



CHAPTER ONE STAMPEDE

With every clap of thunder Clay Reid felt the mules jerk nervously at the reins. Each new lightning flash drove the animals closer and closer to panic. The first drops of rain hadn't fallen yet, but an ugly green-black cloud tossed and tumbled across the wagon trail ahead. In a matter of minutes it would be dropping tons of water straight down on the mules. Then, Clay knew, they would really give him a hard time.

Sudden angry outbursts from drivers in front and behind and on either side told Clay he wasn't the only one in the wagon train who was having trouble. Grown men also had their hands full with jittery teams. There was confusion everywhere. And no wonder!

This was no ordinary August storm approaching. The ominous clouds seethed like a volcano. Clay stood up on the seat of his rumbling Conestoga wagon and looked back over its dirty white canvas top.

Behind him rose the same frightening wall of clouds!

The wagon train was in the center of a storm the likes of which Clay hadn't seen in the five weeks and more he had been driving the wagon west from Independence.

Thunder roared like a thousand bass drums, and the lead mules reared. At the same moment a big black bird appeared above their heads, as if it had been catapulted upward into the air. And, indeed, it almost literally had been. The bird was a crow that had been riding perched on the collar of one of the lead mules. Now it struggled futilely against the rising wind for a few seconds, then dived for shelter straight through the small round opening in the canvas wagon top behind Clay's head. To the sound of the wind, the bird added its own raucous shrieks: "Hi, Clay! Hi, Clay! Hi, Clay!" There were times, the boy thought impatiently, when he wished he had never taught the bird to say a single word.

"Shut up, Littlefoot!" he grumbled. "I'm busy."

The mules reared again.

"Whoah! Whoah! Take it easy!" Clay tried to keep a soothing voice while he yelled against the wind at the same time, but he could scarcely hear himself now. Certainly the mules couldn't hear.

Rain in a sudden pelting sheet dropped out of the sky, and the eight-horse team directly ahead veered sharp left. The wagon they were hauling tilted up, paused crazily on two wheels, then fell over on its side. As if by magic, another team appeared out of nowhere, pulling up so close on the right that the animals shouldered Clay's mules, and the wagons almost locked wheels. Clay's team, eyes wide with new fright, strained forward with all their wiry strength. They broke into a dead run, hauling the huge wagon as if it were nothing more than a buggy.

Clay marveled. How could the creatures do it? This wagon weighed at least four tons with its cargo of heavy paper, metal type, and a complete printing press.

The wind carried off Clay's broad-brimmed hat and almost ripped him from the wagon seat. Then came a new torment. Hailstones as big as walnuts drummed painfully through the boy's shock of thick, curly hair. The sudden hail battered the mules, hammered the animals' sensitive muzzles, bruised their eyes and ears - and drove them completely, wildly out of control, each seeking to escape the aching terror in a different direction. Then, all at once, a devilish harmony united their efforts. Their long legs strained in unison, and they heaved the great Conestoga out of its ruts and raced with it at right angles to the four files of wagons in the train.

In this direction, Clay knew, lay disaster. A deep gully slashed through the prairie only a little way off. His powerful hands locked like vises on the reins. He braced himself on the heaving seat and pulled back with all his might. Fear doubled his strength. Released from somewhere came the power he needed to regain control of his eight mules, and he managed to turn them. Out of the tail of his eye he caught a glimpse of what he had escaped - a brown, surging, murderous flood filling the gully only a few yards away.

Now at last the mules began to tire. The cloudburst had changed the dry clay of this sagebrush country into mud as slippery as grease, and the animals' hoofs slid every which way. One of them lost its footing completely and fell. Another went down. The remaining six dragged their fallen mates a little way - and then it happened! The wagon skidded sideways. A front wheel caught on a deeply rooted shrub, and the axle snapped. The wagon bed dropped, plowed into the earth, and the wild race came to an abrupt and violent end.

Clay pitched forward. Although the fall knocked all the breath and most of the wits out of him, he had just enough sense to roll quickly away from the mules' flailing hoofs.

What he did next, Clay never quite knew, but there came a moment when he realized he was standing with a firm grip on the lead mules, while they and their mates gradually calmed down. They were spent - too exhausted for another outburst of panic. They merely stood with heads hanging low, the very picture of listless dejection.

The frenzy of the storm, too, was passing. The whole violent explosion of wind and rain and hail ended almost as suddenly as it had begun. In the full brilliance of the midday August sun, Clay surveyed the wagon train. As a rule it traveled in four parallel lines of ten wagons each. But no lines of any kind were apparent now. The outfits were scattered in every direction, here where low ridges began to rise out of the prairie. Away to the rear he saw the wagon that usually moved along ahead of all the other prairie

schooners like a flagship at the head of a fleet. Someone had given her a flagship name too. *Santa Maria* was painted on her side, and she belonged to the Columbus of this expedition - the wagon train's master, Major Cedric Powers.

The Major was galloping on his bay horse from one wagon to another, as if to survey his scattered flotilla, and Clay knew the big, fatherly man was giving out his own particular brand of encouragement. Sure enough, he had some of it ready when he approached Clay. "Cheer up, my boy. This is the way life is - short and full of blisters. Are you all right?"

"I guess so," Clay answered without much conviction.

"But look at what happened there." He pointed to the broken axle.

The Major whistled. "Busted all to hell, ain't she! Too bad the rain didn't last a little longer. It would have saved you a lot of trouble."

"How do you figure that?" Clay half-guessed what the Major was going to say.

"Water would have been high enough to float that misbegotten ark of yours up over the snag she got caught on."

Clay smiled. The Major was always joshing him about the big blue Conestoga wagon that did have sloping ends, a little like a boat.

"You got a spare axle?"

"I did have one," Clay answered. "But I let Asa Gower have it when die *Hunhdori* broke down this side of Bent's Fort. Can you find me another? I'll need someone to give me a hand with it too."

"Very well, sir," the big wagon master said, saluting. "Right away, sir." This was part of a game he sometimes played with Clay who was the youngest driver in the train - barely fourteen and strong, though he didn't look it because of his slightly stooped shoulders and thin face. The Major was old enough to be his father, but it amused him to pretend that young Clay bossed him around. Some said it was because he had no son of his own and wished he did.

"I ought to be able to catch up with the train tomorrow," Clay said. Then he had a sudden limp feeling in the pit of his stomach. He wasn't sure he wanted to stay here alone tonight, even if he did have a man from one of the other wagons to keep him company. Everyone knew they were getting close to Indian country, and only last year the Apaches had swooped down out of the mountains that Clay could see not far ahead. The warriors had done plenty of damage around the settlement called Trinidad somewhere fairly close by. So far on this trip no one had actually seen an Indian. But if Clay was going to encounter hostile Apaches, he would rather do so when he was with the train, not half a day behind.

"This train is sticking together!" Major Powers barked, relieving Clay's worry on that score. "No one will move from here until you're ready. I'll tell Finn to dig up another axle someplace and round up some men to lend a hand. Now get your tools out. God helps them that helps themselves."

Clay opened the toolbox on the side of his wagon. As he readied the jack, he hoped Finn would remember to bring another one. Raising the wagon to install the new axle would be a considerable job. The cargo was heavy, and some of the big bundles of paper in it had probably shifted forward when the broken axle plunged into the ground.

Clay hadn't had any choice about the way in which the cargo was stowed, because the loading had been finished when he was hired to drive the wagon. A complete print shop had been packed into the big Conestoga by a man named Ezekiel Phinehas - Father Ezekiel Phinehas – who had bought it cheap and was shipping it to Santa Fe.

Clay smiled at the thought of the excitement he had felt when the elegant priest offered him the job of driving the press west, and of operating it once they got it to Santa Fe. The whole thing had seemed too good to be true. Clay had been thinking for a long time he would like to go West. He had started to learn the printing trade in Independence before his father and mother died of smallpox, and the shop had been the only home he had known for the last three years. It took something big and surprising like the priest's proposal to shake him loose. So here he was more than two-thirds of the way to dreamed-of Santa Fe, and as soon as he got the broken axle fixed, he would be on the trail again.

The plop-suc plop-suc of hoofs in mud told him help for the wagon was almost here. The Major led a little group of men who were bringing tools and a spare axle.

"Finn," the Major said to a compact, neatly built young fellow who rode a sorrel mare, "you can see why Clay calls his wagon the *Poor Richard*. She sure looks poorly, don't she?" Then, laughing at his own joke, the Major rode off and left Finn in charge.

"You know, Clay," Finn said, pushing his hair out of his eyes, for he, too, had lost his hat in the storm, "I've been meaning to ask you for the longest time. Why do you call it the *Poor Richard*?"

"I thought everyone would know that. It's a print-shop wagon, and Benjamin Franklin - you've heard of him - used to be a famous printer, and he called himself Poor Richard. So that's all there is to it."

"All right, let's see what we can do here," Finn said, and he began directing the men, most of whom were older than his twenty-seven years. Soon there came a creaking and groaning from the big wagon bed, as they turned jacks under the front end and slowly lifted it out of the mud. The motion of the wagon and all the stir of men and horses seemed to suggest to the crowd it was time to take an interest in what was going on.

"Hi, Clay! Hi, Clay! Hi, Clay!" Littlefoot screamed and emerged from the wagon. At intervals all through the repair job he repeated the companionable greeting Clay had taught him in the lonely print shop back in Independence.

Finally the men shoved the big wheels into place and doped the hubs, packing the grease in well to keep them from screeching and getting hot.

"Son, you're ready to roll," Finn said at last.

But to Clay's surprise the other wagons were not preparing to move on. Instead they were circling up as they always did when they made camp for the night.

"It doesn't look as if anyone's rolling any farther today," Clay said. "What's the idea?"

"We've been held up so long that we couldn't get to a camping place that's any better," Finn answered. "And you never can tell what one of these cloudbursts is going to do. It may have washed a deep gully across the trail so that we'll have to go several miles out of our way. I'll do a little scouting this afternoon so we'll know what we're up against before we start tomorrow morning."

The teams of eight or ten mules and horses were being unhitched. Drivers were placing strong rawhide hobbles on the feet of the animals. Half a dozen fires, built with emergency kindling supplies, were crackling to life outside the circle of wagons.

"Is there anything the Major isn't prepared for?" Clay wondered. More dry firewood came out of hiding, and cooks got the water they needed from the kegs each wagon carried.

Clay hurried to close the circle by adding his own wagon to it, then he hobbled his mules and joined the group around the Major's cook-fire where he ate his meals. Here he heard talk of something he had missed while he was helping to repair his wagon. He listened carefully as he ate.

A lone rider, it seemed, had appeared from the east, chatted for a while with Major Powers, then moved on toward the west and higher country. And now, Clay could see, the wagon master was in a bad mood.

"What makes *him* so full of wrath and cabbage?" Clay said to Finn in a low voice.

"I don't know. Why don't you ask him?"

Clay asked, and he got an explosion.

"Did you see that low-down, cross-eyed son of a stuffed coyote that rode through here a while ago? Well, he's the captain of the wagon train that has been trying to get ahead of us ever since we left Independence. Today he's done that very thing."

"How did he do it?" Clay asked. He had seen no train pass by.

"He made a fool out of me as easy as shooting. To begin with, that freak hailstorm missed him altogether. He could travel while we were having our stampede and fixing your wagon!" The Major looked ferociously at Clay. "See that ridge over there? That sneaky polecat had his train go along behind the ridge, while he came over and talked to me so sweet and sympathetic about all the trouble I was having. Look!"

Clay stared up the long, gentle slope. There, outlined against the mountains in the distance, were the white tops of wagons.

"I swore I'd never let him get ahead of me," the Major went on, "but now we have to poke along behind him all the way up over Raton Pass and all the way down the other side."

"Why so?" Clay asked.

"Because we see the last of flat country, starting just a little way from here. Then the wagons will have to travel single file, not four abreast. We couldn't pass him, even if we caught up with him. There are places where he couldn't let us pass even if he wanted to - which he doesn't. He's made up his mind to get his cargo into Santa Fe ahead of mine, so he can ask a better price for it."

A call from the other side of the circle put an end to the Major's tirade. "Stagecoach! Stagecoach!" The word swept through camp.

Clay felt a quick thrill of anticipation. For days now he had felt the same way, every time the stagecoach came from the east and passed them on the trail. He was expecting his employer, Father Phinehas, who had stayed behind, tending to some business in Independence. The priest had promised to overtake the train before it reached Raton Pass, and Clay would certainly be relieved to hand him responsibility for the wagon before they entered mountain country.

But it soon became clear that this stagecoach did not have Father Phinehas aboard- for the very good reason that it didn't come from the east. Clay had to look toward the mountains and shade his eyes against the brilliant afternoon sun before he saw the high, swaying vehicle that was rushing toward the circled wagons.

"Ah-whooh-wah!" The familiar yell of the driver announced the approach of the stage. And Littlefoot, who waddled about camp, echoed with a bloodcurdling "Ah-whooh-wah!" which gave Clay the creeps because everyone said it sounded just exactly like an Indian war whoop.

The stage driver reined in and came to a full stop near the Major's fire. "I hear you're in serious trouble, sir," he said, looking like an emperor on a high throne, a patronizing emperor.

Major Powers let out a bellow of pure rage. "I'll be dogged if you don't turn me into a curly wolf and make me want to howl! I suppose you heard that fairy tale from a good-for-nothing wagon train captain just ahead of us? You can see for yourself he's a liar!" Then the Major pulled himself together and asked, "Anything new in Santa Fe?"

"About the same as always, except we had a mighty nice little robbery the day before I left."

"Stagecoach?"

"No. Some fellow broke into a rich Mexican rancher's place and made off with a lot of gold and jewels and stuff."

"Catch him yet?"

"No, they don't even know who he is or what he looks like. Could be I've got him right here in my coach, helping him make his getaway."

A shiver of excitement stirred the back of Clay's neck under his long hair. The driver was only joking, about the getaway, at least. But just the same, this came close to being the kind of thing Clay had dreamed about sometimes back in the print shop in Independence when he was running off a handbill offering a reward for the capture alive or dead of some road agent who had held up a stagecoach.

The driver's second bit of news created more of a shiver in the train. There was Apache Indian trouble a-brewing, he said, and the Major had better keep a sharp lookout. Hundreds of Apaches seemed to be gathering west of Raton Pass in the mountains somewhere.

"Nobody's sure what they're up to, but no good, if you ask me. Better double your guard." With that the driver gave a great flourish of his long whip. The cracker on its tip sounded out like a gunshot, and the eight beautiful horses lunged eastward. The creaking red coach was soon out of sight.

A robber - and Indians - ahead!

There was no doubt that Major Powers took the stage driver's warning about Indians seriously. That night he did double the guard.

