

# THE BEST OF THOMAS MAYNE REID

- THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN
- THE MAROON

**ИНОСТРАННЫЙ ЯЗЫК: УЧИМСЯ У КЛАССИКОВ**

## **Лучшие романы Томаса Майна Рида**

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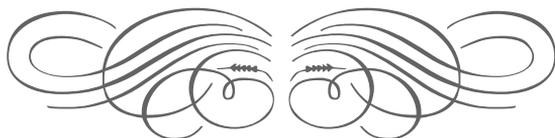
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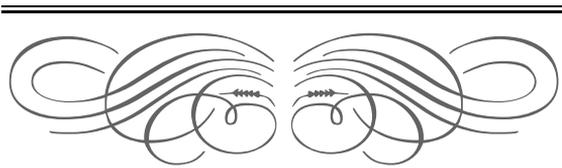
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# The Headless Horseman







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## PROLOGUE

The stag of Texas, reclining in midnight lair, is startled from his slumbers by the hoofstroke of a horse.

He does not forsake his covert, nor yet rise to his feet. His domain is shared by the wild steeds of the savannah, given to nocturnal straying. He only uprears his head; and, with antlers o'ertopping the tall grass, listens for a repetition of the sound.

Again is the hoofstroke heard, but with altered intonation. There is a ring of metal — the clinking of steel against stone.

The sound, significant to the ear of the stag, causes a quick change in his air and attitude. Springing clear of his couch, and bounding a score of yards across the prairie, he pauses to look back upon the disturber of his dreams.

In the clear moonlight of a southern sky, he recognises the most ruthless of his enemies — man. One is approaching upon horseback.

Yielding to instinctive dread, he is about to resume his flight: when something in the appearance of the horseman — some unnatural seeming — holds him transfixed to the spot.

With haunches in quivering contact with the sward, and frontlet faced to the rear, he continues to gaze — his large brown eyes straining upon the intruder in a mingled expression of fear and bewilderment.

What has challenged the stag to such protracted scrutiny?

The horse is perfect in all its parts — a splendid steed, saddled, bridled, and otherwise completely caparisoned. In it there appears nothing amiss — nothing to produce either wonder or alarm. But the man — the rider? Ah! About him there *is* something to cause both — something weird — something *wanting!*

By heavens! it is the head!

Even the unreasoning animal can perceive this; and, after gazing a moment with wildered eyes — wondering what abnormal mon-

ster thus mocks its cervine intelligence — terror-stricken it continues its retreat; nor again pauses, till it has plunged through the waters of the Leona, and placed the current of the stream between itself and the ghastly intruder.

Heedless of the affrighted deer — either of its presence, or precipitate flight — the Headless Horseman rides on.

He, too, is going in the direction of the river. Unlike the stag, he does not seem pressed for time; but advances in a slow, tranquil pace: so silent as to seem ceremonious.

Apparently absorbed in solemn thought, he gives free rein to his steed: permitting the animal, at intervals, to snatch a mouthful of the herbage growing by the way. Nor does he, by voice or gesture, urge it impatiently onward, when the howl-bark of the prairie-wolf causes it to fling its head on high, and stand snorting in its tracks.

He appears to be under the influence of some all-absorbing emotion, from which no common incident can awake him. There is no speech — not a whisper — to betray its nature. The startled stag, his own horse, the wolf, and the midnight moon, are the sole witnesses of his silent abstraction.

His shoulders shrouded under a *serape*, one edge of which, flirted up by the wind, displays a portion of his figure: his limbs encased in “water-guards” of jaguar-skin: thus sufficiently sheltered against the dews of the night, or the showers of a tropical sky, he rides on — silent as the stars shining above, unconcerned as the *cicada* that chirrup in the grass beneath, or the prairie breeze playing with the drapery of his dress.

Something at length appears to rouse from his reverie, and stimulate him to greater speed — his steed, at the same time. The latter, tossing up its head, gives utterance to a joyous neigh; and, with outstretched neck, and spread nostrils, advances in a gait gradually increasing to a canter. The proximity of the river explains the altered pace.

The horse halts not again, till the crystal current is surging against his flanks, and the legs of his rider are submerged knee-deep under the surface.

The animal eagerly assuages its thirst; crosses to the opposite side; and, with vigorous stride, ascends the sloping bank.

Upon the crest occurs a pause: as if the rider tarried till his steed should shake the water from its flanks. There is a rattling of saddle-flaps, and stirrup-leathers, resembling thunder, amidst a cloud of vapour, white as the spray of a cataract.

Out of this self-constituted *nimbus*, the Headless Horseman emerges; and moves onward, as before.

Apparently pricked by the spur, and guided by the rein, of his rider, the horse no longer strays from the track; but steps briskly forward, as if upon a path already trodden.

A treeless savannah stretches before — selvedged by the sky. Outlined against the *azure* is seen the imperfect *centaurean* shape gradually dissolving in the distance, till it becomes lost to view, under the mystic gloaming of the moonlight!





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## CHAPTER 1

### *The Burnt Prairie*

On the great plain of Texas, about a hundred miles southward from the old Spanish town of San Antonio de Bejar, the noonday sun is shedding his beams from a sky of cerulean brightness. Under the golden light appears a group of objects, but little in unison with the landscape around them: since they betoken the presence of human beings, in a spot where there is no sign of human habitation.

The objects in question are easily identified — even at a great distance. They are waggons; each covered with its ribbed and rounded tilt of snow-white “Osnaburgh.”

There are ten of them — scarce enough to constitute a “caravan” of traders, nor yet a “government train.” They are more likely the individual property of an emigrant; who has landed upon the coast, and is wending his way to one of the late-formed settlements on the Leona.

Slowly crawling across the savannah, it could scarce be told that they are in motion; but for their relative-position, in long serried line, indicating the order of march.

The dark bodies between each two declare that the teams are attached; and that they are making progress is proved, by the retreating antelope, scared from its noonday *siesta*, and the long-shanked curlew, rising with a screech from the sward — both bird and beast wondering at the string of strange *behemoths*, thus invading their wilderness domain.

Elsewhere upon the prairie, no movement may be detected — either of bird or quadruped. It is the time of day when all tropical life becomes torpid, or seeks repose in the shade; man alone, stimulated by the love of gain, or the promptings of ambition, disregarding the laws of nature, and defying the fervour of the sun.

So seems it with the owner of the tilted train; who, despite the relaxing influence of the fierce mid-day heat, keeps moving on.

That he is an emigrant — and not one of the ordinary class — is evidenced in a variety of ways. The ten large waggons of Pittsburgh build, each hauled by eight able-bodied mules; their miscellaneous contents: plenteous provisions, articles of costly furniture, even of *luxé*, live stock in the shape of coloured women and children; the groups of black and yellow bondsmen, walking alongside, or straggling foot-sore in the rear; the light travelling carriage in the lead, drawn by a span of sleek-coated Kentucky mules, and driven by a black Jehu, sweltering in a suit of livery; all bespeak, not a poor Northern-States settler in search of a new home, but a rich Southerner who has already purchased one, and is on his way to take possession of it.

And this is the exact story of the train. It is the property of a planter who has landed at Indianola, on the Gulf of Matagorda; and is now travelling overland — *en route* for his destination.

In the *cortège* that accompanies it, riding habitually at its head, is the planter himself — Woodley Poindexter — a tall thin man of fifty, with a slightly sallowish complexion, and aspect proudly severe. He is simply though not inexpensively clad: in a loosely fitting frock of alpaca cloth, a waistcoat of black satin, and trousers of nankin. A shirt of finest linen shows its plaits through the opening of his vest — its collar embraced by a piece of black ribbon; while the shoe, resting in his stirrup, is of finest tanned leather. His features are shaded by a broad-brimmed Leghorn hat.

Two horsemen are riding alongside — one on his right, the other on the left — a stripling scarce twenty, and a young man six or seven years older. The former is his son — a youth, whose open cheerful countenance contrasts, not only with the severe aspect of his father, but with the somewhat sinister features on the other side, and which belong to his cousin.

The youth is dressed in a French blouse of sky-coloured “cottonade,” with trousers of the same material; a most appropriate costume for a southern climate, and which, with the Panama hat upon his head, is equally becoming.

The cousin, an ex-officer of volunteers, affects a military undress of dark blue cloth, with a forage cap to correspond.

There is another horseman riding near, who, only on account of having a white skin — not white for all that — is entitled to description. His coarser features, and cheaper habiliments; the keel-coloured “cowhide” clutched in his right hand, and flirted with such evident skill, proclaim

him the overseer — and whipper up — of the swarthy pedestrians composing the *entourage* of the train.

The travelling carriage, which is a “carriole” — a sort of cross between a Jersey waggon and a *barouche* — has two occupants. One is a young lady of the whitest skin; the other a girl of the blackest. The former is the daughter of Woodley Poindexter — his only daughter. She of the sable complexion is the young lady’s handmaid.

The emigrating party is from the “coast” of the Mississippi — from Louisiana. The planter is not himself a native of this State — in other words a *Creole*; but the type is exhibited in the countenance of his son — still more in that fair face, seen occasionally through the curtains of the carriole, and whose delicate features declare descent from one of those endorsed damsels — *filles à la casette* — who, more than a hundred years ago, came across the Atlantic provided with proofs of their virtue — in the *casket*!

A grand sugar planter of the South is Woodley Poindexter; one of the highest and haughtiest of his class; one of the most profuse in aristocratic hospitalities: hence the necessity of forsaking his Mississippian home, and transferring himself and his “penates,” — with only a remnant of his “niggers,” — to the wilds of south-western Texas.

The sun is upon the meridian line, and almost in the zenith. The travellers tread upon their own shadows. Enervated by the excessive heat, the white horsemen sit silently in their saddles. Even the dusky pedestrians, less sensible to its influence, have ceased their garrulous “gumbo;” and, in straggling groups, shamble listlessly along in the rear of the waggons.

The silence — solemn as that of a funereal procession — is interrupted only at intervals by the pistol-like crack of a whip, or the loud “wo-ha,” delivered in deep baritone from the thick lips of some sable teamster.

Slowly the train moves on, as if groping its way. There is no regular road. The route is indicated by the wheel-marks of some vehicles that have passed before — barely conspicuous, by having crushed the culms of the shot grass.

Notwithstanding the slow progress, the teams are doing their best. The planter believes himself within less than twenty miles of the end of his journey. He hopes to reach it before night: hence the march continued through the mid-day heat.

Unexpectedly the drivers are directed to pull up, by a sign from the overseer; who has been riding a hundred yards in the advance, and who

is seen to make a sudden stop — as if some obstruction had presented itself.

He comes trotting back towards the train. His gestures tell of something amiss. What is it?

There has been much talk about Indians — of a probability of their being encountered in this quarter.

Can it be the red-skinned marauders? Scarcely: the gestures of the overseer do not betray actual alarm.

“What is it, Mr Sansom?” asked the planter, as the man rode up.

“The grass air burnt. The prairy’s been afire.”

“*Been* on fire! Is it on fire *now*?” hurriedly inquired the owner of the waggons, with an apprehensive glance towards the travelling carriage. “Where? I see no smoke!”

“No, sir — no,” stammered the overseer, becoming conscious that he had caused unnecessary alarm; “I didn’t say it air afire now: only thet it hez been, an the hul ground air as black as the ten o’ spades.”

“Ta — tat! what of that? I suppose we can travel over a black prairie, as safely as a green one?”

“What nonsense of you, Josh Sansom, to raise such a row about nothing — frightening people out of their senses! Ho! there, you niggers! Lay the leather to your teams, and let the train proceed. Whip up! — whip up!”

“But, Captain Calhoun,” protested the overseer, in response to the gentleman who had reproached him in such chaste terms; “how air we to find the way?”

“Find the way! What are you raving about? We haven’t lost it — have we?”

“I’m afeerd we hev, though. The wheel-tracks ain’t no longer to be seen. They’re burnt out, along wi’ the grass.”

“What matters that? I reckon we can cross a piece of scorched prairie, without wheel-marks to guide us? We’ll find them again on the other side.”

“Ye-es,” naïvely responded the overseer, who, although a “down-easter,” had been far enough west to have learnt something of frontier life; “if theer air any other side. I kedn’t see it out o’ the seddle — ne’er a sign o’ it.”

“Whip up, niggers! whip up!” shouted Calhoun, without heeding the remark; and spurring onwards, as a sign that the order was to be obeyed.

The teams are again set in motion; and, after advancing to the edge of the burnt tract, without instructions from any one, are once more brought to a stand.

The white men on horseback draw together for a consultation. There is need: as all are satisfied by a single glance directed to the ground before them.

Far as the eye can reach the country is of one uniform colour — black as *Erebus*. There is nothing green — not a blade of grass — not a reed nor weed!

It is after the summer solstice. The ripened culms of the *gramineae*, and the stalks of the prairie flowers, have alike crumbled into dust under the devastating breath of fire.

In front — on the right and left — to the utmost verge of vision extends the scene of desolation. Over it the cerulean sky is changed to a darker blue; the sun, though clear of clouds, seems to scowl rather than shine — as if reciprocating the frown of the earth.

The overseer has made a correct report — there is no trail visible. The action of the fire, as it raged among the ripe grass, has eliminated the impression of the wheels hitherto indicating the route. “What are we to do?”

The planter himself put this inquiry, in a tone that told of a vacillating spirit.

“Do, uncle Woodley! What else but keep straight on? The river must be on the other side? If we don’t hit the crossing, to a half mile or so, we can go up, or down the bank — as the case may require.”

“But, Cassius: if we should lose our way?”

“We can’t. There’s but a patch of this, I suppose? If we do go a little astray, we must come out somewhere — on one side, or the other.”

“Well, nephew, you know best: I shall be guided by you.”

“No fear, uncle. I’ve made my way out of a worse fix than this. Drive on, niggers! Keep straight after *me*.”

The ex-officer of volunteers, casting a conceited glance towards the travelling carriage — through the curtains of which appears a fair face, slightly shadowed with anxiety — gives the spur to his horse; and with confident air trots onward.

A chorus of whipcracks is succeeded by the trampling of fourscore mules, mingled with the clanking of wheels against their hubs. The waggon-train is once more in motion.

The mules step out with greater rapidity. The sable surface, strange to their eyes, excites them to brisker action — causing them to raise the

hoof, as soon as it touches the turf. The younger animals show fear – snorting, as they advance.

In time their apprehensions become allayed; and, taking the cue from their older associates, they move on steadily as before.

A mile or more is made, apparently in a direct line from the point of starting. Then there is a halt. The self-appointed guide has ordered it. He has reined up his horse; and is sitting in the saddle with less show of confidence. He appears to be puzzled about the direction.

The landscape – if such it may be called – has assumed a change; though not for the better. It is still sable as ever, to the verge of the horizon. But the surface is no longer a plain: it *rolls*. There are ridges – gentle undulations – with valleys between. They are not entirely treeless – though nothing that may be termed a tree is in sight. There have been such, before the fire – *algarobias*, *mezquites*, and others of the acacia family – standing solitary, or in copses. Their light pinnate foliage has disappeared like flax before the flame. Their existence is only evidenced by charred trunks, and blackened boughs.

“You’ve lost the way, nephew?” said the planter, riding rapidly up.

“No uncle – not yet. I’ve only stopped to have a look. It must lie in this direction – down that valley. Let them drive on. We’re going all right – I’ll answer for it.”

Once more in motion – adown the slope – then along the valley – then up the acclivity of another ridge – and then there is a second stoppage upon its crest.

“You’ve lost the way, Cash?” said the planter, coming up and repeating his former observation.

“Damned if I don’t believe I have, uncle!” responded the nephew, in a tone of not very respectful mistrust. “Anyhow; who the devil could find his way out of an ashpit like this? No, no!” he continued, reluctant to betray his embarrassment as the carriage came up. “I see now. We’re all right yet. The river must be in this direction. Come on!”

On goes the guide, evidently irresolute. On follow the sable teamsters, who, despite their stolidity, do not fail to note some signs of vacillation. They can tell that they are no longer advancing in a direct line; but circuitously among the copses, and across the glades that stretch between.

All are gratified by a shout from the conductor, announcing recovered confidence. In response there is a universal explosion of whipcord, with joyous exclamations.