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To Truckee's Trail

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## **To Truckee's Trail**

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This is a work of fiction, loosely based on real persons, who participated in a historic event... but an event that has been but sketchily recorded, and little remembered save among a few historians. The late George R. Steward was one such: an essay he wrote about the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party for American Heritage Magazine first fired my imagination about them over thirty-five years ago. My thanks are due to him for that inspiration. Thanks also to Kathy Johnson and Craig Lockwood who encouraged me to imagine the epic journey of the party and to set it down in this form, to Oren Woody, devoted fan and reader... and to Mom and Dad for everything else.

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# **To Truckee's Trail**

**Celia D. Hayes**

## Chapter 4 – Pilgrims' Progress

From Dr. Townsend's Diary:

*"Twenty-second of May, 1844 With much labor, we have crossed the Elkhorn River, and reassembled our wagons and teams on the far side, and ventured out into the Desert..."*

From E.S. Patterson Interview, University of California Local History Archival Project 1932:

*"...Oh, it was a glorious to see... I can close my eyes and see it still, mile after mile of that beautiful green grass, full of wild-flowers it was, rippling in that sweet clean wind, as if thousands of little animals were running through it. The wagons coming over the top of the hill, those canvas covers shining in the sun, and the feel of it when we children ran through it in our bare feet, with the sun on our faces, and butterflies and dragon-flies all going every which way in the sunshine... Ma said I had to look after my baby sister, Sadie, but I didn't mind, she was the closest thing to a real pet that I had, way back then.*

*And we had chores to do, too. My brothers and I had to get up in the dark when Ma waked us, and round up our oxen, find them where they had strayed to in the night. O' course, they never went far, ours' were as biddable as dogs, they came when we called their names. We had four yoke to start with, and they all had names...Socks and Spot, Baldy and Blackie, Fergus and Red, Corny and Star... and the milk cow, Goldenrod. My sister Nancy had to milk Goldenrod in the morning, while Ma fixed breakfast, and my brothers and I hitched up the teams. We'd have eaten breakfast, and packed up everything by sun-up, and then Cap'n Stephens would have someone blow a horn... it was one of the Oregoners, had the fancy notion to bring a horn.*

*Later on, we didn't have anything like that, Just the Cap'n come along, and say to Ma, "All ready and hitched-up, Miz Patterson?" and Ma would say "Surely, Cap'n Stephens" and then she would drive the team herself... but that was later on, after we left the Oregoners at Ft. Hall, and it was just our eleven wagons..."*

From Dr. Townsends' Diary

*"...our days begin very early, at 4 AM, for we must be ready for the days' march by 5:30; wagons packed, the teams all hitched, everyone fed and ready to roll out..."*

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The day began with a knock of a fist against the wagon-box, close by John's head in the dark, and the voice of whoever had the over-night watch on the cattle-herd, making the wake-up rounds.

"Doc Townsend...you awake?"

"Aye, I'm awake..." John pulled on his trousers and boots in the dark, and then shook Liz's shoulder. "Dearest, time to rise,"

He clambered out of the wagon, through the front, loosing the canvas apron against the morning air, and taking the lantern with him, before he climbed down to the ground. He stumbled to the fire that his family shared with Allen and Sarah, kicked the coals apart and tossed some small kindling, and some buffalo chips on them. The fresh stuff lit readily and he took a small twig from the fire, and lit the lantern from it.

He hung the lantern in its accustomed place on the first wagon-bow, and yawning hugely, set off on the short journey to the men's privy pit. Returning from it to his wagon, he passed Mrs. Patterson, wrapped in a shawl and jacket over her night-dress, returning from the women's privy-pit. They pretended not to see each other.

On returning, John went directly to the tent where Moses and Francis slept, pitched just outside the wagon-circle that protected the horses and mules, and opened the tent-flap. He could see Elizabeth's shadow moving in their wagon.

"Mose... Francis. Time to rouse, gentlemen, time to rouse." Moses groaned theatrically, and pulled his pillow over his head, but Francis grunted and threw off his blankets. He pulled on his trousers and shirt, and padded off towards the men's privy pit.

John gave Moses another shake, took up Ugly Grey's bridle and climbed over the wagon tongue, secured for the night by chains to the Montgomery wagon, in search of his horse. Ugly Grey often chose to be skittish in the mornings, prancing and dodging his master as if playing a game for some minutes, before allowing John to slip the metal bit between his teeth, and pull the leather bridle over his ears; a game, a part of the morning ritual.

When they set up camp every evening, they parked their wagons in a rough oval; just far enough apart to angle the wagon tongue and chain it to the wagon ahead, securing a corral inside for the horses, and Old Hitchcocks' mules. They set their campfires and tents on the outside of the circle, with the privy pits dug close enough to be safe, but distant enough to spare sensibilities, and loosed the oxen and milk cows to graze under the guardianship of two men chosen by rote to keep guard throughout the night.

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Stephens adamantly insisted on a night guard, and the inclusion of every man and boy old enough to participate in it, a pair of them watching from sundown to midnight, and another pair from midnight until morning reveille. There were no exceptions, not even for Stephens himself, although he was often to be found patrolling at odd hours through the night. John wondered if the man ever slept entirely through the night; He thought not. At least the fact that Stephens claimed no privilege of exemption for himself reduced the level of complaint regarding his leadership to mere background grumbling.

Moses had roused himself by the time John returned leading Ugly Grey, and busied with taking down the tent. His and Francis' bedrolls were already bundled up, ready to be put back into the wagon. The fire had caught nicely, a kettle already sending up steam, and Elizabeth, with her hair in an areole around her face, was grinding coffee. Sarah was mixing up a batch of dough for fry-bread, balancing the bowl on her knees. By the Patterson wagon, Isabella already had bacon on the fire, and the smell of it mixed appealingly in the cool morning air.

The camp slowly roused into waking life, evidenced by the voices of men and women, and the cries of "Catch up! Catch up!" mixed with the jingling of tack and chains, and the clatter of breakfast preparations. Women bustled in and out of the shadows around their campfires, about their morning chores, while the men pulled on their outer garments and shouldered the task of hitching up the ox-teams for the days' travel.

John hastily kissed Elizabeth and bade a hurried "Good Morning, Dearest Liz", and she smiled and replied, "Good Morning, dear Doctor," and no time for anything more, as he had to saddle Ugly Grey. It might be that cattle had strayed far during the night, or chosen to hide in the cotton-woods and other brush along the winding creek-bottom and the river adjacent, where they had camped the night before. As oxen were found, and yoked, and hitched to wagons, it would become clear if any had strayed.

Francis led up the first yoke, and John hastily unchained the wagon tongue and pulled it around. Now to capture Elizabeth's buckskin pony, who tended to be even more coy in the morning. Elizabeth had finally named the pony Beau, after Beau Brummell, laughingly saying that he was a dandy, and in truth so vain, that he would stand and admire his reflection in a pool of still water before dipping his muzzle into it to drink. But Beau had another vanity, a taste for sweets, and when he tired of evading the halter, he would step trustingly up and nuzzle hands and pockets.

By the time John had Beau captured and saddled, Moses had brought up the second yoke, and Francis had them hitched. Allan Montgomery was securing his lead yoke to his own wagon. Elizabeth poured him a mug of coffee, scalding hot and sweetened with molasses, and he sat with her, on the wagon bench while she combed out her long hair and pinned it up for the day's travel.

"I long for the day when our oxen are as tame as the Patterson's teams," John remarked, idly. "They all come to the boys, without having to be chased all over creation. Their wagon is ready to roll out whilst everyone else is still rounding up their beasts... that rowan-colored beast of Millers' is a particular plague. He runs and hides in the brush, or over the brow of a hill, every morning without fail, and then puts on an air of innocence when he is caught."

"For shame, Doctor," Elizabeth chided him, laughing.

"How can a mere animal express a human feeling?"

"I don't know he manages," John insisted, "But he does. We find him a half-mile from the herd, strolling back and forth, nibbling a little at the grass, and I swear he is laughing at us, for the trouble he has caused."

"I don't believe a word of it," Elizabeth said, "Oxen laughing at you, and being sly..."

"Your Beau Brummell is clever enough to have you bringing him sweetmeats," John countered, "And you say yourself he is as vain as a peacock. Why shouldn't an ox have any less of a personality?" Sarah, busy about the fire, and the plank laid across a pair of kegs that served as kitchen, remarked,

"That pony minds me of Mr. Montgomery, sometimes, always so certain that everyone is looking at him."

"Sarah, dearest, your husband is truly among the handsomest of the younger men, no wonder that everyone should look upon him and marvel... although there is a handsomer among the older gentleman."

Elizabeth and Sarah exchanged such a look, and simultaneously began to laugh. John thought '*Best not to know why women are laughing about men, it's mysterious, and best left un-examined*'; similar to all those occasions when he had to pretend not to hear Thorp's friends in full complaint against Stephens' rule as captain. Still laughing, Sarah handed John a plate of hot-bread, and fried bacon, and he accepted it with gratitude.

"A culinary marvel as always, Mrs. Montgomery. We have butter this morning, I see."

"We shall, for as long as the cow gives milk," Sarah replied briskly, and Elizabeth added,

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“We have made a marvelous discovery... a covered bucket of fresh milk hung under the wagon by the grease-bucket in the morning will have churned itself into butter by early afternoon...”

Allen accepted his plate with a surly grunt, and John frowned. It worried him more than he liked to say, that Allen preferred cutting a dashing figure in front of women, and favored the company of the young and unmarried men over that of his own wife. Allen and Sarah were but newly married, but still. Above all in the world John prized Elizabeth's company and companionship, and was as eager as a lovesick boy to spend time with her. Responsible men like Young Martin, and James Miller held their wives in much the same generous affection. Just the other day, he and Allen and James, and young Bernard Murphy had ridden out at nooning, scouting for buffalo. James was teasing Bernard about making calf-eyes at one of the girls in the Oregon contingent, saying,

“How will you ever have the courage to ask her father for her hand, if you can only look at her with a moon-face, and never be bold enough to speak to her outright?” Allen laughed bitterly and said,

“Pay no mind, Bernard... while women are all for marriage, it's not clear to me that all men need be!”

It was an odd, mocking thing to say, and John wondered still, although the others had passed it off as a joke.

But it remained that Allen and Sarah often times behaved like strangers to each other, and it did not escaped John's notice that Allen spread his bedroll under the wagon at night, and at meals, Sarah barely spoke to him at all.

Stephens appeared silently in the campfire-lit circle, leading a paint-pony he had bought from a party of passing Pawnee Indians, and shadowed as always by Dog. John groaned,

“How many not found, this morning?” while Elizabeth exclaimed with pleasure,

“Good morning, Captain Stephens... will you have some coffee?” He looked as if to say no, but Sarah handed him a full cup of it, and he said instead

“Six... including Miller's rowan.”

John wolfed the last of his breakfast, handed his plate and cup to his wife, and tossed Beau's reins to Moses; this was becoming a predictable part of the morning, riding out to find animals which had strayed from the herd, beyond the easy reach of drovers and men on foot. Oxen might have been dumb, as Old Man Hitchcock pointed out, but they were creatures of habit,

and some of them liked to wander far. So far, they had always been able to locate the wanderers after a brief horseback search along the river bank, or where the grass grew with particular richness.

“Miller, that ox of yours is going to make some Sioux tribe a feast they won’t ever forget,” John said, when they returned the prodigal to his impatient master, and less-venturesome yoke-mate, “And I swear, I won’t mind a bit... I might just ride up and ask them for a taste.”

“When it happens, get a taste for me, too, Doc,” James Miller snapped the yoke on his errant and peripatetic property. The sky had begun to pale in the east, attended by rosy clouds whose color deepened, while the stars faded, all but the brightest and largest.

“I do believe it may rain today,” Old Greenwood sniffed the air like an ancient hunting hound. He too was mounted on a spotted pony, like those ridden by his sons.

“Keep that in mind, as you scout,” Stephens said only, and Greenwood and his two boys rode off, in the direction of travel they would take today, and John recollected how the Oregon-bound Mr. Hammer had said so scornfully,

“Wouldn’t it be better to hire a man who could see the trail?” Only later did he think of retorting

“But this is a man who can smell it!”

He and Stephens nodded to each other, and then wheeled Ugly Grey and the paint-pony, and rode in opposite directions around the camp, where each wagon stood hitched and ready, drivers at the alert beside their lead teams, women and children scrambling up to their places in the wagon. All the portable detritus of their camp gathered up and packed, all the disposable left behind; the campfires burning out, the privy pits with the last shovel thrown upon their contents, the places where the horses and the oxen had pastured, trampled and grazed over. All the water casks filled, everyone fed, the last of the loose herd gathered up, the last child, dog and horse accounted for and in their place.

Stephens and John met at Stephen’s wagon, where his three yoke stood patiently in harness, waiting for his drover’s command. It was a marvel to John, how Stephens with just his one silent teamster worked so efficiently by himself in breaking camp. Like the Pattersons, he was always ready to roll out, twenty minutes before everyone else; all those years of experience on the trail to Santa Fe.

Now Stephens stood in the stirrups and waved his hat towards Thorp’s wagon; the clear silver notes of a bugle winged up into the morning

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sky. Who was first today? Oh, the quarrelsome Shaw, last in line yesterday, and let none forget it. Shaw's heavy laden-wagon angled out of the camp-circle, bullwhip cracking like a pistol-shot, followed by the Clemmons' family, then Prather, Thorp, Jacob Hammer who preferred to depend on his visions and prayers in the conduct of the daily journey, and the other Oregoners... then Stephens, the Murphy and Miller wagons, Sullivan's and Martin's, Fosters, and his own, and the Patterson's, with Allen bringing up the rear, trailed by the loose herd. Stephens would ride ahead for the morning march, in advance of the first wagon.

John wheeled back to his own wagon, where Francis stood ready, and Elizabeth impatiently waiting in Beau's saddle, ready to be riding along in the cool of the morning with the out-riders, free of the constant jolting and dust attendant upon travel in the wagon. John himself would be riding close to the lead wagon for the day's march, while other mounted men flanked or circled the line of wagons, which moved at a slow pace of oxen plodding, and tended to spread out as the day wore on, since the travelers were desirous of avoiding the dust kicked up by the hooves and wheels ahead.

The sun rose up from the hillside at their backs, into a blue sky flecked with milk-weed puffs of cloud, in which the wagons were the only evidence of a man-made world. The only things moving in it besides themselves, were birds and insects springing out of the grass, and the cloud-shadows rolling over it, that and the river always on their left, wide, shallow and muddy brown. John had heard the same witticism about it being "too thick to drink, and too thin to plow" too often in the last couple of weeks to be amused any more. He took it in mind to ride up to the top of the tallest rise, just ahead of the route of march, and see if he could see much of the way forward from there, as well as the entire line of wagons. Ugly Grey cantered ahead, eager to move faster, after being held to a gentle stroll. He tackled the hill as if he wanted to tear great chunks of it off with his hooves, plunging up and up until John reined him in at the crest, and turned him around. Grey pranced restlessly, even so. John dismounted and stretched. It was quiet, up here on the hill, nothing but the wind rustling in the endless grass, and a hawk on motionless wide-spread wings floating in circles overhead. He seemed to be an immeasurable distance from the wagons, crawling below, the clamor of their passage; shouts of teamsters, and the sharp crack of whips, the voices of children, barely disturbing the vast quiet. They would pass through this vast deserted grassland, make their camp and move on, leaving it to the silence of the blowing wind, and the harsh cry of a hawk, nothing which would know or care that they had once passed through.

He counted the wagons as they passed below, took note of the outriders, and the trailing loose herd, the gaggle of women and children, walking alongside, like goslings after their mothers. He shaded his eyes; could that be little Eddie driving the Patterson team? It must be; John recognized Eddie at a distance, from the sling on his arm. Three days before, Eddie fell from the moving wagon and broken two bones in his left arm. John helped Isabella set the bones and bind them up, and himself dosed Eddie with syrup of opium. This way, it looked as if his mother was keeping a close eye on her adventurous child. John didn't think it would last: Isabella would take her eye off him for a moment, and Eddie would be off on another appalling adventure.

He looked ahead to the west where a fast-moving horseman, a mere dot at that distance, kicked up a puff of dust on the farthest ridge-line; One of the scouts, returning. John remounted; he wanted to do a quick pen and ink drawing of the wagons as they looked to him just now, moving against the background of the river and the rolling country on the far side, with the green islands set like emeralds in the river, which the angle of the morning sunlight turned to a sheet of silver. Perhaps he might do it this afternoon, if Old Greenwood's son was not bringing back word of some particularly laborious obstacle in their way. The horseman came over the next ridgeline: Britt Greenwood, no one else rode so like he and the horse were actually one creature.

Ugly Grey, of course, was not interested in going down the hill as fast as he came up it. John could feel him grinding the metal bit in his teeth, and placing his feet just so. A human would be grumbling crossly under his breath. He urged him across the slope, and intercepted Britt at Stephens' wagon.

"It's a creek-bed, with a steep drop-off, both sides," Britt reported, "We went upstream and down, nearly as far as the river, and it's the same all the way."

"Take a party ahead, and dig out a ramp, as much as you can," Stephens ordered, "Make a start... we'll finish it when we get there."

On his way to pass the word, and take the pick and shovel from his wagon, he passed Elizabeth and Isabella, walking together, leading Beau with little Sadie perched in the saddle and squealing with excitement and enjoyable apprehension.

"I'm taking up road-building, at this time of my life, and I'm afraid I have need of your Beau, again" John told his wife, "Mrs. Patterson, would

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you be able to send Samuel and Oliver ahead, on Beau with whatever tools you can muster?"

"Of course," Elizabeth lifted down Sadie, "Time to walk, sweeting, Beau has work to do!"

Road-building or at least, that part of it relative to creek-banks was getting to be something they were getting well-experienced in. John's pioneer party, composed of all the boys and men who were not actually driving wagons or with the herd, picked a place where a side gully had broken down some of the steep wall of the creek-bed. And Patrick Martin was at it already, as John had come to expect.

The elder Patrick might have been hasty and hot-tempered but also generous to a fault. He had the energy of two men and near the strength. No matter if it was digging out a ramp for the wagons or felling a tree to use for a wagon-brake, Patrick was first there and fastest, wielding shovel or ax in a furious storm of dirt or wood-chips.

Sweating mightily, John and the other men broke it down even more, prying rocks out of the creek-bank and rolling them to the bottom to make the foundation of a ramp. They used buckets and wash pans to carry more soil dug from the top of the ramp to fill in at the bottom, packing it down with buckets of creek-water. They had rough-finished the down-ramp, and begun tearing down the bank on the opposite side for the up-ramp, when Shaw's lead wagon caught up to them.

"It's just wide enough," Stephens surveyed the work accomplished so far, "Lock wheels going down, and double-team going up."

"You'd have to do it again, Cap'n in another two miles, too," Old Greenwood sat slouching in the saddle of his horse, looking down at the makeshift ramps, "But that I found the place where I came this way 'bout ten years ago it was, with two wagons and a pack-train... it's rocky, but passable. I blazed the trees either side, and left a trail back even a farmer can find. The water is deep in the middle, but the streambed slopes nice and gentle."

"We're gonna move on after this? I don't know why you're in such an all-fired hurry," grumbled Shaw.

"We only made six miles since hitch-up" Stephens said, abruptly, and walked away. The old mountain-man looked at Shaw peaceably and said,

"Whoever's going to camp in the snow and eat rocks in six months ain't gonna be me an' my boys, seh."

They chained a sturdy tree-branch, thrust through the spokes of each wagons' rear wheels, locking them into place and throwing up huge gouts of dust, as each one skidded down the ramp. Then they had but to laboriously

draw the wagons in pairs, two and two, out of the creek-bed by double-hitching their teams. It was dusty, exhausting work, and the sun stood close to overhead by the time they were done with it.

"We'll noon at the next creek, and rest before we cross," Stephens directed; his face masked in dust. John thought there would have been the usual rumble of discontent from Shaw and Thorp, and their adherents, but that they had already crossed over. He turned to remount Ugly Grey, and there was Elizabeth, bearing a canteen and a tin cup, and a towel soaked in cool water from the creek.

"We took the children a little way upstream," She said, as John gratefully wiped his face and drank his fill.

"Eddie collected some pretty pebbles, and we saw the dearest little frogs, about the size of my thumb, hopping all around... and dragonflies with eyes like jewels. And Sarah and I picked a basket of wild cherries... which are not entirely ripe, but will taste extremely fine in a pie tonight. We have found a patch of wild onions, also," She added.

"We will feast like lords tonight, then," John said, "I must make a note of it in my diary!"

"You had better," Elizabeth twinkled at him, "For Mr. Montgomery ventured off the trail a little way, while waiting to cross the creek, and managed to shoot an antelope for our supper."

"In that case, a kingly repast indeed, and well worth a long entry." John kissed his wife and swung himself up into the saddle again, wincing slightly as he took up the reins.

He had some blisters on his palm, and an ache in his shoulders from laboring at the earth ramps; not as trail-hardened as he would like to be, obviously. Back to ranging the length of the train, keeping watch on the flanks. They were crossing Pawnee territory, Old Greenwood had told them a few nights ago.

"Not what they used to be," Old Greenwood sounded slightly mournful, "They got cleaned out by the smallpox an' then the Lakota ripped them up good. They won't be looking for trouble, any time soon. Good for us, I'd be guess'n."

"Better safe 'n sorry." Stephens said, and John agreed most heartily with that sentiment. They reached the second creek as the sun reached the highest overhead, and heartily glad to see it, to unyoke the oxen and let them drink. A pretty place, with the poplar leaves shimmering in constant movement overhead. They dined on the cold bacon and bread left over from breakfast, but Elizabeth spread out a blanket, on a patch of grass in the shade,

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and brought out cool water, and a shrub made with vinegar and a little of the sour wild cherries mashed with sugar,

"A picnic in the farthest wilderness," John said gratefully, and dozed for a while in that murmuring shade, while the oxen slapped flies off their flanks with their tails, and children played along the creek banks.

After a while, he roused himself, and walked up stream, slapping at an occasional mosquito. He smelt smoke, and around the gravelly bend, he came upon Patrick Martin, and Joseph Foster, Old Martin's hired men, Ed Bray, and his own man, Francis. Patrick and Joseph had lines dangling into the water at midstream; Ed Bray had set his to one side, as he deftly gutted a fat silver trout. Francis was tending the fire, and three or four more fish, threaded onto a frame of green willow twigs were grilling gently over it.

"Speak you now softly, sor," Patrick rumbled, in his soft Irish brogue,

"For the fish are still hungry... how they would be biting in the morning, with the mist on the river and all... oh, that would be a foine sight."

"We had a longing for the taste of a bit of trout, so we did," Ed Bray was also Irish, wiry and weathered, and Patrick said,

"Faith, and me old friend does not set as good a table as any in the land?" Bray sighed and replied

"Well, as my wages are paid those meals... Still, I had a longing to taste something else, now and again... and the rivers are so full, they fair leap out and array themselves on a griddle... speaking of which, how are they doing, Frankie?"

"Ver' fine," replied Francis, "Anodder few minutes, I 'tink."

"Don't forget the salt, Frankie," Joseph Foster told him. He settled himself against the weather-polished trunk of a fallen tree and sighed, "Doc, this is the life, I swear to you."

Joseph Foster was a small, spry man, cheery as a cricket, still quite young although he had already lost much of his hair. In all the weeks of travel, John had never heard a cross word from Joseph, or anything other than the greatest good cheer in the world, even when his wagon tipped over on a steep creek down-drop a few days before. Joseph's wheel yoke were so badly tangled in their harness that one of the oxen broke its leg and had to be dispatched. Foster butchered the fallen ox on the spot, and borrowed another from the Murphy's spares until he could purchase a replacement at Ft. Laramie, saying

"It's an ill wind that blows no one any good... roast beef for all tonight, and won't it taste good after salt junk and pemmican?" Fair-skinned and

freckled, he had been much plagued by sunburn. He was blistered and reddened on his exposed face and hands, and John said,

“Joe, you’d best cover yourself better from the sun, there’ll be nothing left to you but a little crisp like a bacon rind.”

“Fortunes of the trail,” Joseph replied, cheerfully. “D’you fancy a taste of fish, Doc? We only brought four plates, though.”

“The doc’s a gentleman,” said Patrick, ever genial, “Can’t ask a fine gentleman to eat with his fingers.”

“I’ve already eaten,” John protested, but Francis handed him a plate with a bit of broken, grilled trout on it, and it smelled so tempting that his resolve broke down. And it was good, slipping of the tiny white bones of it and meltingly tender.

“Good, m’sieu, no?” Francis smiled shyly.

“Marvelous... my compliments to the chef,” John replied, and Francis said

“M’sieu jests... I am not a chef, merely a hired driver.”

“You might be able to pass yourself off as one, in California,” John answered, “For sure, I almost wish I had hired you as such,” and Francis protested,

“No, m’sieu, Madam Montgomee does the cooking very well...it is just that one longs for something... a touch of the different.”

“Aye, we’re only along for the fishing,” Ed Bray was laughing, “A little of that for me, Frankie... thanks. No, Doctor, sor, we are just as keen to reach California as you, just that we have not the wherewithal for a wagon and stock and supplies and all. So we’ll contract to work our way, in exchange for board, and that’s the way of it for poor men such as Frankie and meself.”

“Speak for yourself, Bray” Joseph had pulled forth another sleek silver-gleaming trout, “I heard the fishing was grand. And so I packed my traps and set out, and if this is anything to go with, California is a land such as true anglers’ dream of.”

And Patrick Martin caught John’s eye, and laughed, and John thought it was well, that some were having the time of their lives, fishing in a wilderness river in the middle of the great desert.

Now, on the move again, he squinted at the sky, off towards the south where the pretty and creamy white clouds of the morning were piling up and up and up, into a great tower, brilliantly white at the top, but flat and dark across the bottom, pressing down on the plains south of the river like a great grey flat-iron. A grey veil hung from the bottom of that cloud, and a gusty

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south wind brought a teasing breath of moisture and the smell of rain. John rode towards the head of the train, where old Hitchcock stumped along leading his mules, and Greenwoods' pack pony.

"Looks like we're gonna get wet again," Stephens said laconically, as a bolt of blue-white lightening shot from cloud to land, too distant for any sound but a faint rumble. "Close up as much as possible, and keep a close eye on the loose stock."

"And me with my rheumatiz," complained Old Man Hitchcock as the thunder grumbled again...

"It looks as if it would just pass to the east of us, if we keep going," John ventured. Although it seemed as if the cloud spread, pressing closer and closer against the earth, and there was a queer greenish cast to the air as the sunlight winked out.

No, they could not outpace this storm, entirely, but perhaps they might avoid the brunt of it. Ugly Grey seemed to tremble with unease, and John could hear oxen bellowing as mighty crack seemed verily to split the sky right over their heads. The clouds darkened to the color of lead, and pressed even closer as if twilight was falling in the very middle of the day, and a mighty gust of wind sent the wagon covers swaying, and the women's skirts to flaring out.

Down in the river bottom, the wind lashed the trees were in a tumult of green leaves, tossing like waves in a storm at sea. Up ahead, he glimpsed Elizabeth, pulling at Beau's reins; she must have been leading him, walking with Sarah and Isabella and the children, and now Beau pulled away from her, in a head-tossing, snorting panic, as thunder crashed again overhead. Sarah screamed, barely heard, and John raked Ugly Grey's flanks with his heels.

"Sarah!" he shouted, when he reached the struggling women and the panicky horse. "Give me your shawl!"

She looked barely older than Sadie at that moment, her eyes huge and dark with panic. John snatched the shawl off her shoulders and threw it over Beau's head. Unable to see, he stood, head drooping, and John took the reins out of Elizabeths' hands and shouted,

"Get in the wagon, both of you! I'll see to Beau!" The storm was upon them, now impossible to count the seconds between the flash and the noise, while gusts of wind flattened the grass. The rain announced itself first as a growing rustle on the grass, pattering in random wet splotches. Elizabeth and Sarah picked up their skirts and ran. The first few fat drops resounded like pebbles on the wagon-top, and then the full force of it swept in, and the light pattering became a full-throated roar.

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Sarah and his wife were safely in the wagon, and through veil of rain, he could barely make out the dim shapes of other wagons and their teams. They had all slowed or stopped as the rain swept in. A fringe of silvery drops fringed his hat, even, and suddenly something smacked his shoulder, and Ugly Grey seemed to start. The sound of the rain on the canvas, next to where he stood between Beau and Ugly Grey took on a deeper note, and the grass was suddenly full of bouncing white pebbles the size of marbles, and the rain flailing his shoulders and the horses' backs was ice cold. Yet he seemed to be sheltered from the worst of it, and almost as suddenly as it had begun, the sky lightened, and the hail stopped.

Sarah and Elizabeth peeped out from the wagon cover, still quite shaken from the sudden violence of it all.

"Dearest, are you quite all right?" Elizabeth's voice trembled, "You are quite soaked."

"I am quite unharmed," John replied, "I apologize for shouting, Dearest; the storm looked to be quite violent and I feared for you both. I must go and see if anyone has been injured."

"Then I will take back Beau," Elizabeth said, with a stronger voice. "And Sarah will want her shawl returned to her."

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From Dr. Townsend's Diary:

*"Caught on the trail this aft. in a storm of some violence, with hail of some 1 to 1 and a half-inch diameter and much heavy rain, fortunatly of no lasting duration. No very great injury to our party taken, but a very great fright to us all. Mrs. Thorp o'ertaken with a fit of hysterics, Mr. Magnent the cattle-driver sustained a great many bruises about the shoulders from the hail, and Mrs. Patterson sustained a blow on her head from a piece of hail whilst attempting to shelter her oldest son from the worst violence of the storm..."*

From E.S. Patterson Interview, University of California Local History Archival Project 1932,

*"There was a storm, we were caught in, along the Platte I think it was, oh, an incredible sight to see it come in, across the river bottom, and worse to be caught on the trail without any shelter, lightening everywhere, and hail the size of slingshot. Ma shouted at us all to get into the wagon and button up the flaps tight, but she caught up an iron pot-lid to cover her head and went to see*

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*to the team, as my brother Oliver was driving it, and the oxen were snorting and getting to be fractious because of the hail and lightning. Ma held the pot-lid over Oliver, and she was hit on the head by a hailstone, raised a great welt the size of a goose-egg, it did. Doctor Townsend chided her, afterwards, why didn't she get into the wagon, like the other women, and Ma said right back to him, because she couldn't think of anything except for what she could do to protect her children...."*

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The afternoon march dragged, seemingly endlessly; John realized that he had been struck by hailstones also, when his shoulders began to ache. The weary day's march told on them all, in the voices of women raised, chiding fractious children, drovers impatiently snapping their great bull-whips over the backs of the teams they drove, teams which were tired and thirsty. Only Old Greenwood did not seem wearied, of all the men, slouching easily on his painted Indian pony, as he and John rode by Stephen's wagon.

"Two more miles, if that," Greenwood said. He and his boys had found a good place to camp the night, a sheltered meadow, tucked into the curve of a low rise above the river, with a freshet of water coming down from the higher ground, plenty of deep green grass for the animals, and stands of trees on the low islands in the river for firewood.

"Why are the largest trees on the river islands?" John asked, curiously, "And not on the banks, as elsewhere?"

"Fire," Greenwood answered, "In the fall when the grass is dried, these plains are plagued with fires. Sometimes they are started by lightening, sometimes by the tribes... they say it makes the grass grow more richly, but it burns everything before it save what is protected by the river channel."

"Then we are fortunate to be venturing here in the spring, when everything is still green," John said, and the old man sighed.

"You are, that, Doctor... it is a horrible sight to see, a line of fire across the horizon, moving through the grass as fast as a man may run, and everything... everything, rabbits and antelope, prairie hens and all, leaping and running from it all, as fast as they can."

"You must have seen many strange sights in your journeys to these desolate parts," John ventured, and the old man signed, reminiscently,

"I have that, Doctor, I have seen many marvelous things, things that put the accounts in Old Strabo's Geography to shame... there is a place where fountains of hot water spring up out of the ground, and natural cauldrons of mud bubble as if overflowing from the infernal regions. There are places, I

have heard, where rivers run into the desert and sink without a trace into the sands.”

“I have seen brave Indian warriors test themselves and worship their gods by thrusting sharpened bones through their own flesh and dangling from the roof of the council house by leather thongs attached to those bones, chanting for hours until their flesh tears loose and they drop down to the ground. I myself knew a man, a white man, who was captured, and made to run, naked to amuse the warriors of the Blackfoot tribe, and he ran barefoot for a day, outdistanced them all but three, and killed them with his bare hands.”

“I have seen lakes in the high mountains, as blue as sapphires and so clear you can see twenty, thirty feet down, and valleys of trees all turned wondrously to gold in the fall...I have seen sights so beautiful and terrible as to turn your heart forever away from those places our kind call civilization.”

“And yet you speak like an educated man,” John said, wonderingly, “You know Strabo, and the classics.”

“No ‘counting for taste, Doc,” The old mountain man smiled, “A wise man goes where his heart tells him to go, not where other folk think he should go. Tell you truth, though, sometimes I miss such things. Not commonly, though.”

“I have a small library,” John ventured, on impulse, “In my wagon... I could not countenance leaving them behind, since I had collected them with no little trouble. I have a volume of Byron’s poetry, and Lord Chesterfields’ letters, and others such as Herodotus’ histories and Pilgrim’s Progress.”

“Bunyan?” Greenwood chuckled, “Seems fitting... considering. I’ll think on your kind offer, but my eyes are so bad, I would need one of the boys to read it to me, and they don’t care so much for the exercise of it. But thank-ee, anyway, Doc.”

As the sun slanted towards the western horizon, turning a reach of the Platte to molten gold, the first wagons reached the appointed camping place for the night. Old Greenwood’s boys had already marked the quadrants of the wagon circle, driving four sticks into the ground with a bit of cloth flagging the end, and fluttering in the light breeze. Tired men and boys unharnessed weary oxen, turning them loose for the moment to drink at the riverbank.

A party of older boys set off to cut wood, while women and older children gathered small dry kindling from where it had fallen from trees, or from skeleton branches left scorched and bone dry by last year’s fires, flashing over the prairie and leaving nothing green above ground. The smoke

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from cookfires and the ringing sound of someone pounding in tent-pegs filled the grassy bowl of their encampment, along with the voices of women, and children laughing.

John circled the wagons one last time, and slid down from Ugly Grey so tired that his legs fairly buckled underneath him. He barely felt strong enough to unsaddle Grey, sending him with a slap on the rump into the central corral. The chore of chaining up the wagon tongue drained him utterly, and he thought he might be trembling from the reaction of all the long days' labors and alarms. He poured a dipper-full of water over his head, and it ran down, soaking his hair and shirt again, as he took a long drink, and felt somewhat better.

Sarah and Elizabeth had busied themselves around the campfire, from which came the most extraordinarily savory smells, and Moses appeared from the river-bottom with an armload of wood. A roast sizzled on a spit arranged over it; Allen Montgomery's antelope, and John's mouth filled. Elizabeth hastily set aside the pie she was constructing, and brought him a tin cup, a cup most marvelously cold to the hand, and refreshing to drink of.

"Mrs. Patterson and I gathered a quantity of hail in a milk-bucket, before it melted," she said, "And buried it in a flour-barrel. We thought it would be a treat, to have something so cold. Isabella thought upon making ice-cream, but there was only just enough to make some more cherry shrub for everyone."

"A most blessed thought," John said, and drained it with sincere appreciation. "Ahhh that was most welcome, my Dearest Liz... I might just be able to stay awake long enough to dine without falling asleep into my plate."

"You had best," Elizabeth ordered, "Sarah and I will not have our bravest efforts go unappreciated. Not only are we dining on roast antelope, but we found wild peas along that creek were we nooned... they do not taste so well as from the garden, but they are green."

"It smells so wonderful; might I not have a little taste...?" John pleaded, and reached for the cooking fork.

"No!" Elizabeth mockingly slapped his hand away, and so he must content himself with resting a while, sitting on a box and leaning against the wagon-wheel, while the women cooked, and Allen cleaned his hunting rifle, but it was all the better for having waited for it, and they ate their fill around the campfire, as the sunset colors; gold and purple and orange, faded out of the western sky and stars bloomed so large in the sky over their heads, it

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looked almost as if he could reach up and pluck it from the sky, as one would pluck a wildflower from the grass at ones feet.

From the direction of the Murphy campfires floated a thread of music, a penny-whistle and the complicated patter of an Irish drum. Old Murphy and one of his sons, playing to amuse his grandchildren, joined presently by a fiddle, and the merry laughter of children dancing with each other by the campfire, as the stars bloomed overhead. John leaned back against the wheel, and smiled. Perhaps he would take Elizabeth by the hand, and they might walk down to the Murphy's, and dance to a penny-whistle and fiddle under the stars. Or he might fall asleep, first, content to know they were another fifteen miles closer to California.

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