Clementine

A Short Story Inspired by Erin

By Maryanne Peters

Gabe Horton was just the scout and guide.  The leader of this wagon train was Ezekiel Masterton.  He was the man who called the shots.  Gabe could only recommend.  Pastor Ezekiel seemed to hold the will of every one of the settlers in his hand.

He had promised them a new life in Wyoming Territory where land had been made available.  He spoke about a Christian community in the wilderness which they would build and where God would smile down upon his people and the crops would never fail.  They had to get there first.  And then they had to deal with any Indians who might not be ready to step aside for a foreign god.

“We need have no fear of savages or of any other wild animals living in those parts,” Pastor Ezekiel had told them.  “God will protect us for we shall pray every day for deliverance from all evils.”

Gabe knew not to smirk.  He would be well paid up front, so that if they were lost he would still do well, but if they made it and his job was done, there would be more money.  That comforted him where liquor could not.  They had strange ideas about sin, and liquor was, if not a sin, then a serious temptation of the Devil.  So they said.  He would have to do without for at least six weeks.

Gabe knew a thing or two about sin and temptation.  He was a sinner and had been tempted, but he trusted in God’s forgiveness.  What else could he do.  Sometimes sin was the only way, and temptation?  Well, temptation is tempting, and God had neglected to give Gabe a stronger resolve.

But he could say a prayer and be as pious as the next man, if that was required.  But generally he stayed out in front, riding back when the situation required, to warn Pastor Ezekiel in the lead wagon.

At night they would corral the wagons in a square with sentries keeping watch in each corner.  But they all understood that in an attack, the circle was best.  Hopefully that would not be needed on the journey.  Gabe knew the tribes along the route, their customs and enough for their language to assure them that they were just passing through.

No, Gabe knew that the problem in wagon trains as often as not comes from within.  Often the trains are made up of strangers and conflicts can arise.  Even where led by a single leader like Pastor Ezekiel there could be strains brought about by hardship or general disappointment.  Beyond civilized cities lie the wrecks of broken dreams.

But the first problem that arose from this wagon train seemed minor.  There was a thief in their midst.  It hardly seemed worth calling everybody together and shouting about the eighth commandment, but Pastor Ezekiel demanded that the person who had stolen “personal items from ladies boxes” should step forward.  Nobody did.

They rode on into more hostile territory and Gabe hoped that it was over, but the stealing continued.  It seemed to Gabe that Ezekiel was almost driven to madness by these minor offences.  He started to suggest that the thief was “a deviant” and “an instrument of the Devil” and “driven by disgusting desires”.  It seemed to Gabe that saying that this poor fellow should be cast out was hardly likely to achieve a confession.

As it turned out, no confession was needed.  The young fellow was caught in the act.  He was a boy of barely 15 years of age named Clement Thompson, a cousin of one of the wagon owners.  He was discovered making off with a woman’s dress in the middle of the day during a stop to water the horses.  He tried to escape and ripped the garment, ruining it, it was said.

Gabe advised against the delay but Pastor Ezekiel insisted in holding a type of trial for the boy, at which he asked somebody to speak for the young man but nobody would.  The leader of the flock screamed fire and brimstone and selected the punishment he had talked about – banishment.

Pastor Ezekiel was not a man to be messed with, but Gabe did his best to seek mercy for the boy.  Gabe knew that there were all types of men in the world, and some were less men than others, but that did not make them Godless.  At first Pastor Ezekiel was talking about stoning but then when he chose banishment he wanted to make sure that the boy did not follow the slow-moving wagon train and wanted to tie him to a tree.

“That would be certain death,” said Gabe, “and thereby murder.  But if I use hemp twine the boy will able to chew through it by the morning and we will be well gone”.

They clothed poor Clement in the ripped dress he had stolen and tied him to the tree by the trail, with some rouge daubed on his face.  Gabe was horrified.  He went up to the tree and pulled off some bark to allow him to carve a glyph upon the sapwood with his knife.  He then took a bead from the Indian necklace and placed it in the boy’s mouth.

“The Indians will come,” Gabe whispered in the boy’s ear.  “They have been following us for days.  Show them the bead between your teeth and they will not harm you.  Show them what I have carved on the tree here by your head.  They will recognize this sign and understand.”

The boy’s eyes thanked him.  He could see that.  He would not forget them.

And he did not.  Even though it was two years before he saw those eyes again.  And when he did they were the eyes of a saloon girl in Hope City Montana.

He rode in close to sunset having guided some prospectors through Indian country and up into the hills.  If they struck gold or anything else of value, he knew no good would come of it, but it seemed that the Indians would suffer no matter what.   Their territory would shrink as the white man’s grew.  It saddened him.  He needed a drink.

The Hope City Saloon was the first he saw.  It was not the only saloon in town, but it looked like the first.  It looked like an old saloon.  The type he knew.  Swing doors, a bar, a staircase with rooms above, beer, hard liquor and pretty women.

He saw her as he entered.  He saw those eyes.  The same except now surrounded by kohl, the eyelashes so long and dark.  He thought that this might just be somebody similar, but then he saw her smile signalling that she knew him, and owed him.

She walked over to him.  She looked like the Saloon hostess who would walk up to any man who entered and say: “Hello Stranger, and welcome to the Hope City Saloon”.  She wore a dress in pink with black trim that looked expensive.  It was cut low in the front to reveal her bosom, and was tight at the waist showing she was well corseted.  Her hair was fair and copious, pinned high on her head in a style that begged for her to draw a single pin and see it tumble down over her shoulders.

“I never got your name all those years ago,” she said.  “But I think that I owe you my life.  The least I can do is to get you a drink.”

And so it seemed to him that all he had heard was true.  The Indians had respected the mark he had left.  That had given not only life, but new life.

“Gabriel Horton is the name,” he said.  “Call me Gabe.  I’ll take the drink, thank you.  And when you have time I would like to hear your story.  I think that will be a fair repayment for what little I did for you back then.”

“Take a seat Gabe,” she called from the bar.  “You can call me Clementine.  And yes, fair enough, I owe you my story, so all others will have to wait.”

She shot a glance and a smile to several men lined up at the bar.  Gabe could read the look of disappointment on their faces.  Their gaze followed her as she returned to the quiet table in the corner that Gabe had chosen, with a bottle of local liquor and two small glasses in her hand.

She swished her full skirts out of the way as she sat, but Gabe could see that the skirts were split at the front, allowing her long shapely legs clad in French hosiery to be seen almost to their full length.

“I want to thank you for what you did for me,” she said.  “Not even my own family would speak up for me, but you did.”

“That Pastor Ezekiel was a madman,” said Gabe.  “I am not sure if you know what happened to him and his followers, but [any ideas?]

“When they Indians came I thought they would kill me for sure, but then I held the bead between my teeth as you said, and they cut me free.  What was that bead?”

“To be honest, I don’t know.  I had an Indian wife for a while.  She gave me the necklace and told me that each bead meant something to each tribe.  I took the one for that tribe and gave it to you.  I have plenty more.  I have never had to use them, but it is good to know they work.”

“But the sign.  I showed them that.  You know what it means?  They did.”

“I know sure enough,” said Gabe.  “They might have guessed from the dress.  But if the bead did not work they would respect you as one of the two spirit people.  It’s funny, but to people like Pastor Ezekiel you are Satanic, but to the Indians you are blessed.”

“They treated me well, although they did cut me,” said Clementine wistfully rather than with bitterness.

“I am so sorry to hear that,” said Gabe.

“It is better that way,” she said.  “All thought of going backward is gone.  From that point I could only move in one direction, and that direction led here.”  And she poured out two glasses, his with much more, and they drank.

“So how did you get here?”

“I was taken in by a two spirit person who lived solely as a woman.  There were others that did not, but she asked me if this is how I wanted to be and I said yes.  It is strange but of course in our world this choice is never open.  If you had asked me anyway else I would have said no.  I would have said that I want to be a man, and just wear women’s clothes from time to time.  But when I was faced with the choice, I chose to be a woman.  I now know that this was the right choice.  My soul spoke for me, if you can understand that.”

“We are what we are,” said Gabe.  He knew what he was.  A loner.  An adventurer.  He had made his choices.  His soul had spoken for him long ago.

“She told me that my balls would need to go.  They would hold me back.  I never really agreed to that.  There was a ceremony of some kind.  The pipe was smoked with something other than tobacco.  I felt strange, as if it was not my body I was living in.  There was chanting and dancing.  I saw the knife but I left nothing.  A piece of me was thrown on the fire and I watched it happen without caring.

“I avoid those ceremonies,” said Gabe.  “Anything can happen.”  He had two marks on his chest to remind him.

“She chose me a husband.  The man had lost his wife.  His children had slight need of me, but I was closen because he was pining.  My two spirit teacher explained to me how I was to please him in the carnal way.  She said that women like us have a gift.  Even without having a cunny for a man to enter, we can please him in many ways.”

“You don’t have to go into this,” said Gabe.  He was past middle age now, but he still had lead in his pencil when such conversation arose.

“Well, when it all that you do then you learn to do it properly.  I cannot bear children or feed them on my breast.  I can love them, but in an Indian village children have many mothers.  A man should have but one wife, and if that woman’s only job is to please him, then she must be good at it.  She must you every part of her body better, to make up for the part she does not have.”

Gabe moved uncomfortable in his seat.

“The lips, the tongue, even long hair wrapped around.  Her thighs, or even an armpit, and of course, a back passage prepared properly so that it is cleaner than even a mouth.  All of this I learned from my teacher.”

Gabe had been listening, in growing … well, in growing disquiet.  But he was suddenly aware that there was a man standing over Clementine, trying to interrupt.

“Clemmy, I am sorry to intrude, but don’t you figure that your regulars are entitled a little bitty piece of your attentions?” the Man pleaded of her.

“No get yourself gone, Horace,” she snapped.  “Can’t you see that I am talking to an old friend over here.  You can go to the bottom of the line for your bad manners.”

Gabe smiled.  He poured another two glasses - only half as much for her.

“My husband was a good man.  I think that he objected to me to start with, and he even struck me more than once.  But when you can do what I can do then a man does not want you to stop, and an unhappy woman will stop.  In the end I knew that he did not want me to take the place of his late wife, and I assured him that I never would.  She was his true wife.  I was only his pleasure wife.  But he loved me in his way.”

“What happened to him?” asked Gabe, guessing that this man was no more.

“He died.  His heart gave out in the middle of a bison hunt.  People say that the death of somebody so close really does injure the heart.  If so, his death is the closest that I have come to such a wound.”

“And after that?”

“As we buried him his children thanked me for all that I had done for him.  They said that I brought the fire back into his eyes.  I told them that they had done a similar thing for me.  They had show that life without somebody to love is shallow.”

“They let you go?”

“They asked the tribe to allow me to leave, but they would welcome me back should I wish to return.”

“Will you?”

“There is love there.  And nobody judges me for what is between my legs.  But these are my people.  And they are all hungry for what I offer.”

She waved her arm in the direction of the men at the bar.  They were all staring at Gabe in furious jealousy, or so it seemed to him.

“Do any of them know what is between your legs?” Gabe asked.

She smiled, and said: “Oh no.  I wear a chastity device of my own making.  I tell everybody that I am a virgin.  I was brought up in a strict Christian household - which I was.  I tell that that I am saving myself for the man who will be my husband.  Until he arrives, there is a place they cannot go.

“Pastor Ezekiel would be proud,” Gabe teased.

“Plenty want it.  Hardly a week goes by without me receiving a proposal of marriage.  But of course I have high standards.  And,as only you know, I have a secret.”

“Yes,” said Gabe.  “Please be careful.”

“The chastity device is well made,” she said.  “Even if I was unconscious they would have trouble getting in.  I say to them: ‘It’s not that I don’t trust you; it’s that I don’t trust myself’.  That drives them crazy.  It was my first lesson - kept them wanting more tan you will allow.”

“So will there ever be love for you Clementine?”

She looked at him with just a trace of sadness.  I happy demeanor was her cast by habit, and probably by inclination, but there was a concern there that he could detect.

“I hope so,” she said.

“I have a shawl pin in my belongings,” said Gabe.  “I would like you to have it.  I don’t know why I kept it.  I got it from some Indians years ago.  I used it when I carved that sign on the tree that you were tied to.  You should wear it.  I have a feeling that it will bring you good luck.

She poured out two more glasses.  She said: “I already have so much from you.  It seems like you are my spiritual godfather.  But I will happily wear it for you.  But after this drink I have business to attend to.  The bottle is yours.”

She left the table and he finished the bottle slowly just soaking up the presence of people without talking to them.  That was his way.

She went upstairs periodically and when she did it seemed as if the lights of the bar dimmed a little, or was it that she was a source of light herself?

He called upon her the following day.  In the morning she was dressed more demurely, but seemed even more beautiful.  She had brought a shawl for the pin to be worn.  She recognized the glyph.  It has saved her life.  It had made her new one.

She was not sad to see him ride away.  She knew that he would be back.  But also she knew who he was.   He was a loner.  He was an adventurer.  He had no choice in it.  His sou spoke for him.

But he did return, less than a year later.  Quite possibly it was to see her, and let her light and her love of life shine upon him for the moment or two he allowed himself to be in one place.

She was not at the saloon.  The barman said: You will find her down at Doc Gardiner’s Office.  We all miss her here.”  Gabe looked across at doleful faces lining the bar.

He took the directions offered and headed off down the street.  He observed that in only a year Hope City had grown.  It seemed that Doctor James Gardiner was the real thing.  A physician lured out from the east and provided with tidy and modern consulting rooms and a cottage nearby.

And when he entered the waiting room it seemed that the light from the window could not explain to brightness.  No, that was because she was there.

“Gabe,” she called out.  “You are back!”

She stood near the door which bore the doctor’s name, resplendent in white with small red cross on one breast, her hair up in a bun looking like spun gold.  Her eyes, those eyes that spoke of love and deep concern for anybody the subject of her attentions, shone like polished obsidian.

Thankfully the room was empty.  He could speak freely.

“No longer a saloon girl?” he asked.

“A married woman,” she said, arising her hand to show him a ring.  “And that is thanks to you.”

“I am happy for you,” he said.  “But I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I am Mrs. Gardiner now,” she said.  “James arrived here shortly after you left.  Not long after that he had a badly injured indian brought in.  Somebody told him that I spoke the language.  So we met and well, we became friends.  The Indian had seen the shawl pin on me.  Months later he told James what it meant.  It should have been an end to our friendship, but, well, James is a man of science.”

“So he learned that you were not … not complete?”

“He learned that I was special.  He told me that he probably fell in love with me when we first met, but he says that he soon learned he was not alone in that”.  She smiled, the way he remembered that she did.  She was still a saloon girl, but with only one man to please.

“So he married you?”

“Not before he had learned all of my secrets” she giggled.  “And by then, he had to marry me.  I simply insisted on it.”

“And a family?”  It seemed a churlish thing to ask.  It just came out.

“Small town doctors are always offered the orphans.  So, perhaps yes.  But for now we need no other company but one another.  He is very busy at work, and at home, well, it is like I said to you when we last met: If my only job is to please him, then I must be good at it, and I am!

“I don’t doubt it for a minute,” Gabe said.

The End

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