Reid Mayne

# The Yellow Chief

Томас Майн Рид

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**Майн Рид Т.**

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# Содержание

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## Chapter One.
## The Punishment of the Pump

"To the pump with him! And see that he has a double dose of it!"

The words were spoken in a tone of command, earnest and angry. They were addressed to the overseer of a cotton-plantation not far from Vicksburg, in the State of Mississippi, the speaker being Blount Blackadder, a youth aged eighteen, and son to Squire Blackadder, the owner of the plantation.

Who was to receive the double douche?

Near by stood a personage to whom the words evidently pointed. He was also a youth, not very different either in age or size from him who had given the order; though his tawny skin and short crisped hair bespoke him of a different race – in short, a mulatto. And the time – for it is a tale of twenty years ago – along with other attendant circumstances, proclaimed him a slave of the plantation.

And why ordered to be thus served? As a punishment, of course.

You may smile at the idea, and deem it a joke. But the "punishment of the pump" is one of the most severe that can be inflicted; far more so than either the bastinado, or castigation by the lash. A man may writhe while his back is being scored by the cowskin; but that continuous stream of cold water, at first only refreshing, becomes after a time almost unendurable, and the victim feels as though his skull were being split open with an axe.

What had "Blue Dick" – the plantation sobriquet of the young mulatto – what had he done to deserve such chastisement?

The overseer, hesitating to inflict it, put this question to Blount Blackadder.

"That's my business, and not yours, Mr Snively. Enough when I say he has deserved; and darn me if he don't have it. To the pump with him!"

"Your father won't be pleased about it," pursued the overseer. "When he comes home – "

"When he comes home; that's my affair. He's not at home now, and during his absence I'm master of this plantation, I guess. I hope, sir, you'll recognise me as such."

"Oh, sartinly," grumbled the overseer.

"Well, then, I've only to tell you, that the nigger's got to be punished. He's done enough to deserve it. Let that satisfy you; and for the rest I'll be answerable to my father."

What Blue Dick had done the young planter did not condescend to explain. Nor was it his passion that rendered him reticent; but a secret consciousness that he was himself in the wrong, and acting from motives of the meanest revenge.

They had their origin in jealousy. There was a quadroon girl upon the plantation to whose smiles Blue Dick had aspired. But they were also coveted by his young master – the master of both.

In such a rivalry the end is easily told. The honest love of Blue Dick was doomed to a harsh disappointment; for Sylvia, the quadroon, had yielded her heart less to the dictates of natural partiality, than to the combined influence of vanity and power. It was a tale oft told in those days of the so-styled patriarchal institution – happily now at an end.

Maddened by the discovery of his sweetheart's defection, the young mulatto could not restrain himself from recrimination. A collision had occurred between him and his master's son. There had been words and threatened blows, quickly succeeded by the scene we are describing.

Mr Snively was not the man to hold out long against the threats of authority. His place was too precious to be risked by an act of idle chivalry. What to him was the punishment of a slave:

a ceremony at which he was accustomed to assist almost every day of his life? Besides, he had no particular liking for Blue Dick, who was regarded by him as a "sassy fellow." Assured against blame from Squire Blackadder, he was only too ready to cause execution of the order. He proceeded to do so.

The scene was transpiring in an inclosed court-yard to the rear of the "big house" (Negro nomenclature for the planter's dwelling), adjoining also to the stables. On one side stood the pump, a tall obelisk of oak, with its massive arm of iron, and spout five feet above the level of the pavement. Underneath traversed a trough, the hallowed trunk of a tree, designed for the watering of the horses.

In the hot summer sun of the Mississippi Valley it should have been a sight to give gladness to the eye. Not so with the slaves on Squire Blackadder's plantation. To them it was more suggestive of sadness and fear; and they were accustomed to regard it with the same feelings as one who looks upon a gallows, or a guillotine. More than one half their number had, one time or another, sat under that spout till its chilly jet seemed like a sharp spear piercing their wool-covered crania.

The punishment of the pump was too frequent on Squire Blackadder's plantation to need minute directions as to the mode of administering it. Mr Snively had only to repeat the order received, to some half-dozen stalwart slaves, who stood around ready to execute it. The more ready, that Blue Dick was now to be the victim; for, even with these, the mulatto youth was far from being a favourite. Full of conceit on account of his clearer skin, he had always shown himself too proud to associate with them, and was thus deprived of their sympathies. It was his first punishment, too; for, although he had often before offended in a different way, Squire Blackadder had refrained from chastising him.

It was thought strange by all, though none knew the reason; and this immunity of which he had been accustomed to boast, rendered his now threatened punishment a thing for his fellow-slaves to rejoice at.

They who were ordered to administer it, went about their work with a will. At a sign from the overseer, Blue Dick was seized by two of the field hands, and dragged up to the pump. With cords procured from the adjacent stable, he was lashed to the trough in such a position that his crown came directly under the spout, eighteen inches below it. By stays stretching right and left, his head was so confined that he could not turn it an inch one way or the other. To have attempted moving it, would have been to tighten the noose, by which the rope was rove around his neck.

"Now, give him his shower-bath!" vociferated young Blackadder to the huge negro who stood by the handle of the pump.

The man, a savage-looking monster, who had himself more than once been submitted to a similar ducking, obeyed the order with a gleeful grin. The iron lever, rattling harsh upon its pivot, moved rapidly up and down; the translucent jet shot forth from the spout, and fell plashing upon the skull beneath.

The by-standers laughed, and to the victim it would yet have been only pleasant play; but among those who were jeering him was Sylvia the quadroon! All were abroad – both the denizens of the negro quarter, and the domestics of the house – spectators of his suffering and his shame.

Even Clara Blackadder, the sister of his tyrant torturer – a young lady of about twenty summers, with all the seeming graces of an angel – stood on the back porch contemplating the scene with as much indifference as if, from the box of a theatre, she had been looking upon some mere spectacle of the stage!

If she felt interest in it, it arose from no sympathy with the sufferer.

On the face of her brother was an expression of interest vivid and pronounced. His features bespoke joy – the joy of a malignant soul indulging in revenge.

It was a sad picture, that presented by these two young men – the one exulting in despotic power, the other suffering torture through its exercise. It was but the old and oft repeated tableau of master and slave.

And yet were they strangely alike, both in form and feature. With the ochreous tint extracted from his skin, and the curl combed out of his hair, Blue Dick might have passed for a brother of

Blount Blackadder. He would have been a little better looking, and certainly showing a countenance of less sinister cast.

Perhaps not at that moment; for as the agony of physical pain became added to the mental anguish he was enduring, his features assumed an expression truly diabolical. Even the jet of water, spreading like a veil over them, did not hide from the spectators the fiendlike glance with which he regarded his oppressor. Through the diaphanous sheet they could see white lips tightly compressed against whiter teeth, that grinned defiance and vengeance, as his eyes rested on Sylvia. He uttered no groan; neither did he sue for mercy; though the torture he was enduring caused him to writhe within his ropes, at the risk of their throttling him.

There were few present who did not know that he was suffering extreme pain, and many of them from self-experience. And it was only when one of these, stirred by vivid memories, ventured to murmur some slight words of expostulation, that the punishment was suspended.

"He's had enough, I reckon?" said Snively, turning interrogatively toward the young planter.

"*No*, darn him! not half enough," was the reply; "you haven't given him the double. But never mind! It'll do for the present. Next time he offends in like manner, he shall be pumped upon till his thick skull splits like a cedar rail!"

Saying this, Blount Blackadder turned carelessly upon his heel, and went off to join his sister in the porch – leaving the overseer to release the sufferer at his discretion.

The iron handle discontinued its harsh grating; the cruel spout ceased to pour; and Blue Dick, disengaged from his garotte, was carried fainting to the stable.

But he was never again subjected to the punishment of the pump. The young planter did not have the chance to carry out his threat. Three days after, Blue Dick disappeared from the plantation. And on the morning of that day, almost simultaneous with his disappearance, was found the body of the quadroon girl Sylvia, at the bottom of the peach-orchard, her head split open to the chin!

It had been done by the blade of a wood-axe. There was no mystery about the matter – no speculation as to the author of the deed. The antecedent circumstances pointed directly to Blue Dick; and he was at once sought for.

Sought for, but not found. As soon as the hue-and-cry had gone abroad, the surrounding settlers, planters as well as poor whites, sprang to their arms, and into their saddles. The blood-mastiffs were put upon Blue Dick's track; but spite their keen scent for such game, and the energetic urging of their owners, they never set fang in the flesh of the mulatto murderer.

# Chapter Two.
# The Blackadders

In the time preceding the extinction of slavery, there was no part of the United States where its chain was so galling as in that region lying along the lower Mississippi, known as the "Coast." More especially was this true of the State of Mississippi itself. In the old territories, east of the Alleghany range, the "institution" was tempered with a certain touch of the patriarchal; and the same might be said of Kentucky and Tennessee. Even in parts of Louisiana the mild indolent habits of the Creole had a softening influence on the condition of the slave. But it was different on the great cotton and tobacco plantations of Mississippi, as also portions of the Louisiana coast; many of whose owners were only half the year residents, and where the management of the negro was intrusted to the overseer – an irresponsible, and, in many cases, severe taskmaster. And among the owners themselves was a large number – the majority, in fact – not born upon the soil; but colonists, from all countries, who had gone thither, often with broken fortunes, and not unfrequently characters as well.

By these men the slave was only looked upon as so much live-stock; and it was not a question either of his happiness or welfare, but the work to be got out of him.

It would be a mistake to say that Mississippian planters were all of this class; as it would be also erroneous to suppose that Southern masters in general were less humane than other men. There is no denying them a certain generosity of character; and many among them were philanthropists of the first class. It was the institution itself that cursed them; and, brought up under its influence, they thought and acted wrongly; but not worse, I fear, than you or I would have done, had we been living under the same lights.

Unfortunately, humane men were exceptions among planters of the lower Mississippi; and so bad at one time was the reputation of this section of the South, that to have threatened a Virginia negro – or even one of Kentucky or Tennessee – with sale or expulsion thither, was sufficient at any time to make him contented with his task!

The word "Coast" was the *bogey* of negro boyhood, and the terror of his manhood.

Planter Blackadder, originally from the State of Delaware, was among the men who had contributed to this evil reputation. He had migrated to Mississippi at an early period of his life, making a purchase of some cheap land on a tract ceded by the Choctaws (known as the "Choctaw Purchase"). A poor man at the period of his migration, he had never risen to a high rank among the planter aristocracy of the State. But just for this reason did he avail himself of what appeared, to a mind like his, the real privilege of the order – a despotic bearing toward the sable-skinned helots whose evil star had guided them into his hands. In the case of many of them, their own evil character had something to do in conducting them thither; for planter Blackadder was accustomed to buy his negroes *cheap*, and his "stock" was regarded as one of the worst, in the section of country in which his plantation was "located." Despite their bad repute, however, there was work in them; and no man knew better than Squire Blackadder how to take it out. If their sense of duty was not sufficient to keep them to their tasks, there was a lash to hinder them from lagging, held ever ready in the hands of a man who had no disposition to spare it. This was Snively, the overseer, who, like the Squire himself, hailed from Delaware State.

Upon the Blackadder plantation was punishment enough, and of every kind known to the skin of the negro. At times there was even mutilation – of the milder type – extending beneath his skin. If Pomp or Scip tried to escape work by shamming a toothache, the tooth was instantly extracted, though not the slightest sign of decay might be detected in the "ivory!"

Under such rigid discipline, the Blackadder plantation should have thrived, and its owner become a wealthy man. No doubt he would have done so, but for an outlet on the other side, that, dissipating the profits, kept him comparatively poor.

The "'scape-pipe" was the Squire's own and only son, Blount, who had grown up what is termed a wild fellow. He was not only wild, but wicked; and what, perhaps, grieved his father far more, he had of late years become ruinously expensive. He kept low company, preferring the "white trash;" fought cocks, and played "poker" with them in the woods; and, in a patronising way, attended all the "candy pullings" and "blanket trampings" for ten miles around.

The Squire could not be otherwise than indulgent to a youth of such tastes, who was his only son and heir. In boyhood's days he had done the same himself. For this reason, his purse-strings, held tight against all others, were loosed to his hopeful son Blount, even to aiding him in his evil courses. He was less generous to his daughter Clara, a girl gifted with great beauty, as also endowed with many of those moral graces, so becoming to woman. True, it was she who had stood in the porch while Blue Dick was undergoing the punishment of the pump. And it is true, also, that she exhibited but slight sympathy with the sufferer. Still was there something to palliate this apparent hardness of heart: she was not fully aware of the terrible pain that was being inflicted; and it was her father's fault not hers, that she was accustomed to witness such scenes weekly – almost daily. Under other tutelage Clara Blackadder might have grown up a young lady, good as she was graceful; and under other circumstances been happier than she was on the day she was seen to such disadvantage.

That, at this time, a cloud overshadowed her fate, was evident from that overshadowing her face; for, on looking upon it, no one could mistake its expression to be other than sadness.

The cause was simple, as it is not uncommon. The lover of her choice was not the choice of her father. A youth, poor in purse, but rich in almost every other quality to make man esteemed – of handsome person, and mind adorned with rare cultivation – a stranger in the land – in short, a young Irishman, who had strayed into Mississippi, nobody knew wherefore or when. Such was he who had won the friendship of Clara Blackadder, and the enmity both of her brother and father.

In heart accepted by her – though her lips dared not declare it – he was rejected by them in words scornful, almost insulting.

They were sufficient to drive him away from the State; for the girl, constrained by parental authority, had not spoken plain enough to retain him. And he went, as he had come, no one knew whither; and perhaps only Clara Blackadder cared.

As she stood in the porch, she was thinking more of him than the punishment that was being inflicted on Blue Dick; and not even on the day after, when her maid Sylvia was discovered dead under the trees, did the dread spectacle drive from her thoughts the remembrance of a man lodged there for life!

As the overseer had predicted, Squire Blackadder, on his return home, was angry at the chastisement that had been inflicted on Blue Dick, and horrified on hearing of the tragedy that succeeded it.

The sins of his own earlier life seemed rising in retribution against him!

# Chapter Three.
# A Changed Plantation

We pass over a period of five years succeeding the scene recorded.

During this time there was but little change on the plantation of Squire Blackadder; either in the dwellers on the estate, or the administration of its affairs. Neither castigation by the cowskin, nor the punishment of the pump, was discontinued. Both were frequent, and severe as ever; and whatever of work could by such means be extracted from human muscles, was taken out of the unhappy slaves who called Mr Snively their "obaseeah." Withal, the plantation did not prosper. Blount, plunging yet deeper into dissipation, drained it of every dollar of its profits, intrenching even on the standard value of the estate. The number of its hands had become reduced, till there were scarce enough left for its cultivation; and, despite the constant cracking of Mr Snively's whip, weeds began to show themselves in the cotton fields, and decay around the "gin" house.

At the end of these five years, however, came a change, complete as it was cheerful.

The buildings underwent repair, "big house" as well as out-offices; while the crops, once more carefully cultivated, presented a flourishing appearance. In the court-yard and negro quarters the change was still more striking. Instead of sullen faces, and skins grey with dandruff, or brown with dirt, ill-concealed under the tattered copperas-stripe, could now be seen smiling countenances, with clean white shirts covering an epidermis that shone with the hue of health. Instead of profane language and loud threats, too often followed by the lash, could be heard the twanging of the banjo, accompanied by its simple song, and the cheerful voice of Sambo excited in "chaff," or light-hearted laughter.

The change is easily explained. It was not the same Sambo, nor the same "obaseeah," nor yet the same massa. The whole *personnel* of the place was different. A planter of the patriarchal type had succeeded to the tyrant; and Squire Blackadder was gone away, few of his neighbours knew whither, and fewer cared. By his cruelty he had lost caste, as by the courses pursued by his son – the latter having almost brought him to Bankruptcy. To escape this, he had sold his plantation, though still retaining his slaves – most of them being unsaleable on account of their well-known wickedness.

Taking these along with him, he had "started west."

To one emigrating from the banks of the Mississippi this may seem an unfitting expression. But at the time a new "west" and a "far" one had just entered on the stage of colonisation. It was called California, a country at that time little known; for it had late come into the possession of the United States, and the report of its golden treasures, although on the way, had not yet reached the meridian of the Mississippi.

It was its grand agricultural wealth, worth far more than its auriferous riches, that was attracting planter Blackadder to its plains – this and the necessity of escaping from the too respectable society that had sprung up around him in the "Choctaw Purchase."

He had not taken departure alone. Three or four other families, not very dissimilar either in circumstances or character, had gone off along with him.

Let us follow upon their track. Though three months have elapsed since their leaving the eastern side of the Mississippi, we shall be in time to overtake them; for they are still wending their slow and weary way across the grand prairie.

The picture presented by an emigrating party is one long since become common; yet never can it be regarded without a degree of interest. It appeals to a pleasant sentiment, recalling the earliest, and perhaps most romantic period of our history. The huge Conestoga wagon, with its canvas tilt bleached to a snowy whiteness by many a storm of rain, not inappropriately styled the "ship of the prairies;" its miscellaneous load of tools and utensils, with house furniture and other Penates, keeping alive the

remembrance of the home left behind, still more forcibly brought to mind by those dear faces half hid under the screening canvas; the sun-tanned and stalwart horsemen, with guns on shoulder, riding in advance or around it; and, if a Southern migration, the sable cohort forming its sure accompaniment, all combine to form a tableau that once seen will ever be remembered.

And just such a picture was that presented by the migrating party of Mississippi planters *en route* for far California. It was a "caravan" of the smaller kind – only six wagons in all – with eight or ten white men for its escort. The journey was full of danger, and they knew this who had undertaken it. But their characters had hindered them from increasing their number; and, in the case of more than one, the danger left behind was almost as much dreaded as any that might be before them.

They were following one of the old "trails" of the traders, at that time becoming used by the emigrants, and especially those from the South-western States. It was the route running up the Arkansas to Bent's Fort, and thence striking northward along the base of the Rocky Mountains to the pass known as "Bridger's."

At that time the pass and the trails on both sides of it were reported "safe." That is, safe by comparison. The Indians had been awed by a sight unusual to them – the passage through their territory of large bodies of United States troops – Doniphan's expedition to New Mexico, with those of Cooke and Kearney to California. For a short interval it had restrained them from their attacks upon the traders' caravan – even from the assassination of the lonely trapper.

As none of Blackadder's party was either very brave, or very reckless, they were proceeding with very great caution, keeping scouts in the advance by day, and guards around their camps by night.

And thus, watchful and wary, had they reached Bent's Fort, in safety. Thence an Indian hunter who chanced to be hanging around the fort – a Choctaw who spoke a little English – was engaged to conduct them northward to the Pass; and, resuming their journey under his guidance, they had reached Bijou Creek, a tributary of the Platte, and one of the most beautiful streams of prairie-land.

They had formed their encampment for the night, after the fashion practised upon the prairies – with the wagons locked tongue and wheel, inclosing a hollow space – the *corral*– so called after a word brought by the prairie-merchants from New Mexico.[1]

The travellers were more than usually cheerful. The great chain of the Rocky Mountains was in sight, with Long's Peak raising its snow-covered summit, like a vast beaconing star to welcome, and show them the way, into the land of promise that lay beyond it.

They expected, moreover, to reach Saint Vrain's Fort, by the evening of the next day; where, safe from Indian attack, and relieved from camp watching, they could once more rest and recruit themselves.

But in that hour of relaxation, while they were looking at Long's Peak, its snowy crown still gilded by the rays of the setting sun, there was a cloud coming from that same quarter that threatened to overwhelm them.

It was not the darkening of the night, nor mist from the mountain-sides; but a dusky shadow more to be feared than either.

They had no fear of it. They neither saw, nor knew of its existence; and, as they gathered around their camp-fire to make their evening repast, they were as gay as such men might be expected to be, under similar circumstances.

To many of them it was the last meal they were ever destined to eat; as was that night the last of their lives. Before another sun had shone upon Long's Peak, one-half their number was sleeping the sleep of death – their *corralled* wagons enclosing a space afterward to become their cemetery.

[1] The Spanish word for inclosure, adopted at an early period by the prairie-traders, and now become part of our language.

# Chapter Four.
# A Painted Party

About five miles from the spot upon which the emigrants were encamped, and almost at the same hour, another party had pitched their tents upon the plain.

There was not the slightest resemblance between the two sets of travellers, either in personal appearance, in the language spoken, or in their camp-equipments.

The latter were all horsemen, unencumbered with wagons, and without even the impedimenta of tents.

On dismounting they had simply staked the horses on the grass, and laid down upon the buffalo robes, that were to serve them both as shelter and for couches.

There were about two score of them in all; and all without exception were men. Not a woman or child was among them. They were young men too; though to this there were several exceptions.

To have told the colour of their skins it would have been necessary to submit them to ablution: since that portion of it not covered by a breech-clout with legging continuations of leather, was so besmeared with paint that not a spot of the natural tint could be detected.

After this, it is scarce necessary to say, that they were Indians; or to add that their painted bodies, nude from neck to waist, proclaimed them “on the war-trail.”

There were other evidences of this, in the manner in which they were armed. Most of them carried *guns*. On a hunting excursion they would have had bows and arrows – the prairie tribes preferring these weapons in the chase.[2] They had their spears, too, slung lance-fashion by the side of the saddle; with tomahawks stuck in their belts. All of them were furnished with the *lazo*.

Among them was one sufficiently conspicuous to be at once recognised as their chief. His superior dress and adornment told of his title to this distinction; while there was that in his bearing toward the others, that placed it beyond doubt. They seemed not only to fear, but respect him; as if something more than the accident of hereditary rank gave him a claim to command them.

And he on his side seemed to rule them; not despotically, but with a firmness of tone and bearing that brooked no disobedience. On alighting from his horse on the spot selected for their camp, the animal was unsaddled by another, and taken away to the pasturing place; while the chief himself, doffing a splendid cloak of white wolf-skins, spread it on the grass, and lay down upon it. Then taking a pipe from his embroidered pouch, and lighting it, he seemed to give himself up to silent meditation – as if he had no need to take further trouble about the affairs of the camp, and none of the others would venture to intrude upon his privacy.

None did, save his immediate attendant; who brought him his supper, after it had been prepared, and assisted also in arranging his sleeping-place.

Between him and his attendant not a word was exchanged, and only a few with one of the others. They related to setting the camp sentinels, with some instructions about a scout that might be expected to come in during the night.

After that the chief stretched himself along his robe, refilled the pipe with fresh tobacco taken from his pouch, and for some time lay smoking with his eyes fixed upon the moon. Her light, resplendent in the pure atmosphere of the upland prairies, falling full upon him, displayed a figure of fine proportions – indicating both toughness and strength.

As to the face, nothing could have been told of it, even had it been seen under sunlight. Striped with vermilion on a ground of ochreous earth, with strange devices on the forehead and cheeks, it

[2] They have several reasons for this preference. The arrow does its death-work silently, without alarming the game; besides, powder and lead cost more than arrow-sticks, which can also be recovered.

resembled a painted escutcheon more than a human face. The features, however, showing a certain rotundity, told them to be those of a young man, who, but for the disfiguring of the paint, might have appeared handsome.

Still was there something in his eyes as they glanced under the silvery moonlight, that betrayed an evil disposition. No water could have washed out of them that cast at once sinister and sad.

It was strange that one so youthful – for he seemed certainly not over twenty-five – could have obtained such control over the turbulent spirits around him. One and all of them, though also young, were evidently of this character. He was either the son of some chief long and universally venerated, or a youthful brave who had performed feats of valour entitling him to respect.

The band, over which he exercised sway, could be only an expeditionary party belonging to some one of the large prairie tribes; and the material composing it pointed to its being one of those roving troops of young and reckless braves, often encountered upon the plains – the terror of trappers and traders.

There was something unusual in this chief of youthful mien, keeping apart from his comrades, and holding them in such control.

While they were carousing around their camp-fire, he was quietly smoking his pipe; and after they had gone to sleep, he was still seen lying wide awake upon his wolf-skins!

It was a singular place in which he and his followers had encamped; a spot romantically picturesque. It was in a gorge or glen forming a flat meadow of about six acres in extent, and covered with grass of the short grama[3] species. It was inclosed on three sides by a bluff rising sheer up from the plain, and bisected by the tiniest of streams, whose water came spout-like over the precipice, with a fall of some twenty feet. On the side open toward the east could be obtained a clear view of the prairie, undulating away to the banks of Bijou Creek. With the moon shining down on the soft grassy sward; the Indian horses grouped and grazing on it; the warriors lying asleep upon their robes; the stream glistening like a serpent as it swept silently past them; the cascade sparkling above; and around the dark framing of cliffs; you have a picture of Rocky Mountain life, that, though rare to you, is common to those who have traversed that region of romance.

It did not appear to have any charm for the young chief, who lay stretched upon the wolf-skins. Evidently thinking of something else, he took no note of the scenery around him, further than now and then to raise himself upon his elbow, and gaze for a time toward that portion of it that was least picturesque; the monotonous surface of the plain stretching eastward. That he was scanning it not for itself, but something that he expected to appear upon it, would have been made manifest to one who could have known his thoughts. Expressed in English they would have run thus:

"Waboga should have been here by this. I wonder what's detaining him. He must have seen our signal, and should know where to find us. May be that moon hinders him from stealing a horse out of their camp. As their guide they ought to trust him to go anywhere. Well, come he or not, I shall attack them all the same – this night. Oh! what a sweet vengeance! But the sweeter, if I can only take them alive – one and all. Then, indeed, shall I have true revenge!

"What can be keeping the Choctaw? I should not have trusted him, but that he speaks the white man's tongue. They'd have suspected any other. He's stupid, and may spoil my plans. I want them – must have them *alive*!

"Now, if he should turn traitor and put them on their guard? Perhaps take them on to the fort? No – no; he would not do that. He hates the white man as much as I myself, and with nearly as good reason. Besides, he dare not do it. If he did – "

The soliloquy of the recumbent chief was suddenly interrupted, and his thoughts diverted into a different channel, by a sound reaching his ear, that seemed to come from the distant prairie. It was

[3] *Grama*, the New Mexican name for a species of grass forming the finest pastured of the prairies – the famed buffalo grass not excepted.

the hoof-stroke of a horse; but so faint, that only a practised ear could have heard, much less make out what was causing it.

In an instant he had changed his attitude, and lay with cheek closely pressed to the turf. In another instant, he muttered to himself:

"A horse – a single horse – must be the Choctaw!"

He raised himself upon his knees and looked out over the plain. A low ridge ran obliquely up to the mouth of the gorge in which the Indians were reposing. There was a clump of bushes upon its crest; and over the tops of these he could perceive a small disk, darker than the foliage. He knew it had not been there before.

While he was scanning it, there came, as if out of the bushes, three short barks, followed by a prolonged lugubrious howl. It seemed the cry of the prairie-wolf. But he knew it was not this; for soon after it was repeated with a different intoning.

Simultaneously with the second utterance, a similar cry was sent back as if in answer. It was the response of the camp-guard, who was keeping watch among the horses. And in this there was an intonation different from either of the others. It was evidently understood by him who had signalled from without, and told him he might safely approach: for the instant after, the dark spot above the bushes was seen moving along behind them; and presently appeared by the side of the clump, in the shape of a man on horseback.

It was a horseman in the garb of a white hunter; but the moon falling full upon his face, showed the copper-coloured skin of an Indian.

He rode forward to the edge of the camp; exchanged some words with the horse-guard, that had answered his signal; and then came on toward the chief, who had risen to receive him. The salutation told him to be the Choctaw so impatiently expected.

"Waboga has delayed long," said the chief, half-reproachfully. "It is now after midnight. He knows we must make our attack before morning."

"The Yellow chief need not be troubled about the time. The sleeping-place of the white travellers is near at hand. It will take but an hour to reach it. Waboga was detained against his will."

"Ha! how?"

"The pale faces had grown suspicious, and watched him. Some trappers, on their way to Saint Vrain's Fort, came up with the emigrant train after sunrise, and stayed with it till the noon halt. They must have said something against the guide. All day after, Waboga could see that the white men were watching him."

"Then they are not encamped where I wished them?"

"They are. The Yellow chief may rest sure of it. They were not so suspicious as that; but allowed the guide to conduct them to their sleeping-place. It is in the creek bend where Waboga was instructed to take them."

"Good! And their numbers?"

"Nine white men in all – with their women and children. Of the blacks, about five times as many – men, squaws, and papooses."

"No matter for them: they won't resist. Describe the whites."

"The chief of the caravan, a man of middle age – a planter. Waboga well knows his kind. He remembers them when a boy dwelling beyond the Big river – in the land of which his people have been despoiled."

"A planter. Any family with him?"

"A son who has seen some twenty-four summers – like the father in everything but age; a daughter, grown to a woman – not like either. She is fair as a flower of the prairie."

"It is she – it is they!" muttered the chief to himself, his eyes glistening in the moonlight with an expression at once triumphant and diabolical. "Oh! 'twill be a sweet revenge!"

"Of the other whites," continued the Choctaw, "one is a tall man, who has much to do with the management. He acts under the orders of the planter. He carries a great whip, and often uses it on the shoulders of the black slaves."

"He shall have *his* punishment, too. But not for that. They deserve it."

"The other six white men are – "

"No matter; only tell me how they are armed. Will they make resistance?"

Waboga did not think they would – not much. He believed they would let themselves be taken alive.

"Enough!" exclaimed the Cheyenne chief – for it was to this tribe the Indian belonged. "The time has come. Go wake our warriors, and hold yourself ready to guide us."

Then, turning upon his heel, he commenced gathering up his arms, that lay scattered around the robe on which he had been reposing.

His body-servant, already aroused, was soon in attendance upon him; while the slumbering warriors, one after another, startled from savage dreams, sprang to their feet, and hurried toward their horses.

The best-drilled squadron of light cavalry could not have got half so quickly into their saddles, as did this painted troop of Cheyennes.

In less than ten minutes after receiving the command to march, they were riding beyond the bounds of their bivouac – equipped for any kind of encounter!

# Chapter Five.
# A Traitorous Guide

As already known, the emigrants had *corralled* their wagons on the banks of Bijou Creek.

The spot selected, or rather to which their Indian guide had conducted them, was in a bend of the stream, that looped around the encampment in the shape of a horse's shoe. It enclosed an area of some four or five acres of grassy ground – resembling a new-mown meadow.

With an eye to security, it could not, to all appearance, have been better chosen. The creek, running sluggishly around the loop, was deep enough to foil any attempt at fording; while the narrow, isthmus-like neck could be defended with advantage. It had not been the choice of the travellers themselves, but of their Indian guide, who, as already stated, had presented himself to them at Bent's Fort, and been engaged to conduct them through Bridger's Pass. Speaking the white man's tongue, though but indifferently, and being a Choctaw, as he declared himself, they had no suspicion of his honesty, until that very day, when a band of free trappers, who chanced to pass them on the route, and who knew something of the Indian's character, had warned them to beware of him. They had obeyed the warning, so far as lay in the power of men so little acquainted with the prairies. And how could they suspect a guide who had chosen for their night's camping-place a spot that seemed the very place for their security? How could they suppose that the deep, slow stream, running silently around them, could have been designed for any other purposes than that of defence? It never entered their minds to suppose it could be intended as a trap. Why should it?

If anything could have given them this thought it would have been what they had heard from the trappers. Some of them had reflected upon the character given of their guide. But more discredited it, believing it to be only ill-will on the part of the whites towards the Indian – like themselves, a hunter. Others said it was a trapper joke – a story told to scare them.

There was something odd in the eagerness the Indian had shown in directing them to their present camping-ground. It was some distance from the travelled track, where they had seen other places that appeared sufficiently suitable. Why should he have taken the trouble to bring them to the bend of the creek?

The man who made this reflection was Snively, the overseer. Snively didn't like the look of the "redskin," though he was a Choctaw, and spoke a little English. That he had come originally from the other side of the Mississippi was not proof of his being honest; for Mr Snively had no great faith in the integrity of men tailing from the "Choctaw Purchase" – whatever the colour of their skin – red, white, or black.

His suspicions about the guide, communicated to his fellow-travellers, were adopted by several of them, though not by their leader. Squire Blackadder scouted the idea of treason, as also did his son.

Why should the Choctaw betray them? It was not as if he had been one of the prairie Indians, and belonging to some predatory band. He was merely a wanderer from his own tribe, who, in the Reserve allotted to them west of Arkansas State, were now living as an inoffensive and half-civilised people. He could have no motive in leading them astray, but the contrary. He was not to receive his recompense for acting as their guide until after their arrival on the other side of the mountains. A good sum had been promised him. Was it likely he should do anything to forfeit it? So reasoned Squire Blackadder and several of the emigrants who accompanied him.

Snively and the others were not satisfied, and resolved to keep a sharp eye upon the Indian.

But, watchful as they were from that time forward, they failed to see him, as he slipped out of their camp, near the mid-hour of night, taking along with him one of the best horses belonging to the caravan!

He must have got away by leading the animal for some distance along the edge of the stream, concealed under the shadow of the banks. Otherwise, on the open prairie, with the moon shining down upon its treeless sward, he could not have eluded the vigilance of the camp-guards, one of whom was Snively himself.

It was only by an accident that his departure was discovered, just before daybreak. The horse he had taken chanced to be a *mare*, that some weeks before had dropped a foal. It was too fine a creature to be left behind upon the prairies, and had been therefore brought along with its dam.

The colt, after a time missing its mother, ran hinnying about, till its cries of distress startled the camp from its slumbers. Then a search on all sides resulted in the universal conviction that their guide had betrayed them – or, at all events, had stolen off, taking the mare along with him!

There was no more sleep for the eyes of the emigrants. One and all ran wildly around the wagons – the whites meeting each other with cautions and curses, alike contradictory; the blacks – men, women, and children – huddling together, and giving voice to their fears in shrieks and chattering.

And, in the midst of this confusion, a dark mass was seen moving across the prairie, upon which the white light of the moon was already becoming blended with that of the grey dawn.

At first it came slowly and silently, as though stealing toward the camp. Then, as if concealment was no longer deemed necessary, the mass broke into a scattered cloud, showing it to be composed of horsemen.

Their trampling sounded upon the turf, at the same time that a wild yell, issuing simultaneously from threescore throats, struck terror into the hearts of the emigrants. There could be no mistaking that cry. It was the war-whoop of the Cheyennes.

The travellers had no time to reflect upon it – it was the slogan of attack; and, before they could think of any plan for defending themselves, the dusky horsemen were at hand, swooping down upon them like the breath of a tornado!

The emigrants were not all cowards. Three or four were men of courage, and not the least courageous was Snively the overseer. Still was it more by a mechanical impulse, than any hope of successfully defending themselves, that they discharged their guns in the faces of the approaching foemen.

It did not stay the impetuosity of the charge. Their shots were returned by a volley from the guns of their savage assailants, followed up by a thrusting of spears; and, in less than ten minutes' time, the *corral* was captured.

When the day broke, it disclosed a scene, since then, alas! far from unfrequent on the prairies. A wagon train, with its tilts torn down, and the contents strewed around it; the cattle that had drawn it along standing near, and wondering what had befallen it; their owners in captivity, some of them bound hand and foot, others lying lifeless upon the turf!

Embracing all, a cohort of painted savages – some keeping guard over the captives, others indulging in on unchecked Saturnalia; some dead-drunk, others reeling in a state of half intoxication – each with cup in hand, filled with the fire-water taken from the captured wagons!

Such was the spectacle on Bijou Creek on that morning, when the emigrant train of the ex-Mississippi planter fell into the hands of a war-party of Cheyennes, led by the *Yellow Chief*.

# Chapter Six.
# Two Trappers

The gorge in which the young Cheyenne chief and his followers had made their night bivouac, was only one of a series of similar glens, that with short intervals between, notched the foot of the *sierra*[4] where it edged upon the open prairie. It was not the main chain of the Rocky Mountains, but a spur running out into the plain.

About a mile farther along, and nearer to Bijou Creek, was another gorge, not very dissimilar in size, but somewhat so in character. Instead of an embouchure open to the plain, it was shut in on all sides by bluffs, rising abruptly above it to the height of over a hundred feet.

There was an outlet nevertheless; where a tiny spring-branch, gurgling forth from the bottom of the encircling cliffs, passed out into the open country, after making its way through a *cañon*

[4] *Sierra*, The Spanish word for "saw." It also signifies a mountain chain or ridge, the idea having no doubt come from the denticulated appearance of the Spanish mountain chains, seen *en profile*, against the sky. What we call the Rocky Mountains, are known among Mexicans as the *Sierra Madre* (mother chain). Spurs and branching ranges have particular names, as Sierra Mogollon, Sierra Guadalupe, etc. This word is being adopted into our language, and will soon be thoroughly "naturalised" as "cañon," "ranche," and others. *Cerro* is a different word, and signifies an isolated mountain or high hill, as "Cerro dorilo."

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.