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A TENDERFOOT IN COLORADO

CHAPTER I

ENTER THE TENDERFOOT

IN 1869 I found myself five thousand miles to the westward of Old England, in a car on the newly opened Union Pacific Railroad, with a good hope of being safely landed by it in the part of the Far West known as Wyoming Territory, U.S.A. I was a tenderfoot, though the title itself was strange to me; but I was out to learn, and when I heard the strange word used by a man near me on the car I turned to my neighbour, a friendly Westerner with whom I had had lots of conversation since we left Omaha, Neb., and asked:

“What on earth does he mean by a tenderfoot?”

He looked at me with a smile, saw his chance, and started to spread himself.

“It began like this,” he explained. “Some ten or eleven years back, when they first struck gold in Gregory Gulch, and every soul who could started to get to Pike’s Peak, or bust, a good five hundred miles across the Great Plains, there was lots of fellers that jes’ hoofed it on their ten toes the whole blessed road. You can bet their feet

was pretty well skinned for them by the time they got to Pike's Peak, and naturally the other fellers who'd been before 'em and got healed up first set themselves up for real old-timers, and took the notion of calling every new arrival a tenderfoot."

"Oh," said I, "then it just means a new-comer, pure and simple!"

"Pure!" he fairly laughed aloud. "Well, I don't know so much about 'pure,' but 'simple' wouldn't be so far out mostly. The simple tenderfoot don't know the ropes, and you bet he's got lots to learn."

"I suppose that means, then"—I hesitated—"that—that I'm a tenderfoot?"

"Why, certainly!" He smiled back at me. "And if you'll not be offended by my saying so, you look it all over."

"Offended? Me? Not in the least. Why should I be?" Had I not only just ceased to be an undergraduate at Trinity, Cambridge, rejoicing there in the title of Cherub, though I can't say whether it was my blue eyes and curly hair, or my pink cheeks and innocent expression that earned me the name in college.

"Julesburg!" shouted the conductor—*anglice* guard—putting his head in at the end door of the car. "Any here for Julesburg?"

Nobody was for Julesburg and, looking out of the window, I couldn't feel surprised there should be nobody, for the town seemed to consist of about three and a half dilapidated board shanties stuck down in a treeless waste of yellowish-brown buffalo

grass, which spread on every side to the horizon, in wide rolling downs.

“Not much of a place now,” commented my companion, whom by the way, I had learned to call Mr. Crocker, “but when I was travelling this route about two years back Julesburg was a pretty lively hole. ‘Hell on wheels,’ they called it. It was the end of the railroad track already laid, and the beginning of the new grade under construction where the company had thousands of hands at work. Every month these chaps, when they got their money, used to come in here to Julesburg to spree it off. There’s a few of their relics over yonder.”

Our train was already moving out of the depot (station), and the prairie was littered for miles with old tin cans and empty bottles. Also, on the outskirts of what had once been the town, there stood almost a forest of little wooden crosses sticking up at all sorts of angles, survivors of more that had fallen down.

“You can bet there’s a few pretty hard citizens planted under there,” said Mr. Crocker. “They didn’t call this place ‘Hell on wheels’ for nothing. Why, Julesburg thought nothing of having a man for breakfast; and quite often they used to have two or three.”

A man for breakfast! “Well,” I thought, “I may be a tenderfoot, but I’m not going to give myself away to Crocker by inquiring if he means to imply that Julesburg was addicted to cannibalism. Of course he’s only indulging in American humour.’ A fortnight spent in New York and

Boston had enlightened me as far as that. Nevertheless, Mr. Crocker spotted by my eye that he had puzzled me.

“A man for breakfast means that somebody’s got slugged overnight in one of the dives around town, or bin shot in the lay-out of some tin-horn,” he explained. But to me this explanation was hardly more lucid than the puzzle. Pretty obviously, Mr. Crocker was talking the language of the Far West for my special benefit, and what a “dive” might be, I could perhaps guess, but “the lay-out of a tin-horn” was still too much for me. However, what had I come to the Far West for but to learn? “What’s a lay-out? and what’s a tin-horn?” I ventured.

“A tin-horn’s a gambler. That is,” he corrected his definition, “it means a special type of gambler, and a low-down one at that. Some gamblers are quite ‘way-up’ men of course.”

It was not hard to guess “way-up,” so I held my tongue without inquiring. Mr. Crocker looked at me critically as he went on:

“A tenderfoot hasn’t much show if he once lets himself be drawn into a tin-horn’s den,” he remarked, in warning tones. “That is, if he’s got money on him.” I felt as if my friend Mr. Crocker’s penetrating eye had been able to pierce through my clothing as far as those \$300 in green-backs, in a nice soft chamois-leather belt which I wore under my shirt next my skin. “If they can’t get him to play a game of cards and rob him that way, they’re quite liable to club him, or dope him, or it might

be to shoot a hole in him, though shooting is liable to make too much noise."

"And you really mean to say, those crosses on the prairie were put up over murdered men?" I queried.

"Yes," he said, "and over a few of their murderers too. You see, there's bound to be quite a few men buried there who simply slipped up in trying it on with the wrong man. You see, a skunk who is out to rob is liable to find himself mistaken in his victim. There's tenderfeet that can shoot."

I said nothing, but I was again conscious of that critical eye of his.

"Can you shoot?" he went on.

"Yes, a little—with a rifle, that is," I answered guardedly. Of course I had been a Volunteer at Cambridge, but I thought it hardly worth while explaining all that. "And I've got a good gun, a 12-bore, double-barrel, by W. W. Greener, in my luggage," I added.

"Very good thing to have too sometimes," he said, with the air of a wise judge. "But a shot-gun's not very handy at close quarters, unless it's a sawed-off. For fighting in a bar-room, let me tell you, or on top of a stage-coach, they like to cut the barrels off a foot in front of the hammers, so the gun handles more like a pistol. Now you ain't got a pistol, have you?"

I shook my head.

"And what's more, I'll lay you ain't got a pistol-pocket to carry one in those English pants you're wearing. Strictly, we're not supposed to carry

concealed weapons, but we all do it." He winked at me as he slued his right hip half round, so that I could see on it the diagonal line of the opening of a hip-pocket in his trousers with a peculiar lump below it inside. "That's what we call going heeled," he said.

"Oh, well then, I'm not heeled," I had to admit.

"There's quite a few men act like you even out West there," he nodded. "But I reckon it's best to go heeled on the off-chance. You never can tell——" He broke off and looked suddenly out of the window. "Look at there," he cried, "there's two Injuns right now watching this train. They'd scalp you in a holy minute, if you was to give 'em the chance."

And not a furlong away on the bare prairie stood two men on foot, holding their horses by the bridles, motionless as statues, watching us pass.

"Are those real Red Indians?" cried I, much excited.

"Why certainly," he said. "You can tell that by the way they wear their blankets, and by the general look of 'em, though they're too far off to see their faces good. Red Cloud's got about 10,000 Sioux, more or less, somewhere around between here and the Yellow-stone River. And there are Arapahoes, and Cheyennes, and Kiowas, besides. They're all Plains Indians, and they're all hostiles, except when they come in every oncet in a while to their reservations and draw rations. But don't you let them catch you out here on the buffalo range, or they'll have your scalp quicker'n you can say

knife. That is, if they feel able to. They mostly leave a good strong train of waggons alone, but let 'em just drop on to some poor emigrant with a family in his waggon, or some unlucky hunter, who happens to have just shot off all his ammunition, and he's their meat."

"Then you mean to say," said I, "that those two men we saw standing so quietly there"—of course our train had left them miles behind by now—"would have scalped us if they could?"

"Those Injuns? You bet they would," returned Crocker. That's just all they live for, is scalps. Of course two Injuns like that, just by themselves, wouldn't be likely to do no great mischief. Two of them wouldn't dream of bothering this train. But it isn't so very long since a big war party of Sioux did actually derail a train—I think it was at Big Thompson—and they scalped a lot of chaps. One feller was a mule-skinner (that's a teamster, you understand) who was camped there, and he, as it happened, he wasn't plumb dead when they took his scalp, and he came to afterwards; and just by luck, in the course of the fight, some other white man shot the Injun who had got his scalp, and recovered it, still fresh and bleeding. So when the whites had driven off the Injuns, they tried to put the scalp back on that mule-skinner's head, but 'twas no sort of use; it wouldn't stick! The man got well though, but now of course he has to wear a wig!"

I really had to put up my hand to my head to feel if my own hair was still quite safe. It gave one

quite a new thrill to be told a horror like that almost on the spot.

"I'll show you Big Thompson when we come to it," said Crocker; "but it's like Julesburg now—nothing but a section house left. There's no town anywheres here along the railroad till we get to Cheyenne. We're due there about 5 p.m. and I'm getting off. You'll be getting off too, I guess; that is, if you're bound for Denver as I understood you to say."

Mr. Crocker was so friendly that I had taken him freely into my confidence. My plans were to get to Denver and get up as soon as possible into the snow-slashed Sierras. As I told him, I was going there for my health. I had been silly ass enough to go for a ride on a hired horse I knew nothing of, just before my final Cambridge exam; the hireling had bolted and thrown me heavily on my head. Result: a bad concussion, and six months of constant headache; and when I got to America the clammy heat in New York had made my head feel much worse. But, by good luck, I came across a book, by Bayard Taylor, just published, *Colorado, the Switzerland of America*, and I felt by instinct that the only chance for me was to go out of these stifling Eastern cities up into the cool keen air of the Rocky Mountains. And the Union Pacific R.R., being now open, enabled me to gratify my instinct—a thoroughly sound one—without delay. In fact, only five days earlier I had been sweltering at somewhere between 90° and 100° in the shade, in the moist heavy air of Manhattan.

Now, 2000 miles west of there, out on the Plains, at an elevation of 5000 feet above sea level and breathing the dry air of the Great American Desert (in my old atlas the Great Plains were marked as The Great American Desert), already I felt very much better.

So when the conductor announced at last "Cheyenne, alight here for Stageline to Denver!" I cheerfully alighted with Mr. Crocker from the cars, and went with him to what he said was the best hotel in town, and there the two of us had supper together. In those days Western meal hours were: breakfast, anywhere between 6 and 9 a.m.; dinner, noon to 1 p.m., and supper, 5 to 7 p.m. After supper Crocker excused himself, saying that he had to go round town on business, so I sallied forth to explore my first Western town for myself.

Candidly, I cannot say that my first impression was good. The city seemed a desolate spot. Just a huddle of raw board houses, with a few more solid ones of brick here and there, dumped down on that everlasting yellow-brown prairie that we had traversed ever so many hundred miles of, since we left Omaha. Immediately outside, on the outskirts, were no gardens, or fields, or fences, or any sign of agriculture—just the bare, naked prairie, dotted here and there with a few camps of teamsters beside their white-tilted waggons, bull-whackers and mule-skinners, as Mr. Crocker had already taught me to call them. He said they brought their waggons in here to Cheyenne to load up with supplies that came out from the States over the newly opened

railroad for the mining towns in various parts of Wyoming and Colorado Territories. Cheyenne was the capital of Wyoming. Colorado lay directly south of it and had no railroads as yet. I had a good look at the teamsters. To me they seemed a pretty rough lot, with their long boots, long hair, and slouch hats, and I noticed that every single one of them seemed to wear a heavy holster-pistol belted on him. Perhaps they had smaller ones besides in their hip-pockets, like my friend Crocker ! But, all alone by myself, I was too shy to ask them.

And then, coming in from the prairie, I saw a man riding on a mustang ! I knew it must be a mustang from my memories of Captain Mayne Reid's stories, *The Scalp Hunters* and the rest. This mustang was a small, active, wiry horse, with a long flowing mane and tail, and a tripping sort of gait. The man on him was dressed very much as the mule-skinners were : he wore a broad slouch hat and long boots outside his pants. I caught a keen glance from him as he passed me, but there was so much real kindness as well as keenness in his eye that I plucked up heart to say :

“ Oh, do you mind my asking—isn't that a mustang ? ”

His face expanded in a cheerful grin.

“ Why yes,” he said, “ I guess so. But we do call 'em broncos out here mostly. And this yer's a California saddle,” and he slapped his hand on the horn. He saw how my eyes were fixed on the knobbed horn that projected high above the front of the saddle.

“What do you have that horn for?” I went on, as this new friend seemed so willing to be interviewed.

“That’s for the lasso,” was his reply. “If you rope a cow-brute on horseback, you can’t hold nothing with your bare hands; what you got to do, is to take a turn of the rope around the horn of the saddle here, and then the horse does all the holding.” He looked me over critically. “You just come off the cars, I reckon, ain’t that so? Then I guess you never see no roping before? It’s quite a trick, roping is, but you can’t handle cattle and horses on these prairies without it.”

My new friend was young though not very young, heavily bearded and uncommonly handsome; and my eye, ranging over him, saw not only his broad-brimmed hat and the pants tucked into the long boots, but also noticed very particularly the style in which he carried his big pistol. He wore his belt slack, so that it hung rather low on his right side; the butt of the pistol just showed at the top of the holster, and I noticed, too, that the lower end of the holster was provided with two long pieces of buckskin string, by which it was securely bound round his thigh.

“Why do you tie it like that?” I asked, making so bold as to touch the holster end.

“To keep it from joggling about too much when I’m riding at a lope,” he replied. “A gun travels better so; and if ever you want to pull it, it pulls better so. Let me tell you that a ‘44-calibre Colt is a heavyish thing to tote around.” He seemed so

friendly that I thought I would get his opinion about pistol-carrying, to supplement Mr. Crocker's.

"Do you mind my asking you something else?" I said. "Do you think I ought to carry a pistol now that I've come out here?"

There was the quaint quizzical look on his face that I was already getting to know.

"Well," he said, speaking as gravely as a judge, "it's like this. You might tote a gun all around this Western country for twenty years and never want it. But, my friend, I can tell you this, if ever you did want it here, you'd want it powerful bad."

That phrase was a chestnut, as he must have known well enough, though I was too green to spot the fact; but I came to know later on that "You'd want it powerful bad" had grown into a byword out West. However, the success of his chestnut seemed to him a good wind-up to our conversation. He raised his single curb-rein—tied as I noticed in a knot over his horse's withers—remarked "So long!" and loped away. To "lope" was not hard to guess. It is a shortened form of the Spanish word "galopear" which the Western man had naturalized as American. I felt I had learned quite a lot as I walked back, well pleased with myself, to the hotel. Mr. Crocker was still out on business in the town, and I found that business hours might extend up to almost any time of night. However, he came in fairly early, and at once took me up into his room, and proposed to continue my education in the matter of pistols and how to handle them.

From the hip-pocket he had shown me, he produced a short bulldog-looking weapon, nickel-plated; it worked with a double pull on the trigger, as he explained, demonstrating the merits of this special action by clicking it round with his thumb on the hammer and forefinger on the trigger. Suddenly—I couldn't say how—the horrid thing went off, and it went off while it was actually pointing my way, and I fairly jumped as the bullet passed within a few inches of my heart, just between my left arm and my side. The leaden missile lodged in the wall behind me, while Mr. Crocker's face went as white as a sheet.

"Oh, what an unlucky accident!" he cried, so loud that it seemed as if he wanted to be heard in the next room. He looked at me very hard. "You're not hurt? Really not? Lord, but that was a close call! I do feel ashamed of myself."

His apologies were loud and profuse. He passed his hands over my breast to make sure I was not wounded, while thought after thought raced through my whirling brain. Even as he passed those examining hands of his over my breast, I reflected that underneath were three hundred dollars, in my belt. I knew nothing of this Mr. Crocker, a mere chance acquaintance picked up on the cars. Suppose he were a thief, and after the dollars! How easily he could have taken them if I had been killed.

And then I thought of my friend of an hour ago, on the mustang pony, and his meaning look at me when he said those words: "You'd want it

powerful bad!" Did I want it now? Could this be the sort of critical moment he had in mind? No, impossible! Crocker had thrown the deadly thing on the bed, and was only eager now to make quite absolutely sure I was not hurt. It was not in me to doubt his real sincerity. Nevertheless, here was I, a tenderfoot, all alone out in this new country, this Wild West, with its well-known and most deadly reputation for crimes of violence; and of course the odious suspicions would not quite go.

However, I declared myself satisfied with my friend's apologies; yes, and more than satisfied with this my first lesson on pistols and how to handle them. Quite enough to serve as an introduction to the peculiar ways of the Far West. And, still pursued by the worthy Crocker's excuses, I sought my virtuous couch, where I speedily forgot my suspicions, and managed to sleep perfectly sound my first night as a tenderfoot.