

AMBUSH

The dusty sun wove its tangled myths into the bright colors of its fading. Gliding aimlessly in the sky a lone desert fowl added a mysterious note to the gathering dusk.

This bleak expansive desert had no desirous qualities that would cause a wandering traveler to smile, yet there was a cynical smile of triumph on Hugh Lambart's face that belied the clean-cut figure of his tall, lanky person.

To this man that rode into the dry desert land there was no quiet repose in which to sink or fade. Only the rough and ready experiences that were his to know would protect him from one of nature's most horrible deaths--that of thirst.

Stopping only now and then to examine his backtrail or to scout an approaching clump of bushes, he thought of the previous months of hard riding, of the fear that accompanied him when passing through a town, or of the sudden appearance of another rider on the trail.

The desert land had always been a refuge for people such as himself, he thought absently as he guided his horse noiselessly over the buried sand. Thus he continued across the desert unaware of the lurking danger.

A young Indian scout, hidden by a high sand dune, raised a heavy SHARPS repeater to his shoulder. Just as he started to press his finger over the trigger, his companion scout tapped him on the shoulder. The echo of that shot never sounded, for after many guttural sounds and silent motions, the two hastened back to their tethered horses. Arriving breathlessly at the camp, they immediately had council with their chief, Mahieh.

Chief Mahieh listened silently to the brief account of his two scouts' action, nodding his head as he approved of the way in which they had conducted themselves.

The upraised hand of the Chief signified to his braves that he was about to speak. The busy summer camp was stilled as Chief Mahieh's voice boomed out into the night air.

"Bluecoats come. We avenge death of Small One who died under hooves of horses because of soldier who hate all Indian." Loud exclamations broke forth from the crowd of pressing braves as the chief paused in his vengeful speech.

"Wait," called Mahieh. "We fight not with man they chase,

for sounds of bullets would warn Bluecoats. Go, my people, avenge death of your chief that would have been."

Hugh, guided by the pale moon light, soon reached a resting place for the night. A high butte surrounded only by the desert wilderness offered a perfect place for one to keep watch and have no fear of being slipped up on.

Getting off his horse and picking his way slowly up the sheer rock wall he finally reached the top. Thirty minutes of hard climbing, but probably worth it, he thought, as he glanced around over his surroundings.

Unsaddling his horse he grimly pictured the many times he had done the very same thing, only this time it was different. He had a sense of relief, of protection. It was in this mood that he threw his weary body down on the hard rocks to a peaceful sleep that didn't come. The dream that had been plaguing him night after night returned again to haunt his weary spirit. The crime, or so that was what Judge Rawling had called it, was reinacted, so clear, so plain-----

He could envision Molly, the girl he was to have married, standing in front of the Lady Wasp, which was the town salon. Her quiet, earnest pleadings still resounded in his ears. "Dad's drunk again, Hugh. Will you please take him home?"

"Why, sure, honey. I'll take him home and put him right to bed," was his own answer too easily given.

After a brief goodnight kiss, he had sauntered into the saloon and had taken Mr. Hodge home, much to the dislike of the bartender who had high dreams of becoming rich off of Mr. Hodge's drinking money.

During that fateful night a death marauder put his stamp on that small and seemingly uneventful community.

When Hodge's dead body was found that next morning, his money gone, they blamed him because he was the last seen with him. Even Molly had testified against him. He could hear her voice say, "No, Hugh didn't like my father. Hugh said that he drank too much and should be taught a lesson."

The only one who had tried to help him was his brother who testified in his behalf, but the testimony of relations has hardly ever decided a case in the favor of the accused.

So, it was like this that a man was sentenced to "hang by the neck until dead."

The dream went on carrying out every detail of his escape, of how Mr. Binkertown, the town blacksmith, had slipped him a gun as he had walked to his death - to the high gallows.

Even in sleep, human emotion is not erased - the faint facial expression of man always exists to show the inner state of his being. So it was with Hugh Lambart; even in sleep he was again drawing the gun and making his escape from death. The taunt lines of his face revealed all this as he slept.

A new day dawned, bringing with it the shadows of yesterday and the renewed hope and life of tomorrow. Arousing himself, Hugh shook his head vigorously as if trying to throw off the nightmare that had so possessed him. He grinned pleasantly to his horse that was trying to open the saddle bags in which he knew was his morning grain.

One of God's mysteries trickled down one side of the mountain butte. In it he rinsed his face that had so long been without cleansing.

Upon examining his refuge he found that he could see for miles on all sides. The small canyon that opened into the desert made a picturesque scene against the miles of white desert sand. Catching a faint movement to the left of the entrance he ran to his saddle bag and took out a long telescope which he trained on the spot where he thought he had seen the movement.

"Indians!" he exclaimed. Quickly rolling the telescope around the canyon mouth, he found that the whole canyon was set for ambush. Pushing his hat back, he decided to wait and see what happened.

An hour, maybe two, had passed when he saw a hand signal given by one Indian to the rest of the ambushers. It was then that he saw, far up in the canyon mouth, a long file of Cavalrymen. Training his glass on them, he knew he had one of two things to do, to let the Cavalry be massacred, or to warn them and forever be running.

He, then, noticed that the Cavalry scout rode into the canyon alone. With a small exclamation he saw that Ted, his brother, was riding as the scout.

"Ted, Ted, go back!" he shouted not realizing that his voice would never carry that far. Running to his saddle he unsheathed his rifle and trained it on what he knew to be the heart of the ambush.

Hugh sighed with relief as he saw his brother turn back and ride to the Cavalry.

Chief Mahieh, surprised by the act, quickly ordered four braves to silence the man on the rock.

Hugh grimly watched the horrible battle in which he had fired the starting shot. He was so interested in the battle that he didn't notice that Indians were surrounding his "perfect refuge."

A bullet, whistling over his head, made him realize the danger he was in. Dropping down on his stomach he could see over the rim of the rock wall, two braves. Without warning or second thought he pulled his pistol and shot them.

To some this act would be considered that of murder. But here in the West life is most dear and treasured, and by protection, life lives.

He wished now he had paid more attention to his own situation, when a sixth sense warned him of coming danger. Turning, he saw an Indian with an upraised gun. Hugh drawing his pistol and rolling his body, managed to escape the bullet that was almost marked with his name. The Indian was no match for Hugh's strength as the two fought hand and hand on the edge of the butte.

An unearthly scream penetrated the air as the red man plunged to his death.

Gasping for breath, he stepped back only to receive the handle of a tomahawk on the back of his head. Regretfully he sank into an unwanted sleep, a kind of senseless nightmare. He felt the hot hand of the red man pass over his brow. Then Molly's smooth hands were wiping away the hot stinging that seemed to possess him. He was sinking into a horrible pit filled with resounding echoes of screaming Indians, and Ted's calm voice was whispering to him -----

"Ted, Ted, is that you?" Hugh questioned.

"Yes, Hugh. There's nothing to worry about; everything's fine. Molly explained everything."

"Molly! is she here?" Hugh asked.

"Yes, she told us that Binketown had threatened her with her life if she didn't testify against you."

Ted, beckoning towards the door, said slowly, "Don't hold anything against her, Hugh."

He quietly left the room as he saw Molly bury her head on Hugh's chest and heard his voice say, "Forgive who for what?"

--Thelma Scifres