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A PAYMASTER'S STORY.

I had been waiting a week at Jefferson for instructions from Washington. I had written for permission to go to New Orleans, as I had relatives there with whom I wished to pass the winter; but at the end of the week my hopes were all nipped in the bud by the following missive:

Major: You will proceed at once to Fort Stetson; thence, with all possible dispatch, to Fort Carson; and thence, to Fort Kearney, at which posts you will pay off the enrolled men and officers, and also settle all duly authenticated bills against the office on account of provisions, forage, camp and garrison store, etc.

It is particularly requested that you will be careful and exact in your return of estimates for the coming winter months.

Capt. Goodwin will detail for you such escorts as you may require.

I have the honor to be, etc.,

G. P. BOWMAN, D. P. M. G.,

Major and Paymaster, U. S. A.

To G. S. Cochrane.

This did not reach me by the hands of Capt. Goodwin however, whom I should have been happy to meet; but by the hands of Sergt. James Conover, who came with six men under his command to escort me on my way, if I deemed sufficient. Goodwin who was sick with fever and ague wrote by the hand of his clerk:

I would send you more men; but really, I think more would be in your way. There are no Indians on the trail between Jefferson and Stetson; and certainly this escort is sufficient against any ordinary highway interpolation. Sergt. Conover is not a very brilliant man; nor is he over and above sociable; but I have found him true as steel; and the privates, members of my own company, whom I send with him, you can rely upon in any emergency. Only, they have the common weakness. Don't give them too free a run at the whiskey bottle. They won't break faith with you to get it, but if allowed full sway they might get a drop too much for your own comfort.

And he wrote about other matters but nothing more of his men.

After reading the letter I raised my eyes and met the gaze of the sergeant, who stood, with his cap in his hand, on the opposite side of the small table. He startled when I looked up, and I thought he was ashamed of having been caught staring at me so fixedly. But the flush quickly left his face, and he inclined his head another way.

He was a man of medium size, very heavily built and evidently muscular. In short, he was made for a fighter, and for one of the valuable fighters who possess stubborn will and dogged resolution rather than hot and impetuous pugnacity. He was not a man to be ever in a ferment; but a man who when fairly aroused, is to be feared. He was not far from 45 years of age, and the stripes upon his forearm showed that he had served four full terms of enlistment previous to the present.

Well, Sergeant, I said as pleasantly as possible. Capt. Goodwin gives such good account of you that I already feel thankful that I am to have your company; and I trust you will have no good reason to complain of me.

He returned my look; but not a smile warmed the chilly gloom of his brown face, nor was there even a gleam of good feeling to break up the hard crust of dogged reserve; but with an effort he ducked his head, and said:

I'll try, sir, to do the best I can.

I came very near showing my dislike of this sort of behavior; but remembering what Goodwin had written. I concluded that I would take the fellow for what he was and make the best of him. However, perhaps this hard crust might break under the influence of acquaintance.

All right, I said. We can none of us do more than try. We've a tramp or several days before us, and I hope they may be pleasant ones.

Certainly, Conover responded. There was a slight relief on the tone, and I took hope.

I went out with the sergeant and found the six men on the piazza, standing at ease under arms. They were really fine-looking fellows, and answered, respectively, to the names Smith, Adams, Mealy, Oesau, Van Wirt and Connolly. Smith was a Yankee; Adams was an Englishman, and had been in the queen's service as a dragoon; Mealy and Connolly were Irishmen; Oesau was a Dutchman, and Van Wirt was a German. A wide range of nationality for so small a squad, but a fair sample of our standing army, nevertheless; and, furthermore, six men of one nation could not have been more brotherly than were these six. Unlike their sergeant, they were free and pleasant, and seemed to be thankful for the privilege of taking the forest tramp with me; while I, in turn, gave them to understand that I would do all I could to make them comfortable. The squad had come with good horses, so the only preparation I had to make for the start was to get my own horses ready and draw my money.

My estimates had been to the amount of \$50,000, and this I must take in gold. I went to the bank, with the sergeant and three of the men and got the money, which I took away in four canvas bags, weighing about 40 pounds each; but at the hotel I packed the gold in a sort of pannier saddle, a contrivance which I had invented myself, and in which I could so pack anywhere from 100 to 400 pounds of gold that it would neither sway nor jingle. In short, a horse could bear in this saddle pack a burden of dead weight almost as easily as he could bear a human rider. And I had a horse on purpose for the work, one that I had used for several years, and that understood his duty as though it had all been reasoned out in his mind.

Bright and early on a clear, cool October morning we set forth from Jefferson with three days' rations in our haversacks; for Stetson was 120 miles away, and we would be doing well to make the trip within the time indicated. I rode in advance, not because I desired it, but because the others were inclined to fall to the rear.

We were passing over a narrow bridge, just on the outskirts of Jefferson, when we met two men and two boys driving before them a drove of cattle. I had met and gone clear of the herd without difficulty, and was thinking how I would like to take one of the fatter bullocks along with me, when an exclamation of anger arrested my attention, and, on turning my saddle, I discovered one of the oxen—a wild frolicsome thing—had attacked the sergeant's horse. It had been quickly done—a frisk—a leap—a lunge of the great curving horns at the horse's side—the rearing of the latter, and the consequent unseating of the sergeant.

When Conover had regained his feet and the frolicsome bullock was far away from his reach; but not so the innocent drovers. The two men were near together, and directly by his side as he grasped his sword hilt and turned upon them. I did not think Conover would harm them; but they were terribly frightened, nevertheless, and the younger of the two—a stout, fair-looking fellow—was the first to speak an intelligent word—(the sergeant had uttered one or two oaths).

Excuse us, my good friend, I am sorry—truly sorry, for the mishap; but I assure you it was no fault of ours.

As Sergt. Conover then stood, his face turned very nearly toward me, so that I caught nearly every line and shade of expression upon his features. He had been terribly shaken and was exceedingly wrathful; but his wrath was in a greater

part made up of chagrin at being unhorsed in so ridiculous a manner than from a mere attack of a bullock. A few seconds he glared into the face of the man who had spoken to him, and then, prefacing his remark with an oath of condemnation, he exclaimed:

—! If ye've got a God, ye'd better thank Him that Jem Conover don't owe ye much of a grudge!

The man uttered something and passed on to attend to his cattle, while the sergeant placed his foot in his stirrup, and as he did so he looked toward me.

Our eyes met, and again I saw him change color and start, as though he had done some guilty thing in thus looking into the face of his superior officer. I smiled and nodded, and in a pleasant way remarked:

'All's well that ends well, sergeant.'

He looked at me as though the proposition might be disputed, but presently, with a forced smile, he returned:

'Aye, aye—that's so?' And the reply was emphatic, as though his decision were a matter of moment.

I rode on, the picture of Conover's passage with the drover occupying my mind. Before this I had fancied that there was something familiar in the sergeant's face and in his general tone and bearing. He might be the man who swore, four years ago, at Snelling that he had been underpaid; or he might be the man who had been accidentally overpaid at Columbus two years before, and who had come forward of his own accord and made restitution.

'If ye've got a God, ye'd better thank Him that Jem Conover don't owe ye much of a grudge.'

Why did those words ring in my ears and echo through my whole being?

Twenty times during that day I looked upon my sergeant when he did not know it, and studied his face; and each effort seemed to bring the last connection nearer, without quite giving it into my hands. He seemed to know that I had begun to feel an interest in his antecedents, and therefore toward the latter part of the day behaved himself more as the officer of an escort ought. He asked me how I would like to have the guard disposed, and very modestly gave me to understand that my wishes would be held as laws by them. I took this for what it was worth, and I knew very well what it meant: There was an old association which he would not have racked up.

That night found us at the foot of Block's mountain, and at the extreme verge of civilization in that direction. Beyond here we were to take the old government supply road—a mere blazed path—with which Conover and two of his men were perfectly familiar; and we would not strike another settlement until near to Stetson.

It was my plan when travelling thus, to make my pannier saddle the substratum of my pillow, with a pair of good revolvers in such position that they could be grasped upon the instant. And I may here remark that though I am naturally a sound sleeper, yet the presence of money under my care and oiled pistols at my hand will render me so sensitive to any disturbing cause that the movement of a mouse would arouse me. Of course the thought of being robbed occurred to me, but not with anything like fear, or even seriousness, for I had not yet dreamed that a man of my escort could have entertained such a plan, and I had no faith that any other power I was likely to meet could lay hold of it. On this night I lay down as usual, having spread my tent to the leeward of a huge boulder, where I was completely sheltered, while the three tents in which my escort slept were set up directly before me.

I went to sleep thinking of Sergt. James Conover, and it must have been immediately after my waking senses left me that my dream senses took up the thread, and they took it up to some purpose. Hampered with no ordinary routine, or system, of circumlocution, bothered with no searching for connecting links or correlative circumstances, they went back over the years with a leap and drew a picture for me as vivid and as distinct as the original event had been just 18 years ago.

I was at Fort Snelling, a second lieutenant of engineers, engaged in surveying government lands, laying out roads and so on, and among those detailed to assist me was a private of the name of James Conover. He got drunk while at work, and when I reprimanded him he used language so offensive and foul that I could not pass it by. In fact, if I had been armed at the time I should have shot him, for his course was such as to entirely place himself beyond the reach of forbearance. I reported him and he was flogged severely—flogged so severely that I bore him no more grudge.

But he bore a grudge toward me, though. Aye—while his back was bleeding and smating he hissed into my ear, 'If you've got a God, be sure to Him, Jem Conover swears that he don't give over this grudge till one of us dies?'

I started out from my sleep and set up. It had been a dream, and yet not only a dream. All the while the scene was being repeated before me, I had been conscious that I lay there in my tent under the old boulder of the Brock. I had sunk into a state where my mind was free to follow its own course, taking the single fact of James Conover for a point of departure, and thence running backward until he was met again.

I remembered all now. Yes. This was the man, who, 18 years before, had cursed and swore and reviled me, threatened all manner of violence; and his only provocation had been that I had threatened to have him punished if he ever got drunk again while on duty with me. To be sure, he was under the influence of liquor at the time; but not so far gone but that he knew very well what he was doing; because, after reaching the fort, on our return, he had given the Shoulder pop (so he called me) a stomach full to carry off, and he didn't believe I would dare to report him. But I did report him, and I gave his speech in full, and the result was that the old major ordered a court martial, out from the sentence of which the man came with 100 lashes.

And there was another result; James Conover never was guilty of a like offense again; but, on the contrary he saw very plainly that the service would very quickly go to rack and ruin if such conduct as he had been guilty of could be permitted, or even lightly treated; and thenceforward he became a better man, and soon reaped the benefit thereof. But he could not forgive me. Twice he swore to me that he would carry that grudge against me while we both lived; and he told me that it was a deadly grudge. I'll never forget it! he said, the last time, I shall carry them marks on my back to my grave, and—you! I hope you may die before I do! Those were his words, spoken while I was stepping on board a steamer at St. Louis; and I knew that they plainly meant that he would help me to die if he ever got the chance.

And here I was, with my old enemy for an escort! From that far-gone time to the present I had never seen nor heard of the man, and he had long ago passed entirely from my mind. Conover is a common name in the army; or, at least, I had happened to hit quite a number of enlisted men of that name; so I had not connected the stout, dark browned, stocky sergeant with the fair-faced, lithe and youthful soldier who had crossed my path at Snelling.

A hasty review of the whole thing brought me to rather an unpleasant understanding of the present situation. That Conover still bore the grudge was very evident; and it was equally evident that he meant to settle the account between us on this trip. I could not think there in the tent. It was too narrow a space. I had arisen, and was upon the point of passing out, with my pistol in my hand, when I heard a stealthy footstep at the entrance. Without noise, I sprang into a front corner, and there crouched down upon my saddle.

I had scarcely gained the position when the flap was drawn aside and a man looked in. Ah! just beyond the face of the interloper was an opening at the end of the mountain, and I caught his profile against a patch of clear sky. It was the hard, bronzed face of James Conover!

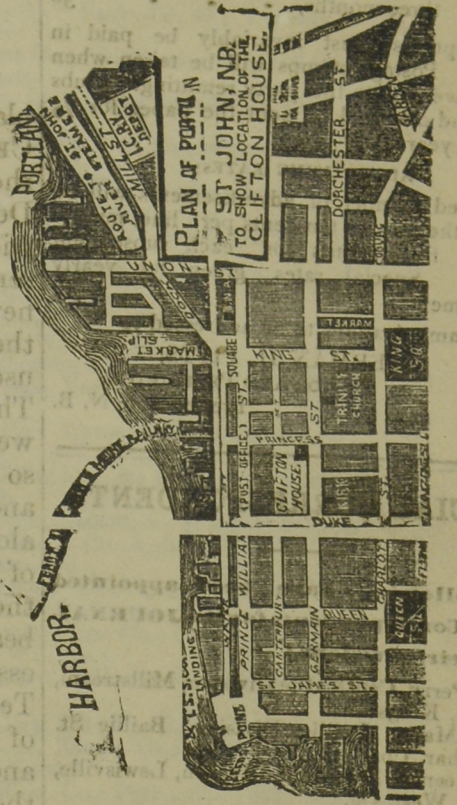
I had my pistol ready for instant use expecting every moment to see him leap to the spread blankets. But he was very moderate. He put his head further in and seemed puzzled. It was of course very dark in there, but yet he could probably see that the bed did not look as though there was a man in it. Once I raised my pistol, full sure that the man was after my life, and fearful that if I threw a chance away he might get the better of me; but I did not fire. Some thing seemed to whisper in my ear: You've hit him once. Be sure you're in danger before you hit him again! and I lowered my pistol and watched. Presently:

Major! came from his lips, carefully and distinctly. Major—Maj Cochrane? There was something in the tone of that voice that gave me heart. It was a sort of imploring, prayerful tone, as of one who has a great favor to ask. I determined to answer him; but be sure I kept my pistol ready at hand.

With a yawn, as though just startled from my sleep, I returned:

A-a-h! Hallo! who's here?

Eh! Down here! It's me, major—Sergt. Conover. I was passing round



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