

Endurance

by

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The big black came into the settlement of Coyote with the unmistakable gait of a thrown shoe. Mark knew exactly when it had happened. He had seen that the trail looped around a steep slope, and decided to save himself a mile or so by short-cutting down the slope. He knew his mountain-bred gelding could do it.

As he approached the bottom of the slope, Mark realized that a twenty-foot layer of dangerous shale-like talus was the reason the trail had looped around the ridge. Still, the black had handled worse than this was lots of times.

The sure-footed horse spread his front feet, leaned back on his haunches, and slid gamely down the talus, leaping the last five or six feet of the loose rock to rejoin the trail. That's when Mark noticed the change of gait. Evidently a sharp piece of rock had wedged the shoe off the black's left front hoof.

"Why, when I'm in such a hurry, Lord?" the harried traveler asked silently. Then, a moment later, "Sorry Lord, I'm taking out my frustration at my own stupidity on You. I should have realized that there was a reason why the trail didn't go down that slope. Give me the patience to take this delay cheerfully...and please remember that I'm supposed to preach in Tucson this week-end."

Mark half-hitched the powerful stallion at the building marked, "Blacksmith," and strode through the opened door. No one was around, but the coals at the forge were still glowing. He crossed the street and entered the ill-fitting doors of a poorly lit saloon to enquire of the whereabouts of the smithy.

"Out back watchin' the fun," the slovenly bar tender grunted, jerking a thumb towards the back door. "'Bout to go out there myself, soon's I git a minute."

The dirt on the unswept wooden floor muted the sound of Mark's boots as he made his way to the back door. Throwing it open, he saw about a dozen men gathered in a semi-circle to his right. The center of attraction was a small Indian who appeared to be hung by his wrists to a couple of large nails driven into the back wall of the saloon. Blood stained the rawhide pigging strips that secured him to the nails. Angry welts crisscrossed his bare back.

A heavysset drover with a short bullwhip was yelling angrily, "Are ya gonna take us ta yer camp, er do ya want more?"

"I'd die before I would betray my people," the victim's voice rasped out weakly.

Elbowing his way into the crowd as another vicious lash was administered with the whip, Mark asked the man next to him, "How long has this been going on?"

"'Bout a half an hour." the grinning cowpoke replied.

"What's he done?" Mark asked.

"He's an Injun," the cowpoke replied. "Ain't that enough?"

"Not for me," Mark replied grimly, breaking through the ring of spectators.

"That's enough!" Mark announced angrily as he stretched up to untie one of the Indian's wrists.

"Out of the way, Stranger," the drover answered nonchalantly. "This ain't no concern of yours."

Turning to face the bully, Mark found the bullwhip snaking around his ankles. One jerk of the whip, and the would-be rescuer was lying face down in the dirt. Scarcely breaking his rhythm, the drover began a figure-of-eight swing that laid alternate lashes on Mark's back and the Indian's.

Scrambling desperately inside the blows, the traveler wrapped his arms around the bigger man's legs and heaved him off his feet. As the bully hit the ground, Mark was on him. An audible gasp escaped the tackled man's lips as the traveler drove his knee into his solar plexus. A couple of solid blows on his chin left the drover unconscious.

Mark ignored the stunned crowd, and turned his attention back to the Indian on the wall. As he stretched upward to remove the pigging strings that tied the victim's wrists to the nails, he saw that they were simply earlier bonds that had not been completely removed. The Indian's hands had actually been nailed to the wall.

A roar of righteous indignation escaped his lips as he dropped back from his stretch. He was swiveling to face the cowardly crowd when he noticed the hammer that had been used to do the dastardly deed lying on the ground under the Indian's feet. As he grabbed it, he saw that it was one of those newfangled claw hammers that could be used to pull nails as well as to drive them.

Stretching himself back to the Indian, he yanked, rather than levered the nail from the Indian's left hand. As he got the claws on the right hand nail, he felt the furious crowd tearing into him from behind. As they pulled him down, he hung desperately to the hammer, managing to lever the nail out, though it exerted crushing pressure on the already injured hand.

The Indian's form drop to the ground as the enraged crowd gang-tackled Mark. The preacher came up swinging right and left with the hammer as he struggled to get free of the crowd. Then something clobbered him heavily on the head, and everything went dark.

When Mark began to regain his senses, he was lying, tied hand and foot, in total darkness. Every effort to sit up shot red hot pokers of pain through his head. Waves of dizziness threatened his befuddled mind as he finally gained a sitting position.

“What’s going on, Lord?” the confused man asked desperately as he scooted backwards until his back stabilized against a wall. He felt a rat take an exploratory nibble at the heel of his boot, and heard it scurry away when he jerked his feet back. He banged his head against the wall to crush a roach that crawled across the back of his scalp. Fortunately, the blow drove the fogginess from his mind.

Mark struggled for an hour or so to loosen the thongs from his wrists. After chaffing the wrists to the point of bleeding, he was resigned to the futility of getting them untied. He leaned back exhausted, and began to take serious stock of his situation.

The musty coolness of the dark enclosure, and the smell of rotting potatoes, convinced him that he was being held in an abandoned root cellar. Scooting backwards along the wall, he came to a corner within a short distance. When he rounded the corner he came to a stairwell leading upwards. After inching backwards up five or six stone steps, he backed into a solid wooden door. At least now he had his bearings.

Mark was about to hunch himself upright against the door when he heard the latch click. He froze as the door cracked opened.

“Senior,” a conspirative voice whispered, almost in his ear. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” he whispered back, startling the owner of the voice at his unexpected proximity to him.

The door opened slowly, pausing with each muffled creak. Then Mark felt a small body on the stairs beside him.

“Hold still while I cut the thongs from your wrist,” he heard, as small hands fumbled awkwardly with the bonds.

He felt a knife sawing on the thongs. Suddenly they loosened. As he pulled his hands free he felt the small hands slide down his arm and put the knife in his hand.

“Cut your feet free,” the voice urged. “Hurry! The guard has only gone to the outhouse for a moment.”

“When you come out, shut the door quietly and take my hand and follow me,” the voice instructed as Mark sawed at the bonds around his ankles. “We are fortunate that the moon has not risen yet, Senior.”

As the bonds parted, Mark stepped outside while the voice urged, "Hurry, Senior, he is coming!" He eased the creaking door shut, grasped his rescuers hand, and followed catlike behind him.

They squatted behind a bush as the heavy-footed guard passed by on the other side of it.

It was not until they had covered about a tenth of a mile that the voice whispered, "Not so tight, Senior. You are hurting my hand."

"Sorry," he whispered. "Are you the one they nailed to the wall?"

"I am, Senior. Thank you for rescuing me."

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About a mile from the unfriendly settlement, they dropped into a dry creek bed.

"How did you get away?" Mark asked the small Indian, no longer whispering.

"They were so angry with you that they neglected me," he replied. "Senior, you left at least three of them lying in the dust with unpleasant dreams before they got you."

"As I slipped between the buildings," the Indian continued, "I saw a strange horse tied in front of the blacksmith's shop. It had to be yours, so I jumped on it and galloped back the way your tracks came from. After dark, I watered him in a creek and circled around the town. He is just around the bend in this dry creek bed."

As Mark mounted the black, the Indian spoke again.

"Senior, I filled your canteen," he said. Then, continuing as he took the reins from Mark's hands, "It is so dark you must let me let me lead your horse to the trail. It's not very far. Then we will part."

"Where are you going?" Mark asked the Indian.

"To my village," the Indian replied. "My companions will expect me to escape and come home."

As the moon eased itself into the midnight sky, Mark noticed that the Indian's pace was slackening. He was about to suggest that they switch places when the smaller man suddenly collapsed in the deep sand. Reproaching himself, the preacher cradled the Indian's head with

one hand and moistened his lips from the canteen with the other. When he noticed that the Indian felt fevered, Mark made up his mind that the preaching would have to wait. This was a victimized human being in real need of help, and he was taking him to his village.

Laying the lad, who weighed less than a hundred pounds, across the black's neck, Mark remounted. Once in the saddle, he dragged the Indian into a sitting position in front of him, and proceeded towards the trail with one hand on the reins and the other arm supporting the weakened man. When they reached the trail, Mark put the stallion in a pacing gait that ate up miles with minimal jarring of his patient.

The Indian regained his senses a mile or so down the trail. When he was able to straddle the horse without aid, Mark began plying him with questions. He was a Yaqui, a small tribe with a long history of betrayal by the Spaniards. His name was Amiel. He was fourteen years old. His father was the chief of his village, and had sent him to help a trapper who had lived at peace with the Indians in exchange for teaching Amiel the English language.

Amiel had been captured because he was found on foot after his pony broke its leg in a prairie dog hole during a buffalo hunt. His captors had brought him to Coyote, claiming that the Indians were trying to steal their cattle. They were trying to force Amiel to lead a posse to the rest of the hunting party.

Mark and Amiel were traveling along side of a rocky creek when the morning sun peaked over the mountain. They turned off the main trail into the creek when it was light enough to see. After riding in the stream for an hour or so, Mark brought the stallion out of the water in a rocky spot that would leave no trail, and picked his way through the trees. The Indian walked behind for a mile or so to obliterate, any traces of their passing. They finally found a well-disguised campsite, and curled up to sleep, trusting the stallion to alert them of any approaching danger.

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The sun was afternoon high when Mark awoke. Gazing down on the sleeping Indian, he began to realize how much pain the youth had been through. The Indian jerked wide awake when Mark reached down to feel his forehead. He was still fevered.

That afternoon Amiel rode behind Mark, pointing out the way along game trails through the hills and scrub junipers until they came to a larger Indian trail. Since they were in friendly Indian territory, Mark stuck to the softer areas along the way because the black was still missing a shoe. It took another two days to reach the Yaqui village. By the time they reached it Amiel's fever was so high he was a bit delirious.

When they arrived at the village, the delirious youth was taken straight to his father's lodge, where an Indian healer woman began treating his wounds with her native remedies. Mark was escorted directly to the council lodge immediately adjacent to the chief's hut for interrogation. The chief spoke broken English, and listened closely to every detail. He raised the back of Mark's shirt to see if there were any whip welts to verify that part of his story. When the chief was satisfied that Mark was telling the truth, he was given an empty lodge to sleep in.

Mark detected a distinct somberness in the village the next morning. He suspected that Amiel was not doing well, and asked to see the youth. When he was admitted into the chief's hut, the little Indian was tossing deliriously on a deer skin on the floor. His forehead felt hot and dry. Both his hands were massively swollen.

Suddenly Mark knew what he had to do. He drew his knife as he knelt over the boy, and gently took his hand in his own. The hair rose on the back of his neck as he wondered what the Indians were thinking, but they raised no objections. He carefully slipped the tip of his blade under the crust of the wound on the palm side. Pus oozed around the tip of the blade, and literally poured out of the wound when he raised the crust. As he pressed gently to express the rest of the pus, he saw approval on the face of the Indian healer. He asked for hot water. A short time later Amiel's mother brought some, and the healer woman began bathing the wound.

In a stroke of inspiration, the white man offered his knife to the Indian woman as he held Amiel's other hand still for her. Her eyes lighted in appreciation of his respect as she slid the point under the crust on her side, obtaining much the same results as Mark had. The Indians finished bathing both Amiel's hands, and covered the wounds with a poultice that smelled like creosote. Amiel seemed less restless when Mark walked out of the hut.

The hunting party arrived back at the village about noon that day. They had found Amiel's dead horse and read the story of his capture from his trail, but had been unable to locate him at Coyote after a whole day of spying. Finally, they had headed back for their village, running across a small herd of buffalo on the way home. They were laden with fresh meat when they arrived. Amiel's father asked Mark to be their guest at the feast they would be holding that evening.

Mark had shared the trail provisions from his saddlebags with Amiel, which meant that neither of them had eaten a full meal since they had left Coyote. By mid-afternoon the aroma of roasting meat was eliciting anticipatory gurgles from deep inside him, somewhere near his appetite. He was half-heartedly grooming the black to take his mind off his hunger when he realized that this was Sunday—the Lord's Day. As he tried to imagine how the congregation felt when the visiting preacher failed to show, it suddenly struck him that maybe God had brought him here to preach the gospel to the Indians.

"Lord, I don't know the least thing about Indian customs," Mark prayed. "If you want me to preach here, please have the chief to ask me to speak." Inwardly convinced that it was going to

happen, he spent the rest of the afternoon in prayer and contemplation for guidance in what he should say.

When the feast was ready, the Indian braves sat cross-legged around a fire in front of the council hut. Mark was directed to a position next to the chief. After they had stuffed themselves on roasted buffalo, flat bread, and speckled beans, the chief raised his hands for silence, and asked Mark to tell them why he had risked his own life to save Amiel's.

Mark stood to address the braves. He spoke slowly as the chief struggled to translate for him. "I helped Amiel because the son of God once gave his life for me," he replied. Then he gave a brief account of how a holy God saw that all men were sinners that deserved to die. But God loves us so much that he sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place. He described the crucifixion--How they had nailed Him to the cross and dared Him to come down, and how God turned his face from him because He was bearing our sins. Mark finished by explaining how God forgives all the sins of those that will admit how sinful they are and accept the death of Jesus Christ as the payment for their sins.

When Mark sat down, the chief remained standing. "Jesus Christ was weak to allow men to treat him that way," he declared. "Our elders used to claim that flowers came from the blood that dripped from His cross, but we have only heard His name spoken in anger as the white men mistreat us. We resent the way the His followers despise us, and chase us off the good land. We have learned to hate that name. We will not follow the white man's God!"

Suddenly Amiel appeared on the opposite side of the circle from his father. He looked gaunt and weak, but his eyes were clear. He raised his wounded hands in the flickering firelight.

"I, too, have felt nails being driven through my hands," he began in a surprisingly strong voice. "Was I weak," he asked, "When I chose to be nailed to the wall rather than to betray my companions? Was I weak to remain there and be beaten, when I could have agreed to betray them and been taken down?"

A chorus of "No's" rose from the circle of braves. "You were strong."

"I know," Amiel asserted, "What Jesus Christ suffered for me by staying on that cross. It was only His love for me that kept Him there."

"The men who nailed me to the wall used the name of Jesus Christ with contempt," Amiel continued. "I believe He died for me, and I will use His name with respect," he added decisively.

"Well spoken, little warrior," the chief replied after a long moment of shocked silence. "If the rider of the black stallion with the missing shoe is willing, this village will hear more of Jesus Christ at the fireside tomorrow.