

Run Like the Wind

By

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1 Trail of tears

The call of cattle lowing carried across the dark hills in the still morning air like the call of a rooster on Sunday morning. The sound awakened Eongus “Gus” McIntyre suddenly. He had been searching for civilization for ten days. Had it found him? Could it be true or was he imagining things?

He listened carefully and was positive it was the low rumbling of cattle being roused from sleep as the sun began to make its bright presence known across the eastern horizon. It was not so long ago young McIntyre had taken that sound for granted on the farmlands of the Illinois River where his family had plied the rich soil for the past decade. Now, it was music to his ears especially if it was cattlemen pushing livestock to greener pastures nearby.

He rolled up his blanket, gathered his meager belongings and started to run toward the familiar sound. His pace was swift and quiet. His grandfather always said his grandson ‘ran like the wind.’ He prayed he would find friendly farm hands prodding livestock toward winter feeding grounds. He was eager, but apprehensive. The Black Hills had been anything but friendly to him so far. Ten days ago, almost exactly six weeks after he and his father had left their farm to seek their fortune in the lucrative gold mines of the Black Hills, they had been attacked by bandits. His father was killed and the fourteen-year-old abandoned along the trail. He was lucky to have survived the ambush and had been wandering for days, keeping a close eye out for Indians and outlaws.

When his father steered their horse-driven wagon into the Black Hills, it was the rampaging tribes he most feared. When they reached the Nebraska Territory, they had been told of a big uprising in the Black Hills. General George Armstrong Custer and his entire cavalry unit had been wiped out at a place called the Little Big Horn June 25, 1876.

“Keep your eye out for Indians, Gus,” his father had warned, waving his arm from side to side. “They’ve been known to kill any white man they find trespassing on their land, and they think all of this is their

land. They can have all of it except the small piece you and I stake as our claim. We're gonna be rich, son, and no savages are gonna stop us."

Unfortunately, it was white men the McIntyres should have feared most.

When the attack began, his father ordered Gus to run, and he did. He couldn't remember running any faster or being more scared at any time in his short life. He hid in the forest for a full day while the outlaws ransacked their wagon and tortured his father,

"Give us your gold or we are gonna kill, you," the leader of the gang ordered.

"I ain't got no gold but I'm fixin' to get me some if you boys let me go," the elder McIntyre pleaded. "I just left my Illinois farm two months ago. I'm on my way to find my fortune."

"Then today is not your lucky day," the outlaw with long red hair and a shaggy beard bellowed just before shooting Eongus James McIntyre Sr. in the forehead. They left him lying there in the dirt while they laughed and rummaged through the wares they had packed for what his father called "the adventure of a lifetime."

Gus went unnoticed in the thicket not far from where his father lay dead. He didn't emerge from his hiding spot until he was positive the outlaws had departed for good. Then, he crawled out and tended to his father. He pulled a blanket over his lifeless body because he couldn't stomach looking at his only kin in such a bludgeoned condition. The bullet had torn off half of his father's face.

Gus buried his father with a shovel he found among his family's scattered belongings. The outlaws had not only taken his father's life, but they took everything of value brought from Illinois. Guns and ammunition, food and supplies were all gone.

Fourteen-year-old Gus spent another day at the burial site, mourning the loss of his only relative and trying to figure out what to do next. He constructed a small cross and planted it at the gravesite before striking off in search of his destiny. He had no desire to mine for gold but he knew he had to locate civilization in order to survive.

The Black Hills, most of which rises from the plains of Nebraska and is located in what is now known as South Dakota, was more than one hundred square miles of wilderness in 1876 and no place for a fourteen-year-old farm boy. Long considered the sacred land of the

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Lakota Sioux Nation, the lawless territory was infested with gold thirsty settlers, angry Sioux renegades and outlaws of all kinds.

Just two years earlier, Custer had confirmed the presence of gold in the Black Hills, aggravating the Sioux Nation with the rush of humanity to their sacred land. It was September now, three months since Custer met his demise. The Black Hills oozed with unrest.

Young Gus McIntyre was comfortable on the rich farm lands of Illinois, but he had been taught to fend for himself in the forests by his grandfather. He could track and hunt, find and build shelter and live off the land if needed.

He was an expert marksman, but had no gun or ammunition. All he had to defend himself with was a slingshot his grandfather taught him to use long before he was strong enough to raise a firearm in his tiny hands. It gave him a bit of confidence as he wandered through the forest-covered hills and valleys. He knew he could find game, and he was deadly accurate with the sling. A hunting knife was his only real weapon and it always hung at his side.

Autumn had almost completed its transformation of the Black Hills. The leaves had turned color and the nights were growing cooler. In another month there could be snow on the ground, Gus' search for civilization was suddenly becoming more urgent.

Each night when he fell asleep, he dreamed of home, a tiny farm along the Illinois River where he and his parents had enjoyed a wholesome life. Influenza had taken the life of his mother in 1874 and devastated his father. Now "gold fever" had slain Jamie McIntyre, and Gus had never felt so alone.

The sound of the cattle gave the enterprising boy hope. As he skirted along the edge of the trail that led north he thought the sounds were getting closer. The low rumbling actually sounded like the call of a mother to her young calf. His heart raced. He increased his pace and fixed his eyes on the horizon.

When he found the herd, it was in a valley a mile away. He waved his arms and called to the cattlemen who were driving the cows north. But, of course, they could not hear him above the din of the lowing and pounding of hooves. He had to get closer.

It took him about an hour to make his way down the rocky slope to the valley floor. It appeared some of the drovers had stopped at a covered wagon for lunch. He quickly decided it would be the best place

for him to make an appearance. After all, he had spent ten days wandering and the entire morning chasing the sounds of livestock.



2 Toots

Gus could hardly contain the joy he felt as he approached the covered wagon where a couple of riders laughed with a gargantuan black man with a full beard and odd-shaped hat, made from the fur of some sort of animal. Gus had never seen the likes of it. It seemed poised and ready to attack from atop the giant Negro's head at any minute. One of the riders sipped coffee from atop his horse, while the other dipped a ladle into a pot simmering over a campfire. Whatever they were cooking, it smelled delicious. Gus' mouth watered.

As quietly as he could, he snuck closer to the wagon. When he was within twenty-five yards of the three strangers, he stepped out of the brush to announce his presence. Before he could utter a word, a lariat circled his body and yanked him off of his feet.

"Hey look what I caught sneaking up on you boys," a tall cowboy, seated atop a tan horse declared. The cowpuncher who had been sipping coffee immediately yanked a pistol from his holster and aimed it at the intruder.

"Hold on! Hold on!" the black man called out. "He's just a kid!"

"I don't care who or what he is," the coffee drinker said. "Anyone who sneaks up on me is likely to get shot. These hills are teeming with outlaws and redskins. How do we know he's friendly?"

The black man stepped between Gus and the gun-toting cowboy. "The boss ain't gonna like it if'n you shoot an unarmed kid, Buck. Why don't you give me a chance to find out what he wants?"

"Toots, you know better than to step in front of my pistol," Buck replied. "You're lucky I didn't shoot you."

"Hell fire, Buck! You ain't gonna shoot nobody, especially me. You love my cookin' too much to kill me. Now put that gun away." The black man stood well above six feet and blocked out the sun when he

looked down at the boy. Gus guessed his stride was twice the length of his own as he lumbered toward him and said, "Let off that rope a bit, Clint. I'm gonna help the boy up and see what he's doing out here by himself in the middle of nowhere."

Gus' joy quickly turned to fear. He was shaking when the black man reached down, pulled the rope over his head and tossed it back to its owner. He took his hand, helped him to his feet and said, "Okay, mister! Who might you be? And why are you sneakin' up on my chuckwagon?"

"Ah! Ah! I'm Eongus James McIntyre... Please, don't shoot... Need help... Men killed my daddy... I've been lost for days and..."

"Slow down, kid," Toots said. "Come over here and have something to eat and tell me and the boys what misfortune has befallen you. We're not gonna do anything to harm you."

The cook's big, right hand wrapped around Gus' upper arm to ensure he didn't run away, and he used his left to clean off the seat of the boy's pants. Toots dragged him to the campfire, threw a biscuit and a pile of beans on a plate and said, "Sit right there on that log and put some grub in your belly. I'll grab you a cup of coffee and you can tell us what's goin' on and why you showed up here in the middle of the Black Hills. Mind you, though. I want you to do your eatin' and explainin' slow like. You're among friends, son."

Gus swore the ground shook each time the big black man took a step but the plate of food garnered his full attention. The beans were too good to ignore. They were cooked in molasses and mixed with venison. It was absolutely the finest-tasting food Gus had consumed in a very long time. As he took the last bite of the biscuit he said, "This is good! Thank you."

Seated in the middle of the three cowboys and the cook, Gus told his story. When he had finished, the cowboys apologized for treating him like a rustler.

"You have to understand," Buck said, "When it comes to injuns and the outlaws, he who hesitates generally ends up dead like your daddy. The Black Hills is no place for greenhorns. You're lucky to be alive."

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“Shucks, Buck. I think the boy knows that already. You don’t have to be so darned straight forward. He’s just a kid who has suffered greatly already,” Toots said.

“Sorry, boy. It’s the only way I know.”

“It’s okay,” Gus replied. “I shouldn’t have snuck up on you like I did. I just didn’t know who you were and how you would react if I just walked up and said ‘howdy!’”

“Did you recognize any of the men who assaulted you and your father?” Toots asked.

“No, sir! But I would know the one in charge, the man who shot my father, if I ever saw him again,” the fourteen-year-old replied. “He had red hair like mine, a big beard and a scar that stretched from his right temple to his chin. He was mean, and I’ll never forget his face.”

“He’ll pay for what he done,” the cook said. “The Good Book says ‘vengeance shall be mine.’ ”

“It also says something about and ‘eye for an eye.’ My grandpa told me that. I think that’s fair.”

“Whatever you are thinkin’, boy, wipe it from your thoughts. A vengeful man has a hard time findin’ peace,” Toots said.

The youngest of the three men, the man who was eating when Gus walked in on the group, introduced himself. He stuck out his hand and said, “They call me Junior because my father is in charge of this cattle drive. Let me assure you, there is nobody on this drive who will hurt you but we will give you all the help you need.”

“I’m Gus. It’s easier than Eongus, and that is what my momma and daddy always called me. My dad only called me Junior when he was mad at me. Does your father do that with you?”

“No, the old man calls him worst names than that when he gets upset with his boy,” Buck said with a laugh.

“Speakin’ of the old man, here he comes now.” Toots said. “He’s probably wonderin’ what’s takin’ you guys so long to get back to work.”

“You best get along before he gets here. I’ll tell him we’ve got a visitor,” Junior said.

All three mounted their horses and rode out toward the herd. Junior stopped to chat with his father before following the other hands to the cattle that were moving slowly through the valley.

“You don’t have anythin’ to worry about, son,” Toots said. “This is a pretty good bunch of fellas. If it is help you need, you’ve run

into the perfect outfit. Mind my word, though. The old man is a hard one. Grip his hand firmly when you introduce yourself and be respectful. That is Walter B. Hamilton III. I call him Mr. H. You best call him Mr. Hamilton.”

Hamilton rode in atop a big, white stallion. It was the most beautiful horse Gus had ever seen. The boss wore silver spurs and a silver belt buckle that reflected the sharp rays of the autumn sun. He sheathed a Winchester rifle before dismounting.

The trail boss looked at Toots and then at the boy. “Is the coffee hot, Toots?”

“You know it always is, Mr. H,” the cook replied.

“Then give me some and tell me who this greenhorn is,” Hamilton said as he swatted dust from his Stetson and ran a kerchief across his brow.

“My name is Eongus James McIntyre, Mr. Hamilton, and I’m in need of a little bit of help,” Gus said, reaching his hand out to the imposing foreman.

“Well, that’s what I understand,” Hamilton said, impressed by the kid’s firm grip. “Do you know anything about cattle, son?”

“No, sir, but I’m willing to learn.”

“Well, we’ll see about that,” he said as he drained his coffee cup. “Mighty good coffee, Toots. Thanks! You’re in charge of this young’un. Teach him all you know, and keep him out of trouble until we get to Deadwood.”

“That’s what we’ll do, sir,” Toots replied.

“See you in a few hours when we bed this bunch down for the night,” Hamilton said as he remounted and rode out of camp. “Glad to have you aboard, Irish!”

When only the cook and Gus were standing at the campfire, he asked, “Does that mean you and me is partners, Toots?”

“I think it does.”

“How did he know I was Irish, Toots?” Gus asked.

“Names sometimes tell a lot about a man, son,” the cook replied. “And it’s hard to hide that red hair atop your head.”

“What does your name mean, Toots?”

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“It means mind your own business,” the cook said as he lifted the pot from the hot coals. “Douse that fire and I’ll start packing this rig up so we can move up the trail and get ready to feed this bunch supper.”

Gus smiled and took to his chores as if he was a regular Circle-H hand.