

Congratulations on yet another book! As with *Men of Oak*, what you have here with *A Man True* is a simple, straightforward story but with beautiful Christian themes chosen with care. Your portrayal of the setting is good; we are given a strong sense of the era from the details, and your description of good old-fashioned manners and chivalry makes one yearn for the good old days. The main characters set such a charming example in holy conduct, it's easy to see how this would be great book for the shelves of every conscientious Christian family that understands the importance of raising and training a child "in the way he should go" (Prov. 22:6).

—Editor's Note

**A MAN
TRUE**

Timothy W. Bryant

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TRUE**



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To my wife,

FAITH.

Your love has always made me want to be a better man.

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Eli

The baby was warm against my chest, and seemed content to sleep wrapped snugly to me with a sling I had seen Cherokee Indian mothers use. Under my long wool coat with its heavy cape, at first glance someone might not notice the child, but they would notice the Henry rifle, with its two-foot-long octagon barrel and sixteen-shot magazine and brass receiver, slung across my back. With too close of a look, they might also notice the two Remington Army .44-caliber handguns with extra-loaded cylinders, one for each. Just a little too close, there would be a twelve-inch-long,

two-inch-wide-bladed Bowie knife. Not an easy weapon to ignore.

These weapons, this long heavy wool coat, a pair of boots, and Momma's Bible were left for me in a large wooden box at the army headquarters in Memphis. When I stepped off the paddleboat from New Orleans, there was a young army private there to meet me. He seemed to recognize me, said if I were to follow him there were arrangements made for me to stay. When I entered my quarters, there was this large crate in the middle of the room. In the box, a note read, "Thought you might need these for the journey and Momma's Bible for the new job. William."

There would be no harm come on this child while I have a bullet or an ounce of strength left in my body. A strong body has run in my family for many generations. Broad shoulders, hands larger than most, and just enough love of a good fight when put upon to convince men they have made a mistake of laying a hand on me.

Besides, this child has suffered enough, what with the loss of her dad and most likely her mother, unless my doctorin' helps her heal and I can manage a warm dry place for us to hole up. No sir, those men may stay on my back trail and they may even catch us, but this child is safe.

Recalling the events of the previous night seemed to help take my mind off the lack of sleep, plus the load I carried: baby Emma, weapons, and supplies for the three of us. Then there was keeping an eye on Mercedes as she struggled to stay on the horse. Now I walked beside the horse with my hand on a belt around her waist after she came too close to falling to the ground.



Just on the Arkansas side of the Mississippi, an hour or so after dark, I came upon the camp. The screaming put me and the dogs to caution, moving slowly in the dark up to the edge of the camp, keeping myself and

the horse back in the dark just enough to see into the camp but not be seen or heard. Easing out of the saddle, both dogs moved close to me, sensing the danger, ears up waiting and watching with me. By count, there were a dozen men in the camp, a large covered wagon, and one man tied to one of the wagon wheels. Appeared I would be there too late for him, but the woman on the ground slowly rose to her feet. Twelve men by my count, not a one reached out to help her up. The fire and rage began to come on me; there were only twelve by my count. On her feet, she faced the largest of the twelve and the one who seemed to be giving the orders. A big man, even by my standards.

She was tall for a woman, hair and eyes dark. Even with what I believe the big man had put her through before I arrived, she looked strong. "Sign the papers," the big man said to her. "I will take the child and let you live." Slowly she turned to the wagon. From the wagon, a baby began to cry.

So quickly, she turned on the big man, the slap sounded like a gunshot setting him back on his heels. Then she was on him. The next scream was his as her fingers dug into his eyes, her momentum took him to the ground. His head made a *crack* sound as it hit a rather large rock next to the fire. Then there was a shot, smoke came from around the woman's waist. She lay on top of him, and neither was moving. That was the moment I decided to enter the camp.

Now the horse I had been riding was a bit skittish, so my first shot sent him on a wild run straight through the camp and dead set on running over the fella holding the reins to their horses. Trampled by my horse, he lets go of the horses and they all take off into the dark with my horse. The rest of the men didn't notice me at first, with the lady taking out their leader and my horse running through the camp. I moved just into the edge of the campfire light and purposely shot the first two men low in the legs. Thumbing the hammers back on those two Remington Army .44 calibers, I took two

more men out, one in the shoulder, another low and in the legs. Killing would be easy, and these men seemed deserving of killing, but I had seen too much death in the war. Running through the smoke from my shots, I struck hard across the head of the next man with the octagon barrel of one of the Remingtons. He went down and out. That left six men bunched together facing me, the sound of me pulling the hammers back on those two pistols, and the dogs' teeth bared. Low growling caused four of them to decide to leave in a hurry. Scared men running always seems to cause dogs to give chase. The other two dropped their guns but did not seem ready to leave.

“Mister, you don't know whose business you are gittin' into or you would leave now. Those men that left will be back, and there's gonna be more with them.”

I had nothing to say to these men at this point. Keeping my guns on them, I moved to the wagon. Looking in the back, I could see a small child wrapped in a blanket. The tailgate was down on the wagon. I still

had nothing to say, but I laid both pistols down on the tailgate. With a prayer under my breath, I said, “Lord, please help me not to kill these men.” What kind of men would treat a woman and child like this? The rage in me was almost more than I could bear. After the war, the guilt of the killing was—is—so heavy on my soul. I wished no harm on no one. But a child, a woman, treated with such disrespect had to be answered hard.

Two quick steps and I was face-to-face with the two men. I kicked their weapons away. The one who had spoken had a knife carried low in his right hand and lunged straight at me, thrusting upward as he came in. Leaning back just enough for the knife to miss, I grasped his wrist with my left hand, pulling him into my right fist. At that moment, the other man to my left swung a fist to my side; the pain of the blow did not keep me from breaking the man’s wrist as I yanked him into the other man. The scream and the sound of bones breaking gave the second man no chance to avoid a blow on the chin, a blow that I set my feet for

and swung from the waist. They would both be out for a while.

The baby began to cry, so I stepped to the back of the wagon, quickly holstered my two guns, reached into the wagon and pulled out a large basket. The baby was wrapped snugly but was very unhappy. So I lifted the baby gently out—a girl, I believe, because of the lace and very small pink bonnet on her head. Even with the blanket wrapped around her, she barely filled my two large hands. Picking her up calmed her, and then there was a sound behind us. It was her mother. Carrying the child, I went to her. She had rolled onto her back, alive but shot low on her left side. The big man was holding a pistol when she had attacked him. Looking at him, I could see the right eye was bad; a lot of blood from the eye and the crack on his head. He was of no concern to me now; she was, and I knew the bleeding had to be stopped.

Her eyes seemed so dark. Seeing the baby and me holding the child, I could see the fear in her, fear for

her baby in the hands of this large, unshaven, weathered man. For all she knew, I was one of them. So I gently unwrapped the blanket and laid the baby on her chest, and then covered them both with the blanket. The next thing I did was something I learned from my mother and father. I laid both of my large hands on them, eyes closed, head bowed, and began to pray.

“Lord, hear my prayer, have mercy on these two ladies. I don’t know what has brought us together, but I believe you had a hand in it, so I ask for your strength and healing and your peace. Also, Lord, forgive me the hurt I put on those men. You know they deserved it. Amen.”

When I opened my eyes, the fear in hers had gone, and she whispered, “The baby’s name is Emma.”

The dogs were back. Mary-Lou had blood around her mouth and Bill had a boot in his, which he dropped at my feet. Then both dogs moved slowly to the lady and baby, gently putting their noses against them, making a soft whimpering sound. They both sat back

on their haunches and looked at me. “Good dogs. We are going to take care of these ladies.”

“Friends?”

“Yes, ma’am, they are.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“May I have your name, please?”

“Elijah, Elijah Johnson.”

“Sir.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“There is milk and clothes for Emma in the wagon. Please see after my baby girl.”

“Call me Eli, ma’am. She is safe with me. You both are. Let me see to your wound, then I will add supplies from the wagon to my supplies, for you and Emma, and we need to move. I believe those men will be back, and some of these men lying around will start coming to soon.”

There was a nudge on my left; it was Mary-Lou. She had dragged the basket over for the baby, so gently

I lifted Emma from her mother's chest, laid her in the basket, and covered her. Both dogs moved to either side of the basket. At this point there would be a problem touching the basket or its contents without their permission.

I turned to the lady to care for her wound. Her dress was a dark blue with large buttons down the front to the waist. "Ma'am, may I have your name?"

"Mercedes," she whispered low, eyes barely open.

"Mercedes, I will have to open the front of your dress to care for your wound, is that okay?"

Then suddenly with both hands she grabbed my coat and pulled herself up to me, her eyes black and wide open. "Eli, they will be back and they want my baby."

The terror in her eyes went away only because she passed out. Quickly I dressed her wound; the bullet went clean through, but it tore a large hole going in and coming out. She was losing a lot of blood fast; a tight field dressing with some packing, and both wounds

and the bleeding slowed. After we left and I found us a safe place to stop, I would dress the wound again. The army had taught me how to kill, but also how take care of a wound in the field.

Going through the wagon, I found a ladies' bag with baby clothes, also cans of evaporated milk for the baby, some blankets, and food: coffee, some bacon, and dried fruit to add to my supplies. A leather pouch lay under her bag; inside, it had some papers that looked important, so I stuffed it into the large bag with the baby supplies. I had dropped my saddlebags off the horse before entering the camp. Good thing, 'cause I don't think he will be coming back. Returning to camp after fetching my saddlebags, there stood Bill with the reins of one of their horses in his mouth, and let me tell ya, it was a beauty. Blackest horse I ever saw with a small blaze and two white front stockings. Mary-Lou, on the other hand, had not left the side of baby Emma and mother.

I had our supplies loaded on the horse when I turned to see Mercedes standing. Two quick steps and I had her in my arms before she fell, then I lifted her onto the saddle. The horse seemed very gentle, as if he knew her and knew she was not well. Taking Emma, we headed into the darkness; by the moon and stars, I believed it to be about midnight.



The horse stumbled, or I did, causing Mercedes to tense up and release a small moan. I believe that man had broken one or two of her ribs; if he survived his injuries and I should ever cross paths with him, God help me.

We had been traveling twenty-four hours, only stopping to feed the baby and give Mercedes a break. She refused to eat, only drank some water, ever asking about Emma, drifting in and out of consciousness. I knew I had to find shelter soon, someplace where we

could hole up for a while so I could get some food in her and she might sleep.

In the last few miles, we had left the flat country and were now in the Ozarks of Arkansas. I had been heading to this country before I involved myself with these ladies. I believe by daylight we should be at a settlement called Newport on a large bend in the White River. There, maybe I can find a place for the ladies to stay.

Suddenly, Mercedes began to shake. I quickly reached my right arm up around her; she fell over on my shoulder as I lifted her from the horse. We would have to stop.

Just ahead, with the moonlight, I could see a large outcropping of rocks. Not more than thirty yards ahead, there loomed in the darkness a large rock overhang. I walked under the large rock with Mercedes over my shoulder, and saw that it opened back about forty feet. I carried her to the back of the overhang, laid her gently down—not easy with Emma still wrapped to me. Once

she was laid down on what felt in the darkness to be very thick moss, I unwrapped Emma from my chest and laid her beside Mercedes. The dogs moved in close and lay beside them. That black horse had followed us and stood just at the edge of the overhang where he had found some grass; which was good, because my bacon and coffee were in the saddlebags on him.

I found some large rocks and stacked them in a way around a small hole I dug for the fire to be reflected back into the cave. There was plenty of dry wood, and soon I had a fire going and extra wood close by.

After pulling the saddle from the horse, I laid it on the ground besides Mercedes, covered it with the saddle blanket, then slowly and gently laid her head on the saddle. When I removed the dressing from her wound, it began to slowly bleed. Quickly I cleaned the wound with water and remembered a paste made of honey given to me by a doctor I had made friends with in England. Taking it from my saddlebag, I applied it to the wound, then wrapped it with a clean cloth.

With the fire going, I had water heating in my small coffeepot. I shaved some salted beef jerky into a cup and poured the hot water over it, making a beef broth. As I turned from the fire to Mercedes, she was looking at me but was not sure who I was. She said, "Please help my baby, sir."

"Yes, ma'am," said I. "Ms. Emma is fine. I am taking good care of her. You need to drink this, ma'am." As I put the broth to her lips, she took a little, swallowed slowly, then took some more. Little by little, I was able to get two cups of my broth down her, then she turned her head to one side and went to sleep. Now for the baby; she had been very quiet, so I wondered if she was okay. I checked the bag in the wagon and found diapers and a bottle. The bottle was very welcome as I was not sure how to git the milk in her otherwise; 'course on the trail, her mother had been feeding her mother's milk. She proved to have a good appetite, which made me believe she was healthy. And did she like to smile.

The canned milk I watered down, just as I had seen my wife do for our child.

There was frost on the fallen leaves, normal for middle of March. I stepped from the cave at dawn; both dogs ran past me down to the creek below the cave. The horse I had tied to a tree was just under the overhang at the cave entrance. I untied the horse and we walked down to the creek to join Bill and Mary-Lou for a drink and to get some fresh water for coffee. We should leave soon, but Mercedes had a fever in the night, just as the night before.

Upon my return to the cave I found both ladies asleep, so I stirred the coals of the fire, added some wood, then sat the coffeepot to boil. Once boiling, I sprinkled a few drops of cold water in the pot to settle the grounds, and had my first cup, always the best.

Stepping to the edge of the cave entrance looking down toward the creek, I found a large flat rock to sit on and watch the dogs run up and down the creek. The horse I had left on a small patch of grass by the creek;

he seemed content there. The dogs noticed me, heads up as soon as I appeared from the cave, watched me a minute to see if I would call or motion for them to come. When I did not, they returned to exploring the creek for food. Thinking of our situation, I knew we would have to leave no later than tomorrow; we would be out of supplies and milk for the baby. Mercedes had fed the baby twice on the trail here, but she had become too weak and I believe her milk may have dried up. I was getting low on cloth as I kept changing Mercedes bandages; hopefully she would be up to travelling.

As I finished the last of that first cup, I heard a slight noise in the cave. I walked back in and the light from the fire, after catching up the wood I had added to it, shone baby Emma awake. Thinking she might be hungry when she awoke, I had a bottle ready. She smiled at me as I handed her the bottle, very able to hold it herself, so I begin the task of changing her—not really a job I look forward to, but not too much different than changing a saddle and blanket on a horse. It

Eli

seemed to me it needed to be cinched up tight, just like a saddle; neither needs to come loose at the moment when it is needed most.