THE PHANTOM TRACKER

OR,

THE PRISONER OF THE HILL CAVE.

BY FREDERICK DEWEY

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.
CHAPTER II.
CHAPTER III.
CHAPTER IV.
CHAPTER V.
CHAPTER VI.
CHAPTER VII.
CHAPTER VIII.
CHAPTER IX.
CHAPTER X.
CHAPTER XI.
CHAPTER XII.
CHAPTER XIII.
CHAPTER XIV.
CHAPTER XV.

THE PHANTOM TRAILER;
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CHAPTER I.

THE CAVE-HUNTER AND THE SHADOW.

It was a sultry, scorching day, on the banks of the river Gila—very sultry and silent. The sun in the zenith looked whitely down, and the yellow banks reflected its rays fiercely on the sluggishly-creeping, warm river. Away over the flat, glistening plain reigned the utmost silence. As far as the eye could reach it saw nothing—only dead level, dead heat, and dead silence. Here, mile upon mile from civilization, hundreds of miles away from any habitation, this vast wilderness stretched away—always level, always hazy, always silent—a spectral land.

A large catfish lazily rolled and tumbled on the surface of the river, too hot to swim, and too stupid to move—lying there, he only, at times, waved his fins and tumbled gently. A vulture sat on a sand-crag just above him—a water-vulture, or, rather, a brown, dirty fish-hawk. He was lazily watching his chance to swoop suddenly down upon the fish, and carry him off in his talons. But it was too hot to undergo any useless exertion, so he watched and waited for a sure chance, pluming himself moodily.

A panting coyote sat on his house at a little distance, watching the pair, and vaguely conscious that he was very hungry; a mule-rabbit under an adjacent tiny shrub tremblingly watched the coyote, starting violently at the slightest movement of the latter; and a huge yellow serpent, long and supple, dragged his scaly body up the bluff toward the rabbit.

The sun shone redly down now, leaving its white appearance for a sanguinary and blood-red hue; a haze was brewing.

Suddenly the quiet was disturbed. The coyote sneaked away, with his bristly chin upon his lank shoulder; this alarmed the rabbit, and he, too, fled, making the most gigantic leaps; in ten seconds he had disappeared. The snake's eyes flashed in enraged disappointment, and hissing spitefully, he raised his head to discover the cause of the hasty flight.

He soon saw it. On the barren banks he could have seen a mouse at a long distance. The object he saw was the exact reverse of that diminutive quadruped, being a large, stalwart, swarthy man, on a large black horse.

He appeared suddenly, riding over the crest of an adjacent hillock. He stopped on the summit, glared keenly around, then rode down into the river. He stopped in the river where the thirsty horse drank greedily. Then, after dismounting and drinking deeply himself, he boldly rode up the opposite bank.

He appeared well acquainted with the locality, for this was the only fordable place for miles—either the river was too deep or the bottom too soft—"quicksandy."

Riding up the bank, he halted and sat for a moment buried in profound thought. He was a Mexican, a giant in proportions. His visage was that of a crafty, wily man, and his keen black eye was one that never quailed. His dress was simple, being in the American manner, of well dressed buck-skin. He however still clung to his *sombrero*, which, instead of being cocked jauntily on the side of his head, was drawn down over his eyes to shield them from the hot sun. His whole equipment was that of a mounted ranger, and this style of dress has so often been described as to be familiar to all.

Instead of the short carbine which a Mexican habitually carries, he sported a long, elegant rifle—a very witch to charm a hunter’s eye. Then he had a brace of silver-mounted revolvers, each firing five times without reloading. Like the rifle, they were costly, and fatally precise and true, models of expensive and beautiful workmanship.

But in his belt was that which, however captivating to the eye *they* might be, cast them into the shade. It was a long dagger, double-edged, sharp as a razor, with a basket handle of rare workmanship. This last was gold (the handle)—pure, yellow gold, chased and milled into all manner of quaint and droll devices. It hung jauntily in its ornamented sheath at his belt, and his hand was forever caressing its beautiful handle.

Why should this man, forty years of age, rough, plainly dressed, riding with the stealthy air of one who is at war—with a ragged saddle and plain, even homely steed, have such elegant and costly weapons? They cost a large sum, evidently, and should be the property of a prince.

While he is caressing his dagger, as the weapons and their history are the subjects of this narrative, let us go back a year for a brief space.

The name of the Mexican was Pedro Felipe, the old and tried servant of a wealthy and kind master, also a Mexican. A year ago his master, Señor Martinez, had occasion to cross a vast, sterile wilderness, lying a hundred or more miles north of the Gila river. While on that plain, in a remote part of it, called the Land of

Silence (a ghostly, spectral plain, considered haunted), his only daughter, a beautiful young girl, was abducted by a robber chief, and carried away to a rendezvous—a hollow hill in the plain. Here she was rescued by Pedro, disguised as a black savage.

The hillock had an aperture in it, and Pedro, on hearing a noise, looked out and saw the lieutenant of the band, a fierce man called the "Trailer," approaching. Knowing he must take his life or be discovered by the whole band, he shot him dead, from off his horse.

From the Trailer's body he took the weapons we have described, and then left the body to be devoured by wolves and birds of prey. He was certain that in the hillock a large treasure was secreted, but fearing to be discovered by the band, whom he expected to arrive every hour, he left without searching for it. But the band, he soon after learned, disbanded without returning to the hillock, and left for Mexico.

Pedro had but one glaring fault—the love of gold. He was now on his way to the hill in the Land of Silence, to search for the treasure, and he felt confident of finding it. Why not? The captain and the Trailer were dead—he had seen them both fall; the party had at the same time disorganized; and he was certain they had never returned to seek for it.

The Trailer had been the last robber on the spot, and he himself had killed him; so he was certain of finding the treasure untouched.

Pedro Felipe's absorbing love of gold had brought him on this hot day to the northern bank of the Gila, on his way to the Land of Silence in search of it.

The sun gleamed redly through the haze as Pedro looked northward, with his raven eye toward the spectered Land of Silence. It was an ill-fated land. Many dark and mysterious deeds had taken place there, many deeds of which the world would never know. Indians and hunters avoided it and deemed it haunted by evil spirits. Well it might be; it was a ghostly, hazy, quiet place, where the sun shone fiercely, and water was scarce.

Pedro's experience had been strange in this land, and he was very superstitious. But he was also brave and crafty, having the reputation of being the best Mexican scout and Indian-fighter in his part of the country.

So, urged on by his love of gold—his only and great fault—and by the prospect of adventure and excitement, he was to brave, alone and unaided, the land of specters and of death—the Land of Silence.

He turned his horse's head to the south, and peered away over the plain. Nothing was in sight; he was alone in the vast wilderness.

"Farewell, Mexico!" he said; "good-by to your sunny plains and pleasant groves! May it not be long before I come back to thee, my land! Farewell, my old master, my beautiful mistress, and her noble husband; my old companion, Benedento—and all I hold dear. This morning I stood on your border, sunny Mexico. To-morrow, at sunset, I will be alone, *alone* in the Land of Silence. Farewell, my land! I may never tread your soil again."

He slowly dismounted, and placing his arm affectionately round his steed's neck, raised his *sombrero* reverently.

“My faithful horse, we must go; time is precious. Once more, farewell, my land.”

He waved his hand with a graceful parting-salute, calmly, but with a vague presentiment of coming evil. Then he remounted, turning his horse’s head to the north; under the hot sun, blazing with blinding heat, in the desert alone, he rode away, bound for the Land of Silence.

As he started, a vulture rose from an adjacent knoll, and wheeled slowly above him, and croaked dismally. Was it a bad augury—the warning of evil to come?

The vulture returned to his perch; the other animals returned to their former places, and Pedro was riding away.

As the last wink of the setting sun gleamed out over the silent plain, a new form appeared on the southern bank of the river. He, too, peered sharply about him when he reached the crest of the knoll, and he was very wary and watchful. When he had finished his scrutiny without seeing any thing to alarm him, or arouse distrust, he rode down the bank.

In the river his horse (a powerful black) halted to drink; but the rider never moved. Then, when he had finished, the horse stepped up the northern bank and galloped away toward the north.

The traveler was dressed in buck-skin; was armed to the teeth; had a black, conical hat in which a black plume nodded and waved, and a face in which glowed two raven eyes.

He was an ugly-looking customer—a desperado in appearance.

In the twilight soon horse and rider became blended in one blurred mass as they receded, rapidly growing fainter to the sight, and further away. In half an hour darkness had fallen, and they were no longer visible from the river bank.

Who was the rider?

Ask the winds.

Where was he going?

To the Land of Silence, directly in the Mexican’s tracks.

CHAPTER II.

LOST IN THE DESERT.

On the afternoon in which last chapter's events occurred, a train of three wagons plodded slowly up to the southern bank of the Gila, about twenty miles east from the place where Pedro forded it. Here was quite a good ford, and it was somewhat in use, being on a northern trail—one of the many from Mexico to the north. The country about it was exactly similar to that around the other ford with one exception—away in the east, Vulture Mountain was barely visible in the distance. From that mountain toward the east the Gila river was constantly under the quiet supervision of a sandy-rocky range of disconnected mountains, to its extreme source. But here all was flat, sterile, and quiet.

The wagons were accompanied by several horsemen, and one horsewoman—or rather, young girl. In fact, these were almost the entire party, the only ones in the wagons being the teamster, one American, and two Canadians.

It was a small train—a "whiffit-outfit." Three wagons were a small number beside the dozens that generally consorted. It could easily be seen it was not the property of a large stock-owner or freighter, but was evidently the property of a single man—an emigrant.

It was even so. The man yonder on the verge of the bank—that sturdy, bronzed man of fifty or thereabouts, about whom the other horsemen gather, is the owner: Joel Wheeler, a northern New Yorker.

Hearing of the rapid fortunes which were constantly being made by enterprising Americans in Mexico, he had left a comfortable home in New York to gain immense riches. After being in that “golden” land for several years he had found out what many others had done before him—that the men in Mexico were as keen and shrewd at a bargain as any one else—in fact, many times more so.

His exchequer ran low; marauding savages and violent disease thinned his flocks; his native servants plundered him; until, completely disgusted and homesick, he packed his goods and chattels and started, *en route* for his old State.

His daughter, the horsewoman on the sorrel pony, was a sweet, lovely girl of eighteen. Blessed with natural beauty, the several years’ sojourn in Mexico had done much to enliven and develop it—being a brunette she was rendered doubly comely by the fresh, dry air of that country.

Another of its pleasant freaks had it played upon her; it had given her that much to be desired blessing, *perfect* health. From a pallid, feeble invalid she had become a jovial, blooming maid—a very picture of sound health. During her residence in Mexico she had, without losing her northern modesty and chastity, contracted the universal *abandon* of the graceful, indolent people, which, while it detracted nothing from her purity, visibly added to her external attractions. In one respect, however, she still clung to her former breeding—her equitation. While it was, and is, customary for Mexican ladies, when so inclined, to ride astride of a horse, and while she knew it was much the easiest way, she still rode, as she termed it, “in civilized fashion.”

Christina Wheeler (Christina being curtailed to the tantalizing appellation of Kissie) was a courageous, high-spirited girl. Though being in possession of several masculine traits, she still preserved that feminine reserve and chariness of conduct which is so necessary in male eyes, and without which woman sinks to the level of a beautiful, favorite dog, or a precise, costly gem. She was a kind and beloved mistress to the few servants; and while treating them graciously and well, brooked no unseemly or obtrusive familiarity. Besides her beauty she was no nobler nor more intellectual than scores of women one may chance upon during a day's ride through a prosperous and refined district. But her beauty was regal—more—bewitching, as many a disappointed Mexican dandy only too well remembered, who had basked in her impartial smiles only to mope and sulk afterward.

Did I say impartial smiles? I was wrong—entirely so. If report said truly, the sweetest were bestowed on her father's chief man, or foreman. He was with the party, being an adopted son of the old gentleman. Sturdy, self-reliant and brave, and withal, handsome, being brought up from infancy with Christina, no wonder her romantic spirit had endowed him with all the qualities requisite as a hero. It had; and as she gazed at him now, as he conversed with her father, she felt pleased at seeing how much he relied on young Carpenter.

The young man bestrode a light-colored steed, known from its peculiar color throughout the western and southern States as a "clay-bank." He was well curried and rubbed down; indeed a curry-comb attached to his saddle-horn denoted this was an every-day occurrence, even in the desert.

Such a man was Samuel Carpenter. At twenty-five years of age he well understood wild life, and it showed his tidy, neat habits—every thing belonging to him being kept in perfect order.

The other two horsemen were rough-looking, wiry men of middle age. One, mounted on a gray "States horse," was Burt Scranton—Carpenter's assistant. The other was a man well known in southern Texas and northern Mexico—"Tim Simpson, the guide."

The latter, for a stipulated sum, had agreed to conduct the party by the shortest and quickest way to the Leavenworth and Texas trail—being nearly four hundred miles from their present position.

Like many others of his calling he was reticent in the extreme, scarcely speaking save in monosyllables. He had several reasons for this: one was that it *kept him out of trouble*; another, that he was not annoyed by a cross-fire of questions, which guides detest.

The teamsters were Kit Duncan, an American, and Napoleon and Louis Robidoux, two brother Canadians, whom Joel Wheeler had brought from New York. They were now returning with glad hearts toward their northern home.

It is unnecessary to state the party was well armed—every man carried a rifle, and the regulation brace of revolvers and a "bowie." The wagons were drawn by horses—six to a wagon.

Instead of sitting in the wagon and driving, the teamsters had adopted the southern habit, of riding the "near" wheel-horse and guiding the leaders by a single line. When wishing to "gee," he steadily pulled the line; to "haw," a short jerk was sufficient.

This is the party, its outfit and position, now on the southern bank of the Gila.

They forded the river and stood headed northward on the other side. Now they were in the heart of the Indian country—now they must be wary and guard against the hostile and cunning savages.

“Well,” remarked Mr. Wheeler, looking north, “had we better stop here, or go on?”

The question was addressed to the guide, who was down on his knees searching for Indian “sign.” He arose.

“Stop hyar.”

“Why? what are your reasons?”

“Water hyar. No water fur forty mile.”

“Is that so? Well, then we had better stop. We can’t afford to lie out all night without water, can we Sam?”

“No, sir,” replied the young man. “We should be obliged to fast if we did. When the weather is sultry, especially on the southern prairies, food begets thirst. We should suffer without water. Any old plainsman will tell you when out of water to keep your stomach empty, unless a dry cracker can be called food. It is true, medical men say the reverse; but, sir, men that have suffered thirst know that food without water is dangerous. *I have tried it.*”

“K’rect!” muttered the old guide, in assent.

“Skience is one thing an’ experience is another,” declared Burt Scranton. “I’ve studied one an’ tried t’other. Unhitch, boys.”

All hands went to work to prepare for the night. While the preparations for camping were going on, the cook, Kit Duncan (the hardest worked, and consequently sourest and snarliest man in the party), who was also a teamster, went down to the stream to fill his kettle with water.

A "jack-rabbit," startled at his approach, sprung from under a projecting sand-point, and darted away up the bank. As it gracefully and rapidly "loped" away, Christina (or Kissie, as we shall call her), ever on the alert, noticed it.

"Oh, what an enormous rabbit!" she cried. "The largest I ever saw. Pray, Simpson, is that the common rabbit?"

"No. Jack-rabbit."

"What a very odd name. Why do they call it so?"

The guide did not give the true answer—that because of its resemblance to a laughable beast of burden; but answered shortly, as he filled his pipe:

"Big ear; like—like—like—donkey."

"Oh, hum! I perceive. See, it has stopped under that little bush. There—Oh, my! it is hurt—it is lame! see how it limps—I will catch it, it is so curious."

Kissie was impulsive. Without further preface she lightly struck the sorrel pony with her riding whip, and on a swift gallop went after the rabbit, which slowly limped away.

The guide, being the only idle one, alone noticed her. He shook with suppressed laughter, awaiting the result.

The guide well knew, though Kissie did not, that this strange rabbit plays some unaccountable pranks, and is the direct cause of many hearty laughs at a "greenhorn's" expense. Seeing a human being, he at once retreats, limping as if badly hurt. This attracts some one not “well up” in prairie life, and he pursues it. But let the sequel tell its own tale.

As Kissie drew near, the rabbit bounded away as if suddenly cured of its disability, gaining some distance; then he limped again—this time dragging one of its hind-legs laboriously.

His long ears were laid upon his back, which was suddenly shrunken, as if by a shot in the spine; he pawed hastily with his fore-feet; and, evidently, was badly hurt. Perhaps his sudden activity was the result of severe fright, succeeded by a reaction—so reasoned Kissie.

“Bunny, Bunny,” she cried, “you are mine—you are my captive.”

She was quite close upon him, and was drawing closer at every spring. The rabbit was almost caught.

“Count not your chickens before they are hatched,” warns an old saw. Perhaps it would have been better for Kissie to have recollected it. But on she went, with no other desire or thought besides catching the feebly-struggling animal.

To her surprise she drew no nearer, though the rabbit seemed scarce moving, and Dimple was going at a smart gallop. Surprised and nettled, she plied the whip, and once again she was on the rabbit’s very heels.

Once again the rabbit suddenly darted away as lightly as a deer; but only for a few smart leaps.

Again he seemed stricken by that odd impediment to his flight. It was very strange—what could it mean?

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