Long Rifle Vanguard

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Long Rifle Series

Towards Oregon
For Texas and Freedom
Long Rifle Vanguard

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To Richard and Heidi and all young citizens
of our great republic

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1. At the Indian Queen

"TWO MONTHS from now, gentlemen, a hundred wagons will be on the Kansas River, waiting to start for Oregon."

Senator Benton leaned forward on his elbows as if to avoid raising his voice against the sounds of the tempest raging outside. He studied the faces of his four dinner companions. Their eyes were upon him as he continued.

"A hundred wagons; maybe twice that number. Gentlemen, if those wagons reach their destination, Oregon is as good as saved. If they do not—" Here the voice of the Senator from Missouri sank to a note that was charged with feeling—"nothing can save Oregon!"

During the pause which followed, rain pelted loudly against the window. The old "Indian Queen," favorite tavern and meeting place in Washington of men of the West, shuddered through a prolonged blast of the March storm. Three flicking candles cast giant shadows against the walls of the little room. The night, the storm, the wavering shadows and, above all, the five serious faces revealed by the yellow light of the candles, combined to give the meeting the semblance of a conspiracy.

A conspiracy it was, too. A conspiracy to save an empire for the United States.

At Senator Benton's left sat Senator Lewis F. Linn. These two "gentlemen from Missouri" had long been trying to arouse Congress and the people of the United States to the importance and value of Oregon. But Congress, dominated by men from the East, had listened with deaf ears. Oregon was far away, and the East was interested in other things. Besides, Oregon was disputed territory, and Congress wanted no trouble with England.

Settlement of the Oregon dispute had been postponed in 1818 by an agreement to open that country for a period of ten years to joint settlement by citizens of the United States and Great Britain. Ten years later this agreement had been renewed for an indefinite period.

Now the "joint-occupation" agreement was fast proving a losing venture for the United States. To strengthen the British claim, fur traders had established posts throughout the vast territory which today comprises the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.

American settlers, on the other hand, were slow to undertake a three-thousand-mile journey across a trackless wild where many of the Indian tribes were known to be hostile. Besides, settlers would go only where they could take wagons, and as yet no emigrant party had succeeded in taking wheeled vehicles to Oregon.

In 1832 Captain Bonneville, sent out by President Jackson, had taken ten wagons across the continental divide, which at that time was considered sufficient evidence that they could be taken all the way to the Pacific Coast. Later attempts with wagons had failed. Only the previous year, in 1842, a party of Oregon-bound emigrants had been persuaded by British agents to abandon their nineteen wagons at Fort Hall, on the Snake River. The news of this latest failure, filtering back to the States, seemed to discourage all further attempts.

Senators Benton and Linn, though discouraged, refused to give up. The future of the nation was at stake. While still striving to batter through the indifference of Congress, they carried the matter to the people through the newspapers. For months, however, their appeals for settlers willing to make another try with wagons had met with little response. Then, with dramatic suddenness, a man appeared upon the national scene who brought them new hope.

That man was Marcus Whitman, Oregon missionary. He now sat on Senator Benton's right. A square-built man he was, whose face showed signs of frostbite and exposure. Whitman had arrived in the national capital only the day before, after a wintry journey from his mission in the valley of the Columbia. All the way from the frontiers of Missouri he had been telling of the wonders of Oregon. Newspapers by the score had carried his stories.

It was Senator Linn who broke the silence following Senator Benton's words. "A hundred wagons, do you think, Dr. Whitman?"

Marcus Whitman let his eyes travel slowly around that circle of faces before attempting a reply.

"I have no doubt of it," was his answer. "Missouri, and all the states along the Ohio, are stirred up by the call to Oregon."

While the missionary was speaking, the door of the little room opened, squeaking on its hinges. The five men looked up as a bald-headed man in the uniform of a captain of the United States Army entered. The captain was followed by a much younger man in the dress of a lieutenant.

The captain had been summoned to the meeting, and for his own reasons had brought the youthful lieutenant. At Senator Benton's nod the newcomers took chairs at the foot of the table. The conversation continued with hardly a break.

"Can they expect to get all the way through with the wagons?" This question was put by the Honorable James M. Porter, Secretary of War under President Tyler, who sat at the left of Senator Linn.

"Dr. Whitman has already answered that question in the press." Senator Benton's voice showed a shade of impatience. "He himself took a wagon all the way through. Am I right, Doctor?"

Marcus Whitman shook his head, as if regretfully. "Only as far as Fort Boise," he replied. "That was seven years ago, in thirty-six. I was advised by the British factor at Fort Boise that my wagon could not be taken all the way. At the time, I believed him. But I can say this, for a fact, gentlemen. Two wagons were brought from Fort Boise to my mission on Walla Walla Creek two years ago last fall."

During the brief pause which followed, six pairs of eyes studied the missionary's face.

"There is no question in my mind about it," Whitman continued. "Wagons *can* be taken all the way to Oregon."

Senator Benton shifted his eyes to the other end of the table. "That is your judgment, too, isn't it, Captain Bonneville?"

The bald-headed captain looked up smiling. An eager light appeared in his eyes, and he spoke with conviction. "It is, Senator Benton. The hardest part of the journey lies between Fort Boise and Dr. Whitman's mission. But it will not prove impossible."

Captain Bonneville exchanged glances with the young lieutenant at his side. The younger officer nodded.

"Lieutenant Garonne has also been through that country," Bonneville continued. "He has the same opinion."

A flicker of interest—almost of admiration—came into the Senator's eyes as they rested momentarily on the handsome face of the youthful lieutenant.

But the Cabinet official was speaking again, this time with obvious impatience. "Then what is their problem?" he wanted to know.

Dr. Whitman's face fell into lines of weariness. He had already told his story a hundred times and more. Would easterners, he

wondered, ever be able to realize the dangers and hardships to be encountered in the West?

When he spoke, his voice was even and gentle. "Protection, Mr. Secretary. They need protection on the way, and help when they arrive in Oregon." He lifted his eyes to meet those of Senator Benton.

It was the other Senator from Missouri—gentle-voiced, scholarly Senator Linn—who spoke to confirm the missionary's words.

"They will need supplies along the way," Linn told the Honorable Secretary. "Most of all, they will need a detachment of soldiers to protect them from Indians who may be stirred up by British agents."

"I am told that such accusations against the British are pure nonsense," the Secretary replied.

Senator Benton glared, and wet his lips, but was silent. His colleague spoke gently and with a faint smile. "We have all been told that," said Senator Linn, "by the very same gentlemen who have told you. Gentlemen who are quite willing that Britain should have Oregon.

"Don't mistake my meaning, Mr. Secretary," Linn continued. "I do not accuse British officials of stirring up the Indians. But British subjects, hired by the great fur companies, are to be found in nearly every Indian village between the Missouri River and the Pacific Northwest. They are determined to keep settlers out of their fur country and will go to any extreme to do it.

"So what we want, Mr. Secretary," he continued, still in unruffled tones, but with emphasis that could not be mistaken, "is to avoid the massacre of United States citizens peacefully on their way to settle United States land in Oregon."

"We ought to have a string of forts from the Missouri all the way to the mouth of the Columbia," Senator Benton broke in, forcefully.

"In violation of our treaty with England?" Secretary Porter's question was slightly sarcastic.

Senator Benton's face reddened. "In violation of no treaty, sir! Britain has no just cause to object."

The Secretary waved his hand, as if to silence further argument on that particular point. "Be that as it may," he said, "you can hardly expect me to erect a string of forts in time to protect wagons going out there this summer."

"Certainly not!" Senator Benton was not to be sidetracked. "What we want is a detachment of soldiers sufficiently large to protect those wagons." The Senator's eyes came to rest upon a third man in uniform, his own son-in-law, Captain John C. Fremont, who sat between Doctor Whitman and Garonne.

The Cabinet official spread his hands. "I can do nothing contrary to the wishes of the President and the Congress," he declared. "I can send Captain Fremont out again with an expedition, but it will have to be a topographical and scientific mission, not a military one."

"How far will the captain be authorized to go?" Senator Benton asked. There was a note of interest, almost of hope, in his voice.

"All the way, if necessary," the Secretary of War answered. "But I repeat that it cannot be in any sense a military party."

"The party will be armed, however?" asked the Senator.

"Certainly—for its own protection, but not as a guard for a wagon train. In Mr. Webster's opinion," the Cabinet member continued, "the sending out of a military guard would be an acknowledgment of our government's official interest in this movement to settle Oregon. As such, it would be a violation of our treaty with Great Britain."

Senator Benton's face again grew red. "Fiddlesticks!" he exclaimed. "You and I both know Daniel Webster is one of those who believe that this country is big enough as it is. New England doesn't want Oregon. Most of the East doesn't want it. Only the West means to have it!"

Benton struck the table with his clenched fist. "Twenty years ago Thomas Jefferson himself told me," he went on, "that we ought to have the Pacific Coast. Andrew Jackson has always said we ought to be a two-ocean country. No matter what Daniel Webster and all his kind think, we're going to take Oregon. Our national destiny demands it. And that wagon train this summer is going to clinch it for us, once and for all!"

Following this outburst from Benton, the Cabinet official was silent for a moment, while his eyes scanned the faces of the men around the table. He saw Captain Bonneville and Lieutenant Garonne making furtive movements, and knew that the two were shaking hands beneath the table. He saw Captain Fremont leaning forward, an expression of glowing determination in his eyes. He

saw Senator Linn drumming the table top with fingers that trembled with emotion. He saw the lips of Marcus Whitman moving as if in a silent prayer. And what he saw impressed him with the belief that this little group of men from the West would somehow have their way.

The Secretary did not want trouble with England, but the words of Senator Benton had stirred him. England, he knew, was building a world empire by colonization. These men of the West were but seeking to build homes, to expand the country they loved. American destiny! A two-ocean country! The greatest, perhaps, in the world!

When his eyes had completed the circle back to Senator Benton, the Cabinet official spoke with an undercurrent of meaning which his listeners could not fail to understand. "As I have already told you," he began, "Captain Fremont will be sent out again this summer, in charge of a topographical and scientific expedition. This time he will go to the Pacific Coast with a considerable number of men, well armed and equipped. His route and rate of travel will be matters for him to decide. He will not be authorized to join forces with the wagon train to Oregon. In fact, he will have definite orders to the contrary. However, if the emigrants *should find themselves in trouble*, and the captain *should be in their vicinity*, then the *captain will have to be guided by his own judgment*."

Having thus spoken, the Secretary arose to his feet, as if fearing to be questioned further on the subject. "I regret, exceedingly," he said, glancing at his watch, "that I have another meeting to attend. Under the circumstances, you will excuse me?"

The other six arose with the Secretary. Senators Benton and Linn shook the Secretary's hand, then walked with him to the door.

They returned a moment later to take their places with the others at the table. The six were smiling now, convinced that the Secretary of War had made up his mind to give the wagon train all the assistance he could without openly disobeying Congress and the President.

Senator Benton made little attempt to hide his elation as he turned to the missionary.

"You understand the situation, Dr. Whitman?" he asked.

Smiling faintly, Marcus Whitman nodded. "I think I do, Senator."

Benton then turned to his son-in-law. "And you, Captain?"