

The Letter

Seated on a narrow wooden bench, he looked at the letter again. With an ache in his heart, he slowly read. As he read, his eyes grew wide and his chin began to quiver. Upon completing the second sheet, he reread it over again, thinking that perhaps his eyes had deceived him, *“If you are not willing, then another recipient will be chosen.”*

After reading it a fourth time, he tucked the sheets back into the envelope and returned to the house. His father was just cleaning up the last of his eggs, when Jacob entered the kitchen. “Well, son, what did it say?”

“Was it something from Zachariah before his death?” Mrs. Morgan asked anxiously. “Had he intended to tell us of his illness?”

“No, Mother. It is from a Mr. Clarence Weatherbee.”

“And who is Mr. Weatherbee?”

“Uncle Zac's attorney in San Francisco.”

“Oh my! And what on earth did he want of you?” Mrs. Morgan exclaimed.

Jacob excitably said, “Mother, Uncle Zac left his entire estate to me.”

“Oh, well that can't be much,” Professor Morgan said with a shrug.

Professor Morgan never had thought much of Zac; he just considered him a worthless mountain man that lived with the Indians.

His wife agreed. “I'm afraid your father is right, son, so don't get your hopes up for a lot of riches or some such thing. Why, Zachariah was always on the go. He never did settle down and make something of himself. Anyway, what could he possibly

have acquired clear back there in the wild Utah Territory? After, all he was just a Mountain Man!

Jacob nodded, and then trying to contain his excitement, said, “That's not all.”

“Oh? So what else did it say, son?” the professor inquired.

Taking a deep breath, Jacob continued, “It...ah...it says in Uncle Zac's will that I get his entire estate and his most prized possession—whatever that is—if I follow his instructions exactly.”

“I see,” Mrs. Morgan chuckled, and softly said. “That sounds like my brother. What are his instructions?”

Jacob read on. “After I receive this letter, I am to contact a banker by the name of—let's see...” Jacob again extracted the faded yellow papers from the envelope and scanned the first page. “A Mr. Galloway, here in Boston, at the Massachusetts Bank. I am to meet with him, and if I accept Uncle Zac's proposal, he will advance sufficient funds from Uncle Zac's estate so I can secure passage on a ship to San Francisco.”

“What!” Jacob's mother said with incredulity.

“That's right, Mother. I have to go to San Francisco and meet with Mr. Weatherbee, the attorney.”

The professor's face grew hard, and his eyes narrowed, as they rested heavily on Jacob's face. “So if—and only if—you were to go to San Francisco and meet with this so-called attorney, then what could it be about?” he asked with his jaw set like granite.

Jacob said, “We'll go over the will, and find out what I have inherited.

Jacob felt excited, and he was more than ready for this. He realized his parents were concerned for him, but sometime and some place he would have to make decisions for himself, and perhaps this was the time.

Two days later, the Professor, Mrs. Morgan, and Jacob sat in Mr. Galloway's office at the Massachusetts Bank in Boston, waiting to hear what he had to say. He was firm when Jacob's parents began to argue. "I am very sorry," he said. "But my instructions are very explicit and forbid anyone to accompany your son to San Francisco."

"Well, in that case, he just won't go," Mrs. Morgan said. "I'm sure there isn't any real purpose anyway, for my brother couldn't possibly have anything of enough value to justify the trip."

Mr. Galloway said, "Mrs. Morgan, I do not know the value of Mr. Sherwood's estate. However, I have received more than sufficient funds for your son to travel to San Francisco, *unaccompanied*. It must be his decision to make," he said, peering down over his thick glasses at Jacob.

Jacob thought, "How could I turn down this opportunity? Finally a chance to go West and live the life I have always dreamed of."

"Well, Jacob—" his mother began.

"I'm going!" Jacob said firmly.

His mother turned to his father for support, but, tenderly, Professor Morgan said, "Dear, Jacob is seventeen years old. It is time he determines the course of his own life. If he wants to go, then maybe we should let him. Who knows, maybe he'll come back with a more than we think."

Jacob's mother blurted out, "But he's only a boy, he doesn't have any experience with traveling, he needs someone to go with him." Although Mrs. Morgan tried to think of every reason she could to keep Jacob from chasing the dreams of her adventurous, dead brother... the professor finally prevailed. After signing the required documents, Mr. Galloway turned all of the

funds over to Jacob for the long ocean voyage. Jacob was now looking forward with great anticipation for the adventure that lay ahead. The least of his concerns was the size of his inheritance, but what occupied Jacob's mind was: What was his Uncle's most prized possession?

Jacob stood on the pier at the Boston harbor and stared in awe at the massive ship Brooklyn with its stark mast outlining the blue of the eastern sky. Despite his longing to begin the voyage, he was apprehensive

Not every ship that departed from this harbor over the years, had reached the port for which it had been bound. The sea, he had been told, was fraught with danger. Everything from fierce storms to blood-thirsty pirates had caused many voyages to end up at the bottom of the sea. Each journey had been begun with as much hope as this one would be for him. His mother's tears did nothing to calm Jacob, as they spent their last few minutes together.

"Son," she began in one last, futile attempt to keep him home, "I fear that you are making a terrible mistake. I realize that you were fond of your Uncle Zac, but he was a wanderer. You hardly knew him at all. There will be nothing for you to inherit, and when you discover that, you will be eight months away from us. Please, son, stay here at home. You can—"

Jacob firmly, but lovingly, cut her off. "Thank you for your concern, Mother, but I am going. There may not be much of an inheritance, but I need to leave. I need an adventure. I just wish that Uncle Zac could be there to share it with me."

The Brooklyn anchored on the first of July, 1855, and the crew went to work making preparations to row the passengers to

land in smaller boats. There were dozens of ships anchored in the bay.

As Jacob stood on the ship's deck waiting his turn to be rowed to shore, he saw men in uniform riding horses along the shore and soldiers marching in file following their leader. Jacob remembered, that a treaty had been signed in 1848 after a war with Mexico, making California the possession of the United States. In 1850, it had become a state.

Jacob gathered his belongings and prepared to disembark from the ship. He stood last in line, as the adults and children boarded the waiting sea craft. Jacob felt a hand gently rest on his shoulder and turned to see Captain Richardson extend his other hand. "Jacob, if you ever want to explore the sea like your Uncle Zac, you are welcome aboard my ship any day. I would be proud to be your captain."

Jacob shook his hand and thanked the Captain for his kindness, and soon found himself standing on the shores of California.

The fog was beginning to clear, as Jacob walked into the bustling seaside town of San Francisco. He stumbled a few times as he tried to find his land legs. All Jacob could think about was finding a room with a hot bath, a soft bed, and a solid tasty meal.

Jacob found an inn not far from where he had landed and had his trunks retrieved from the dock. After bathing and having his hair trimmed and his clothing cleaned and pressed, he spent a night in deep slumber.

The following morning Jacob looked and felt like a gentleman for the first time in months, as he went in search of Mr. Weatherbee's office. Walking along the dusty streets, he saw the

rolling hills in the distance and buildings springing up in all directions. With the Gold Rush of 1848, San Francisco was no longer a small town. In a short time, the gold fever had helped to increase the population from 1,000 to over 25,000 residents, who crowded the city, each wanting to make their fortunes.

To avoid being stepped on by horses, Jacob carefully made his way across the main street and maneuvered around and between the horse-drawn wagons and buggies.

Jacob felt totally alone in this new land, when suddenly he had a dark foreboding feeling come over him. At first, Jacob brushed the feeling off, as nothing more than homesickness. However, as he continued on in to the city, he became more and more uneasy and cast frequent glances over his shoulder. The hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood up, and he stopped and quickly turned and scanned the area, looking for someone or something out of place.

He cast his eyes carefully over the streets he had just traversed, and saw no one that seemed even vaguely interested in him, but he couldn't shake the feeling that someone was following him. As Jacob continued on, he quickened his steps. He wondered if someone had been watching *for* him, even expecting him.

Glancing again in all directions, Jacob suddenly remembered in the letter that Uncle Zac's attorney had sent to him. It stated that there would be others who would be willing to inherit his uncle's estate. He now wondered if there was someone who didn't want him to meet with Mr. Weatherbee. After all, he had been told that there were other worthy recipients. Did they know he was coming?

Uneasiness turned to fear, and sweat trickled into his eyes. Wiping his face with a kerchief, Jacob again looked in all directions, and still he saw nothing that looked suspicious.

Jacob ducked into the nearest alley, dashed up another street, and walked into the back door of a mercantile. Carefully glancing around inside, he searched for several minutes out the front window, but no one appeared. In fact, everyone seemed so intent upon going about their own business, that they didn't even notice him.

“Not so fast, young man. I want to go over the letter with you. I must be absolutely sure that you are willing to do everything your late Uncle Zac requires of you. I must see to it that you understand fully the dangers involved.”

Jacob nodded, and Mr. Weatherbee continued, “Now let's see that letter a moment.”

Jacob handed it over, and the attorney read quietly for a minute or two. Then he looked up and said, “You probably wondered if there was really an inheritance at all?”

“Well, I thought there must be something, but I had—”

“I suppose you were surprised to learn that your late Uncle Zac was worth over one hundred thousand dollars.”

“Yes sir,” Jacob said.

“Well, it's a fact, young man. Your Uncle Zac owned some ships and invested in other things that I will cover in a moment. And it's all yours, if you are willing to do as he requests. Now mind you, if you fail—or if you decide not to try at all—there are others who would be more than willing to take your place, and the inheritance will go to another worthy recipient,” Mr. Weatherbee said. He again settled back into his chair and folded his arms over his very prominent stomach.

“Yes, sir,” Jacob answered meekly.

“He favors, or rather, favored you because you were so full of questions, and at a young age, you reminded him of a son he had always wanted.”

Jacob nodded in agreement. “As your Uncle Zac stated in the letter, the rest of the family all figured him to be a worthless mountain man and Indian lover. Not one of them, not even his sister, could accept Zachariah's living with the Indians for five years. They were especially disgusted by the tales he told of his Indian wife. And you, Jacob, on the other hand, had been enthralled by it all.”

“All right, let's cover the things your Uncle Zac required...ah, expects me to have you do,” Mr. Weatherbee said. “First, you must spend two years with a mountain man.”

Jacob felt a quiver of pleasure pass over him. Wow! He would be spending two full years with a real mountain man. It was what he had always wanted, ever since his Uncle Zac had told him stories so long ago.

The attorney continued, “Zed Hafenbrack was like a brother to your uncle. As it says in the letter, the two of them spent nigh unto fifteen years as partners in the mountains. You must not only spend two years with him, but you must learn from him, *if* you want your uncle's fortune. Is that clear, Jacob?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well. Next, you must spend at least one year among the Sioux Indians. You are to learn their ways and their language. Your Uncle Zac had many friends among the Indians, and he loved them. He also learned their ways and was trusted by them and he wants you to do the same, if you can, that is.”

Jacob seemed to shrink at that request. It frightened him, but if his Uncle Zac had been able to do it, then he would, also. “I'll try,” he said weakly.

“If you fail, you lose your inheritance!” Mr. Weatherbee reminded him firmly.

Then he saw a trunk. It was huge! His heart raced.

Before he could approach it, the door opened across the room, and in walked a man dressed in weathered buckskins. The stranger was taller than Mr. Weatherbee, but half the weight. The man was dressed in buckskins, and Jacob could see that he had a slight frame. He held a brown cap made of an indistinguishable fur in one hand, and his face was deeply tanned and weathered, a thick black beard hid much of it. He had long dark hair, which, although thin on top, hung down mid-way to his shoulders. Jacob's eyes fell to the man's feet. He wore leather moccasins that laced up to his knees. Jacob lifted his eyes again, looking for a sign of who the man was.

“This is Zed Hafenbrack, Jacob,” Mr. Weatherbee said.

Jacob was stunned. He had expected a big man, not this shriveled-up little man, who was supposed to teach him how to be a mountain man.

Zed was not to be fooled, it was as if he had read Jacob's mind. He said, “Boy, don't let my size fool ya. I'm more for my height than ya'll ever be—ya and that city frame of yours,” the mountain man said.

Caught off guard, Jacob began, “No, I...ah...didn't think you —”

“Don't lie ta me, boy! If ya and me are ta get along, ya better learn one thing right now. Don't ever lie ta me or ta no buddy else. Ya savvy, boy?”

“Yes, sir,” Jacob mumbled with a red face.

Mr. Weatherbee cleared his throat, and held out a large brass key, “Here's the key to that trunk. The trunk belongs to me,

but your Uncle Zac wanted you to have a few of his things, if you accepted his challenge. Mr. Hafenbrack and I will leave you to go through the contents of the trunk, alone.”

Buckskins

The brass key turned easily in the lock, and Jacob, with a pounding heart, lifted the lid of the ancient trunk. A woolen Indian blanket covered something beneath it. He leaned over and lifted the blanket. A grin creased his face, as he hurriedly threw the blanket aside and pulled out a set of neatly folded buckskins. He held the leather shirt up and was surprised that it appeared to be very close to his size. Eagerly, he removed his shirt and slipped into the soft buckskin. It fit him almost perfectly.

He feared that the pants would be too short, but was pleasantly surprised that they fit him very well. A pair of tall moccasins that had never been worn was also in the trunk. He tried the pair on and laced them up. They fit just right and came up just a few inches below his knees. Jacob exclaimed. “How did he know?” He suddenly felt transformed, as if he was indeed a mountain man. He had to restrain himself from shouting out with excitement.

The next item he took out of the trunk was a long fifty-caliber Tennessee rifle. Jacob tried it for balance, holding it to his cheek, and sighting down the barrel. He checked the flint; it was a new piece. The barrel was oiled and the wood polished. It was a beautiful weapon. The rifle was not new, but had obviously been given excellent care. He could hardly wait to get into the hills.

His Uncle Zac had also left him a good supply of ball and powder, which were in a leather possibilities bag, which all mountain men used to keep their personal items in.

Jacob carefully examined a long, very sharp Bowie knife that he pulled from a leather sheath. Again, it showed signs of use, but also of excellent care. He strapped it to his waist with the leather belt and scabbard he found coiled in the bottom corner of the trunk.

Dawn revealed a rugged range of mountains in the near distance. “Right where I hoped we'd be,” Zed remarked, with a tired smile. He heaved a sigh of relief as he looked ahead at the Sioux Indian Territory. “There's game aplenty in ‘em hills,” he said. “We'll push on fer a few more hours, and then we'll take a rest and replenish ‘ar meat supply.”

It was before noon when they reached the foothills, and Zed finally called for a stop. They rubbed their horses down and staked them out in some deep meadow grass. Then they fixed a quick meal, ate, and slept.

In the late afternoon, when both were refreshed from their short sleep, Zed said, “Boy, it's time ta do some hunting. It'll be up ta ya, ‘cause I figure on staying behind ta watch fer Graff and his cohorts. I think we’re safe enough distance ahead of them boys, but we can't be too careful.”

Jacob readily agreed to hunt by himself. “I'll head north,” he said. “When I get something, I'll hang it in a tree and come back for you.”

“Just don't get yerself lost, boy,” Zed warned. “And don't waste no powder! The less noise we make, the less chance there'll be of trouble with the Indians. There could be some around, ya just never know. We are mighty close now ta the hunting grounds of the Sioux. They get real ornery if any buddy hunts on their ground without permission, so don't go too far.”

“Will they give us permission when we get onto their lands?” Jacob asked, as he lifted his rifle and grabbed his possibles.

“No, I don't reckon so, but we need meat. A man doesn't need ta go hungry, when there's game about,” Zed said dryly.

Jacob was confident he could bag a deer with one shot. It just had to be the right shot. He left their camp on foot and hiked for close to an hour before he came to a small tributary off the main river. No sooner had he crossed the river, when he spotted a large buck and two doe feeding a short distance from the river bank

They were upstream and upwind, so Jacob decided on the closest doe, because doe meat would be tenderer than that of the buck. He sat with his back to a tree and took aim, but one doe suddenly, for no explainable reason, bounded into the trees, with the other one following close behind. The buck lifted his head when the does ran into the trees, but apparently he saw no reason for alarm. So, he dropped his head, and went back to eating.

Jacob shifted his position, dropped to one knee, and carefully took aim at the buck. He wasn't that far away, so Jacob decided on a head shot, not wanting to spoil any meat. He slowly applied pressure to the trigger. There was an explosion as the powder ignited; firing the rifle. A cloud of smoke obscured his vision. As it cleared, Jacob could see the buck was down.

Leaping to his feet, Jacob ran into the clearing. The buck was lying on its right side with its head toward Jacob. He walked straight to it, eager to dress his deer and show Zed how much his green pupil had learned. He laid his rifle across the tufts of grass and grasped the large rack with his left hand, while drawing his knife with his right. He extended the blade to the buck's throat to

cut his bleeder, but just as he touched its neck with the blade, the buck blinked!

Before Jacob could draw the knife across the animal's throat, it threw its head and attempted to rise. Horrified, Jacob dropped his knife and caught the other antlers with his right hand. He realized he must have only grazed the buck's head and knocking him out for a few moments. The startled animal tossed its head again in an attempt to extricate Jacob, but Jacob kept a firm grip on the antlers, knowing that if he let go he would be gored to death.