robbed!"

"Our worthy friend is quite a ventriloquist," slowly uttered Poynter, as his fiery eyes roved around the room, dwelling slightly upon each face; but upon one in particular he cast a glance of mingled hatred and triumph, then passed to another. "I would willingly give half I am worth, just to take one lesson from him," dwelling with bitter emphasis upon each word.

"Well, friends, we may as well break off now before harm is done," said Neil McGuire, in a vexed tone. "There's something wrong here, and the less we say, perhaps the better it will be, for who can have any object in breaking up this meeting, unless he or they are connected with this accursed gang of scoundrels?"

"But what! must we give up the plan after all this to-do?" exclaimed Demetrius Bacon, again leaping upon his stool in order to gain the desired auditory, forgetful of his late downfall.

"Give up the devil!" retorted McGuire, who was not always precise in his language. "When I put my hand to a thing in dead up-and-down earnest, it's bound to go through. And now listen, all of you. Until you hear from me, attend to your business as usual, and do not make what has happened to-night the subject of conversation. We must use a little more circumspection, for if a spy can enter among us here we will need all our wits."

"I show you the spy—why don't you take him?" again squeaked the strange voice, and then as each man glanced at his neighbor, it added: "His name, *now*, is Clay Poynter!"

"My dear sir, whoever you may chance to be," cried the man thus strangely denounced, in an assumed tone of *nonchalant* politeness, as he glanced around the room, "I made an error a few moments since. I said that I would give half I am worth; so I will add the other moiety, if you grant me an interview."

There was no reply to this speech, and the party filed through the doorway into the bar-room of the "Twin Sycamores," the majority of them pausing to take a parting drink before leaving for home. Beside Neil McGuire stood a medium-sized man, of a sandy complexion, and who appeared to belong to a different class from the rough, homespun-clad farmers that surrounded him, if one might judge from his apparel and general demeanor.

A heavy gold watch-guard, from which depended a bunch of seals, crossed his waistcoat, and while with one hand holding a

riding-whip he daintily flecked a speck of dust from the tip of his well-polished boot, the other raised a glass of liquor from the bar. As he did so, a solitaire diamond ring flashed back the candle-light with a thousand scintillations. Among the frills of his linen shirt-front a magnificent cluster pin of the same jewels gleamed forth, exciting the wonder and admiration of a number of the men present.

At present his features were calm and expressionless, while his small gray eyes shone with a half-vacant air; but beneath all this a close observer would have seen something more. He would have pronounced the stolidity a mere mask, and would have seen that not a man present but was keenly scrutinized. He would have said that it was as if a panther had donned a sheep's skin, for some particular purpose. And he would have been right.

"Come, Dement," said Neil McGuire, turning toward this man. "Come, let's go," and the two men elbowed their way from the room.

The remainder, such as had not departed, continued to converse in low tones upon the subject of the strange voice. Poynter was carelessly leaning back against the counter, holding a glass in one hand, while he listened intently to the remarks, although not appearing to do so.

"It may be all right, Touter, but it is mighty queer, anyhow. And then who *is* this fellow? Do *you* know—does anybody know, except that he appears to have plenty of money, and calls himself Clay Poynter?" distinctly uttered a bold, free tone, and the speaker turned his head toward the person alluded to.

He was a somewhat remarkable-looking man apparently five or six and twenty years of age. In form he was tall, and straight as an arrow, with a lithe suppleness in every movement, that, joined to his swarthy complexion, and long, straight black hair, in part confirmed the rumor that he had Indian blood in his veins.

"Ah, my dear Indian Polk," blandly interrupted Poynter, as he drew himself erect upon hearing these words. "You do not drink. Allow me to offer you a glass of brandy!" and with a lightning-like movement he hurled the heavy glassful at the head of the young man.

But, quick as was the action, the missile was eluded by an adroit duck of the head, and Polk sprung forward with a fierce curse, lunging out with his clenched fist a fearful blow as he did so. The blow fell upon Poynter's half-averted cheek, tearing the skin as if cut with a knife; but not a quiver or a motion was the result of the blow.

Before the assailant could recover his balance, Poynter's left hand clutched his throat, and then the massive fist shot out, taking Polk full between the eyes, with such crushing force that he was hurled clear across the room, where he fell head-first in a senseless heap beneath a table.

Coolly wiping the blood-spots from his shirt-front with a handkerchief, Poynter turned to the bar without another glance at the fallen man, and called for a glass of brandy. Henderson promptly served it, at the same time whispering:

"You'd better look out, Mr. Poynter, fer 'Injun' hain't no baby, an' 'll hev y'ur blood fer this, ef so be he kin. He's a devil, shore!"

"Bah!" laughed Poynter, snapping his fingers. "I don't care *that* for him. If he crosses my path again, or lets me hear any more of his dirty hints, I'll hit him a square blow next, one that he'll not get over so easily as this one. But when he gets up, just give him my compliments, and tell him that if he relishes the specimen, there's plenty more of the same brand at his service," and so saying, Clay Poynter left the room and vanished in the darkness, leaving those behind him still more puzzled at him than before, which is saying a good deal.

CHAPTER II. THE DOUBLE SHOT.

"What can be keeping Nora, I wonder?" half muttered a man, as he anxiously peered through the leafy screen before him, with a gesture of impatience.

A man, we said, and as he turns his head so that the sun's rays fall beneath the broad-brimmed slouched hat, we can see that it is Clay Poynter, who is there awaiting the arrival of some person. Even had not his muttered exclamation revealed this fact, there was an eager, ardent tinge to his restlessness that would have betrayed his secret—would have told of an appointment with some one a little more than a mere friend.

A woman would have guessed that he was expecting a sweetheart, whom, for some reason, he could not visit openly, and she would have been right. He was awaiting a sweetheart, and her name was Nora McGuire.

Again Poynter peered through the bushes. He saw a small but neat vine-covered log-house, of only one story. Behind this and upon either hand spread the fields of young grain, now a level, waving sea of verdure, with strange forms and figures chasing each other, as the blades were bent by the fitful gusts of wind.

Behind this, again, rose the rugged mounds forming the "Wildcat Range," among whose more difficult recesses the "big game" still could be found, and it was rumored that yet more dangerous customers might there be met with—that many a

wild scene of blood and crime those rock-crowned hills had witnessed.

But of this our friend took no heed, for he saw the object of his thoughts step from the cabin door, and after a hasty glance around, trip lightly toward the spot where he was standing. Poynter pushed aside the screen of bushes, and half emerged, but as if by a second thought he drew back, with a muttered curse.

He had caught a glimpse of Neil McGuire's stalwart form passing from the field to the cabin, and for some reason, best known to himself, did not wish those keen gray eyes to note his presence. The young girl now reached the screen of bushes, and with one glance behind her, passed them, and then was tightly clasped in the strong arms of Poynter.

"For shame, Mr. Poynter, to surprise me in that way!" pouted the dainty lips, as Nora glided from the embrace.

"But, Nora, 'tis all your own fault, if I am obliged to surprise you, as you say," laughed the young man.

"And why so?" innocently queried the maiden, with the slightest possible toss of her pretty head.

"Well, pet, the fact is, I have a serious monomania, that troubles a—"

"A *what*? Is it any thing very dangerous?" asked Nora, with a startled air.

"That depends," he laughed again. "But, as I was saying, the disease is beyond my power to cure. It is, that whenever I see a

dainty little rosebud mouth, like one that shall be nameless, I feel an irresistible desire to just stoop my head and see if it is as sweet as it looks!"

"Oh, you horrid creature! I thought you were sick, or something," pouted Nora, half turning away.

"Now you're mad, and I've got something of importance to tell you."

"No, I am not mad; but you talk so queer at times, that I can't understand you. You seem to delight in making sport of me."

"I make sport of *you*. No, no, little one. I love you far too well for that. It is only my way. But come, take my arm and let's walk. I have something to say that can not be postponed, and some one might interrupt us here," added Poynter.

"But can't you come to the house, Clay? It don't seem right for me to meet you in this manner," hesitated Nora.

"Your father is at home, and you know what he said the last time I called. If any one else had spoken to me in that way, Nora, he would—" And then pausing abruptly for a moment, he added: "But what has he told you about me, pet?"

"About you? Why—" faltered the maiden.

"Come, Nora, it is better that I should hear it from you than him. No matter how harsh or unjust it may be, I shall not forget that he is *your* father."

"Oh, Clay, it was dreadful!"

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