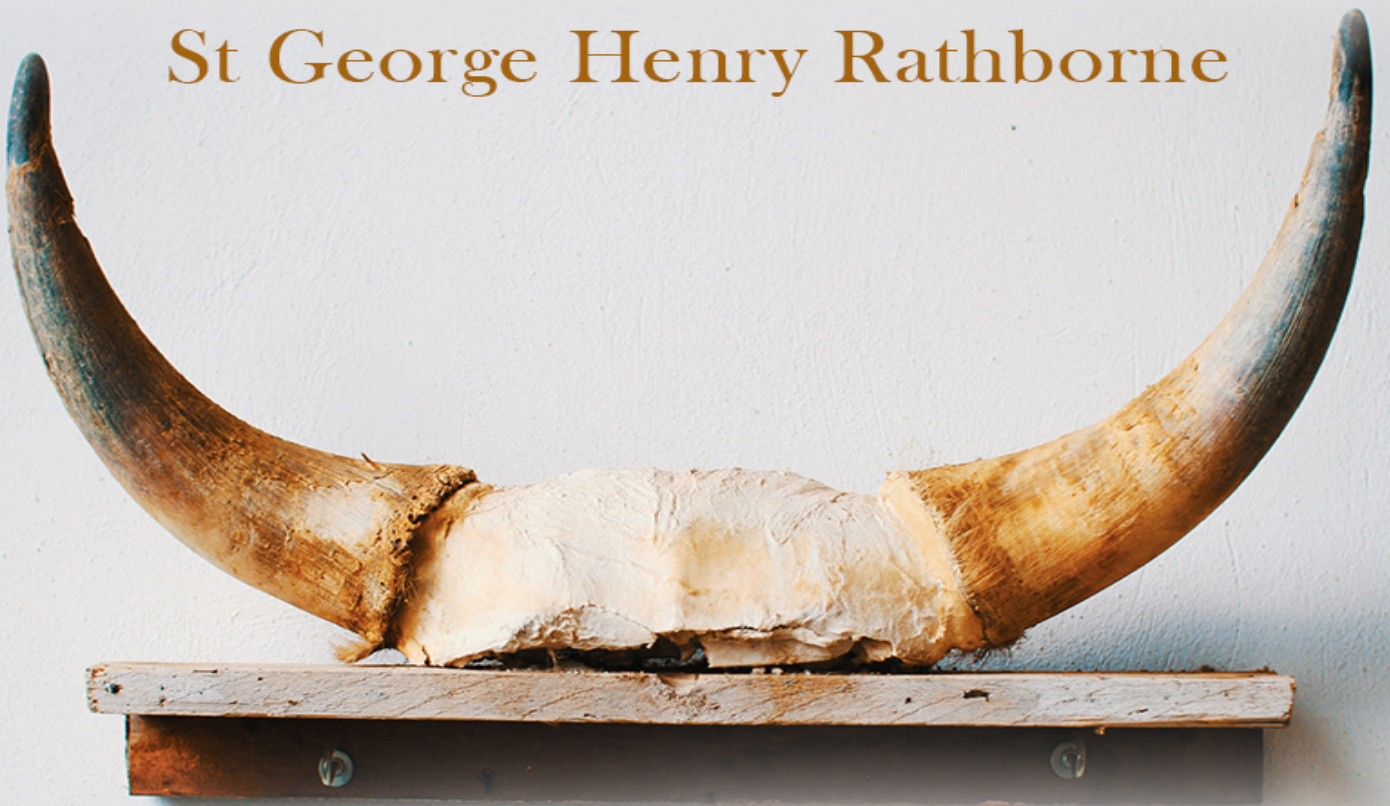


St George Henry Rathborne



THE HUNTER HERCULES

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The Hunter Hercules

**Western Romance of the Prairies (The Champion
Rider of the Plains)**

e-artnow, 2022

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CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG HUNTER'S FIRST PRIZE.

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It was a beautiful scene. Not a cloud marred the vast blue dome of heaven. Autumn reigned supreme in the Lone Star State, where brave Houston fought, and valiant Bowie fell at the Alamo. Near the Comanche ground on the far north-western border of the State we would bring the reader on this bright, cheerful morning in October.

The prairie which, a month or two before, had presented a beautiful aspect of flowers and green grass, had been literally baked to a rich brown color, and now, moved by the breeze that was blowing the long, dry grass, looked for all the world like the waves of the ocean or an inland sea.

Riding leisurely across the prairie was a young man of about twenty-two or three. He wore a complete suit of fine buck-skin, which, it was plainly apparent, had been made by a "regular" tailor, for it bore none of the marks which almost always distinguish the clothes of the old trapper.

The suit was beautifully made and ornamented, and truly became the fine form of the owner. The head-covering of the young equestrian was a large felt, which kept the sun from his face and might prove almost as effective as an umbrella, in case of a shower.

The face underneath the hat was a resolute one.

The eyes were gray and piercing; the nose, rather large and slightly inclined to the Roman, but was perfect for all that; the cheek-bones high and the mouth firm.

On his upper lip, the rider sported a fine mustache, and taken altogether, he was a very “good-looking fellow.”

The form of the young hunter was not large, but there appeared to be a vast amount of strength in that well-knit frame.

The horse upon which he was seated was a large bay, the exquisite shape of whose limbs proved that it was a good runner. The horse had indeed been selected on account of its speed, and could show a clean pair of heels to ninety-nine out of a hundred of its fellows.

The arms of the young man consisted of a light rifle which he carried across the pommel of his saddle, a pair of revolvers in his belt, and, keeping them company, was a sharp, two-edged hunting knife. Although a stranger on the plains of the Great West, Chauncy Branrere was no novice in the art of hunting. He could bring down a deer as well as the most experienced hunter. His hand was steady and his eye quick and sure.

He was the only son of a wealthy citizen of New York, and had made this trip to the South-west in a spirit of adventure. Chauncy had traveled over Europe; had hunted in Asia, Africa and South America, and was now to satisfy his love of the wild excitements of the chase by a season in the South-west.

Chauncy had intended to secure an old hunter for a guide, who was an old friend of his father's. Many years before, the two had fought in the Mexican war, side by side, and the hunter's life had been saved by his comrade in arms, which made them good friends. After the war Chauncy's father returned to his home in the North, and

several times received scrawling letters from the old hunter, but the two had never seen each other since their parting.

Disappointed in meeting the old Texan, Chauncy had started out alone, determined that he would not wait in the little border town for the old ranger's return.

He had a mission to accomplish if possible, for he had not come out for the hunting alone. An uncle had died and left two-thirds of his estate, which was large, to an adopted son and the other third to Chauncy. This adopted son having had a quarrel with the uncle had gone "out West." No one had heard of him for years, and it was not an unlikely thing for him to be dead.

Mr. Branrare was to institute a search for him, and if he was not found at the end of a year, then the former was to assume possession of the fortune bequeathed to the missing man.

The horse of the young man was approaching one of the numerous "mottes" of trees which spot the prairies of Texas. Suddenly he started and looked around.

It was a sound which, in any place, would have awakened all that was chivalrous in his nature. It was a cry for help, and it was a woman's voice!

It came from the trees, not once but twice—thrice, and without hesitation the young hunter dashed his spurs into the sides of his horse, when, like a flash, the noble animal darted forward and in a moment reached the trees.

Throwing himself from his horse, Chauncy rushed in among the undergrowth rifle in hand. He reached the edge of a small glade with a few bounds, and a thrilling sight was before him.

On the limb of a tree opposite to him was a large panther flattened out for a leap. Not five yards from the tree was a young girl, her face blanched with terror!

CHAPTER II.

THE KNIGHT AND THE “LADIE FAIR.”

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A panther and its prey!

A panther and its foe!

Quickly raising his rifle the young man, with nerves as steady as steel and lips compressed with a fierce courage, took a quick aim and the hammer fell. Then a sharp, whip-like crack, and, with a scream that seemed half-human, the panther gave a leap from the tree, straight toward the girl, but, impelled by agony and a baffled purpose, the leap sent him several feet past the crouching figure of the maid.

Chauncy had expected this, and before the animal could turn he was upon it, knife in hand.

A few stabs sufficed to let out the little life that was in the panther, and then Chauncy arose to his feet.

Wiping his bloody knife upon the body of the slain creature, he put that weapon back into his belt.

Then for the first time he turned his eyes upon the maiden he had saved. A cry of surprise and admiration came from his lips as his eyes fell upon her. She was now upon her feet. Large, flashing black eyes, a pearl-like forehead, chin and nose, an exquisitely molded mouth, all framed with silky black hair which reached far below her waist!

Such was the picture before the young man.

The wild look was still in her eyes as she turned them upon her rescuer.

"I hope you have not received any hurt," said he, advancing.

"No, sir; thanks to your timely arrival I have escaped from a fearful death. Oh, sir, you must excuse me if I do not thank you sufficiently. What I have gone through has unnerved me," said the fair girl, in a voice which to Chauncy seemed the sweetest he had ever heard in all his life.

"Any one would have done the same," he said.

This seems to be the regular programme on such occasions, and Chauncy followed the general rule, most probably because he knew nothing else that would be so appropriate.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but any one would not have done what you have," replied the other.

"Then he would have been nothing but a brute. I had hardly time to aim and fire, but I am sure that had I seen your face I would never have shot the panther," exclaimed Chauncy.

"And why not?" questioned the beautiful maiden.

"Because I could not have taken my eyes off of it! You must pardon me if I seem rude, but the truth is, I am surprised at seeing a woman out here, and a young and beautiful one at that."

"It does not matter, sir. If you are surprised at seeing me here I must confess that I am equally surprised at your sudden appearance. I had no idea a human being, except it be Comanches, was within twenty miles of this spot, and they are as bad as the panther. You must know, then, that I was very much astonished when you fired your gun."

Chauncy did not have to remain long in suspense, for she told her story in a very few words.

Her name was Donna Iola, and she was the daughter of an American who had married a Mexican. She had been out riding and had been captured by a band of Comanches, under the chief Red Buffalo. They had taken her north to their village, and from thence, in the night, she managed to escape on one of the mustangs.

It was the second night before. Upon reaching the grove of trees she had entered and tied her horse, while she searched around for berries or something to eat. It was then that the panther had come upon her.

Knowing that she must be hungry, the young hunter left her for awhile, but returned ere long with a brace of birds which with a true hunter's skill he prepared for the spit. Then a fire was kindled, and in due time the savory repast was ready.

They were not long in dispatching this, and then, after a good drink of water from the cool spring, the Donna declared herself ready for her ride homeward.

Of course Chauncy had resolved to accompany her to the hacienda of her father, and the two started off, going in a southerly direction.

As they rode along, Chauncy noticed that the Donna's horse seemed quite tired, and he decided to stop in the next clump of trees they came to.

It was nearly three hours before they reached this, and then they were amply repaid for their trouble, for in the cool, shady grove was a spring of water.

The two horses were tied to trees, and then the two young people wandered about among the trees, talking and laughing.

Had the hunter been an old hand at Indian-fighting he would never have idled the precious time away in this manner.

That the Comanches would follow up the Donna's trail was a sure thing, and delay was dangerous.

But entirely unconscious of what they were doing, the two remained in the grove for several hours.

Dinner was eaten, and then they prepared to depart about the middle of the afternoon.

The air was rather cool now, and they enjoyed the ride very much. The horse that the Donna rode was a little refreshed by the rest, and could no doubt hold out until evening.

They had not gone a mile from the grove when Chauncy heard the sound of horses' hoofs pounding upon the ground behind him, and turning in his saddle he saw to his extreme astonishment and chagrin, a band of Comanches coming after them.

They had tracked the Donna lola to the grove, and were now following her.

CHAPTER III.

THE COMANCHES' PRIZE.

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Chauncy could not help wondering why he had not seen the Indians before. The truth of it, however, was, that he had not been on the look-out for them and hence did not see them.

They had come up to the grove, and when the young man first heard and saw them, were just coming out from among the trees. This was a sudden and startling interruption to the *tete-a-tete* he was having with the Donna lola.

A word sufficed to explain to the Donna the cause of his pale face. Chauncy had no fear for himself. He was mounted on a fast horse and could have escaped in a trice, but he would sooner cut off his right hand than desert his fair companion.

The mustang was put to its fastest speed, and for a mile managed to keep its distance. Then the Indians began gaining, at first slowly and then more rapidly, until at length Chauncy saw that in fifteen minutes more the Comanches would overtake them. What then would be their fate?

He most probably would be burned at the stake, while the Donna would become the squaw of the chief, Red Buffalo.

How could they escape?

Suddenly he thought of his horse. Not one of the Comanches could overtake the "Ranger," as his steed was