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journal or publication title	Bulletin of the Tohoku Society of German Study
volume	58
page range	143-160
year	2017-12-10
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10097/00127154">http://hdl.handle.net/10097/00127154</a>

## Ol' Wobble and the Greenhorns:

An English Translation of Karl May's Short Story *Der erste Elk* (1893)

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### Introduction

Karl May's humorous Wild West hunting story, *Der erste Elk* (The First Elk), was written sometime between December 1889 and January 1890, but not published until 1893. It appeared in the weekly periodical *Ueber Land und Meer* (Over Land and Sea, volume 9,



FIGURE 1

issue 11, pp. 341-350), whose editor, Joseph Kürschner, had asked the well-known writer for a contribution. To stimulate May's imagination, Kürschner sent him a few drawings by Frederic Remington (1861-1909), the American painter and illustrator famous for his depictions of the Old West. We speculate, as have others, that one drawing in particular, entitled *The Texas Type of Cowboy*, (see Figure 1) inspired May to create his cowboy character Ol' Wobble.<sup>1)</sup> The short story was later revised and included in the first volume of his 1894 novel *Old Surehand*.<sup>2)</sup>

A good deal of May's fiction dealing with the American West is written from a first-person perspective. In his early stories, the narrator portrays himself as a young unnamed German adventurer. In his later Wild West stories, the "I" is actually May, or his alter ego Charley (Karl), a.k.a. Old

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1) Cf. Karl May (2003), *Der Bowie-Pater und andere Erzählungen* [with annotations by Christoph F. Lorenz] (Karl May's gesammelte Werke, vol. 84). Karl-May-Verlag, Bamberg and Radebeul, p. 341.

2) On May's novel *Old Surehand* see Claus Roxin (2001), "Old Surehand I-III." In: Gert Ueding (ed.), *Karl-May-Handbuch*. 3rd edition. Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg, pp. 200-210.

Shatterhand, a German frontiersman, second to none, who claims to have actually experienced all the fantastic events described in his tales.

However, *The First Elk* is narrated neither by the anonymous traveler, nor the German superhero, but Samuel Parker, an American former railroad clerk and aspiring frontiersman. Unlike Old Shatterhand, who is sometimes mistaken for a greenhorn by unsuspecting characters he purposely leaves in the dark, Samuel Parker is a real greenhorn and an incredibly bad marksman, barely “capable of hitting a church tower from thirty paces” (p. 345). In addition, Parker takes credit for bagging a mighty elk bull, which was actually shot by a Native-American Shoshone chief (with the latter approving the former taking credit). This ruse is motivated by Parker’s strong desire to earn respect from Ol’ Wobble, despite expressing that “...it is not proper to adorn myself with borrowed plumes...” (p. 350).

Christoph F. Lorenz suggests an interpretation of *The First Elk* as May’s attempt to assuage his own real-life dilemma, in that he perpetually failed to separate his Wild West fantasy from his Saxon reality. Samuel Parker’s bagging of the enormous elk bull is just as fictitious as all of May’s (Charley’s) other “true life” Wild West adventures.<sup>3)</sup> In our view, whether or not May really intended to caricature his usual first-person superhero through the Parker character remains unclear. However, when May incorporated the elk story into *Old Surehand* (again narrated by Old Shatterhand), and Parker actually happens upon the “famous” German adventurer, the writer explicitly contrasted the two men by describing the American as someone who “had a high opinion of himself, yet wasn’t comparable in the slightest to any first-class frontiersman [such as Old Shatterhand].”<sup>4)</sup> In one scene of the novel, the German even gives Parker a good dressing down, leaving no doubt as to who is boss.<sup>5)</sup>

There are a few other features that set *The First Elk* apart from May’s other more emblematic frontier stories. It is one of only a handful of stories in his extensive oeuvre without a single German: all characters are either English-speaking whites or Native

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3) May, *Der Bowie-Pater*, p. 342.

4) Karl May (1894), *Old Surehand* (Karl May’s gesammelte Reiseromane, vol. 14). Friedrich Ernst Fehsenfeld, Freiburg, vol. I, p. 79.

5) “Then shut up and don’t try to tell me what to do or criticize my actions! You may be a good person and a passable frontiersman, but I had already outgrown your criticism before I even set foot on the grounds of the Wild West for the very first time. No one who mistakes Hatatitla, Old Shatterhand’s famous stallion, for a coach nag has the right to lecture me. And that’s that!” Ibid., p. 79.

Americans. Also unusual for a typical Wild West adventure à la Karl May is the absence of any fatalities; not a single person is shot, killed, or scalped. The only casualties in this tale are a vulture, an elk calf (which Parker and his friend first mistake for a mule and then, again erroneously, believe to be “some kind of fawn”), and the eponymous elk bull.

### Translators' Notes

Our translation of the text is based on the original 1893 version as published in *Ueber Land und Meer*.

The modern German word for “elk” is actually *Elch*, but May preferred to use *Elk* in the title and throughout the text. This is an archaic German form, which (apart from its capitalization) is identical to the English word.

It was not difficult to maintain most of the English words and expressions used by Karl May in our translation, such as: “bowie knife,” “greenhorn,” “rifle,” “lariat,” “boys,” “cowboy,” “leggings,” and “stables.”

In only a few cases did we change the author’s choice of words to expressions to which English speakers — in particular, seasoned readers of Western novels penned by the likes of Zane Grey, Louis L’Amour, and other American writers — could better relate. For example, “Mesch’schurs,” May’s Anglicized spelling of *Messieurs*, the plural of the French *Monsieur*. Though it is one of the author’s all-time favorite “English” expressions (it is frequently used throughout his frontier stories; three times alone in *The First Elk*), we felt it better to replace it with the more fitting terms of “gents” and “fellers” (“fellows”), widely used by American writers of Western fiction.

Another example is “th’is clear,” Ol’ Wobble’s “habitual expression” showing his confidence when faced with adversity. Aside from the rather odd contraction, stylistically, and with respect to actual English punctuation, we felt “’tis clear” rings more naturally in the English reader’s ear.

In addition, we changed the spelling of the name of this protagonist from “Old Wabble” to “Ol’ Wobble,” as May assigned this nickname due to the character’s wobbly gait (“to wobble” corresponds to the German verb *wabbeln*). Actually, the most comprehensive English dictionaries do offer two corresponding entries, “to wobble” and “to wabble,” but the latter is archaic and practically never used. May, faced with a choice between the two, was most likely guided by his linguistic instinct and chose “wabble,” the form closer to his

familiar German *wabbeln*, over “wobble.”

Native-American Shoshone names and words have been maintained as given by Karl May. However, we modified the spellings of *At-pui*, *Pap-muh*, *To-ok-uh*, and *pare* to bring them into correspondence with both May’s primary source of transliteration and modern standardized Shoshone spellings. It is very likely that the writer, who pretended to be fluent in several Native American languages, consulted lists of Indian vocabularies in *Zwölf Sprachen aus dem Südwesten Nordamerikas* (Twelve Languages of North America’s Southwest) by the Swiss ethnologist Albert Samuel Gatschet (1832-1907), a pioneer in his field. The Shoshone name *At-pui*, “Good Heart,” which is bestowed upon our story’s main protagonist, appears in the original 1893 print inaccurately as *At-qui*. Looking this name up in Gatschet’s work, we find in the list of Ute words (Ute, according to Gatschet, is closely related to Shoshone, for which no separate list is given) the entry *at*, “good,” but instead of *qui* for “heart” we get *pui*.<sup>6)</sup> May himself corrected this mistake when he revised the elk story for *Old Surehand*. A similar slip happened with another character’s name, *Pap-muh*, “Bloody Hand,” which appears both in the original and in its revised version incorrectly as *Paq-muh*, but, according to Gatschet, the correct Ute (or Shoshone) word for “blood” is *pap*.<sup>7)</sup> Moreover, *The First Elk* (p. 349) and *Old Surehand*<sup>8)</sup> both inaccurately give a Shoshone word for “elk” as *peere*, which is entered by Gatschet as *pare*.<sup>9)</sup> Nevertheless, according to the *Newe Taikwappeh Shoshoni Dictionary* (2017)<sup>10)</sup> there are no less than fifteen different words in various Shoshone dialects that can be translated as “elk.” The closest of these to May’s entry and thus the form we decided to use is, *pah’re*, from the Goshiute dialect. Regarding the Shoshone names, we consulted with both Shoshone tribal elders<sup>11)</sup> and several Shoshone/English dictionaries<sup>12)</sup> to determine the modern spellings of Gatschet’s work and decided the final spelling versions of the names *Pap-muh* and *At-pui*

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6) Albert S[amuel] Gatschet (1876), *Zwölf Sprachen aus dem Südwesten Nordamerikas. Pueblos- und Apache-Mundarten; Tonto, Tonkawa, Digger, Utah*. Böhlau, Weimar, pp. 101, 111.

7) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

8) May, *Old Surehand*, p. 28.

9) Gatschet, *Zwölf Sprachen aus dem Südwesten Nordamerikas*, p. 107.

10) Refer to <http://shoshoniproject.utah.edu/dictionary/#top>.

11) We want to express our thanks in particular to Mr. Ted Howard, Cultural Resources Director of the Shoshone-Paiute Tribal Headquarters in Idaho, for the spelling approval.

12) Refer to <http://www.shoshonidictionary.com/shoshonidictionary.asp>. Another helpful source of reference is [http://www.native-languages.org/shoshone\\_words.htm](http://www.native-languages.org/shoshone_words.htm).

to be *Bwap-moq* and *Att-bi'a*, respectively.

With respect to the Shoshone Chief *To-ok-uh*, the reader should be aware that May translated this name as “Fast Arrow,” when in actuality it means “Running Arrow.” When May looked up the Shoshone (or Ute) word for “arrow” in *Zwölf Sprachen aus dem Südwesten Nordamerikas*, he easily found the entry *uh* in the list of nouns.<sup>13)</sup> But Gatschet’s rather short list of adjectives does not provide any entry for “fast,” so the writer had to look for a close alternative. He obviously chose from the book’s list of verbs the word *to-ok*, which means “to run.”<sup>14)</sup> Nevertheless, using the same protocol as described above, we decided the final spelling version of “Fast (or Fast Running) Arrow” to be *Kit’ant’nook-huu*.

### **Translation: The First Elk**

Have I ever met him?! Now, there’s a question if I ever heard one! Not only have I met the man, I rode with him during my first far West adventure, an adventure that... well, sit a spell fellers, and let me divulge the whole story — I’m pretty sure you’ll get a good belly-laugh out of it.

The man’s true name was Fred Cutler. But because he was skinny as a rake, with a kind of a tottering, wobbly gait, together with all those dangling clothes flopping off that lean body of his, everyone just called him Ol’ Wobble. In his younger days, he had been a cowboy down yonder in Texas. I reckon that he got so used to those Texan duds that the hombres down there like to wear, that by the time he got up north to these parts, no one could ever get him to wear anything else.

I can still see him standing there right in front of me — nothing but skin and bones, on his feet somethin’ akin to boots, with leggings older than dirt. Over his shirt — the color of which I’d rather not mention — hung a jacket, which was never quite buttoned proper — exposing his bare neck and chest most the time. Under his crumpled hat, he wore a crusty bandanna with corners that swayed down to his shoulders. Strapped to his belt hung a long bowie knife, which sort of paid complement to his heavy silver earrings. In one of his large, brown, bony hands was the inevitable, always glowing, cigarette — doubt there was anyone who had ever seen him any other way.

But, the most outstanding thing about Ol’ Wobble was that weather-beaten, wrinkled,

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13) Gatschet, *Zwölf Sprachen aus dem Südwesten Nordamerikas*, p. 103.

14) *Ibid.*, p. 115.

and perpetually clean-shaven face with thick, protruding lips, a long, peaked nose and piercing grey eyes that never missed much, even though the lids were forever half shut. No matter what happened, that face of his always had an expression of superiority that nothing could ruffle or perturb. That superiority was well deserved though, for in spite of his wobbly gait, there had never been a finer horseman than Ol' Wobble, and no one was handier with a rifle or a lariat. He wasn't lacking any quality that makes up a true frontiersman. Being cocksure and mighty quick on the uptake, "'tis clear" was his habitual expression that he uttered whenever he came up against a decision. To me, that little saying showed he had the confidence to deal with any circumstance — always knowing what to do next.

Anyway, before that first ride I was working as sort of a railroad clerk down in Ogden. When I saved up enough money, I finally did what I originally set out to do and that was to try my hand at some prospecting. So I bought myself a mining kit and set off for Idaho. Even though I was a greenhorn — a complete tenderfoot — I didn't like the idea of sharing any new riches that I may find with any other folks, so I took but one companion: Ben Needler, who knew the Wild West just as little as I did.

The day we got off the wagon train at Eagle Rock, not only were we dressed up like a couple of real dandies, we had packed ourselves like burros, with heaps of shiny, handsome bits and bobs that all had one thing in common: they were all utterly useless. After hiking for a week, we finally reached Payette Fork. By that time we were truly down and out, half-starved and looking like a pair of dirty tramps. We had dumped all our fancy gear along the trail — except for our weapons and ammo. But to tell you honestly, I would have given them away too for a piece of bread and a pat of butter, and I know Ben felt the same way.

So we sat close to the edge of a thicket, resting our sore feet in the river, imagining all sorts of delicacies that could fill our empty bellies: haunches of venison, buffalo loins, bear paws, roast elk — if only...! Yes, elk... We had been told there were elk to be found 'round these parts — elk as big as a bull buffalo. Just as Ben licked his lips and said, "With any damn luck one of those critters would jump into our sights right now. And by golly, if it did, I'd like nothing more than to pump two bullets right between its horns, and then..."

"An' then... you'd be a goner!" a voice laughed from the bushes behind us. "That elk would crush you to a pulp with its ANTLERS. You don't shoot no elk 'tween the horns, cuz elk ain't got no horns! Looks like you two little whippersnappers must've sprouted wings, flown all the way from New York City, an' done hit the ground right here, havan'tcha, fellers?"

We leaped to our feet and caught sight of a man coming out of the bushes where I reckon he'd been spying on us. There he stood, large as life, Ol' Wobble, looking just the way I described him before. His face showing an expression that made us feel about an inch tall. His half-closed eyes gave us a look, which was unsettling because it was tolerant yet condescending. The conversation that followed though, I had better skip, other than to say that he questioned us like a schoolmaster might scrutinize pupils. After that, he told us we could tag along with him, and we were much obliged.

We traipsed for about a mile, away from the river, until we reached what he called his rancho, a log cabin on a small prairie surrounded by woods. Behind the cabin were a few open stables built as a bad weather shelter for his horses, mules and cattle, all of which were grazing on the range. You ought to know that Ol' Wobble had worked himself up all the way from a cowboy to an independent cattle rancher. He had a white foreman, Will Litton, and a few Snake Indians whom he called vaqueros as hands, all of whom were loyal and devoted to the old boss.

When we came near the cabin, we saw that his men were busy loading a light wagon with a canvas and supplies.

"Well, now, wouldn't that be somethin' for the two of you young'uns," the old fellow said. "You talked 'bout shootin' them elk an' such, an' right now me and my boys are fixin' to go huntin'. C'mon then! Join us on the trail! Lemme see what'cher made of. Prove yourselves as men we could use out here, an' you'd be welcome to stay. But first, you had better come into the house and grab some vittles; a hungry shot ain't gonna hit nothin' but air, 'tis clear!"

Well, that was sure fine with us being as famished as we were, so we got right into the grub on offer. Ol' Wobble though was not of a mind to delay setting out on our account. So as soon as we washed down our last bite, he had us mounted up, and off we were.

We headed back to the river first, then continued upstream until we came to a ford that we had to cross. The old-timer, leading an unsaddled mule on a halter, was riding point and had insisted that I keep by his side. When the two of us had reached the opposite bank, the others followed — Ben Needler on a bay, and Will Litton on a white, and behind them the wagon pulled by a four-horse team with one of the Indians at the reins. That Indian was called Bwap-moq, *Bloody Hand*, but since he was dressed like a cowpuncher, he didn't look as bloodthirsty as his name might have suggested. The other Indians, whose loyalty to the oldster was never doubted, had stayed at the rancho.



Once we got to the other side of the ford, we rode on for a while through sparsely timbered patches of forest. Suddenly, we came upon a verdant, treeless valley that opened into a grassy prairie. It took us a couple of hours to reach the grassland's far edge where the ground began to rise a bit, and it was there we found us a good place to set up camp. We pulled up the horses, unloaded the wagon and pitched the canvas. We hitched the stock behind the tent and kindled a fire in front. We intended to stay there for a day or two to get us some pronghorns or, with any luck, a buffalo. Scattered skeletons here and there made it plain that every once in a while buffalos came this way. Yes sir indeed, a huge, sun-blached bison skull was perched just to the side of our tent.

Our plan was that after we'd done our share of hunting down here, we whites would head up to the high mountain marshland, to a spot where, or so Ol' Wobble claimed, we would find us plenty of elk, while *Bloody Hand* stayed behind to watch over camp.

For the time being though, we skirted along the edge of the prairie looking for game. Unfortunately, not a single critter showed up, not that day, nor the next, which put the old guy in a mighty cranky mood. But I didn't mind a bit that no critter showed; what I feared was the kind of tribute Ol' Wobble would pay my shooting skills once he got a gander at them. You see, back in those days I might have been capable of hitting a church tower from thirty paces, but if someone wanted me to shoot a running antelope at sixty, I was certain that any bullet of mine would only kick up dirt.

Just as I was pondering my poor marksmanship, Ol' Wobble came up with the unfortunate idea to test our rifleman skills. He told us to aim at a few vultures that were sitting on a buffalo skeleton not more than seventy paces away. I was the first one who had to show off his talent. Well, I tell you, those vultures didn't have to worry about a thing. It happened just the way it was bound to happen, four times I pulled the trigger and four times I didn't even graze so much as a tail feather. Making matters worse, not one of them birds was even of a mind to clear off. Those scavengers know perfectly well that no man in his right mind would shoot at them. The sound of a bullet don't scare them off; it rather attracts them. Even them dumb birds know that the innards of any bagged game will be theirs. After my display, Ben missed twice, but his third bullet dropped one of them buzzards clean. That finally gave the other birds the notion to think better of the situation, and off they flew.

“Eximious incomparable”,<sup>15)</sup> the old-timer mocked us, hootin' and hollerin' — his

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15) *Eximious incomparable*: English words used by K.M. in the German text. Because he used two adjectives not separated by a comma we surmise this is an expression unique to Ol' Wobble.

wobbly limbs wildly shaking. “You fellers were made for the Wild West, ‘tis clear! Don’t you worry none; you already are whatever you could possibly ever become! You’re the finest pair of riflemen I ever saw, an’ there sure ain’t no way of risin’ any higher!”

Ben took the ribbing in good stride. I, on the other hand, got cross and griped, which did me no good as the oldster came back at me:

“Stop yer whinin’, mister! Your friend here at least downed one of them buzzards with his third ball, so I reckon there’s still hope for him. But you ain’t worth a bucket of spit, an’ that’s a natural fact! I got no use for the likes of you so I’ll give ya some good advice; you’d be better off scootin’ on outta here, the sooner the better!”

That really riled me, because, for the love of god, no one is born a crack shot. Besides, up to that point in the ride, I had yet to have used a full pound of powder. Despite his tongue-lashing, it was then and there that I firmly made up my mind to earn Ol’ Wobble’s respect — one way or another.

The following morning we set out for the high country marsh of the Salmon River Mountains. We packed provisions, utensils, blankets and other necessities on the mule but left the wagon. It was of no use through the rough land we were going to travel over as we headed out of camp, which was to remain under *Bloody Hand’s* watchful eye.

Well, I reckon y’all know that part of the country well, so I won’t bother you with a lengthy description. But let me say this: A Snake Canyon run sure ain’t no trip for no scaredy-cat. On his left, a rider is in danger of plunging into a rocky abyss, especially where the chasm twisted into sharp angles. On his right, sheer cliffs as high as the sky. And in between that damn vertical drop and the unstable rock face was nothin’ but a four-foot-wide footpath. You had to be frettin’ ‘bout all that while trying to descend down a shockin’ steep trail — that is until the track mercifully crawled back up the other side and cleared to the Wihinasht Trail. I thanked my lucky stars that our horses were used to this treacherous terrain, and that I have never suffered from any form of the jitters! I heaved a huge sigh of relief when we finally passed through the canyon. Though we were soon enough about to face another danger, that I alone had failed to see.

Not long after we had hit the Wihinasht Trail we came across a party of eight mounted Indians, four of them wearing the feather headdresses of chiefs. They did not seem to be a bit surprised by our sudden appearance and just looked at us with an indifferent, stoic demeanor that’s so common among the red race. The chief at the head of the band, riding a gray, cradled a strange, long object fringed with feathers in his left arm. Both parties rode

past each other without saying so much as a word. It may seem odd, but I felt greatly touched by this brief, silent encounter with the former masters of this land. They did not strike me as dangerous; they were not wearing war paint and appeared to be without weapons. Yet, we were hardly around the next bend of the trail and out of their sight, when Ol' Wobble drew rein and spat, casting a grim glance back:

“Damn! What in tarnation are them scoundrels doin’ up here? Them’s the Panasht Shoshone Injuns, all right, an’ they’re enemies of the Snake branch my vaqueros belong to. I wonder where they could be headed... I’ll be damned... I got a hunch their trail’s gonna lead ‘em to my rancho! I reckon that the boys back home are in harm’s way! Damn, of all times, it’s gotta happen when I’m gone!”

“But they were unarmed,” I butted in.

Ol' Wobble's half-closed eyes darted a disdainful look at me. He didn't even bother to respond to me and continued on:

“Now we’ve got other things to do other than stalkin’ elk, at least for today an’ tomorrow. We best be headin’ back to camp lickety-split; we might even have to return to the rancho. We gotta get ahead of them redskins somehow! As it is, luck’s on our side boys, cuz I know a shortcut, an’ it ain’t far from here. But it sure ain’t no way for no horse; it takes a good climber to make it down without gettin’ yer neck broke. C’mon, boys! Now our rifles got to do a little talkin’, ‘tis clear!”

We left the main trail and turned our mounts into a narrow side-path that opened up between the cliffs to our left. We rode on full gallop for about five minutes before the track broadened out into a small high-lying valley, which was partly covered with marshland, partly with meadow, with a lot of lofty trunks of hemlock spruce rising up along the rocky ledges. A gently bubbling stream flowed down the valley center.

Ol' Wobble slid off his horse and said:

“There, at the end of this here valley, there’s a trail that leads down. If we do some hurryin’, we’ll reach the camp before them redskins. One of us has to stay here with the horses; but it’s got to be one we can do without, an’ that’ll be our swell Sam. A feller who’s done missed his aim not once, but four times — he might be shootin’ at us instead of them Injuns.”

“Swell Sam” of course was none other than me, Samuel Parker, the very man who had once been just an ordinary railroad clerk in Ogden City before he turned himself into the handy frontiersman he is today! I declare though, I was mighty vexed by the way he spouted

off at me again, so I furiously complained. But Ol' Wobble cut me off right quick — he just barked, “Shut up”.

The oldster then ordered me to look after our animals and not to leave the valley until he returned. He and the others grabbed their weapons and dashed off.

I was fuming. Did I have to take that? And what of those poor Indians? They looked peaceful enough, as if they couldn't harm a fly — and now they were about to get shot! Should I leave them to such a fate without so much as lifting a finger? No! They were human, the same as us. Besides, I still had a bone to pick with the old-timer over his damn insults and wisecracks. Back then, I did not know the Wild West the way I do now, so I gave in to my foolish notions of fair-mindedness and decided on retaliation.

I tied the mule and my companions' horses to the nearest trees and galloped back on the path we had come. Now, don't get me wrong, I wasn't abandoning the stock for good; I did feel responsible for what Ol' Wobble had entrusted me with. But, it was my intention from the very start to simply warn the Indians, and then immediately ride back to the valley. So at breakneck speed, I raced along the Wihinast Trail back into Snake Canyon. There I saw the Indians right ahead of me; they heard me a-comin', looked back over their shoulders and halted. Luckily, the trail through the canyon was still wide enough for a powwow at the spot where we met up. I reined my horse and asked if one of them understood English. The one on the gray who was clasping that long, strange, feathered piece replied:

“I am Kit'ant'nook-huu, *Fast Arrow*, a chief of the Panasht Shoshones. Has my white brother come back with message from the man who has seen many winters, whose herd is minded by Snake braves on the other side of the prairie across the river?”

“Then you know him? Good,” I said. “He believes you are his enemies and has hurried ahead on foot to kill you. As a Christian man, I felt it my duty to warn you.”

The gaze from his dark eyes seemed to pierce the innermost depths of my heart when he asked:

“Where are your horses?”

“We left them in the green valley on the other side of the Wihinast Trail.”

For a moment, he talked to the others in a lowered voice. Then he asked me with a friendly expression on his face:

“My white brother is still new to this land?”

“I only arrived a few days ago.”

“What does pale-face do in mountain?”

“We came to hunt elk.”

“Is my brother a great hunter?”

“No. My bullets never hit what I’m aiming at.”

He asked me many other questions, all the time smiling, and before long, he knew just about the whole kit-and-caboodle. Somewhere in there I even told him my name, to which he said:

“Samuel Parker. Hard name for the red man to remember. We will call you Att-bi’a, *Good Heart*. White brother, Att-bi’a, if you stay long in this land, you will learn to be more careful. You mean well, but you could have brought death to you and your band. You are lucky — we are not on the warpath!”

He pointed to the long, feather-fringed thing clasped in his left arm and continued:

“This totem is peace-message for Snake chiefs. We carry no weapon. We take this totem to rancho of the man who has seen many winters. The Snake braves minding his herd will bring totem to their chiefs. So there is nothing to fear — we will be in no danger when we powwow with the man who has seen many winters. But our gratitude is as great as if you had truly saved us from death. We will not forget this. Whenever you need friends, come to us. Att-bi’a, *Good Heart*, will be always welcome. I have spoken. *Háu*<sup>16)</sup>.”

He then gave me the Indian handshake and rode off with his band. But before they got too far out, I called back after them and told *Fast Arrow* that he mustn’t ever tell the oldster what had happened here. After *Fast Arrow* agreed, I doubled back, satisfied that I’d done the right thing. Yet it dawned on me that Kit’ant’nook-huu had been right — I hadn’t done the smart thing — my carelessness could have indeed risked all our lives.

Back at the valley, I took the packs off the mule and turned the horses loose so that they could graze. Now I had plenty of time to do what I needed to do most: brush up on my poor shooting skills. My powder horn was full to the brim, and there was a whole lot more of the stuff in the supplies. After I had used up all the powder in my horn, I felt confident enough that I could now at least hit a church tower from two hundred paces.

It was dusk by the time Ol’ Wobble, Ben and Will returned. They had met the Indians down at the site of our tent and brought me the “news” that everything had ended surprisingly well. The Indians’ intentions, they told me, had been entirely peaceful and they had set out to return to their villages straightaway after they handed over the totem to *Bloody*

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16) *Háu*: Native-American (but not Shoshone) greeting frequently used in K.M.’s frontier stories.

*Hand* so he could deliver it to his chiefs. Well, can you imagine that? It goes without saying that I kept my mouth shut about what I had done and what I knew.

We spent the night in the small valley and rode the following morning to the high country marsh, which was not very far away. It lay in another valley that was much bigger than the one where we had camped. A small lake occupied the valley center. Around the lake was treacherous marshland, with only brief patches of bushes and woodland, surrounding its swampy banks. Towering masses of bare, rugged rock enclosed the huge basin. Its dimensions were such that a rider — had he been on solid ground — would have needed two hours to travel from one end to the other, as the valley floor was of equal length and width.

We drew our reins when we found a good place to make camp; took the supplies off the mule and got us a fire going. Then, once again, “Swell Sam” was told to stay behind to watch over the horses, while the others picked up their rifles and set out on a hunt.

Everything remained quiet until midday, when I heard a few gunshots some distance off. Some time later Ben Needler showed up alone because he had squeezed the trigger too early when spottin’ an elk cow, so Ol’ Wobble had given him hell and sent him back to the camp. The oldster himself returned with Litton a little before dusk, still raising Cain over Ben and their bad luck.

“Damn it! There was tracks a-plenty out there,” he blustered, “not only of elk, but of redskins too! They must’ve been sneakin’ around here not too long ago, spookin’ all the game, ‘tis clear! The only game that came into sight was a cow, a single cow! An’ what did this here Needler feller do? Couldn’t bide his time, let off both ‘em barrels with a helluva bang, an’ that cow showed us a clean pair of heels! That’s what happens when you get mixed up with greenhorns! But don’t you think I’ve made it the whole damn way up here for nothin’, no sir! I’m gonna stay here for one or two more days, or for as long as it takes me to drop one of them big bulls!”

After that, he did not speak a word to Ben or me. The next morning, still in a bad mood, he declared that only he and Litton would go out hunting; the two tenderfoots were to stay in the camp so that they wouldn’t spoil the stalk again. Well, I reckoned he had every right to do whatever he saw fit; but we also claimed that right for ourselves. As soon as the two of them were out of sight, we set off carrying out a plan that we had hatched the night before. If it was true that the elk had been frightened away, then they were somewhere outside the valley, and that was where we intended to look for them. Since we figured that our trip could

take most of the day and we probably would not be back before nightfall, we took the mule along with us not just to carry our gear, but, we hoped, to return with the carcass of some huge animal draped across its back.

So we left the camp and headed for the neighboring valley. This valley though had no lake, or marsh, but we soon discovered that there were some people already living there — people who kept a mule at least — so it was unlikely that we would be able to find any elk there either. We didn't see anyone, or their dwellings, but we did catch sight of their unsaddled, unbridled mule munching to its heart's content on the green grass off in the distance to our right. Where were the people? I thought. Well, I had to find them. While I walked on, leading our mule behind me on a halter, Ben strolled over to have a better gander at theirs. The mule kept grazing until Ben had neared himself to within a hundred paces of it. That was when the animal got scent of him, raised its head, turned around like a flash and flew with great leaps straight in my direction. For a moment, I thought it acted that way because it was happy to see one of its cousins tagging along with me. Then... Good Heavens, what was that? That was no mule! That was a head of game! Even a greenhorn like me could see that now. I dropped to my knees beside our mule, jerked the rifle to my shoulders, aimed and squeezed the trigger. The strange critter made two or three more leaps, and then collapsed. Eager to know what I shot at, I dashed to where it had come down, and saw that the bullet had hit it right in the breast. Ben joined me, and we both agreed that I had bagged some kind of fawn. Then we heaved the carcass over our mule, fixed it to the saddle with a rope, and we were on our way again.

We hadn't travelled far when we reached the end of the valley. To our right and left towered cliffs — impossible to climb — and before us stood a path on a rather steep slope, which we thought might be some kind of saddle or a pass that we were hoping would lead us into another valley. Since our mule was a good climber we took our chances and went on straight ahead. It took some doing, but we managed to get to the top of the ridge, and from there we could see that our guess had been right; on the other side of the crest the ground dropped away and widened out into the next valley.

It was then that we heard some strange sounds off in the distance, sounds as if produced by human voices. We wanted to know what was happening out there, so we reckoned it'd be best to get to a higher vantage point so we could overlook the second valley. The ground underfoot sloped up on both sides of the narrow pass but it was not difficult to climb. So we left our mule behind for the time being and worked our way up the left slope. When we got

to the edge of the cliff, Needler was about to lean forward to get a better gaze. I shoved him back quick though, fearing that his light-colored clothes would give our position away to whoever was out there. My outfit was darker, so I crawled to the edge and scanned the ground below.

While I could not survey the entire terrain — our lookout was not high enough for that — I did spot seven Indians on horseback in the rear of the valley. They rode spread out in a line and were moving slowly forward, but howling at the top of their lungs. As they came closer their bellowing rose to such a racket that our mule farther down got spooked; she started heeing and hawing, skittishly wiggling her ears and swishing her tail in a frightful manner. I had to send Ben to calm her down.

Then, impulsively, I shifted my stare towards another cliff about forty paces out. You couldn't imagine my surprise when I saw a big Indian just sitting there — right across from me. And who do you think that Indian was? None other than Kit'ant'nook-huu, *Fast Arrow*! He gave me a nod and cupped his right hand to his lips, which was the Indian way of signaling silence. What on earth was he doing there? And why did he want me to keep mum? I got even more perplexed when I recalled that he had been unarmed the day before yesterday, but now I saw a rifle resting on his knees.

I was trying to figure all this out, while the hollering was coming all the closer. Then, all of a sudden from below me, I heard the sound of falling rocks, and looked down... Good Heavens! A monster was coming! From the direction of the second valley a giant, angry, snorting beast came bolting up, like a bat out of hell, heading straight for the top of the saddle where Ben and the mule were! The storming animal was at least twenty-hands high at the withers with a stout, sinewy body and long gangly legs. Its face was fearsome; flaring nostrils, a droopy upper lip and a scrubby goatee, making it look even fouler.

A scream of terror tore from Needler's throat when the behemoth, which seemed to have materialized out of thin air, charged within six paces of poor Ben. He threw his rifle down, turned on his heels and ran, no, tumbled, headlong back down into the valley we'd come from. The mule didn't show any more guts than its master. She jumped back just as fast and slid down the hill inelegant-like on all fours. Just then, the steaming ogre, eyes glittering with rage, not noticing that Ben and the mule had already skedaddled, and thinking its path was still blocked, reared its ugly head sideways, with those colossal antlers, and charged up the slope that way.

There was no time for me to pay any mind to make sure Ben and the hinny reached the



bottom of the valley in one piece. For the enraged leviathan, now stampeding — fast, with great leaps — right to where I lay! I was just as horrified as Ben had been as it came rapidly closer. Just then the rifle slipped from my hand, so after that there was only one thought racing through my mind: Get the hell out of there! I jumped up and dashed along the edge of the cliff, leaping from rock to rock, as the brute was hard on my heels. Desperately, I looked for any way possible to give the fierce quadruped the slip, so when I spotted a yawning cavity in the rock wall to my left, I propelled myself into that hole faster than I have done anything else in my life. Luckily, it was only then that the mammoth caught up with me, so all it could do was poke its sweaty head through the gap as far as its mighty antlers would permit — blocking the crevice so much so that it got pitch black inside. As it snorted like the devil himself, I felt its hot clammy breath billowing all over my face. Mercifully, the fuming bull's fear was greater than its wrath because the beast finally pulled back its head and turned to resume its torrid flight. The chief had been calmly waiting for this exact moment from across the opposite cliff. When the creature presented him with its outstretched breast, *Fast Arrow* took aim and fired — the bulky mammal dropped in its tracks.

Kit'ant'nook-huu hurried to get down from his perch and rushed over to my hiding place where the massive bull elk had so neatly pinned me down. I was warily peeping out of my sanctuary while he inspected the mighty carcass. Finally, he said to me with a smile:

“My white brother can come out! This *pah're* (Shoshone for elk)<sup>17</sup> was killed by your bullet, it is yours!”

“By *my* bullet?” I asked stupefied, creeping out of my refuge.

“Yes”, he nodded with a roguish grin on his face. “You are Att-bi'a, *Good Heart*, who wanted to save lives; for that you shall have respect of other white man. The Panasht warriors delivered totem to the Snake brave who looks after the white man's teepee. On return home, we rode into the Valley of Elks where we hid our weapons. You come to that valley after we left. You did not find game, my eyes see only elk child on your mule. You are honest. You say your rifle cannot make bullets go where you want. But, you must not let your companions know about this. I want them to respect you — just as I have love for you. I sat on cliff yonder while my braves drive this *pah're* to me — one of the strongest I have seen. But when I see you, I decide that you must have it. We say it is Att-bi'a's bullet

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17) Explanation in parentheses given by K.M.

that kill *pah're*. My wish is you make your name as a great hunter — even before your bullets learn their way! Your friend has not seen me. I leave now. He will not know what happened. My eyes wish to see you again. I have spoken. *Háu!*”

He pressed my hand and hastened away, disappearing into the valley from which the elk had been driven.

The immense goodwill of a so-called savage! He generously let me have what was rightfully his, so that the honor of having bagged the giant elk could be bestowed upon me. Should I have declined to accept this gift? No. Back then, I was simply too young and didn't have the guts to refuse. Besides, I still had a score to settle with Ol' Wobble for turning me into a laughingstock. I admit, it is not proper to adorn myself with borrowed plumes, and it was a downright lie. Nevertheless, I couldn't help it; I badly wanted the old frontiersman to be green with envy seeing that trophy that I, “Swell Sam,” the greenhorn railroad clerk had taken!

Now I had to look for Ben and the mule. I made my way back down into the valley we had come from and eventually found them there; they'd thought it best to put a good distance between themselves and the pass. Luckily, both of them had come through their tumble unscathed. I waved for Ben to come back and led him back up the hill to the elk. Of course, I had picked up my rifle when I went down to look for him and he had not seen it slip from my hands. He had not seen *Fast Arrow* either, nor had anyone else. So naturally, Ben was convinced that I had bagged the animal. You can imagine his astonishment, his bewilderment and... his envy!

But I did feel a bit sorry for Needler. So to ease my guilty conscience, I suggested we tell Ol' Wobble that he had shot the “elk child.” That idea got Ben so giddy that he straightway crushed me in a big old bear hug. I stayed behind to watch over “my” kill in case some wild vermin got the notion of feasting on it, while Needler took the mule and set off for the marsh to fetch Ol' Wobble and Litton.

It was late afternoon when he returned with the two of them. Because he had been on his feet all day long without spotting so much as a single hair of elk, the old fellow just stood there and stared at the enormous hide, wrapping himself in silence for quite a spell. Then after pondering the scene before him, he finally admitted, at length, that he had rarely, if ever, seen such a mighty specimen. I got my satisfaction all right, oh yes indeed; as every inch of his wobbly figure was twitching and shuttering with jealousy, turning his gangling frame into a bizarre muddle of wildly gesticulating limbs — like a windmill gone mad!

Eventually, he got a grip on his emotions, but those half-closed eyes gave me an almost threatening look when he said:

“Well, yes siree, now I know where I stand with you! Few days back when you was deliberately burnin’ the hide of Mother Earth with four bullets you was takin’ me for a jackass, ‘tis clear! But I sure hope that ain’t gonna happen again if the two of us are gonna be friends!”

Well, we became and remained friends, and together we bagged a good many head of game over the years. It was as if Chief Kit’ant’nook-huu’s gift proved to be a miracle by bestowing upon me a sharp eye and a steady hand: for god as my witness, from that day forward my bullets flew so true that it never occurred to the old fellow that I could have fibbed about that elk. Since those days, I have often met with *Fast Arrow*, and both he and his tribesmen still call me Att-bi’a, *Good Heart*. He faithfully kept our secret, and today is the first time that I have ever shared the yarn with any other folks. Yes, gents, I believe that I owe it to my good hunter’s name to come clean: my “first elk” was not my first at all. But it wasn’t my last, not by a long shot! I have spoken. *Háu!*