

FOREWORD

"The Texan Scouts," while a complete story in itself, continues the fortunes of Ned Fulton and his friends, who were the central characters in "The Texan Star."

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THE TEXAN SCOUTS

CHAPTER I

IN THE STORM

The horseman rode slowly toward the west, stopping once or twice to examine the wide circle of the horizon with eyes that were trained to note every aspect of the wilderness. On his right the plains melted away in gentle swell after swell, until they met the horizon. Their brown surface was broken only by the spiked and thorny cactus and stray bits of chaparral.

On his left was the wide bed of a river which flowed through the sand, breaking here and there into several streams, and then reuniting, only to scatter its volume a hundred yards further into three or four channels. A bird of prey flew on strong wing over the water, dipped and then rose again, but there was no other sign of life. Beyond, the country southward rolled away, gray and bare, sterile and desolate.

The horseman looked most often into the south. His glances into the north were few and brief, but his eyes dwelled long on the lonely land that lay beyond the yellow current. His was an attractive face. He was young, only a boy, but the brow was broad and high, and the eyes, grave and steady, were those of one who thought much. He was clad completely in buckskin, and his hat was wide of brim. A rifle held in one hand lay across the pommel of his saddle and there were weapons in his belt. Two light, but warm, blankets, folded closely, were tied behind him. The tanned face and the lithe, strong figure showed a wonderful degree of health and strength.

Several hours passed and the horseman rode on steadily though slowly. His main direction was toward the west, and always he kept the river two or three hundred yards on his left. He never failed to search the plains on either side, but chiefly in the south, with the eager, intent gaze that missed nothing. But the lonesome gray land, cut by the coiling yellow river, still rolled before him, and its desola-

tion and chill struck to his heart. It was the depth of the Texan winter, and, at times, icy gusts, born in far mountains, swept across the plains.

The rider presently turned his horse toward the river and stopped on a low bluff overlooking it. His face showed a tinge of disappointment, as if his eyes failed to find objects for which they sought. Again he gazed long and patiently into the south, but without reward.

He resumed his ride parallel with the river, but soon stopped a second time, and held up an open hand, like one who tests the wind. The air was growing perceptibly colder. The strong gusts were now fusing into a steady wind. The day, which had not been bright at any time, was turning darker. The sun was gone and in the far north banks of mists and vapor were gathering. A dreary moaning came over the plain.

Ned Fulton, tried and brave though he was, beheld the omens with alarm. He knew what they portended, and in all that vast wilderness he was alone. Not a human being to share the danger with him! Not a hand to help!

He looked for chaparral, something that might serve as a sort of shelter, but he had left the last clump of it behind, and now he turned and rode directly north, hoping that he might find some deep depression between the swells where he and his horse, in a fashion, could hide.

Meanwhile the Norther came down with astonishing speed. The temperature fell like a plummet. The moan of the wind rose to a shriek, and cold clouds of dust were swept against Ned and his horse. Then snow mingled with the dust and both beat upon them. Ned felt his horse shivering under him, and he shivered, too, despite his will. It had turned so dark that he could no longer tell where he was going, and he used the wide brim of his hat to protect himself from the sand.

Soon it was black as night, and the snow was driving in a hurricane. The wind, unchecked by forest or hill, screamed with a sound almost human. Ned dismounted and walked in the lee of his horse.

The animal turned his head and nuzzled his master, as if he could give him warmth.

Ned hoped that the storm would blow itself out in an hour or two, but his hope was vain. The darkness did not abate. The wind rose instead of falling, and the snow thickened. It lay on the plain several inches deep, and the walking grew harder. At last the two, the boy and the horse, stopped. Ned knew that they had come into some kind of a depression, and the full force of the hurricane passed partly over their heads.

It was yet very dark, and the driving snow scarcely permitted him to open his eyes, but by feeling about a little he found that one side of the dip was covered with a growth of dwarf bushes. He led the horse into the lower edge of these, where some protection was secured, and, crouching once more in the lee of the animal, he unfolded the two blankets, which he wrapped closely about himself to the eyes.

Ned, for the first time since the Norther rushed down upon him, felt secure. He would not freeze to death, he would escape the fate that sometimes overtook lone hunters or travelers upon those vast plains. Warmth from the blankets began gradually to replace the chill in his bones, and the horse and the bushes together protected his face from the driven snow which had been cutting like hail. He even had, in some degree, the sense of comfort which one feels when safe inside four walls with a storm raging past the windows. The horse whinnied once and rubbed his nose against Ned's hand. He, too, had ceased to shiver.

All that afternoon the Norther blew with undiminished violence. After a while the fall of snow thinned somewhat, but the wind did not decrease. Ned was devoutly thankful for the dip and the bushes that grew within it. Nor was he less thankful for the companionship of his horse. It was a good horse, a brave horse, a great bay mustang, built powerfully and with sinews and muscles of steel. He had secured him just after taking part in the capture of San Antonio with his comrades, Obed White and the Ring Tailed Panther, and already the tie between horse and rider had become strong and enduring. Ned stroked him again, and the horse, twisting his neck around, thrust his nose under his arm.

"Good old boy! Good fellow!" said Ned, pinching his ear. "We were lucky, you and I, to find this place."

The horse neighed ever so gently, and rubbed his nose up and down. After a while the darkness began to increase. Ned knew that it was not a new development of the storm, but the coming of night, and he grew anxious again. He and his horse, however secure at the present moment, could not stay always in that dip among the bushes. Yet he did not dare to leave it. Above on the plain they would receive the full sweep of the wind, which was still bitterly cold.

He was worn by the continued buffetings of blast and snow, but he did not dare to lie down, even in the blankets, lest he never wake again, and while he considered he saw darker shadows in the darkness above him. He gazed, all attention, and counted ten shadows, following one another, a dusky file. He knew by the set of their figures, short and stocky, that they were Mexicans, and his heart beat heavily. These were the first Mexicans that any one had seen on Texan soil since the departure of Cos and his army on parole from captured San Antonio. So the Mexicans had come back, and no doubt they would return in great force!

Ned crouched lower, and he was very glad that the nose of the horse was still under his arm. He would not have a chance to whinny to his kind that bore the Mexicans. But the horse made no attempt to move, and Ned watched them pass on and out of sight. He had not heard the sound of footsteps or voices above the wind, and after they were gone it seemed to him that he had seen a line of phantoms.

But he was sure that his own mortal eyes had beheld that for which he was looking. He and his comrades had been watching the Rio Grande to see whether the Mexicans had crossed, and now he at least knew it.

He waited patiently three or four hours longer, until the wind died and the fall of snow ceased, when he mounted his horse and rode out of the dip. The wind suddenly sprang up again in about fifteen minutes, but now it blew from the south and was warm. The darkness thinned away as the moon and stars came out in a perfect sky of southern blue. The temperature rose many degrees in an

hour and Ned knew that the snow would melt fast. All danger of freezing was past, but he was as hungry as a bear and tired to death.

He unwrapped the blankets from his body, folded them again in a small package which he made fast to his saddle, and once more stroked the nose of his horse.

"Good Old Jack," he murmured—he had called him Old Jack after Andrew Jackson, then a mighty hero of the south and west, "you passed through the ordeal and never moved, like the silent gentleman that you are."

Old Jack whinnied ever so softly, and rubbed his nose against the boy's coat sleeve. Ned mounted him and rode out of the dip, pausing at the top of the swell for a long look in every direction. The night was now peaceful and there was no noise, save for the warm wind that blew out of the south with a gentle sighing sound almost like the note of music. Trickle of water from the snow, already melting, ran down the crests. Lighter and lighter grew the sky. The moon seemed to Ned to be poised directly overhead, and close by. New stars were springing out as the last clouds floated away.

Ned sought shelter, warmth and a place in which to sleep, and to secure these three he felt that he must seek timber. The scouts whom he had seen were probably the only Mexicans north of the Rio Grande, and, as he believed, there was not one chance in a thousand of meeting such enemies again. If he should be so lucky as to find shelter he would sleep there without fear.

He rode almost due north for more than two hours, seeing patches of chaparral on both right and left. But, grown fastidious now and not thinking them sufficient for his purpose, he continued his northern course. Old Jack's feet made a deep sighing sound as they sank in the snow, and now there was water everywhere as that soft but conquering south wind blew steadily over the plain.

When he saw a growth of timber rising high and dark upon a swell he believed that he had found his place, and he urged his horse to renewed speed. The trees proved to be pecans, aspens and oaks growing so densely that he was compelled to dismount and lead Old Jack before they could force an entrance. Inside he found a clear space, somewhat like the openings of the north, in shape an

irregular circle, but not more than fifteen feet across. Great spreading boughs of oaks had protected it so well that but little snow had fallen there, and that little had melted. Already the ground in the circle was drying.

Ned uttered an exclamation of relief and gratitude. This would be his camp, and to one used to living in the wilderness it furnished good shelter. At one edge of the opening was an outcropping of flat rock now quite dry, and there he would spread his bed. He unsaddled and unbridled his horse, merely tethering him with a lariat, and spread the horse blanket upon the flat rock. He would lie upon this and cover himself with his own blankets, using the saddle as a pillow.

But the security of the covert tempted the boy, who was now as hungry as a bear just come from winter quarters. He felt weak and relaxed after his long hours in the snow and storm, and he resolved to have warm food and drink.

There was much fallen wood among the trees, and with his strong hunting knife he whittled off the bark and thin dry shavings until he had a fine heap. Working long with flint and steel, he managed to set fire to the shavings, and then he fed the flames with larger pieces of wood until he had a great bed of glowing coals. A cautious wilderness rover, learning always from his tried friends, Ned never rode the plains without his traveling equipment, and now he drew from his pack a small tin coffee pot and tiny cup of the same material. Then with quick and skillful hands he made coffee over the coals and warmed strips of deer and buffalo meat.

He ate and drank hungrily, while the horse nibbled the grass that grew within the covert. Glorious warmth came again and the worn feeling departed. Life, youthful, fresh and abounding, swelled in every vein.

He now put out all the coals carefully, throwing wet leaves upon them, in order that not a single spark might shine through the trees to be seen by an enemy upon the plain. He relied upon the horse to give warning of a possible approach by man, and to keep away wolves.

Then he made his bed upon the rock, doing everything as he had arranged it in his mind an hour before, and, wrapped in his blankets, fell into the soundest of sleeps. The south wind still blew steadily, playing a low musical song among the trees. The beads of water on the twigs and the few leaves that remained dried fast. The grass dried, too, and beyond the covert the snow, so quick to come, was equally quick to go.

The horse ceased to nibble the grass, looked at the sleeping boy, touched his blankets lightly with his nose, and walked to the other side of the opening, where he lay down and went to his own horse heaven of sleep.

It was not many hours until day and Old Jack was a light sleeper. When he opened his eyes again he saw a clear and beautiful winter day of the far south. The only clouds in the sky were little drifting bits of fine white wool, and the warm wind still blew. Old Jack, who was in reality Young Jack, as his years were not yet four, did not think so much of the covert now, as he had already eaten away all the grass within the little opening but his sense of duty was strong. He saw that his human master and comrade still slept, apparently with no intention of awakening at any very early date, and he set himself to gleaning stray blades of grass that might have escaped his notice the night before.

Ned awoke a little after the noon hour, and sprang to his feet in dismay. The sun was almost directly over his head, showing him how late it was. He looked at his horse as if to reproach his good comrade for not waking him sooner, but Old Jack's large mild eyes gave him such a gaze of benignant unconcern that the boy was ashamed of himself.

"It certainly was not your fault," he said to his horse, "and, after all, it probably doesn't matter. We've had a long sound sleep and rest, and I've no doubt that both of us will profit by it. Nothing seems to be left in here for you to eat, but I'll take a little breakfast myself."

He did not relight the fire, but contented himself with cold food. Then resaddling, he left the grove and rode northward again until he came to a hill, or, rather, a swell, that was higher than the rest. Here he stopped his horse and took a glance at the sun, which was

shining with uncommon brilliancy. Then he produced a small mirror from the pocket of his hunting shirt and held it in such a position that it made a focus of the sun's rays, throwing them in a perfect blazing lance of light.

He turned the flaming lance around the horizon, until it completed the circle and then he started around with it again. Meantime he was keeping a close watch upon every high point. A hill rose in the north, and he looked at it longest, but nothing came from it. There was another, but lower, hill in the west, and before he had completed the second round with his glass a light flashed from it. It was a brilliant light, almost like a sheaf of white incandescent rays. He lowered his own mirror and the light played directly upon his hill. When it ceased he sent back answering rays, to which, when he stopped, a rejoinder came in like fashion. Then he put the little mirror back in the safe pocket of his hunting shirt and rode with perfect confidence toward that western hill.

The crest that Ned sought was several miles away, although it looked much nearer in the thin clear air of the plains, but he rode now at increased speed, because there was much to draw him on. Old Jack seemed to share in his lightness of spirit, raising his head once and neighing, as if he were sending forth a welcome.

The boy soon saw two figures upon the hill, the shapes of horse and man, outlined in black against the sun, which was now declining in the west. They were motionless and they were exaggerated into gigantic stature against the red background. Ned knew them, although the distance was far too great to disclose any feature. But signal had spoken truly to signal, and that was enough. Old Jack made a fresh burst of speed and presently neighed once more. An answering neigh came back from the hill.

Ned rode up the slope and greeted Obed White and the Ring Tailed Panther with outstretched hands.

"And it's you, my boy," said Obed, his eyes glistening. "Until we saw your signal we were afraid that you might have frozen to death in the Norther, but it's a long lane that has no happy ending, and here we are, all three of us, alive, and as well as ever."

"That's so," said the Panther, "but even when the storm was at its worst I didn't give up, Ned. Somehow, when things are at the blackest I'm always hopin'. I don't take any credit fur it. I was just born with that kind of a streak in me."

Ned regarded him with admiration. The Ring Tailed Panther was certainly a gorgeous object. He rode a great black horse with a flowing mane. He was clad completely in a suit of buckskin which was probably without a match on the border. It and his moccasins were adorned with thick rows of beads of many colors, that glittered and flashed as the sunlight played upon them. Heavy silver spurs were fastened to his heels, and his hat of broad brim and high cone in the Mexican fashion was heavy with silver braid. His saddle also was of the high, peaked style, studded with silver. The Panther noticed Ned's smile of appraisal and smiled back.

"Ain't it fine?" he said. "I guess this is about the beautifulest outfit to be found in either Texas or Mexico. I bought it all in honor of our victory just after we took San Antonio, and it soothes my eyes and makes my heart strong every time I look at it."

"And it helps out the prairies," said Obed White, his eyes twinkling. "Now that winter has made 'em brown, they need a dash of color and the Panther gives it to 'em. Fine feathers don't keep a man from being a man for a' that. What did you do in the storm, Ned?"

"I found shelter in a thick grove, managed to light a fire, and slept there in my blankets."

"We did about the same."

"But I saw something before I reached my shelter."

"What was that?" exclaimed the two, noting the significance in Ned's tone.

"While I was waiting in a dip I saw ten Mexican horsemen ride by. They were heavily armed, and I've no doubt they were scouts belonging to some strong force."

"And so they are back on this side of the Rio Grande," said Obed White thoughtfully. "I'm not surprised. Our Texans have rejoiced too early. The full storm has not burst yet."

The Panther began to bristle. A giant in size, he seemed to grow larger, and his gorgeous hunting suit strained at the seams.

"Let 'em come on," he said menacingly. "Let Santa Anna himself lead 'em. We Texans can take care of 'em all."

But Obed White shook his head sadly.

"We could if we were united," he said, "but our leaders have taken to squabbling. You're a Cheerful Talker, Panther, and you deserve both your names, but to tell you the honest truth I'm afraid of the Mexican advance."

"I think the Mexicans probably belonged to Urrea's band," said Ned.

"Very likely," said Obed. "He's about the most energetic of their partisan leaders, and it may be that we'll run against him pretty soon."

They had heard in their scouting along the Rio Grande that young Francisco Urrea, after the discovery that he was a spy and his withdrawal from San Antonio with the captured army of Cos, had organized a strong force of horsemen and was foremost among those who were urging a new Mexican advance into Texas.

"It's pretty far west for the Mexicans," said the Panther. "We're on the edge of the Indian country here."

But Obed considered it all the more likely that Urrea, if he meditated a raid, would come from the west, since his approach at that point would be suspected the least. The three held a brief discussion and soon came to an agreement. They would continue their own ride west and look for Urrea. Having decided so, they went into the task heart and soul, despite its dangers.

The three rode side by side and three pairs of skilled eyes examined the plain. The snow was left only in sheltered places or among the trees. But the further they went the scarcer became the trees, and before night they disappeared entirely.

"We are comin' upon the buffalo range," said the Panther. "A hundred miles further west we'd be likely to strike big herds. When we're through fightin' the Mexicans I'm goin' out there again. It's the life fur me."

The night came, dark and cold, but fortunately without wind. They camped in a dip and did not light any fire, lying as Ned had done the night before on their horse blankets and wrapping themselves in their own. The three horses seemed to be contented with one another and made no noise.

They deemed it wise now to keep a watch, as they might be near Urrea's band or Lipans might pass, and the Panther, who said he was not sleepy at all, became sentinel. Ned, although he had not risen until noon, was sleepy again from the long ride, and his eyes closed soon. The last object that he saw was the Panther standing on the crest of the swell just beyond them, rifle on shoulder, watching the moonlit plains. Obed White was asleep already.

The Panther walked back and forth a few times and then looked down at his comrades in the dip. His trained eyes saw their chests rising and falling, and he knew that they were far away in the land of Nowhere. Then he extended his walk back and forth a little further, scanning carefully the dusky plain.

A light wind sprang up after a while, and it brought a low but heavy and measured tread to his ears. The Panther's first impulse was to awaken his friends, because this might be the band of Urrea, but he hesitated a moment, and then lay down with his ear to the earth. When he rose his uneasiness had departed and he resumed his walk back and forth. He had heard that tread before many times and, now that it was coming nearer, he could not mistake it, but, as the measured beat indicated that it would pass to one side, it bore no threat for his comrades or himself.

The Panther did not stop his walk as from a distance of a few hundred yards he watched the great buffalo herd go by. The sound was so steady and regular that Ned and Obed were not awakened nor were the horses disturbed. The buffaloes showed a great black mass across the plain, extending for fully a mile, and they were moving north at an even gait. The Panther watched until the last had passed, and he judged that there were fully a hundred thousand animals in the herd. He saw also the big timber wolves hanging on the rear and flanks, ready to cut out stray calves or those weak from old age. So busy were the wolves seeking a chance that

they did not notice the gigantic figure of the man, rifle on shoulder, who stood on the crest of the swell looking at them as they passed.

The Panther's eyes followed the black line of the herd until it disappeared under the northern rim of darkness. He was wondering why the buffaloes were traveling so steadily after daylight and he came to the conclusion that the impelling motive was not a search for new pastures. He listened a long time until the last rumble of the hundred thousand died away in a faint echo, and then he awakened his comrades.

"I'm thinkin'," he said, "that the presence of Urrea's band made the buffaloes move. Now I'm not a Ring Tailed Panther an' a Cheerful Talker for nothin', an' we want to hunt that band. Like as not they've been doin' some mischief, which we may be able partly to undo. I'm in favor of ridin' south, back on the herd track an' lookin' for 'em."

"So am I," said Obed White. "My watch says it's one o'clock in the morning, and my watch is always right, because I made it myself. We've had a pretty good rest, enough to go on, and what we find may be worth finding. A needle in a haystack may be well hid, but you'll find it if you look long enough."

They rode almost due south in the great path made by the buffalo herd, not stopping for a full two hours when a halt was made at a signal from the Panther. They were in a wide plain, where buffalo grass yet grew despite the winter, and the Panther said with authority that the herd had been grazing here before it was started on its night journey into the north.

"An' if we ride about this place long enough," he said, "we'll find the reason why the buffaloes left it."

He turned his horse in a circuit of the plain and Ned and Obed followed the matchless tracker, who was able, even in the moonlight, to note any disturbance of the soil. Presently he uttered a little cry and pointed ahead. Both saw the skeleton of a buffalo which evidently had been killed not long and stripped of its meat. A little further on they saw another and then two more.

"That tells it," said the Panther succinctly. "These buffaloes were killed for food an' most likely by Mexicans. It was the shots that set