**The Last of the Troubadours**

O. Henry

Inexorably Sam Galloway saddled his pony. He was going away from the Rancho Altito at the end of a three-months’ visit. It is not to be expected that a guest should put up with wheat coffee and biscuits yellow-streaked with saleratus for longer than that. Nick Napoleon, the big Negro man cook, had never been able to make good biscuits. Once before, when Nick was cooking at the Willow Ranch, Sam had been forced to fly from his *cu* *isi* *ne*, after only a six-weeks’ sojourn.

On Sam’s face was an expression of sorrow, deepened with regret and slightly tempered by the patient forgiveness of a connoisseur who cannot be understood. But very firmly and inexorably he buckled his saddle-cinches, looped his stake-rope and hung it to his saddle-horn, tied his slicker and coat on the cantle, and looped his quirt on his right wrist. The Merrydews (householders of the Rancho Altito), men, women, children, and servants, vassals, visitors, employés, dogs, and casual callers were grouped in the “gallery” of the ranch house, all with faces set to the tune of melancholy and grief. For, as the coming of Sam Galloway to any ranch, camp, or cabin between the rivers Frio or Bravo del Norte aroused joy, so his departure caused mourning and distress.

And then, during absolute silence, except for the bumping of a hind elbow of a hound dog as he pursued a wicked flea, Sam tenderly and carefully tied his guitar across his saddle on top of his slicker and coat. The guitar was in a green duck bag; and if you catch the significance of it, it explains Sam.

Sam Galloway was the Last of the Troubadours. Of course you know about the troubadours. The encyclopædia says they flourished between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries. What they flourished doesn’t seem clear—you may be pretty sure it wasn’t a sword: maybe it was a fiddlebow, or a forkful of spaghetti, or a lady’s scarf. Anyhow, Sam Galloway was one of ’em.

Sam put on a martyred expression as he mounted his pony. But the expression on his face was hilarious compared with the one on his pony’s. You see, a pony gets to know his rider mighty well, and it is not unlikely that cow ponies in pastures and at hitching racks had often guyed Sam’s pony for being ridden by a guitar player instead of by a rollicking, cussing, all-wool cowboy. No man is a hero to his saddle-horse. And even an escalator in a department store might be excused for tripping up a troubadour.

Oh, I know I’m one; and so are you. You remember the stories you memorize and the card tricks you study and that little piece on the piano—how does it go?—ti-tum-te-tum-ti-tum—those little Arabian Ten Minute Entertainments that you furnish when you go up to call on your rich Aunt Jane. You should know that *omnæ personæ in tres par* *tes divisæ sunt*. Namely: Barons, Troubadours, and Workers. Barons have no inclination to read such folderol as this; and Workers have no time: so I know you must be a Troubadour, and that you will understand Sam Galloway. Whether we sing, act, dance, write, lecture, or paint, we are only troubadours; so let us make the worst of it.

The pony with the Dante Alighieri face, guided by the pressure of Sam’s knees, bore that wandering minstrel sixteen miles southeastward. Nature was in her most benignant mood. League after league of delicate, sweet flowerets made fragrant the gently undulating prairie. The east wind tempered the spring warmth; wool-white clouds flying in from the Mexican Gulf hindered the direct rays of the April sun. Sam sang songs as he rode. Under his pony’s bridle he had tucked some sprigs of chaparral to keep away the deer flies. Thus crowned, the long-faced quadruped looked more Dantesque than before, and, judging by his countenance, seemed to think of Beatrice.

Straight as topography permitted, Sam rode to the sheep ranch of old man Ellison. A visit to a sheep ranch seemed to him desirable just then. There had been too many people, too much noise, argument, competition, confusion, at Rancho Altito. He had never conferred upon old man Ellison the favour of sojourning at his ranch; but he knew he would be welcome. The troubadour is his own passport everywhere. The Workers in the castle let down the drawbridge to him, and the Baron sets him at his left hand at table in the banquet hall. There ladies smile upon him and applaud his songs and stories, while the Workers bring boars’ heads and flagons. If the Baron nods once or twice in his carved oaken chair, he does not do it maliciously.

Old man Ellison welcomed the troubadour flatteringly. He had often heard praises of Sam Galloway from other ranchmen who had been complimented by his visits, but had never aspired to such an honour for his own humble barony. I say barony because old man Ellison was the Last of the Barons. Of course, Mr. Bulwer-Lytton lived too early to know him, or he wouldn’t have conferred that sobriquet upon Warwick. In life it is the duty and the function of the Baron to provide work for the Workers and lodging and shelter for the Troubadours.

Old man Ellison was a shrunken old man, with a short, yellow-white beard and a face lined and seamed by past-and-gone smiles. His ranch was a little two-room box house in a grove of hackberry trees in the lonesomest part of the sheep country. His household consisted of a Kiowa Indian man cook, four hounds, a pet sheep, and a half-tamed coyote chained to a fence-post. He owned 3,000 sheep, which he ran on two sections of leased land and many thousands of acres neither leased nor owned. Three or four times a year some one who spoke his language would ride up to his gate and exchange a few bald ideas with him. Those were red-letter days to old man Ellison. Then in what illuminated, embossed, and gorgeously decorated capitals must have been written the day on which a troubadour—a troubadour who, according to the encyclopædia, should have flourished between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries—drew rein at the gates of his baronial castle!

Old man Ellison’s smiles came back and filled his wrinkles when he saw Sam. He hurried out of the house in his shuffling, limping way to greet him.

“Hello, Mr. Ellison,” called Sam cheerfully. “Thought I’d drop over and see you a while. Notice you’ve had fine rains on your range. They ought to make good grazing for your spring lambs.”

“Well, well, well,” said old man Ellison. “I’m mighty glad to see you, Sam. I never thought you’d take the trouble to ride over to as out-of-the-way an old ranch as this. But you’re mighty welcome. ‘Light. I’ve got a sack of new oats in the kitchen—shall I bring out a feed for your hoss?”

“Oats for him?” said Sam, derisively. “No, sir-ee. He’s as fat as a pig now on grass. He don’t get rode enough to keep him in condition. I’ll just turn him in the horse pasture with a drag rope on if you don’t mind.”

I am positive that never during the eleventh and thirteenth centuries did Baron, Troubadour, and Worker amalgamate as harmoniously as their parallels did that evening at old man Ellison’s sheep ranch. The Kiowa’s biscuits were light and tasty and his coffee strong. Ineradicable hospitality and appreciation glowed on old man Ellison’s weather-tanned face. As for the troubadour, he said to himself that he had stumbled upon pleasant places indeed. A well-cooked, abundant meal, a host whom his lightest attempt to entertain seemed to delight far beyond the merits of the exertion, and the reposeful atmosphere that his sensitive soul at that time craved united to confer upon him a satisfaction and luxurious ease that he had seldom found on his tours of the ranches.

After the delectable supper, Sam untied the green duck bag and took out his guitar. Not by way of payment, mind you—neither Sam Galloway nor any other of the true troubadours are lineal descendants of the late Tommy Tucker. You have read of Tommy Tucker in the works of the esteemed but often obscure Mother Goose. Tommy Tucker sang for his supper. No true troubadour would do that. He would have his supper, and then sing for Art’s sake.

Sam Galloway’s repertoire comprised about fifty funny stories and between thirty and forty songs. He by no means stopped there. He could talk through twenty cigarettes on any topic that you brought up. And he never sat up when he could lie down; and never stood when he could sit. I am strongly disposed to linger with him, for I am drawing a portrait as well as a blunt pencil and a tattered thesaurus will allow.

I wish you could have seen him: he was small and tough and inactive beyond the power of imagination to conceive. He wore an ultramarine-blue woollen shirt laced down the front with a pearl-gray, exaggerated sort of shoestring, indestructible brown duck clothes, inevitable high-heeled boots with Mexican spurs, and a Mexican straw sombrero.

That evening Sam and old man Ellison dragged their chairs out under the hackberry trees. They lighted cigarettes; and the troubadour gaily touched his guitar. Many of the songs he sang were the weird, melancholy, minor-keyed *can* *ci* *ones* that he had learned from the Mexican sheep herders and *va* *qu* *eros*. One, in particular, charmed and soothed the soul of the lonely baron. It was a favourite song of the sheep herders, beginning: “*Hu* *ile, hu* *ile, pa* *lo* *mi* *ta* ,” which being translated means, “Fly, fly, little dove.” Sam sang it for old man Ellison many times that evening.

The troubadour stayed on at the old man’s ranch. There was peace and quiet and appreciation there, such as he had not found in the noisy camps of the cattle kings. No audience in the world could have crowned the work of poet, musician, or artist with more worshipful and unflagging approval than that bestowed upon his efforts by old man Ellison. No visit by a royal personage to a humble woodchopper or peasant could have been received with more flattering thankfulness and joy.

On a cool, canvas-covered cot in the shade of the hackberry trees Sam Galloway passed the greater part of his time. There he rolled his brown paper cigarettes, read such tedious literature as the ranch afforded, and added to his repertoire of improvisations that he played so expertly on his guitar. To him, as a slave ministering to a great lord, the Kiowa brought cool water from the red jar hanging under the brush shelter, and food when he called for it. The prairie zephyrs fanned him mildly; mocking-birds at morn and eve competed with but scarce equalled the sweet melodies of his lyre; a perfumed stillness seemed to fill all his world. While old man Ellison was pottering among his flocks of sheep on his mile-an-hour pony, and while the Kiowa took his siesta in the burning sunshine at the end of the kitchen, Sam would lie on his cot thinking what a happy world he lived in, and how kind it is to the ones whose mission in life it is to give entertainment and pleasure. Here he had food and lodging as good as he had ever longed for; absolute immunity from care or exertion or strife; an endless welcome, and a host whose delight at the sixteenth repetition of a song or a story was as keen as at its initial giving. Was there ever a troubadour of old who struck upon as royal a castle in his wanderings? While he lay thus, meditating upon his blessings, little brown cottontails would shyly frolic through the yard; a covey of white-topknotted blue quail would run past, in single file, twenty yards away; a *pa* *isa* *no* bird, out hunting for tarantulas, would hop upon the fence and salute him with sweeping flourishes of its long tail. In the eighty-acre horse pasture the pony with the Dantesque face grew fat and almost smiling. The troubadour was at the end of his wanderings.

Old man Ellison was his own *va* *ci* *ero*. That means that he supplied his sheep camps with wood, water, and rations by his own labours instead of hiring a *va* *ci* *ero*. On small ranches it is often done.

One morning he started for the camp of Incarnación Felipe de la Cruz y Monte Piedras (one of his sheep herders) with the week’s usual rations of brown beans, coffee, meal, and sugar. Two miles away on the trail from old Fort Ewing he met, face to face, a terrible being called King James, mounted on a fiery, prancing, Kentucky-bred horse.

King James’s real name was James King; but people reversed it because it seemed to fit him better, and also because it seemed to please his majesty. King James was the biggest cattleman between the Alamo plaza in San Antone and Bill Hopper’s saloon in Brownsville. Also he was the loudest and most offensive bully and braggart and bad man in southwest Texas. And he always made good whenever he bragged; and the more noise he made the more dangerous he was. In the story papers it is always the quiet, mild-mannered man with light blue eyes and a low voice who turns out to be really dangerous; but in real life and in this story such is not the case. Give me my choice between assaulting a large, loudmouthed rough-houser and an inoffensive stranger with blue eyes sitting quietly in a corner, and you will see something doing in the corner every time.

King James, as I intended to say earlier, was a fierce, two-hundred-pound, sunburned, blond man, as pink as an October strawberry, and with two horizontal slits under shaggy red eyebrows for eyes. On that day he wore a flannel shirt that was tan-coloured, with the exception of certain large areas which were darkened by transudations due to the summer sun. There seemed to be other clothing and garnishings about him, such as brown duck trousers stuffed into immense boots, and red handkerchiefs and revolvers; and a shotgun laid across his saddle and a leather belt with millions of cartridges shining in it—but your mind skidded off such accessories; what held your gaze was just the two little horizontal slits that he used for eyes.

This was the man that old man Ellison met on the trail; and when you count up in the baron’s favour that he was sixty-five and weighed ninety-eight pounds and had heard of King James’s record and that he (the baron) had a hankering for the *vi* *ta sim* *p* *lex* and had no gun with him and wouldn’t have used it if he had, you can’t censure him if I tell you that the smiles with which the troubadour had filled his wrinkles went out of them and left them plain wrinkles again. But he was not the kind of baron that flies from danger. He reined in the mile-an-hour pony (no difficult feat), and saluted the formidable monarch.

King James expressed himself with royal directness. “You’re that old snoozer that’s running sheep on this range, ain’t you?” said he. “What right have you got to do it? Do you own any land, or lease any?”

“I have two sections leased from the state,” said old man Ellison, mildly.

“Not by no means you haven’t,” said King James. “Your lease expired yesterday; and I had a man at the land office on the minute to take it up. You don’t control a foot of grass in Texas. You sheep men have got to git. Your time’s up. It’s a cattle country, and there ain’t any room in it for snoozers. This range you’ve got your sheep on is mine. I’m putting up a wire fence, forty by sixty miles; and if there’s a sheep inside of it when it’s done it’ll be a dead one. I’ll give you a week to move yours away. If they ain’t gone by then, I’ll send six men over here with Winchesters to make mutton out of the whole lot. And if I find you here at the same time this is what you’ll get.”

King James patted the breech of his shot-gun warningly.

Old man Ellison rode on to the camp of Incarnación. He sighed many times, and the wrinkles in his face grew deeper. Rumours that the old order was about to change had reached him before. The end of Free Grass was in sight. Other troubles, too, had been accumulating upon his shoulders. His flocks were decreasing instead of growing; the price of wool was declining at every clip; even Bradshaw, the storekeeper at Frio City, at whose store he bought his ranch supplies, was dunning him for his last six months’ bill and threatening to cut him off. And so this last greatest calamity suddenly dealt out to him by the terrible King James was a crusher.

When the old man got back to the ranch at sunset he found Sam Galloway lying on his cot, propped against a roll of blankets and wool sacks, fingering his guitar.

“Hello, Uncle Ben,” the troubadour called, cheerfully. “You rolled in early this evening. I been trying a new twist on the Spanish Fandango to-day. I just about got it. Here’s how she goes—listen.”

“That’s fine, that’s mighty fine,” said old man Ellison, sitting on the kitchen step and rubbing his white, Scotch-terrier whiskers. “I reckon you’ve got all the musicians beat east and west, Sam, as far as the roads are cut out.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Sam, reflectively. “But I certainly do get there on variations. I guess I can handle anything in five flats about as well as any of ’em. But you look kind of fagged out, Uncle Ben—ain’t you feeling right well this evening?”

“Little tired; that’s all, Sam. If you ain’t played yourself out, let’s have that Mexican piece that starts off with: ‘*Hu* *ile, hu* *ile, pa* *lo* *mi* *ta*.’ It seems that that song always kind of soothes and comforts me after I’ve been riding far or anything bothers me.”

“Why, *se* *gu* *ra* *men* *te, señor* ,” said Sam. “I’ll hit her up for you as often as you like. And before I forget about it, Uncle Ben, you want to jerk Bradshaw up about them last hams he sent us. They’re just a little bit strong.”

A man sixty-five years old, living on a sheep ranch and beset by a complication of disasters, cannot successfully and continuously dissemble. Moreover, a troubadour has eyes quick to see unhappiness in others around him—because it disturbs his own ease. So, on the next day, Sam again questioned the old man about his air of sadness and abstraction. Then old man Ellison told him the story of King James’s threats and orders and that pale melancholy and red ruin appeared to have marked him for their own. The troubadour took the news thoughtfully. He had heard much about King James.

On the third day of the seven days of grace allowed him by the autocrat of the range, old man Ellison drove his buckboard to Frio City to fetch some necessary supplies for the ranch. Bradshaw was hard but not implacable. He divided the old man’s order by two, and let him have a little more time. One article secured was a new, fine ham for the pleasure of the troubadour.

Five miles out of Frio City on his way home the old man met King James riding into town. His majesty could never look anything but fierce and menacing, but to-day his slits of eyes appeared to be a little wider than they usually were.

“Good day,” said the king, gruffly. “I’ve been wanting to see you. I hear it said by a cowman from Sandy yesterday that you was from Jackson County, Mississippi, originally. I want to know if that’s a fact.”

“Born there,” said old man Ellison, “and raised there till I was twenty-one.”

“This man says,” went on King James, “that he thinks you was related to the Jackson County Reeveses. Was he right?”

“Aunt Caroline Reeves,” said the old man, “was my half-sister.”

“She was my aunt,” said King James. “I run away from home when I was sixteen. Now, let’s re-talk over some things that we discussed a few days ago. They call me a bad man; and they’re only half right. There’s plenty of room in my pasture for your bunch of sheep and their increase for a long time to come. Aunt Caroline used to cut out sheep in cake dough and bake ’em for me. You keep your sheep where they are, and use all the range you want. How’s your finances?”

The old man related his woes in detail, dignifiedly, with restraint and candour.

“She used to smuggle extra grub into my school basket—I’m speaking of Aunt Caroline,” said King James. “I’m going over to Frio City to-day, and I’ll ride back by your ranch to-morrow. I’ll draw $2,000 out of the bank there and bring it over to you; and I’ll tell Bradshaw to let you have everything you want on credit. You are bound to have heard the old saying at home, that the Jackson County Reeveses and Kings would stick closer by each other than chestnut burrs. Well, I’m a King yet whenever I run across a Reeves. So you look out for me along about sundown to-morrow, and don’t worry about nothing. Shouldn’t wonder if the dry spell don’t kill out the young grass.”

Old man Ellison drove happily ranchward. Once more the smiles filled out his wrinkles. Very suddenly, by the magic of kinship and the good that lies somewhere in all hearts, his troubles had been removed.

On reaching the ranch he found that Sam Galloway was not there. His guitar hung by its buckskin string to a hackberry limb, moaning as the gulf breeze blew across its masterless strings.

The Kiowa endeavoured to explain.

“Sam, he catch pony,” said he, “and say he ride to Frio City. What for no can damn sabe. Say he come back to-night. Maybe so. That all.”

As the first stars came out the troubadour rode back to his haven. He pastured his pony and went into the house, his spurs jingling martially.

Old man Ellison sat at the kitchen table, having a tin cup of before-supper coffee. He looked contented and pleased.

“Hello, Sam,” said he. “I’m darned glad to see ye back. I don’t know how I managed to get along on this ranch, anyhow, before ye dropped in to cheer things up. I’ll bet ye’ve been skylarking around with some of them Frio City gals, now, that’s kept ye so late.”

And then old man Ellison took another look at Sam’s face and saw that the minstrel had changed to the man of action.

And while Sam is unbuckling from his waist old man Ellison’s six-shooter, that the latter had left behind when he drove to town, we may well pause to remark that anywhere and whenever a troubadour lays down the guitar and takes up the sword trouble is sure to follow. It is not the expert thrust of Athos nor the cold skill of Aramis nor the iron wrist of Porthos that we have to fear—it is the Gascon’s fury—the wild and unacademic attack of the troubadour—the sword of D’Artagnan.

“I done it,” said Sam. “I went over to Frio City to do it. I couldn’t let him put the skibunk on you, Uncle Ben. I met him in Summers’s saloon. I knowed what to do. I said a few things to him that nobody else heard. He reached for his gun first—half a dozen fellows saw him do it—but I got mine unlimbered first. Three doses I gave him—right around the lungs, and a saucer could have covered up all of ’em. He won’t bother you no more.”

“This—is—King—James—you speak—of?” asked old man Ellison, while he sipped his coffee.

“You bet it was. And they took me before the county judge; and the witnesses what saw him draw his gun first was all there. Well, of course, they put me under $300 bond to appear before the court, but there was four or five boys on the spot ready to sign the bail. He won’t bother you no more, Uncle Ben. You ought to have seen how close them bullet holes was together. I reckon playing a guitar as much as I do must kind of limber a fellow’s trigger finger up a little, don’t you think, Uncle Ben?”

Then there was a little silence in the castle except for the spluttering of a venison steak that the Kiowa was cooking.

“Sam,” said old man Ellison, stroking his white whiskers with a tremulous hand, “would you mind getting the guitar and playing that ‘*Hu* *ile, hu* *ile, pa* *lo* *mi* *ta*’ piece once or twice? It always seems to be kind of soothing and comforting when a man’s tired and fagged out.”

There is no more to be said, except that the title of the story is wrong. It should have been called “The Last of the Barons.” There never will be an end to the troubadours; and now and then it does seem that the jingle of their guitars will drown the sound of the muffled blows of the pickaxes and trip hammers of all the Workers in the world.