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Indian Detour

By ROBERT D. ABRAHAMS

MR. E. R. SMITH, late of Philadelphia, his neatly rolled umbrella held firmly in one gnarled hand, his tiny camera in the other, marched bravely into the hotel. Once inside, the gaunt, underfed-looking man stared about him with curiosity. His own high, white collar, with the light summer tie, his old fashioned alpaca suit, his high, black laced shoes, proclaimed him to the onlooker the elderly clerk which he was. Something of excitement in his manner showed that this was no ordinary day in his life, clerk or no. He seemed surprised when he saw so many others in the lobby. He hadn't realized that here would be so many intent on the same adventure as he was, but fellow tourists crowded the lobby of the hotel, and edged toward the dining room, where breakfast would be served.

"Must be two hundred of them," Mr. E. R. Smith reflected. "It's a funny thing. Never travelled my whole life long, and now, when I do something as unlikely as to come on this Indian Detour, it looks as if the whole world is doing the same thing."

He advanced to the entrance of the dining room, glancing approvingly at the New Mexican style decoration of the hotel. The murals of the Indian dancers on the walls—the Spanish colonial type furniture—it was all just as he had hoped it would be. He was glad he hadn't found an ordinary lobby, the kind with railroad time table folders in a rack, next to the registration desk, armchairs arranged in rows, colored fans hanging from the ceiling, and signs on the walls stating that the barber shop, men's room and ladies' room were downstairs. It would have been so disappointing to have found prose when you had come to find poetry.

He had been a little worried before he arrived at Lamy. Perhaps New Mexico would be just like the rest of the country he had watched from the train—interesting enough to

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watch unroll in the continental panorama, but seeming to offer little of adventure to the questing tourist. But coming up to Santa Fe in the bus from Lamy, he had known it would be all right. Those bare, New Mexican mountains looked just as he had hoped they would. The vehicle had passed Indians dressed in bright colors, along the highway, and he had even glimpsed cowboys astride authentic-appearing ponies, galloping along the side roads. Yes, it would be all right. He had been a bit afraid about the altitude—at his age to go up eight thousand feet for the day. He was delighted to discover that he felt no ill effects—only a certain exhilaration, which might have been itself the very excitement of the adventure.

Mr. E. R. Smith bowed courteously to the head waitress, who conducted him toward the dining room to a table for one. "A fine woman," he thought approvingly, as she handed him the breakfast menu. "The stuff pioneers were made of." If only Rob had married someone as smiling and as even-tempered as this head waitress. Rob himself was a good son, and Amelia was all right too, Mr. E. R. Smith thought, but she was a little hard for a father-in-law to get along with. Why did she have to be so confoundedly neat? When she had last been east, she had scolded him about the condition of his room. At his age. As if he didn't know enough to have his room the way he wanted it. He liked order himself, but you could carry it too far. He knew just what Rob's and Amelia's house in San Diego would be like, even though he had never seen it. Everything would be as bare and clean as in a hospital. "There is a fine, big bedroom for you, Dad," Rob had written, "and please believe that we really do want you with all our hearts. It will give the children a chance to get acquainted with their granddad."

It would be nice to see those grandchildren again, Mr. E. R. Smith reflected. He had only seen them twice when Rob and Amelia had visited the East. Now, when the company had retired him at 70, his small pension would hardly have kept him in decent style in Philadelphia, and since

Janet's death, there was really nothing to hold him in his native city. Still, it wouldn't be easy, at his age, moving in with his children and grandchildren.

Resolutely he put thoughts of the future in San Diego from his mind. Today was his day—a day such as he had never had before in his life—and he meant to live it to the full.

One of the pleasant young men in charge of the tour, noticing the old gentleman seated alone at the table, came over and sat down with him. "We'll be off as soon as you all finish breakfast, Mr. Smith," he told him. "We're very lucky, too. I've just heard that there is to be a corn dance at the pueblo where we're going to visit today. It's always more interesting to see the Indians when there's a dance in progress than at other times."

"That's fine, that's fine," Mr. Smith murmured.

"Have you been out in this neighborhood before?" the young man asked.

"No, I've never been anywhere," Mr. Smith admitted. "I'm retired now, and going out to San Diego to live with my son and his family. I come from pioneer stock though," he said looking up proudly but shyly at the young man. "My grandfather was a peddler on the frontier when Illinois was the frontier. I remember as a child—he used to live at our house, you know—all the stories he told me of his adventures. Why, he knew Lincoln when he kept a store at New Salem. The old fellow told me some hair-raising stories about Indians, too. Custer and Yellow Hand and Buffalo Bill, and all that. I've always wanted to see real Indians. My grandfather moved back East when he married, you see. Yes, sir, he told me some fine stories when I was a kid." He shook his head sadly. "I don't suppose I'll have much to tell my grandchildren that they'll be interested in."

"If he was with Custer at the Last Stand, that grandfather must have been a horse," the young man thought. "Nothing but a horse got away." With the usual tact of persons in his employment, he did not express his thoughts.

"Well, you'll see plenty of Indians today," the young man promised.

"I know, I know," Mr. Smith said. "When Rob sent me a ticket to come west, I don't believe I could have made up my mind to leave, if I hadn't heard about this day's stop-over you can make. Yes, sir," he continued, and he spoke with such vehemence that the young man drew back in surprise. "Yes, sir. I guess you could just about call this day the high spot of my life."

"Well, now, I hope you're not disappointed," the tourist leader said, rising. "See you at the bus in half an hour, Mr. Smith."

"A nice young man," the traveller thought, as he watched the agent pause at other tables on the way from the dining room.

* * *

Mr. E. R. Smith finished his breakfast. Confused images of the Wild West were thronging his mind. The Covered Wagon—The Pioneer Mother—The First Scalp for Custer—Banjo on My Knee—On the Lone Prairie—The First Scalp for Custer. . . .

Some of the tourists were just beginning to eat. Mr. Smith walked through the lobby, paused to inspect the Indian murals at greater length, walked through the patio and watched the fountain for a moment or two, strolled back, went to the news stand and looked at the various books describing the locality. Tiring of this, he sauntered to the door which led to the street, and stood surveying the passersby. The line of empty busses, drawn up at the curb, disturbed him. They seemed out of keeping with the feeling of Westernness that he was enjoying.

"These things won't be leaving for some time," he exclaimed to the doorman. "Think I'll just take a little stroll around the square and look the town over."

"The Palace of the Governors is directly across the plaza," the doorman said.

A little Mexican boy was standing in the bright sun-

light. "You sent for me, Señor?" he questioned. "You want buy local paper?"

Mr. Smith started to say he hadn't sent for him. The doorman smiled. "The news stand inside won't allow these little fellows to peddle their papers. That's why they always ask guests if they sent for them," the doorman said.

The old man looked at the bright-eyed little boy. "I don't want a paper," he said, "but I'll just take you along with me, if you want to go. You can show me the sights of the town."

"Oh, si, si, Señor," the boy answered enthusiastically. "Show you all. Palacio de los Gobernadores—Catedral—"

"I don't want to see that stuff," the old man said. "Show me where the cowboys hang out. I want to see the town."

The boy reflected for a moment. Then he nodded. "I know where," he said, and led the way down the long street which led out to the Plaza.

They came to a small saloon, and the boy pointed inside. "Too early in the morning," he explained, "for cowboys. Oh, Señor, you should see Saturday night. Then is much fun."

Mr. E. R. Smith peered cautiously into the interior. Even though it was only eight o'clock, there was a mechanical phonograph playing a Latin air inside, and a shirt-sleeved bartender was wiping the bar. "Come in, come in," he called out. "We're open for business."

At that moment, Mr. Smith, the descendant of pioneers, could not possibly find it in him to say that he had never in his life taken a drink in the morning, and was not, in fact, what might be termed a "drinking man" at all. The inside of the place did look like Mr. Smith's idea of a Western saloon. This was his great day, wasn't it, to do with as he pleased?

Resolutely he tipped the guide, dismissed him and went inside.

"What'll it be?" the bartender asked.

The old man considered. "Brandy," he said.

"Straight?" the barman asked.

"Straight," Mr. Smith said decisively.

* * *

The Pueblo was a large one, and was not overwhelmed by the descent of the tourist horde. The dance which was in progress was an authentic expression, on the part of the participants, of their prayer for the corn. It was not a staged affair, and the Indians merely suffered the whites to be present to observe the ceremony.

All the way out in the bus, Mr. E. R. Smith had been silent, taking no part in the conversations that went on all around. He did not remember ever feeling so exhilarated. He felt as though he could lick the world. He wished he had felt like this sometime back in the office when Mr. Murchison, his superior, had reprimanded him for some fancy error—he'd have told Mr. Murchison something, you bet. Reprimanding a man with pioneer blood in his veins. I guess it's worth while to come from pioneer stock, even though you are a bookkeeper all your life.

"Yes, sir," he told himself. "This is the kind of country my grandfather came to. He taught these redskins a trick or two, you can be sure."

Walking into the sunlit courtyard, which was enclosed by the buildings of the pueblo, Mr. E. R. Smith paused to read a sign: "Visitors will not be permitted to take photographs without the consent of the Governor. Licenses for still pictures, \$3.00 For motion pictures, \$5.00. Pictures of dances may never be taken."

Mr. Smith clutched his little camera even more tightly than before. So these redskins are making rules for us pioneers, now, he thought. That may be all right for the ordinary tourist, but not for the grandson of an old Injun fighter like me. Not for a fellow who can stand up at a bar and drink brandy straight at eight o'clock in the morning.

He gave a slight lurch toward the sign, and deliberately

and contemptuously spat in its direction. Then he entered the courtyard about which the pueblo was built.

There must have been three hundred Indians dancing. A shrine to a saint had been set up under a canopy on one side. The shrine seemed incongruous when observed in the line of the Indians dressed in ceremonial costumes, but Mr. Smith noticed that there were candles burning before the image, and that the shrine was the focal point of the ceremony. Therefore, without permitting himself a pause for a good look, he walked around, keeping clear of the line of the dancers, until he stood just next to the canopy. Then he viewed the scene appreciatively. It was just as he had hoped it would be. One group of braves was gathered around the tom toms, like a football team in a huddle before a play. They were banging on the drums and singing a wild chant to accompany the dancers. The participants had evidently entered the rectangle from the far side, and were slowly advancing in two stamping lines, which were each led by a painted brave, toward the shrine. Mr. E. R. Smith wondered how in the world they had managed to survive the burning sun under which they danced. The ceremonies went on all day, they had been told in the bus. No wonder the Injuns were a dying race.

Mr. Smith waited until the first line of Indians had come up close in front of him. He felt very hot himself. That sun was the hottest he had ever felt. Most of the other whites were standing as close to the pueblo wall as possible, to keep in the shadow. Mr. Smith didn't want to miss anything.

As the nearer line of Indians came up to a point within a few feet of the shrine, he carefully hooked his umbrella over his arm to leave his hand free, raised his camera, sighted, and snapped a picture. So you can't take a picture without a license, he thought triumphantly. Well, no red-skin is going to tell the hard-drinking, two-fisted grandson of a pioneer what he shall and shall not do.

There was a tiny pause, like that in history when one

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nation, having reached the crest, is confronted by its aspiring successor, and hesitates in surprise. The moment passed, and the two leading braves cried out, and the tom toms ceased. The braves started to walk toward Mr. E. R. Smith, who was calmly winding the film for the next exposure. There was another moment of silence, as the Indians faced Mr. Smith. The first brave arrived directly before Mr. Smith and pointed an accusing finger at the camera. "You have taken picture," he said in a loud voice. "You not have a license—even with license cannot take pictures of dance. Didn't you read sign?" The brave looked as though he hoped Mr. Smith would say he hadn't read the sign.

Mr. E. R. Smith looked at the Indian more fearlessly than ever in his life he had looked at the head bookkeeper in his old office. "Sure, I read the sign," he answered, "and I took a picture. What's more, I'm going to take another picture of you right now," and with no further ceremony he raised his camera, sighted and snapped the angry brave.

A whole group of Indians now closed in around the intrepid photographer. "Gather 'round, redskins," he shouted happily. "I'm going to take all the pictures I want, and you're not a-going to stop me." He turned the film again, and snapped the enraged group advancing upon him. "I'm a Smith from Philadelphia," he announced, "and no redskin alive is a-going to tell me what I can and cannot do."

By this time, the young men from the tourist agency, in charge of the party, were in dismay. They were thrown out of their accustomed attitude of good-natured tolerance. Then Mr. Smith, pointing his camera at the tribe, his neatly rolled umbrella still dangling from his arm, felt as though he had been struck with a sledge hammer, or perhaps a tomahawk, and dropped ignominiously to the ground.

* * *

When Mr. Smith awakened, he was in a shady room in the pueblo. The braves, who a few moments before had been threatening him, seemed to be pouring water over his face. Mr. Smith's head hurt. His first thought was for his scalp,

and he felt the top of his head gingerly. No, it was still there. It was inside his head, not on top of it that the pain was.

The young man from the tourist agency, who had talked to him at breakfast, was also standing over him. "Feeling better now?" he asked. "That sun out there gets you before you know it. You shouldn't have stood bare-headed out in the courtyard. You went down all in a heap."

"Oh, I'm all right now," Mr. E. R. Smith reassured him.

"Then we go back to the dance," the braves said, and left Mr. Smith alone with the tourist agent.

"If you're feeling well enough, I'll have you driven back to the hotel," the young man said. "I don't think it would be wise for you to go out in the sun any more."

Mr. Smith agreed, and a few moments later found himself alone in the bus with the driver, returning to the hotel. He still felt weak, and had a slight headache. The thought of the brandy made him feel a little sick. Suddenly, he remembered the pictures. There, in his hand, still tightly clutched, was the camera. He had shown those redskins where they got off. By golly, license or no license, he had taken those pictures, and now he was carrying them away with him. He bet his grandchildren would want to see those pictures, all right, all right. This day had been a triumph, in spite of the touch of the sun. No matter what life was like in San Diego—no matter how neat Amelia would be—he would always have this day.

He patted the camera tenderly. "The First Scalp for Custer," he murmured, as the bus jolted along on the high New Mexican road.