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Nunslinger

Written by Stark Holborn

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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Nunslinger:

The Complete Series

Stark Holborn



HODDER

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 78923 2

Typeset in Plantin Light by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

Nunslinger: Book 1

The True Tale of how Sister Thomas Josephine of St. Louis, Missouri, began to cross the Overland Trail to Sacramento, California with the help of one Abraham C. Muir

I

The searcher of hearts and reins

Of the wagon train there was nothing left. That is what I first recall.

When I came to, with the sun blazing through my eyelids and the dryness of the plain within my throat, I wondered at how I could be alive. Then I saw him, and I was sure I lived not. He leaned over me, eyes blue as a paper flower and the wind of the plains pushing at his hair; I was both terrified and elated for I thought he was the Lord himself.

Since I happen to be a Bride of Christ, this presented itself as no small matter.

Before he could lay his healing hands on me, there were other hands, used for nothing but their own selfish pleasure. They lifted me roughly and I managed one beseeching look toward my Lord. His pistols caught the light as he smiled. In his hand was a pair of dead man's boots.

Their cities thou hast destroyed

They had attacked at dawn, slaughtered the men and stolen the horses, burned all ten wagons. Hours later, the air remained bitter with smoke. Scraps of charred canvas drifted across the dust, evidence of the losses suffered by all. We had been traveling the most desolate stretch of land since our journey began, having left behind Nebraska for the wilds of the plains north of Denver.

There were eight of us together, survivors of that journey. Four were officers' wives on their way to their husbands at distant forts. They kept to themselves, and cried, wailing that their fine stitched shawls and strings of pearls should now be hanging round the necks of red-skinned brats. Fifth was another woman, traveling alone. A butcher's widow, only recently joined at Julesburg, aiming for her sister's home in Salt Lake City.

Sixth was a child, a boy small enough still to be excused from the slaughter. I had seen him during the raid, cowering behind the wheel of a wagon until the fire had flushed him out.

A man, scarred with the tattle-tale marks of a prospector, made up the seventh. His leg had been close to split by a tomahawk strike from behind.

I was the eighth. My head was bruised, but in truth my hurts were slight. I do not believe that I was the target of the blow that knocked me to the ground, and in my heart I forgave the man that dealt it.

The prospector with the shattered leg awoke – his consciousness came and went with the winds. Now the breezes dropped, and the sun burned. The shade cast by our canvas shelter had shrunk to a tiny square. Soon, there would not be room for us all.

Returning my rosary to my belt, I stood. The heat, and the pain in my head made my ears ring and my eyes flood, but it soon passed. I called the young boy to me and we began to move the wounded man further into the shade. As we slid him over the dust, the boy stole a glance my way.

‘Do you know your prayers, child?’

His eyes went wide. They were a different color each – lake blue and forest brown – and he nodded.

‘Then I would ask you to say one for this man.’

I stepped out into the high noon heat then. The air was like chalk in my lungs and I blessed the wisdom of the habit, for the brown cloth shielded my skin as effectively as a parasol. Through the haze I crossed to a larger tent, canvas like ours but with three enclosed sides. Horses stood passively in its shadow; my fellow survivors had commandeered their customary shelter.

Two soldiers were on guard, leaning on rifles. Their blue uniforms were dull and stripped of color, white lines fanning their eyes from constant squinting.

One of them spoke. ‘Best get back to the shade, Sister. A mule couldn’t stand in this heat.’

‘Forgive my interruption,’ I sought out eyes under the hat’s brim. ‘There is a man yonder who suffers. I believe a few drops of some substance to numb his pain would be a mercy.’

‘Can’t waste supplies on a torn-up old scratch. Won’t be no replacing them ’til we reach Fort Laramie.’

‘How far might the fort be?’

‘Four days’ march, if we stick to the trail. Like as not he’ll be long gone by then. Save your breath, Sister.’

‘Sergeant.’ The voice came from behind us.

The wrinkles in the soldier’s uniform seemed to flatten as he pulled himself to attention. In the entrance was the man I had believed to be my Lord. His hair was the color of pale oak wood above his shoulders, and on his hands were broad-cuffed gloves that – despite the ever-present dirt – were clean and creamy as the belly of a calf. I counseled myself to remain calm, but the memory of my earlier mistake continued to agitate me.

‘Fetch the medicine chest,’ he said to the man I had been addressing. ‘You’ll see a bottle marked “ether”. Bring it to me with one of the cloths that you find there.’

His voice was quick and intelligent; something that gave me hope in that land which was otherwise a wilderness. He turned to me then and pulled the wide hat from his head.

‘Sister, I offer my apologies for the idleness of my men. Truly, it is no excuse, but we have had a hard march. They begin to lose their shine the longer we stay from home.’

He lowered his vivid blue eyes, which seemed the only spot of pure color in an inhospitable territory.

‘First Lieutenant Theodore F. Carthy, at your service.’

3

For there is no one in death,
that is mindful of thee

The bodies lay before me in a row, stretched out on the dust. Eight in all, the driver and muleskinners, the guide and guards who had been our traveling companions since we left St. Louis. Now their faces were still, ravaged by wounds or blistered by the heat. It had been the best part of a day before the soldiers had seen the smoke of burning wagons and come to our aid. By then, the sun had already begun its work upon the dead. The plain was keen to claim its own.

There was no time for a proper burial, but Lieutenant Carthy spared two men to aid me in restoring some dignity to the dead. The soldiers had dragged the bodies into a line without a word, wiped their brows on their sleeves and had not shuddered at what they touched.

I was told to mind the sun, for it was now well past its peak and the company would soon be riding to less exposed ground. I could see the men saddling horses and stowing packs. Although no one came to press me, I knew for whom they waited.

I took up a palmful of dust and closed my eyes. It ran through my fingers onto the feet of the first man. I prayed, anointing each body with the earth of the plain. This was as much of a burial as they would receive, these men who were soon to be white bones. *Somebody's darling*, the soldiers had said. They were mine, and the Lord's.

A cry from the camp and I crossed myself, thinking my time alone was nearly over. I was too far away to recognize the warning.

'You just stay mighty still, Sister. Ain't got cause to harm you, if you do as I say.'

There was the sound of a pistol being cocked. How the man had managed to draw so close, so silently, I had no notion. Slowly, I raised my arms and crossed them into my sleeves. Riders were galloping from the camp, a cloud of dust spreading behind them like great wings. At their head was Lieutenant Carthy.

I waited. The riders stopped at twenty paces. Six, all armed, their buttons and belts sparking fire.

‘Lower your pistol, stranger. Or we will shoot you where you stand.’

There was a kind of wheeze from the man behind me that might have been a laugh.

‘Who’s to say you’ll hit me, Ted? You always seem to miss, and it’s beginnin’ to be something of a disappointment.’

Carthy’s face was as pale as his gloves, two spots of red appearing high on his cheeks at the stranger’s words.

‘Without your filthy Indian tricks you’d have long been kicking wood, Abraham C.’

‘Then I ain’t got much of a mind to leave them off.’

Carthy’s eyes dropped to mine. He pulled himself straighter in the saddle, smoothed down the snarl upon his face. His voice, ordinarily so light and courteous, took on a commanding edge.

‘You release this lady now, Muir. I do not expect it to mean much to an outlaw, but she is a Bride of Christ and under my protection.’

The man’s horse drew closer behind me. I could feel the heat of its skin, the breath from its nose on my face. I sensed the muzzle of the pistol mere inches from my temple, but remained as stone, my eyes fixed ahead.

‘Well that’s the thing,’ drawled Muir. ‘Maybe I have a mind to repent. Until that time, this lady is to be my insurance.’

I felt a hand grasp my arm. No gloves, fingers, dark and scarred.

‘Climb up, Sister.’

I stared into the blue of Carthy’s eyes, trying to see some instruction there. Perhaps it was the glare of the lowering sun,

but I could read nothing. It did not matter, for his silence was instruction enough. Another pile of dead, more bones for the plain to whip clean.

I set my foot in the empty stirrup. The man Mr Carthy had called an outlaw kept the pistol trained on me. Not an easy task, as I hauled myself awkwardly onto the packs. Once settled, I found my eyes level with Mr Carthy, his gaze fixed upon me, cold and clear.

. . . and who shall confess to thee in hell?

‘Set me down here.’

The man continued to urge the horse up the hill. My request could have been a louse crawling at his ear, for the attention he paid it.

I raised my hand from the saddle for as long as I dared to attract his attention. I had never ridden behind a man before, especially not in such close quarters. Where Carthy was neat and straight, this man seemed broad and lean, like something that belonged in the wild. I had yet to get a good look at his face. It seemed to shift beneath the shade of his hat until I could not tell what was the crease of an eye, or a deep line filled with shadow.

Yet his scent reached me, strongest of all: raw leather and sweat and something sharp, like the embers of a fire.

The hide jacket was stiff under my fingers. Although I tried to keep a distance, my hold upon his waist was the only thing that prevented me from tumbling down the slope and shattering many a bone in the process. Beneath my arm I could feel his torso, hard muscle and the heat of skin through the calico shirt. I longed to break that contact, for it troubled me. Instead, my eyes found what looked like a necklace beneath his collar, a string of beads the color of old bone. I tore my gaze away and looked resolutely ahead.

‘I ask you to set me down here, sir. We are far beyond range of Mr Carthy’s guns. Set me down or I shall dismount myself.’

Some expression quirked his ears. It tried the very depths of my composure when I realized that it was a smile.

‘Mighty long roll back down that hill, Sister. Like it or not you’d be in pieces by the bottom. I’d be no man if I were to treat my insurance thusly.’

‘Why you’ve been no man at all, *thusly*.’

I bit my lip in self-rebuke, for it was beneath me to speak to him so. Though I did not like it, he was correct. The slope we climbed was close to sheer, a channel scored deep into the hill by some ancient water flow. The passage was at times so narrow that it left lines of pale dust upon the hem of my habit, the toes of my boots.

‘No need to fret, Sister,’ he grunted. ‘I’ll do you no harm. There’s them below that’d like me dead, wouldn’t scruple on sneaking up in the night to do it neither. Like as not they’ll think twice on that if they might catch a lady up in the fire. Insurance is what you’ll be ’til I feel safe from them.’

He sounded reluctant to speak, voice pitched so low it was almost a rumble. Yet I heard in it a vague warmth, an accent that reminded me of my own childhood; of the half-remembered tones that had been mine, before the years at the convent had washed them away.

I made to answer, but the horse skittered upon the loose stones and I felt sure its hooves would fail, that we would be sent plunging to the floor of the plain far below.

‘Up on, Rattle, easy there, up on boy,’ the man urged.

We were nearing a summit. The horse’s steps began to slow and shudder.

‘Forward!’ he shouted.

For one terrible moment I saw air beneath the front hooves and we slipped back. I chanced a look over my shoulder. Below, tiny as baubles, were Carthy’s troops, their canvas shelter little more than a handkerchief spread on the ground. I commended myself to the Lord.

‘Lean forward, damn you!’

I realized he was shouting at me. There was a hand grasping my arm, fingers digging hard into the flesh as I was pulled bodily forward. His own neck was at a level with the horse’s, streams of sweat matching one against the other. He landed a last kick on its flanks.

With a cry, the horse surged upward and staggered onto level

ground. Shaking from the shock and rough treatment, I near fell from the saddle. As I dismounted, my rosary caught on a buckle. I could do nothing but watch as the chain broke and beads cascaded like rain to the dry earth.

Visited by night,
thou hast tried me by fire

‘What does the “C” stand for?’

‘What’s that you say?’

‘The gentleman back there, Lieutenant Carthy. He called you “Abraham C.”’

The man sniffed deep and spat into the embers of the fire. The charcoaling wood hissed for a second.

‘The “C” stands for nothing.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘It stands for no man. Woman neither. Even them Indians in the hills, they got their gods for the earth and the sky and the plateau, but they know they cain’t control what’s beyond them.’

He must have felt pity for my confusion, for he barked a laugh, the expression scudding across his face like a strip of sun caught between shadows.

‘It’s “Sea”, ma’am,’ he allowed me, the end of a smile in his teeth. ‘Abraham Sea Muir, like the wide ocean. Not “c” for “cat”.’

The cold of the night after the constant slap of heat during the day must have made me stupid, for I could not comprehend him. My fear at being taken hostage had dulled somewhat to wariness as the hours wore on, but I continued to sit as far as possible from the man. Muir did not seem to notice my discomfort, nor even inclined to notice anything. He was banking the fire, dimming it so that it provided warmth but little light.

‘If ’t weren’t for a lady present I’d snuff it out,’ he mumbled. ‘Still, rocks should do to shield us from any that’s down there.’

‘You mean Lieutenant Carthy?’

‘I mean any that might not wish me well in the night, and that amounts to a greater number than I care for.’

‘Lieutenant Carthy is a gentleman.’

The words were from my mouth before I could consider their wisdom, and I felt a tremor of unease. I did not wish to anger this man.

Exhausted and cold though I was, I knew I must find my way back to Carthy and his men. I could make my own escape in the night, but I had seen the dangers of the plain. My thin boots would last all of a day on the cruel shale of the canyon edge, so it seemed my best chance lay in persuading Muir to give me up.

He was watching me from across the fire, face a jumble of dark and light. Some emotion fidgeted below the surface.

‘There are no words in your book, Sister, that’ll touch a man like Carthy, were you to pray night and day for the salvation of his soul. Some are ventured too far to return.’

His expression then, darker than I’d yet seen, made me fear that he was right. Not about Carthy, but about himself. That there were hard edges to this world I had never imagined; a world of unbound wounds and blood on the earth and shattered teeth, where a man like Muir lived alone.

A shudder ran across my skin and I broke the gaze. I had gathered what was left of the rosary up from the dust, placed the beads in a pouch at my belt. Muir’s eyes followed my fingers as I pulled out the remainder of a section.

‘No man is beyond salvation, Mr Muir,’ I said, as I touched the beads. ‘I shall pray for both your souls.’

‘Wouldn’t wish my name joined to his by any man,’ he mumbled. ‘Even in prayer.’

The dark look was gone. He pulled off his boots, packed them against the saddle at his head and dragged the blanket from his shoulders.

‘Don’t lay too near the fire,’ he told me, rolling on his side. ‘Holy garb burns just as well as any other cloth.’