

The Free Press Short Story

OLD COMET'S STAMPEDE

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THE Grasshoppers had disappeared leaving the country almost as bare as the Sahara Desert. The acreage seemingly had stripped everything except buildings, livestock and human inhabitants. A large percentage of the people had deserted the region and not a few of the animals were starving.

In the midst of such discouraging conditions Peter Nielson arrived in the Sweetwater Valley. He had been working as a farm hand for two seasons in Iowa, and, like most of his race, had been industrious and thrifty. He had accumulated a number wagon, a plow, a team of work horses and sixty-eight dollars in money, besides a little bit of household "duffie," sufficient for "teaching it."

Scattered up and down the valley there were plenty of abandoned claims. Peter looked about him and selected a hundred and sixty acres of rich bottom land, with a dugout in the bluff that outlined the upland and a sod stable for stock.

The wretched remains of a twenty-acre field of corn stretched in front of his new habitation. In preparation for the winter Peter set about salvaging the few mules that clung here and there to the stumps of what had been cornstalks.

While this work was in progress he turned his team to browse in the strip of woodland close along the river. The first night they came to the stable at dusk, and each was rewarded with a handful of corn. The next evening they failed to appear, and when Peter went in search of them he found one horse dead and the other dying.

Plainly they had been poisoned, but just what they had eaten he never knew with certainty. Their loss was a severe blow, for now he had no animals with which to till his land. Still, he had sixty-eight dollars, while most of his neighbors were penniless.

Peter waited a week, keeping both eyes and ears open. Because cattle were easier and cheaper to keep than horses many of the settlers were working with oxen. Almost any animal could be bought for a song while the famine lasted, but trained oxen of course cost more than those that were unbroken.

David McDowell, who lived on the stage road to El Dorado, had a herd of long-horned Texas steers that had come up from "the Nation," as the Indian Territory then was called. They were big, strong animals naturally, but so weakened now by lack of food that they could hardly stand. Peter walked over to McDowell's and offered to buy two of them.

The old rancher shot a keen glance at the young Swede. "You're over on the claim that Nate Switzer abandoned, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Those bottoms will spring up quicker than this prairie growth; you ought to have a little feed right now, with more coming. I don't want to sell any cattle but I'll make you an offer. You take my bunch of steers and keep them till spring, and then bring me back half of what are left."

Peter chuckled softly, but shook his head. "I don't want more than two," he said. "I don't know that I can bring even two through. I'm going to put in a little wheel, and I need a couple of animals to pull the plow."

"Give me your note for fifty dollars and take ten of those steers."

"I don't want ten, and I don't want to give my note either. What will you charge, spot cash, for two, my pick of the herd?"

McDowell looked at Peter in surprise, for he had not deemed it possible that anyone remaining in the grasshopper country would prefer to pay spot cash, even if he were able to do it.

"That's different," he said, promptly; "you may have ten for twenty dollars." "How much for two?" said Peter wearily.

"Twenty-five dollars."

"What five dollars more for two than for ten? I'll give you fifteen."

"For ten?"

"No; for two!"

other way, but I don't know whether they'll live till morning or not."

He fed them a little corn, and finally they staggered to their feet and began to browse among the scanty green leaves that the stripped trees were putting forth. The next day they were perceptibly stronger.

Peter resolved to take advantage of their condition and break them at once. He had no yoke, but he fitted his horse harness to them and that same evening drove them across the bottoms, using reins and bits, just as if they had been horses. It was impossible to make them travel in a straight line, but under his guidance they finally staggered up to the stable door, where he rewarded them with a few mubins of corn.

For three days he drove them an hour each morning and on the afternoon of the fourth day harnessed them to his wagon for the first time and started up the slope to the level prairie above, intending merely to swing them about there and return to the stable. The rattle of the wagon plainly annoyed them but they went steadily enough till they were just over the crest of the bluff, where they met a man driving a span of mules and followed by a dog.

At sight of the longhorns the dog ran forward, barking, and one of the mules reared and kicked. Instantly the half-starved steers seemed infused with new life. Wheeling to the left, they overturned the wagon, whereupon the bolt fell out of the tongue, freeing them from the vehicle and leaving the evener and whiffletrees to clatter against their heels. Peter was so stunned by the fall that the reins had slipped from his grasp before he realized what had happened.

Scrambling to his feet, he ran after the steers but could not overtake them at they raced along parallel with the top of the bluff. For a hundred yards they followed the upland; then, treading upon the trailing lines, they reared back, shifted at right angles to their former course and bolted straight over the precipice.

Peter slid down the clay and rock to the bottom expecting to find them dead or fatally injured, but the off ox was tugging at the restraining harness, seemingly unhurt. Its mate, however, lay head down where it had fallen and when helped up was found to have broken its right horn short off at the surface of the skull.

The wound healed and after a time seemed to give the animal no inconvenience; but the steer was an absurd-looking creature thereafter, with a yard of horn on one side of its head and not even a stump on the other. Oddly enough, the accident helped greatly in taming the team. They seemed to be afraid to run away again and soon could be driven almost as handily as horses.

That fall Peter used them to fit ten acres of corn stubble for wheat, and they did good work despite the scantiness of their feed.

Before the runaway the steers had been restless, but soon after the catastrophe their owner named the broken-horned one Comet, and its mate Line.

The young homesteader had a sweet-heart back in Iowa, and it had been arranged that the two should be married as soon as he had safely established himself in Kansas. Two years passed, however, before he felt justified in sending for her. When he finally wrote for her to come to El Dorado, where he would meet her, he had forty acres under the plow, two cows and a drove of hogs, but Comet and Line were still his only driving animals. If pork sold well that fall, he planned to buy a horse, but so far he had been unable to afford that luxury.

Peter jogged soberly into town behind his three-horned team, met Lena at the train and went with her to the home of a clergyman, who married them. Then after they had eaten dinner at the hotel and had purchased some groceries Peter loaded her trunk into the back of the wagon and the two set out for home.

Lena laughed merrily when she looked at Comet; nearly everyone laughed upon seeing him for the first time. "Why don't you cut off the other horn to match?" she asked.

"Then he wouldn't match up very well with Line," said Peter. "When I can get some one to help me, I'm thinking of sawing off Line's left horn, though."

Lena laughed again at the idea of a team of oxen each with one immense horn on the outside and none on the inside.

Three miles from town they swung away from the stage road to Wichita for a more direct route across the rolling prairie to the Sweetwater. The month was October, and the bunch grass was as dry and brown as cured hay—indeed it had been cured on the root.

They rumbled slowly on for another mile or two, when a puff of smoke came over a rise at their right and made their nostrils tingle. Instantly Peter sat up. A stiff wind was blowing and he felt more uneasy than he wished his companion to discover. "A prairie fire," he explained casually in answer to Lena's inquiring glance; "there are lots of them at this season, but they don't usually amount to much."

Comet and Line threw up their heads and broke into a shambling trot. When the wagon clattered up to higher ground Peter stood erect. The road ahead was still clear, but to their right a long line

of flame extended for an unknown distance. At its nearest point it was perhaps half a mile away. Peter dropped down upon the seat and shouted to the steers, but they needed no urging.

Across the long, valley-like stretch in front of them they went at an awkward gallop and did not check their speed in mounting the slope beyond. Ahead the fire was already stride the road. In alarm Peter started to turn the steer, but of their own accord they abruptly left the faintly marked highway and went racing across the prairie straight away from the fire. Their instinct told them that only in direct flight lay any possible hope to escape.

There was no road, no fence, no hedge or tree—only the bare, brown plain rising and falling in gentle undulations till cut off by the bluffs that fringed the river valley. Those bluffs were a mile away, perhaps a mile and a half; the fire was coming with the swiftness of the wind by which it was propelled. Once in the cultivated bottom lands, Peter and Lena would be safe—but could they reach them?

The steers seemed to be flying, but already sparks were falling overhead, and every minute despite the speed of the longhorns, the fire swept nearer.

Guiding the frantic animals was out of the question. Peter tucked the lines behind the whip socket, snatched a buffalo skin from the seat and wrapped it, inside out, about Lena's shoulders, at the same time telling her to drop to the bottom of the wagon. He was afraid that the flying sparks might set fire to her clothing.

In a minute or two, if the fire did not reach them first, they would be at the crest of the bluffs. To go headlong over them would mean death, or serious injury at the best, and Peter had formed the desperate resolution to seize Lena's hand, leap out with her when they reached the crest and slide down the face of the bluff, but he could think of no better plan.

Standing erect, he steadied himself with the lines and peered ahead. At first he could see almost nothing, for the dense volumes of smoke rolling overhead hid everything about them.

Suddenly, however, a gust lifted the pall and he caught a glimpse of a wheat field, looking cool and green, and beyond it the line of timber along the river. The bottom land seemed almost at his feet, and an appalling distance below.

"Lena stand up!" he shouted and, bending down, he grasped her arm to aid her. Throughout their terrifying experience she had uttered scarcely a word and now, still silent, she started to rise, when the vehicle swerved violently and threw them both to the bottom of the wagon box.

Old Comet also had caught a glimpse of the bottom lands, and the distance down to the lower level seemed as great to him as to his owner. Once he had hurled himself recklessly over such a precipice, and the memories of that fall were so painful that never again would he be guilty of similar folly. Whirling away from the bluff, he dragged the reluctant Line after him, and the latter, acting as a brake, prevented the wagon from upsetting.

Peter had struggled to his knees before he saw what had happened. Now they were headed directly for the wall of fire which actually slanted over them with the top reaching twenty feet in the air. Maddened by the heat, Line had ceased to hold back, and was running as fleetly as his mate.

Peter crouched down, and buried his head under the buffalo skin. "Hold your breath!" he cried; and for a few seconds they seemed bathed in intolerable heat.

Then Peter raised his head and gasped. The flames were behind them, and the charred prairie, sending up a cloud of fine gray ashes from their galloping panting steers, were running across the feet. Peter beat out several little patches of fire from his coat and with his tongue touched a singed spot on one of his hands. Several places smarted unpleasantly, but he was virtually unharmed; and his bride, thanks to the buffalo skin, was unmarked by the fire.

The steers slowed to a walk, and he turned them in the direction of the road. "Say, Lena," he said, smiling at her smoke-stained face, "when old Comet went over the bluff and broke off that horn I thought it a piece of bad luck, but I know different now."

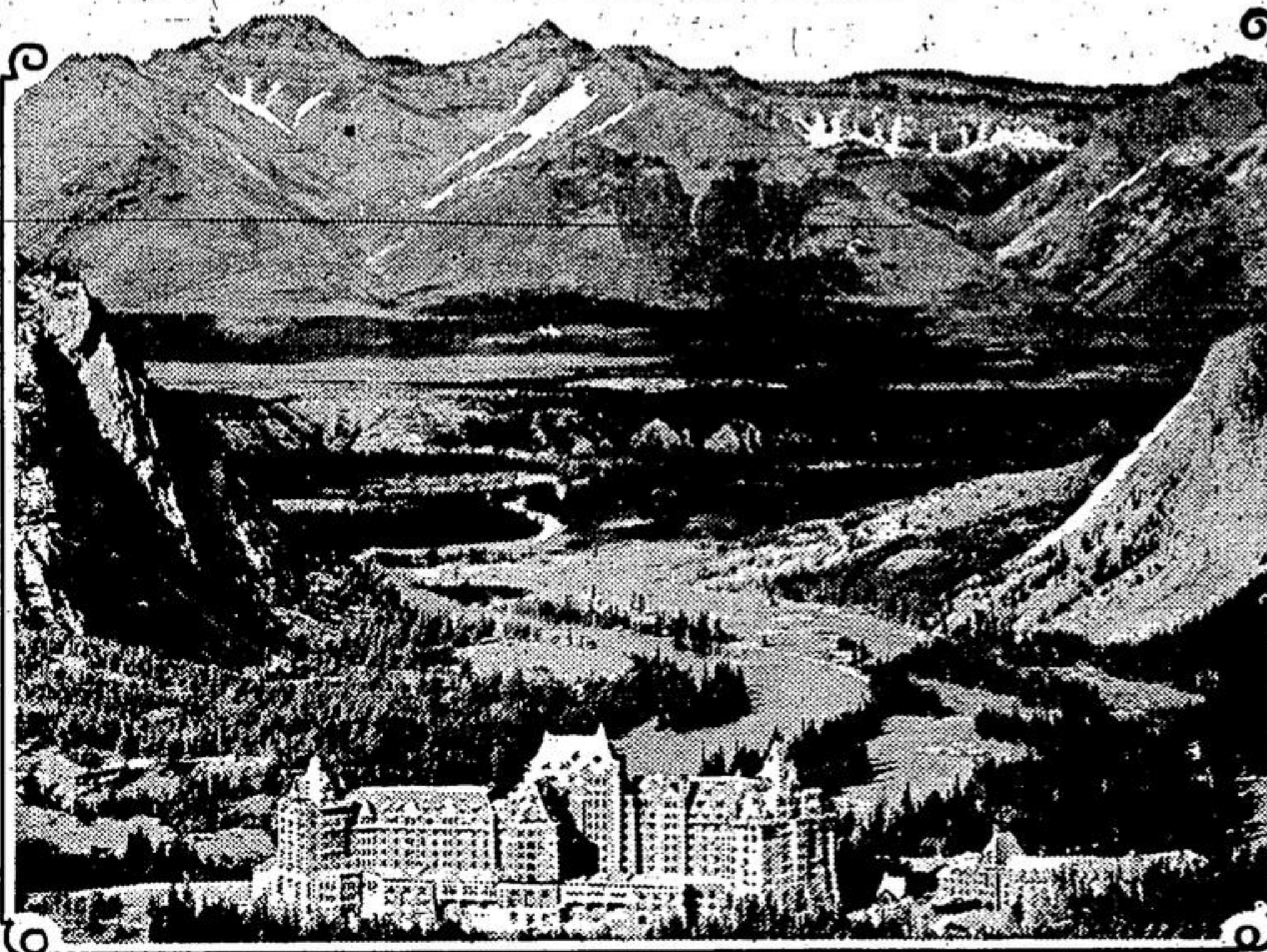
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SELF

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A Woman at Banff



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So they would be
A comfort for old homely folk
Like you and me.
Small gardens with their fences
Snug and tight,
And tiny gates to shut us
From the night,
But THIS He made with
Glory in His veins,

This solitude, where Might
Forever reigns,
Moulded the hills with glad
Exultant hands,
Shaping the valleys for
Wide pasture lands.
And so this towering peak
Forever bears,
Old finger-marks upon
Its rutted stairs.

And every shining height
Reflects the glow
Of some white virgin field
Of drifted snow.
And over it he laid
With loving care,
The mantle of His peace
Forever there.

—EDNA JAQUES.

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spired, one owes full reverence and
respect.
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a monument—dignified, lasting,
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