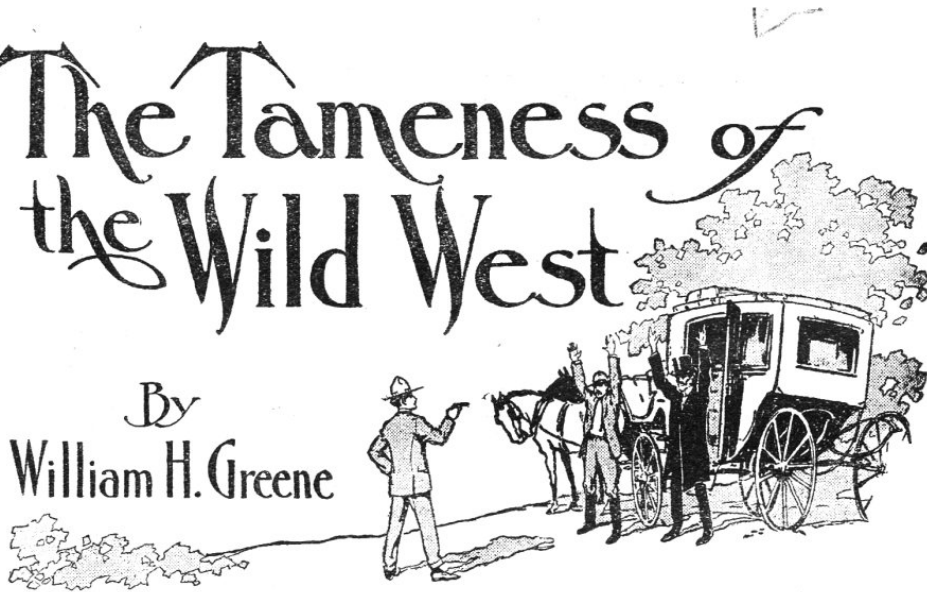


The Tamelessness of the Wild West

By
William H. Greene



GEORGE W. SELDEN might have been of an adventurous disposition if he had not been a timid man. This is not to say that he was a coward, but he lacked a certain daring recklessness which is a characteristic of the real soldier of fortune. He went his way methodically and took no chances.

In the abstract, however, no one could have been fonder of adventure than he. At the age of twenty-seven he still read of the thrilling, hair-breadth escapes of *Diamond Dick*, *Handsome Harry* and *Jack Harkaway*. Accounts of murders, gang fights and other criminal items were his principal reasons for buying the newspapers, taking precedence even of baseball news and sporting topics of the day.

But he never applied the things he read to himself, and therefore kept a position as stenographer in the War Department at Washington, D. C., which was steady and sure, though people told him it held no "future" for an ambitious young man.

He knew, through the papers, all about New York's Bowery and "Hell's Kitchen," San Francisco's "Barbary Coast," and the modest "Swampoodle" section of his own

beautiful city, but he never by any chance ventured into a disreputable neighborhood himself, except in fancy, through the medium of his beloved literature.

His own habits were most conventional. Monday afternoons, when he could get leave from the office, found him at Chase's matinee, and later assisting at the promenade on F Street, where a lot of the prettiest girls in the world are to be met after that performance. Saturdays he drank "tea" with a cherry in it, in the New Willard's "Peacock Alley." A show on Wednesday evening with supper after at the Café Republic, and an occasional Saturday night dance marked the limit of his dissipations.

Sundays he usually spent in the land of romance, with his ever-increasing stock of novels. His was a blameless, quiet life for a man whose favorite hero was Jesse James.

But all this was changed when Selden's great uncle, Reuben Selden, died. Uncle Reuben had never given Selden a cent while he lived, and they had not seen each other oftener than about once a year, but he had known of his nephew's exemplary habits, without having heard of his desperate tastes in

literature. So at the age of eighty-four he died very suddenly, leaving an absolutely unattached fortune of something like two hundred thousand dollars to George W. Selden, humble, humdrum government clerk.

Now, take a man who has never owned more than one hundred dollars at a time in his life, and has had to get up regularly every morning, go to the office and pound a typewriter all day to earn that amount in a month—and suddenly make him independently wealthy. Something is sure to happen. The average man will probably drift toward dissipation and extravagance.

But Selden's tastes lay in another direction. He was still loyal to his old hero, Jesse James, only his attitude changed. He was no longer satisfied to remain in the audience, but wished to help out in the performance, if it was only by carrying a spear. He could afford to do as he pleased now, and he began to picture himself playing desperate parts in wild adventures similar to the ones of which he had read so much.

And when a timid, quiet man does break loose, he can be depended upon to go the limit and do a lot of foolish things.

II.

THREE months later he got off the train at the little town of Calumet, Montana, a disappointed, disillusioned and disgusted man. Life was nothing like it had been in the good old days of '49. All the romance was gone, if there ever was any, or perhaps his favorite authors had been deceiving him.

He had visited all the places that were supposed to be "tough." In the Black Hills he had ridden over the route of the old Deadwood stage, and it was like a drive through Rock Creek Park at home. He had stood at the bar of the Gilt Edge saloon, in Butte, and seen men drinking creme de menthe! He had crossed Death Valley in an automobile.

The Indians he had found to be either drunken degenerates or serious-minded college graduates, who would not think of carrying a scalping-knife. Cowboys, like the ones he had read about, did not seem to exist. Once he saw what he thought was a band of real cow-punchers, in chaps, spurs, red-flannel shirts and sombreros. One of them began to abuse and threaten a young girl who was riding with them, and when Selden rushed heroically to her rescue he was nearly mobbed for ruining a moving-picture film.

The wild spirit of the West seemed to be gone. The Bad Lands of South Dakota sheltered no lurking fugitives.

"Cheyenne was shy any thrills for me," he wrote home to a friend, "and Weeping Wolf was a sad disappointment." Only a very much disgruntled man would make such jokes as that.

In several States he had been arrested and heavily fined for carrying a big Colt's .45 in his belt. He had not seen a single shooting, lynching or hold-up. Everywhere was peace, law, and order. Nowhere had he heard anything half so exciting as the language old Major Dupont used to use when some stupid clerk made a blunder, back in the adjutant-general's office in the War Department.

It was all a fake, and he was going home mad. But he would give the West one more chance to make good. He would stop off at this little town of Calumet, though the very name meant an Indian pipe of peace, which was not encouraging.

The place was rather picturesque, he had to admit, but he was skeptical now, and they would have to show him. There were no gambling-houses open so far as he could learn. The two dance-halls were discouragingly respectable looking, but there was one redeeming feature.

There was still an old stage route between Calumet and the next town, Silver Creek. Next year they were going to build a

trolley line, but he was in time.

Persistent inquiry unearthed the fact that there had once been some sort of a robbery on this route, about forty years ago, but details were lacking. Gossip spreads rapidly in a small town, and Selden's constant harping upon the subject of hold-ups and outlawry led first to the belief that he was slightly out of his mind, until later the theory was advanced that he must be a detective from the East, in search of some criminal.

He was stopping at the Nugget Hotel, about the most uncomfortable place in town, simply because the name pleased him, and, totally unaware of the reputation he was acquiring, he decided to make the stage trip to Silver Creek next day.

Then, made reckless by his unsuccessful search for trouble, an idea came to him which he considered nothing less than an inspiration. He had looked for adventure everywhere in vain. Very well, then he would create some excitement himself, since no one else would do it for him. He would hold up the stage himself.

The more he thought about this the more it pleased him, though he felt a little frightened at his own recklessness. But Jesse James would not hesitate, he reasoned.

He had given up trying to wear his big .45, but had purchased a small .32 caliber revolver, which he carried in the side pocket of his coat. He also had a big, wide-brimmed "Stetson," which he considered a great addition to his costume.

There was a little fellow in a frock coat, silk hat and spectacles stopping at the hotel, whom he had several times tried to engage in conversation, but who had seemed to avoid him. The Rev. Elias Lambert, of Sioux City, was the man's name, he learned from the clerk, and when he got into the stage next evening he found the little clergyman sitting huddled up in the corner. Evidently they were to be companions for the trip.

The driver, a thin-faced man with a gray mustache, climbed up to his seat, cracked his whip, and they were off. They stopped at the post-office for the Silver Creek mail-bag, and clattered noisily down the main street, soon reaching the outskirts of the town, and then the dark, lonely highway.

The coach lanterns cast a fitful gleam upon each side of the road, showing brief glimpses of trees and rocks. They bowled merrily along, and Selden's spirits rose with the excitement and exhilaration of knowing that he was at last on the trail of a real adventure. The Reverend Lambert sat in his corner, silent as a shadow, but Selden could not keep quiet long. He had to relieve his mind with conversation.

"Going to Silver Creek on business, Mr. Lambert?" he asked.

"Yes—that is—not exactly," replied the clergyman.

"Pleasure trip?"

"No."

"For your health, perhaps?"

"Sure, that's it," assented the Reverend Lambert, with a short laugh.

"I see," said Selden, thinking he might have been untactful in mentioning the subject. Another silence followed, and Selden tried again.

"Are you familiar with this part of the country, sir?"

"Sure—er—yes, sir," answered Lambert. "My sister lives in Silver Creek, and I come to see her often."

"Ever hear of any hold-ups on this route?"

"No, sir."

"Liable to happen any time, I understand," said Selden cheerfully.

"Gee—goodness gracious—I hope not!" exclaimed the clergyman in a frightened tone, which made Selden grin.

"Yes, sir," he went on. "Liable to happen any time at all. This would be just the

night for it. No moon and pitch-dark."

The little clergyman appeared to shiver with fright, but made no reply. Selden was enjoying himself thoroughly. Here was a man more timid than himself who would make an easy victim.

"Have you got any large amount of money or valuables with you?" he asked next.

"Not much, sir."

"I always carry at least five hundred dollars with me in cash," Selden boasted. "You never can tell when you may need it."

"That's right. Quite true, sir."

"If you haven't got enough money when you're held up the highwayman is liable to become angry and knock you on the head."

"Horrible!" quavered the minister.

Selden looked out of the window. On the left-hand side rose a high bank, while on the right the big pine-trees overhung the road, their branches sometimes sweeping the top of the coach.

They were going at a good rate, and had probably covered five or six miles. Now was the time and the place, Selden thought, to commit an act of daring which would put him in the same class with the great Jesse James himself.

His hand shook a little as he drew out his revolver, but he managed to make his voice sound steady and sharp enough as he turned the weapon toward his companion and cried:

"Hands up, my man! Quick, now!"

The Rev. Elias Lambert fairly gasped with fright and astonishment, but obeyed promptly.

"Hey, driver! Stop the coach a minute, will you?" shouted the amateur highwayman.

The horses were pulled up short, and Selden whispered to Lambert:

"Get out now. Hurry up. Jump down."

Again the clergyman obeyed with great alacrity, and Selden followed him out, turning his revolver quickly toward the man

on the box.

"Throw up your hands!" he snapped, and the driver promptly obeyed.

"Jump down and line up against the coach beside our reverend friend here."

The driver did so.

"Now then, Brother Lambert," said Selden flippantly, "how much money did you say you had?"

"About fifty dollars," the minister answered weakly. "Take it; but don't shoot me, sir."

"Which pocket is it in?"

"The right-hand inside one."

Selden shifted his revolver to his left hand and slipped his right inside the minister's coat. Suddenly his left wrist was twisted nearly in two, the pistol was wrenched from his hand, and something which felt like a sledge-hammer struck him on the point of the chin. His head whirled, and the ground seemed to come up and hit him.

"Stay where you are, driver, and keep your hands up!" rasped a hoarse, ugly voice, quite different from the timid treble of the Reverend Lambert.

"Now, hand over your five hundred, Mr. Robber!" said the same voice, addressing Selden as he staggered to his feet. "I suspected you were a fly mug from the first. Hand it over!"

Selden took a large roll of bills from his pocket and gave it to the "minister." His watch and diamond pin followed.

"Take off your coat and pick up your hat," was the next order. "Hurry up. No stalling."

Selden did not stall.

"Now, put on these rags of mine, and these lamps," tossing his hat and spectacles to Selden and beginning to remove his coat.

He had been keeping a watchful eye on the driver, but while taking off his long frock coat to change with Selden he made a careless move. Instantly the driver's right hand swept

down and a shot flashed out, followed by a cry of pain, and the ex-clergyman was dancing about, wringing the fingers of his right hand, Selden's weapon dropping from them to the ground.

The driver stooped and picked it up. It all happened so quickly that poor Selden, still dazed from the blow he had received, did not understand it at all.

"Come here, you two," said the driver, and Selden obeyed mechanically, while the other's language was unprintable.

"Hold up your hands, both of you!"

They did so, and a pair of handcuffs were snapped on Lambert's wrists, and then on Selden's.

"You gave us a long chase, McQuade," said the driver with a sigh of relief. "I've followed you all the way from Boston."

"Who are you?" growled McQuade, alias Lambert, and many other aliases.

"My name is Kendall," replied the other. "Ever hear of me?"

"Larry Kendall, of the central office?"

"The same."

"Gee! I thought this other guy was the bull. Oh, I am a simp!"

"Then you not Westerners at all, either

of you?" asked Selden, his voice full of reproach.

"Allow me," said the detective. "Your fellow prisoner is Mr. 'Slim' McQuade, one of the worst men in the East, wanted very badly in Boston just now. I don't know just what to make of you; but you can both jump in the coach together now that the introductions are over, and we'll be getting on to Silver Creek. Don't try to make a getaway, Slim, for it's no use."

"I know when I'm licked," replied Slim.

Mr. George W. Selden, of Washington, and Mr. Slim McQuade, of Boston, got into the coach and were driven to Silver Creek, where they spent the remainder of the night together in the one small cell of which that town can boast. Before Selden got out of the scrape he had had so much adventure that he never wishes to hear the word again.

He is back in Washington now, and never ventures farther West than the Chevy Chase Golf Club. He has entirely lost his passion for "yellow" literature; and if there is one person whose name he hates the very sound of, it is that notorious and unprincipled outlaw, Jesse James.