
IV

Setting forth with the filibusters – On alien ground –
Shooting antelope – Pursued by cholera – Wolves – Wagon repairs –
A desert waste – Night storms – The ghost manada –
A prayer for rain – A desert homestead – The old man – New country –
An abandoned village – Herdsmen on the plain –
Attacked by Comanches.

Five days later on the dead man's horse he followed the riders and wagons through the plaza and out of the town on the road downcountry. They rode through Castroville where coyotes had dug up the dead and scattered their bones and they crossed the Frio River and they crossed the Nueces and they left the Presidio road and turned north with scouts posted ahead and to the rear. They crossed the del Norte by night and waded up out of the shallow sandy ford into a howling wilderness.

Dawn saw them deployed in a long file over the plain, the dry wood wagons already moaning, horses snuffing. A dull thump of hooves and clank of gear and the constant light chink of harness. Save for scattered clumps of buckbrush and pricklypear and the little patches of twisted grass the ground was bare and there were low mountains to the south and they were bare too. Westward the horizon lay flat and true as a spirit level.

Those first days they saw no game, no birds save buzzards. They saw in the distance herds of sheep or goats moving along the skyline in scarves of dust and they ate the meat of wild asses

shot on the plain. The sergeant carried in his saddle scabbard a heavy Wesson rifle that used a false muzzle and paper patch and fired a coneshaped ball. With it he killed the little wild pigs of the desert and later when they began to see herds of antelope he would halt in the dusk with the sun off the land and screwing a bipod into the threaded boss on the underside of the barrel would kill these animals where they stood grazing at distances of half a mile. The rifle carried a vernier sight on the tang and he would eye the distance and gauge the wind and set the sight like a man using a micrometer. The second corporal would lie at his elbow with a glass and call the shots high or low should he miss and the wagon would wait by until he had shot a stand of three or four and then rumble off across the cooling land with the skimmers jostling and grinning in the bed. The sergeant never put the rifle up but what he wiped and greased the bore.

They rode well armed, each man with a rifle and many with the smallbore fiveshot Colt's revolvers. The captain carried a pair of dragoon pistols in scabbards that mounted across the pommel of the saddle so that they rode at each knee. These guns were United States issue, Colt's patent, and he had bought them from a deserter in a Soledad livery stable and paid eighty dollars in gold for them and the scabbards and the mold and flask they came with.

The rifle the kid carried had been sawed down and rebored till it weighed very light indeed and the mold for it was so small he had to patch the balls with buckskin. He had fired it a few times and it carried much where it chose. It rode before him on the saddlebow, he having no scabbard. It had been carried so before, God's years of it, and the forestock was much worn beneath.

In the early dark the wagon came back with the meat. The skimmers had piled the wagonbed with mesquite brush and stumps they'd dug out of the ground with the horses and they unloaded the firewood and commenced cutting up the gutted antelopes in the floor of the wagon with bowieknives and hand-axes, laughing and hacking in a welter of gore, a reeking scene

in the light of the handheld lanterns. By full dark the blackened rib racks leaned steaming at the fires and there was a jousting over the coals with shaven sticks whereon were skewered gobs of meat and a clank of canteens and endless raillery. And sleep that night on the cold plains of a foreign land, forty-six men wrapped in their blankets under the selfsame stars, the prairie wolves so like in their yammering, yet all about so changed and strange.

They caught up and set out each day in the dark before the day yet was and they ate cold meat and biscuit and made no fire. The sun rose on a column already ragged these six days out. Among their clothes there was small agreement and among their hats less. The little painted horses stepped shifty and truculent and a vicious snarl of flies fought constantly in the bed of the gamewagon. The dust the party raised was quickly dispersed and lost in the immensity of that landscape and there was no dust other for the pale sutler who pursued them drives unseen and his lean horse and his lean cart leave no track upon such ground or any ground. By a thousand fires in the iron blue dusk he keeps his commissary and he's a wry and grinning tradesman good to follow every campaign or hound men from their holes in just those whited regions where they've gone to hide from God. On this day two men fell sick and one died before dark. In the morning there was another ill to take his place. The two of them were laid among sacks of beans and rice and coffee in the supply-wagon with blankets over them to keep them from the sun and they rode with the slamming and jarring of the wagon half shirring the meat from their bones so that they cried out to be left and then they died. The men turned out in the early morning darkness to dig their graves with the bladebones of antelope and they covered them with stones and rode on again.

They rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale streaks of light and then a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring planewise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the

unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them. The shadows of the smallest stones lay like pencil lines across the sand and the shapes of the men and their mounts advanced elongate before them like strands of the night from which they'd ridden, like tentacles to bind them to the darkness yet to come. They rode with their heads down, faceless under their hats, like an army asleep on the march. By midmorning another man had died and they lifted him from the wagon where he'd stained the sacks he'd lain among and buried him also and rode on.

Now wolves had come to follow them, great pale lobos with yellow eyes that trotted neat of foot or squatted in the shimmering heat to watch them where they made their noon halt. Moving on again. Loping, sidling, ambling with their long noses to the ground. In the evening their eyes shifted and winked out there on the edge of the firelight and in the morning when the riders rode out in the cool dark they could hear the snarling and the pop of their mouths behind them as they sacked the camp for meatscraps.

The wagons drew so dry they slouched from side to side like dogs and the sand was grinding them away. The wheels shrank and the spokes reeled in their hubs and clattered like loom-shafts and at night they'd drive false spokes into the mortices and tie them down with strips of green hide and they'd drive wedges between the iron of the tires and the suncracked felloes. They wobbled on, the trace of their untrue labors like sidewinder tracks in the sand. The dulege pegs worked loose and dropped behind. Wheels began to break up.

Ten days out with four men dead they started across a plain of pure pumice where there grew no shrub, no weed, far as the eye could see. The captain called a halt and he called up the Mexican who served as guide. They talked and the Mexican gestured and the captain gestured and after a while they moved on again.

This looks like the high road to hell to me, said a man from the ranks.

What does he reckon for the horses to eat?

I believe they're supposed to just grit up on this sand like chickens and be ready for the shelled corn when it does come.

In two days they began to come upon bones and cast-off apparel. They saw halfburied skeletons of mules with the bones so white and polished they seemed incandescent even in that blazing heat and they saw panniers and packsaddles and the bones of men and they saw a mule entire, the dried and blackened carcass hard as iron. They rode on. The white noon saw them through the waste like a ghost army, so pale they were with dust, like shades of figures erased upon a board. The wolves loped paler yet and grouped and skittered and lifted their lean snouts on the air. At night the horses were fed by hand from sacks of meal and watered from buckets. There was no more sickness. The survivors lay quietly in that cratered void and watched the whitehot stars go rifling down the dark. Or slept with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night. They moved on and the iron of the wagon-tires grew polished bright as chrome in the pumice. To the south the blue cordilleras stood footed in their paler image on the sand like reflections in a lake and there were no wolves now.

They took to riding by night, silent jornadas save for the trundling of the wagons and the wheeze of the animals. Under the moonlight a strange party of elders with the white dust thick on their moustaches and their eyebrows. They moved on and the stars jostled and arced across the firmament and died beyond the inkblack mountains. They came to know the night skies well. Western eyes that read more geometric constructions than those names given by the ancients. Tethered to the polestar they rode the Dipper round while Orion rose in the southwest like a great electric kite. The sand lay blue in the moonlight and the iron tires of the wagons rolled among the shapes of the riders in gleaming hoops that veered and wheeled woundedly and vaguely navigational like slender astrolabes and the polished shoes of the horses kept hasping up like a myriad of eyes winking across the desert floor. They watched storms out there so distant they

could not be heard, the silent lightning flaring sheetwise and the thin black spine of the mountain chain fluttering and sucked away again in the dark. They saw wild horses racing on the plain, pounding their shadows down the night and leaving in the moonlight a vaporous dust like the palest stain of their passing.

All night the wind blew and the fine dust set their teeth on edge. Sand in everything, grit in all they ate. In the morning a urine-colored sun rose blearily through panes of dust on a dim world and without feature. The animals were failing. They halted and made a dry camp without wood or water and the wretched ponies huddled and whimpered like dogs.

That night they rode through a region electric and wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses' trappings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beards of the men. All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream.

They halted in the dark to recruit the animals and some of the men stowed their arms in the wagons for fear of drawing the lightning and a man named Hayward prayed for rain.

He prayed: Almighty God, if it aint too far out of the way of things in your eternal plan do you reckon we could have a little rain down here.

Pray it up, some called, and kneeling he cried out among the thunder and the wind: Lord we are dried to jerky down here. Just a few drops for some old boys out here on the prairie and a long ways from home.

Amen, they said, and catching up their mounts they rode on.

Within the hour the wind cooled and drops of rain the size of grapes fell upon them out of that wild darkness. They could smell wet stone and the sweet smell of the wet horses and wet leather. They rode on.

They rode through the heat of the day following with the waterkegs empty and the horses perishing and in the evening these elect, shabby and white with dust like a company of armed and mounted millers wandering in dementia, rode up off the desert through a gap in the low stone hills and down upon a solitary jacal, crude hut of mud and wattles and a rudimentary stable and corrals.

Bone palings ruled the small and dusty purlieus here and death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape. Strange fences that the sand and wind had scoured and the sun bleached and cracked like old porcelain with dry brown weather cracks and where no life moved. The corrugated forms of the riders passed jingling across the dry bistre land and across the mud facade of the jacal, the horses trembling, smelling water. The captain raised his hand and the sergeant spoke and two men dismounted and advanced upon the hut with rifles. They pushed open a door made of rawhide and entered. In a few minutes they reappeared.

Somebody's here somewheres. They's hot coals.

The captain surveyed the distance with an air of vigilance. He dismounted with the patience of one used to dealing with incompetence and crossed to the jacal. When he came out he surveyed the terrain again. The horses shifted and clinked and stamped and the men pulled their jaws down and spoke roughly to them.

Sergeant.

Yessir.

These people cant be far. See if you can find them. And see if there's any forage here for the animals.

Forage?

Forage.

The sergeant placed a hand on the cantle and looked about at the place they were in and shook his head and dismounted.

They went through the jacal and into the enclosure behind and out to the stable. There were no animals and nothing but a stall half filled with dry sotols in the way of feed. They walked out the back to a sink among the stones where water stood and a thin stream flowed away over the sand. There were hoofprints about the tank and dry manure and some small birds ran mindlessly along the rim of the little creek.

The sergeant had been squatting on his heels and now he rose and spat. Well, he said. Is there any direction you caint see twenty mile in?

The recruits studied the emptiness about.

I dont believe the folks here is gone that long.

They drank and walked back toward the jacal. Horses were being led along the narrow path.

The captain was standing with his thumbs in his belt.

I caint see where they've got to, said the sergeant.

What's in the shed.

Some old dry fodder.

The captain frowned. They ought to have a goat or a hog. Something. Chickens.

In a few minutes two men came dragging an old man from the stable. He was covered with dust and dry chaff and he held one arm across his eyes. He was dragged moaning to the captain's feet where he lay prostrate in what looked like windings of white cotton. He put his hands over his ears and his elbows before his eyes like one called upon to witness some appalling thing. The captain turned away in disgust. The sergeant toed him with his boot. What's wrong with him? he said.

He's pissing himself, Sergeant. He's pissing himself. The captain gestured at the man with his gloves.

Yessir.

Well get him the hell out of here.

You want Candelario to talk to him?

He's a halfwit. Get him away from me.

They dragged the old man away. He had begun to babble but no one listened and in the morning he was gone.

They bivouacked by the tank and the farrier saw to the mules

and ponies that had thrown shoes and they worked on the wagons by firelight far into the night. They set forth in a crimson dawn where sky and earth closed in a razorous plane. Out there dark little archipelagos of cloud and the vast world of sand and scrub shearing upward into the shoreless void where those blue islands trembled and the earth grew uncertain, gravely canted and veering out through tinctures of rose and the dark beyond the dawn to the uttermost rebate of space.

They rode through regions of particolored stone upthrust in ragged kerfs and shelves of traprock reared in faults and anticlines curved back upon themselves and broken off like stumps of great stone treeboles and stones the lightning had clove open, seeps exploding in steam in some old storm. They rode past trapdykes of brown rock running down the narrow chines of the ridges and onto the plain like the ruins of old walls, such auguries everywhere of the hand of man before man was or any living thing.

They passed through a village then and now in ruins and they camped in the walls of a tall mud church and burned the fallen timbers of the roof for their fire while owls cried from the arches in the dark.

The following day on the skyline to the south they saw clouds of dust that lay across the earth for miles. They rode on, watching the dust until it began to near and the captain raised his hand for a halt and took from his saddlebag his old brass cavalry telescope and uncoupled it and swept it slowly over the land. The sergeant sat his horse beside him and after a while the captain handed him the glass.

Hell of a herd of something.

I believe it's horses.

How far off do you make them?

Hard to tell.

Call Candelario up here.

The sergeant turned and motioned for the Mexican. When he rode up he handed him the glass and the Mexican raised it to his eye and squinted. Then he lowered the glass and watched

with his naked eyes and then he raised it and looked again. Then he sat his horse with the glass at his chest like a crucifix.

Well? said the captain.

He shook his head.

What the hell does that mean? They're not buffalo are they?

No. I think maybe horses.

Let me have the glass.

The Mexican handed him the telescope and he glassed the horizon again and collapsed the tube shut with the heel of his hand and replaced it in his bag and raised his hand and they went on.

They were cattle, mules, horses. There were several thousand head and they were moving quarterwise toward the company. By late afternoon riders were visible to the bare eye, a handful of ragged indians mending the outer flanks of the herd with their nimble ponies. Others in hats, perhaps Mexicans. The sergeant dropped back to where the captain was riding.

What do you make of that, Captain?

I make it a parcel of heathen stockthieves is what I make it. What do you?

Looks like it to me.

The captain watched through the glass. I suppose they've seen us, he said.

They've seen us.

How many riders do you make it?

A dozen maybe.

The captain tapped the instrument in his gloved hand. They dont seem concerned, do they?

No sir. They dont.

The captain smiled grimly. We may see a little sport here before the day is out.

The first of the herd began to swing past them in a pall of yellow dust, rangy slatribbed cattle with horns that grew agoggle and no two alike and small thin mules coalblack that shouldered one another and reared their malletshaped heads above the backs of the others and then more cattle and finally the first of

the herders riding up the outer side and keeping the stock between themselves and the mounted company. Behind them came a herd of several hundred ponies. The sergeant looked for Candelario. He kept backing along the ranks but he could not find him. He nudged his horse through the column and moved up the far side. The lattermost of the drovers were now coming through the dust and the captain was gesturing and shouting. The ponies had begun to veer off from the herd and the drovers were beating their way toward this armed company met with on the plain. Already you could see through the dust on the ponies' hides the painted chevrons and the hands and rising suns and birds and fish of every device like the shade of old work through sizing on a canvas and now too you could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena, flutes made from human bones, and some among the company had begun to saw back on their mounts and some to mill in confusion when up from the offside of those ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpieced suns against the eyes of their enemies. A legion of horrors, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of crane feathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and

grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools.

Oh my god, said the sergeant.

A rattling drove of arrows passed through the company and men tottered and dropped from their mounts. Horses were rearing and plunging and the mongol hordes swung up along their flanks and turned and rode full upon them with lances.

The company was now come to a halt and the first shots were fired and the gray riflesmoke rolled through the dust as the lancers breached their ranks. The kid's horse sank beneath him with a long pneumatic sigh. He had already fired his rifle and now he sat on the ground and fumbled with his shotpouch. A man near him sat with an arrow hanging out of his neck. He was bent slightly as if in prayer. The kid would have reached for the bloody hoop-iron point but then he saw that the man wore another arrow in his breast to the fletching and he was dead. Everywhere there were horses down and men scrambling and he saw a man who sat charging his rifle while blood ran from his ears and he saw men with their revolvers disassembled trying to fit the spare loaded cylinders they carried and he saw men kneeling who tilted and clasped their shadows on the ground and he saw men lanced and caught up by the hair and scalped standing and he saw the horses of war trample down the fallen and a little whitefaced pony with one clouded eye leaned out of the murk and snapped at him like a dog and was gone. Among the wounded some seemed dumb and without understanding and some were pale through the masks of dust and some had fouled themselves or tottered brokenly onto the spears of the savages. Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with eyes walled and teeth cropped and naked riders with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws and their shields winking in the dust and

up the far side of the ruined ranks in a piping of boneflutes and dropping down off the sides of their mounts with one heel hung in the withers strap and their short bows flexing beneath the outstretched necks of the ponies until they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandylegged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. And now the horses of the dead came pounding out of the smoke and dust and circled with flapping leather and wild manes and eyes whited with fear like the eyes of the blind and some were feathered with arrows and some lanced through and stumbling and vomiting blood as they wheeled across the killing ground and clattered from sight again. Dust stanching the wet and naked heads of the scalped who with the fringe of hair below their wounds and tonsured to the bone now lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming.

V

Adrift on the Bolson de Mapimi – Sproule –

Tree of dead babies – Scenes from a massacre – Sopilotes –

The murdered in the church – Night among the dead – Wolves –

The washers at the ford – Afoot westward – A mirage – An encounter with bandits – Attacked by a vampire – Digging a well – A crossroads in the waste – The carreta – Death of Sproule – Under arrest –

The captain's head – Survivors – On to Chihuahua –

The city – The prison – Toadvine.

With darkness one soul rose wondrously from among the new slain dead and stole away in the moonlight. The ground where he'd lain was soaked with blood and with urine from the voided bladders of the animals and he went forth stained and stinking like some reeking issue of the incarnate dam of war herself. The savages had moved to higher ground and he could see the light from their fires and hear them singing, a strange and plaintive chanting up there where they'd gone to roast mules. He made his way among the pale and dismembered, among the sprawled and legflung horses, and he took a reckoning by the stars and set off south afoot. The night wore a thousand shapes out there in the brush and he kept his eyes to the ground ahead. Starlight and waning moon made a faint shadow of his wanderings on the dark of the desert and all along the ridges the wolves were howling and moving north toward the slaughter. He walked all night and still he could see the fires behind him.

With daylight he made his way toward some outcroppings of rock a mile across the valley floor. He was climbing among the