

Teller of Not-So-Tall Tales

by
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Teller of Not-So-Tall Tales

Christopher D. Ochs

“End of the line!” bellowed a voice above the stagecoach's roof.

Cornelius Browning bounded out of the carriage, satchel in hand, landing on the backcountry station platform next to a waiting young man in coach livery. The planks of the platform—more like an unshaded front porch—yielded under his weight with unsettling groans that puffed out small wisps of dry rot. He squinted under the blistering noonday sun, that just ten miles before was obscured by a relentless gully-washer that poured through two counties.

The surly man who rode shotgun on the stagecoach clapped off a layer of dust that adhered in clumps to his still-damp clothes like cactus burrs. With a grunt, he heaved Cornelius's small steamer trunk to the ruddy-skinned porter.

Before Cornelius could say his thanks to the stagecoach crew, the man plopped back on the bench next to the driver, released the hand brake thick as a two-by-four, and grabbed his trusty Remington. With a raspy giddyap, the driver snapped his reins. The horses whinnied a duet tinged with an undercurrent of panic, and the carriage sped off.

“Welcome to *Waci-Gahtei*, stranger,” the youth said with an easy grin.

“Where?” Stifling a flare of doubt, Cornelius glanced up at the station nameplate. Painted letters with a hint of shiny borders long since flecked away declared “Gate-Watch.” He whooshed a sigh, relieved that he hadn't been deposited at the wrong stop.

“*Waci-Gahtei*. Where ya headed?”

“How do you know I'm not staying?”

“Not too many people stay here, mister. Not since the railroad went a hunnert miles north.”

Cornelius pursed his lips with annoyance. The rail to Provo was still not complete, and this coach was the only connection he could wrangle in time for his appointment.

His gut twitched again with a troubling realization. He looked after the fading dust trail left by the stage, then rubbernecked the length of the one-horse town. The youth and he were the only souls amid the rows of dilapidated buildings facing each other along the main line.

Cornelius looked askance at the lad. He was smallish, but too sinewy to be younger than a teenager. And there was something about his accent that Cornelius couldn't place—Navajo, or Cheyenne?

“I need to be south of Provo, Utah, the day after tomorrow for a big groundbreaking ceremony.” Cornelius reached inside his waistcoat for the passes and departure times. “I need to catch—”

“Don't worry, mister. You didn't miss it. The Provo stage will be here in an hour or so.”

Slipping his hand under one of the leather straps, the youth hauled the trunk past the station's front doors propped open by empty barrels with sun-bleached stenciled labels. Cornelius followed, happy for any excuse to be out of the brutal sun.

“You seem awful sure, son.”

“*Wesa*—town folk call me Wes,” he said with a half smile.

“Browning,” Cornelius returned with a brusque nod.

“I learned the timetables. Little else to do here.” The young man clapped the bell on the window counter. Shouldering open the door next to it, he dragged Cornelius's trunk into the murky room beyond. After a few seconds of shuffling and grunting, Wes reappeared with a stationmaster's cap turned to one side. He tore a numbered card-stock in half, handing one part to Cornelius.

“Here's your claim check, Mr. Browning. Do you want me to tag your other bag, too? Hey, you ain't one of those carpetbaggers, are ya?”

“Wrong part of the country. And thanks, no,” he patted the side of

his satchel. "I have some papers here I daren't lose sight of."

"Suit yourself," Wes said with a shrug. Tilting his head down, his chin almost touched the counter, and he looked up at Cornelius with a mischievous grin and guilty eyes. "If you run into him, don't tell Mr. Smithers. He doesn't like it when I wear his hat."

"And where would he be? Matter of fact, where *is* everybody in this town?" he asked with a nervous chuckle as he filed the card in the pocket with his tickets.

"He eats lunch at Potter's general store across the way. He and others sit around the pickle barrel, listening to Mr. Redner. He tells his tall tales most every day."

"Sounds dandy. I haven't had a nibble since we left Rock Springs." With a smirk, Cornelius added, "Even if I had the foresight to bring food on the stage, the storm that harried us most of the way jarred my bones sore, and would've turned the cabin into a pig trough."

"Storm, mister?" Wes said, squinting out the east window. "Tain't rained anywhere near here in over a week."

"It ended about ten miles before..." Cornelius followed Wes' line of sight, dismissing the clear sky with a non-committal shrug. "Never mind. If I'm not here when the Provo stage arrives, fetch me at Potter's." He tossed Wes a nickel to ensure his memory.

His bulging heavy cloth attaché in hand, Cornelius strolled down the deserted avenue, scanning the building signs crafted in the same faded and flecked motif. In front of what probably served as both church and town hall, he checked his pocket watch against the tower clock and nodded with approval.

Cornelius clomped up the landing of Potter's General, shaking off the accumulation of street dust. Nosing past a door propped open with the ubiquitous faded barrel, Cornelius heard a reedy voice.

"He ignored everyone's advice, even the dire warnings from Pecos Bill..."

He pushed open the rickety screen door, and walked into a setting he had seen in many a small town during his business travels.

A burly man in an apron tied over a striped shirt with sleeves rolled

up, fussing over shelves laden with a cornucopia of dry foodstuffs and sundries. A farmer draped in baggy coveralls, his clodhoppers caked in dried muck and propped up on a disused potbelly stove. A blacksmith still wrapped in his leather apron, sitting next to an angled door, opened and leading into a dark root cellar. A man with a coach company jacket draped over the back of his chair, washing down hardtack with a bottle of sarsaparilla.

Next to the pickle barrel sat a peculiar man with a handlebar moustache. Wobbling to and fro in a rocking chair, his elbows rested on the wooden armrests with his hands steepled in front of him. Dressed in Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, he rattled away in a hypnotic singsong voice with his eyes closed.

“...until that fateful night in Ford's Theater, where President Lincoln met his untimely end, by the hand of John Wilkes Booth, firing the bullet forged from John Henry's steel drill.”

“What kinda tall tale is *that*, Redner?” piped up the farmer between the others' hoots. “John Henry, maybe. I might even swallow Paul Bunyan watching the play through the *thee-ay-ter* windows. But assassinatin' Mr. Lincoln?”

“C'mon ya old coot,” chimed in Mr. Smithers after he wiped spatters of sarsaparilla off his chin. “Everyone knows he's wrappin' up his third term and stumping for his fourth.”

The storekeeper failed to stifle a nervous chuckle.

With a wag of his index finger, the blacksmith added with a smirk, “Don't let them *federales* hear such talk. They show up unexpected-like, and don't cotton to traitorous stuff'n'nonsense like that.”

“But, Lincoln *was* killed in Ford's Theater,” Cornelius blurted out.

Everyone turned their attention like a pack of startled wolves on the unannounced stranger. Redner's eyelids snapped open. After a moment, a friendly grin erased his slack-jawed expression of bewilderment.

“It's common knowledge that Ulysses S. Grant is president now,” Cornelius continued, his certainty dwindling with each word. “Right?” he squeaked, his eyes dancing across the nonplussed faces around the room.

The store erupted with laughter.

“What, 'Ol' Piss-Pantsy Grantsy?” roared the farmer.

“That old sot? Who dragged out the war to a tie?” The blacksmith doubled over, slapping his knee.

“Tie?” Cornelius mouthed in silence.

Redner wasn't laughing. Instead, he drilled dead-serious eyes at Cornelius, who furrowed his brow, full of disdain at these ignorant yokels.

The steeple clock chimed the hour. The farmer, blacksmith and Smithers got up, tired resignation silencing the last of their guffaws. Smithers donned his railroad jacket while the others moseyed out into the harsh sun. He stopped in front of Cornelius, picking the last of hardtack from between his teeth.

“You must've gotten off that last coach, Mister...”

“Browning,” he said mechanically, shaking Smithers' hand.

Smithers eyed Cornelius's satchel with a mite of concern. “Didn't Wes take care of your belongings? I swear, if that Injun's slackin' off again, I'm gonna beat the tar outta him. And he better not be wearin' my hat!”

“No, my trunk's at the station. Got the claim check right here,” he replied, patting his vest pocket. “Wes promised to collect me when the Provo stage arrives.”

Smithers gave Cornelius a curious look that almost became a wince, before shuffling out of the screen door.

“Mr. Potter,” said Cornelius, “I'd appreciate a bottle of that sarsaparilla, and something softer than Smithers' hardtack, please? My teeth are still jangling from my coach ride in that wangdoodle of a storm.”

“Storm?” came the store owner's disembodied voice, followed by a pop of a bottle top. “Tain't been a lick of rain since I dunno when. We could sure use it, though. The town well's fixin' to dry up.”

“Never mind him,” Redner said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “He ain't attuned to such things, though *I* could feel the storm... worlds away.” A wry grin spread under his wagging moustache. “It told me you were coming.”

Potter draped an old newspaper on top of the pickle barrel lid,

along with a brown bottle and a slab of meat with crumbling cheese between hunks of sourdough. He asked for two bits, and Cornelius dug a quarter dollar out of his waistcoat.

Facing Redner, Potter clamped his hands on his hips and chided, “Now don't you go fillin' my customer's head with yer nonsense.” He scolded Cornelius with an indecisive frown, then disappeared again behind his shelves.

Between munches of dry food and gulps of sweetened root tea, Cornelius shook his head and asked in a hushed tone, “What kind of news do these locals get out here? They still think Lincoln's president.”

“Well, he *is*,” Redner said with a half-grin as he rocked back and interleaved his fingers. “For them—and anyone else here in Gate-Watch. But you and I, we know different. We know... sideways from this place.”

“You mean, we know better.”

“No, I mean *sideways*.” Render stopped rocking. “Real for us, but not for them. Our past is not quite *their* past.”

“I'm beginning to think Potter's right. You *are* talking nonsense.”

“I'm sorry to tell you these things in such a haste, but time is of the essence.” Redner leaned forward, urgency in his eye. “It *is* real here. John Henry's real here. Paul Bunyan's real here. Seen him myself. Not too sure about the blue ox, though...”

“But you said yourself. President Lincoln's dead.”

“Yes, I did.” Redner craned his neck toward the pickle barrel. “But that's not what the newspaper says.”

With a derisive snort, Cornelius yanked the paper, and snapped open the month-old *Rock Springs Miner*. His stomach somersaulted, gurgling aloud, when he read the headline splashed across the full width of his hometown paper:

President Lincoln Visits Rock Springs!

The rattle of wagon wheels and a faint cry of “Provo!” wafted through the screen door.

Redner rose from his rocker, and bowed with a flourish. “Not to worry, Browning, you'll have plenty of time to adjust. Gate-Watch is a weigh-station of sorts for souls such as you and I. Now if you'll excuse

me, I think I have *your* stage to catch.”

Cornelius threw the paper at Redner and grabbed his satchel. He jumped out of his seat, hoping to leave Redner behind, along with the uneasy dread curling around his heart.

Redner snatched Cornelius's bottle and drained the remnants. “Hope you enjoy your stay here in Gate-Watch.”

Cornelius dashed out of the store, cutting a diagonal beeline across the rutted dirt avenue. Hearing the screen door slam a second time behind him, he turned to spy Redner traipsing off the store's porch.

Following in a carefree saunter, Redner pulled his cuffs and straightened his bow-tie, all the while maintaining his pleasant grin.

Cornelius tumbled, tripping over an unexpected pothole in his path. Scrambling erect with a choking cough and shaking off the dust from his suit, he gaped in disbelief as Redner ambled around the stage, waving at the driver who called out, “Provo—leaving in two minutes.”

Redner climbed the steps to the station door and handed Wes a claim ticket brown with age, before clambering into the stagecoach. Crossing the threshold, he uttered an “Aha,” as though he had just received a pleasant surprise. He reached to close the door, before Cornelius snatched it open again.

“You fetchin' to steal my ride, Redner?”

Wes heaved a small suitcase up to the driver, then waved goodbye to Redner, who replied with a friendly salute. Cornelius plucked out his own claim check, shoving it into Wes's hand.

“You wish to go to Provo, too, Mr. Browning?” Redner scooted to one side and patted the unoccupied seat. “You're welcome to try.”

Clutching his satchel to his chest, Cornelius bounded up the running board into the coach.

He blinked with wonder as he instead emerged out of Potter's root cellar.

“What in tarnation?” Without thinking, Cornelius sprinted once more across the street, skidding to a stop in front of the depression that tripped him up moments before.

It was in the shape of giant boot print, with a name scratched in the

heel with strokes larger than a woodsman's axe—"Bunyan."

The driver cracked his whip, and Redner waved out the window of the coach.

"Apologies, Mr. Browning, but this is *my* ride now. I'm afraid you've been selected as *Waci-Gahtei's* new teller of tall tales—until this place decides when *your* replacement arrives. Good luck!" He continued to grin and wave until the coach disappeared behind the last building.

Cornelius let slip his satchel and stumbled in a daze toward the station, staring at the faded sign above. He fixed Wes with a pleading stare of incomprehension.

"Gate-Watch is what you white folk call this place." Wes nodded at the sign before handing back Cornelius' errant claim check. "It's the closest your words come to our name—the place of lost people."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher D. Ochs' foray into writing began with his epic fantasy *Pindlebryth of Lenland*. His short stories have been published in the *GLVWG* and award-winning *BWG* anthologies and websites, and by *Firebringer Press*. Using his skills learned with the *LVS*, he crafted a collection of mirthful macabre short stories, *If I Can't Sleep, You Can't Sleep*. His latest novel is a gritty urban fantasy/horror, *My Friend Jackson*, a Finalist in *Indies Today's* Best Books of 2020.

His current projects include: two sci-fi/horror novels *Sentinel of Eternity* and *No Place Like Home*; a prequel novella and a second novel in the *Pindlebryth* saga.

Chris has too many interests for his own damn good. With previous careers in physics, electrical engineering and software, CGI animator, classical organist, voice talent on radio, DVD and OTAKON, it's a wonder he can remember to pay the dog and feed his bills.

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