Hell Or High Water
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On that furnace-hot afternoon of September 7, 1867, Callville was the scene of considerable activity. The barge *Colorado* lay firmly snubbed up against the riverbank, the muddy waves of the Colorado River lapping at its hull. Its owner, Captain L. C. Wilburn, was directing the loading of bags of salt for delivery to the downstream mills; the Mormon men and Paiute Indians formed a human chain from the big stone warehouse to the barge, heaving the bags hand over hand. They were sweating in the heat and tired, but the work went doggedly on.

Suddenly, one of the Paiutes dropped a bag, pointed to the river, and shouted, *“Haiko, haiko.”* This Paiute word for “white man” was a natural attention getter, but when the men looked toward the river, all they could see was a bunch of logs floating on the current. Captain Wilburn, from atop of the barge’s little wheelhouse, could see that there was something—perhaps a man—on the logs.

Two of the men, responding to Wilburn’s shouts, quickly took off their boots and waded into the river. As they came closer, they stared in disbelief at the creature lying prone on the crudely tied logs. The rescuers, John Tillman and Charley McAllister, grabbed the raft quickly and began to pull it out of the main current. The rest reached out to help bring it ashore. They all gawked at the nearly naked body,
the sores and scratches, and the sun-bleached hair and beard. The man was as still as death.

A sudden movement of his head showed that he was alive. When his eyes opened, they were filmy, veined with red, and without focus, like windows in an empty house. When his mouth opened and he tried to speak, only a few strangled sounds emerged. The rescuers watched in silence; then one of them whispered, “By God, he’s some loco’d.”

That stung the men into action; they beached the raft quickly and fumbled to untie the rope that fastened the man to it. When it would not yield to their clumsy efforts, anxiety overcame thrift, and someone produced a knife. They turned the man over and revealed another landscape of sores and bruises. He groaned as they tried to lift him. He was unable to stand erect, so severe were the cramps that knotted his leg and back muscles, but he made a shaky effort. He struggled again to speak, but no one could understand him.

James Ferry, Callville’s mail agent, came to the rescue with a blanket; he and Captain Wilburn took charge. They put the man on the blanket as carefully as possible. Ferry dispatched Charley McAllister to round up some oil and lime for the sores. Then the others carried the man up the hill to Ferry’s house.

All these men had seen worse injuries. Death was not a stranger in that harsh and hostile land, but it usually came from disease, or, more often, from the desert: from exposure, starvation, or heat prostration; from the sting of the scorpion or the bite of the diamondback; from a bullet or an arrow. The odds of this man’s arrival by way of the river were about the same as his falling from the sky. Because it shocked and surprised them, it would long remain vivid in their memories.

At Ferry’s house, the men removed the remnants of the man’s clothes, dressed his sores, and tried to make him comfortable. As they worked, they grew more and more curious. Who was this man? Where had he come from? What had happened to bring him to Callville?

When the man’s eyes opened again, there was a faint spark of life in them. One of the men, startled, asked the question that was uppermost in all their minds: “Who are you?” Barely coherent, the man rasped out the answer, “James White.”

But the men had to contain their curiosity; their mysterious visitor had relapsed into an unconscious state. Captain Wilburn and the
rest, anxious to finish before dark, returned to the loading. Soon the spectacular sunset was turning the drab hills to a smoky purple and the muddy Colorado to copper. The breeze died to a whisper. The makeshift raft lay under a mesquite; it would not long survive Callville’s need for firewood.

Jim Ferry, concerned about White’s condition, remained nearby to come to his aid; the generous residents of the settlement were equally helpful: The men gathered clothes they thought would fit White, and the women prepared nourishing food, later reminding Ferry to ration the portions.

Going in later to light a lamp, Ferry found his charge awake and surprisingly alert. He immediately told White where he was and how he’d been rescued; even better, he brought him a supper consisting of a small piece of mutton, a middling-sized dumpling, and half an ear of corn. Ferry explained the small portions as rationing necessary for those who—like White—were on the verge of starvation. Although he was ravenous, White had to bow to this wisdom; it was a supper he remembered in every detail for the rest of his life.

White was more than grateful for his rescue by the settlers and for their compassion and consideration, but he was reluctant to talk to them about his river experience that evening as Ferry suggested. Ferry had heard the words “some loco’d” applied to White that afternoon, but it is doubtful that he considered it more than the usual comment on difficult, strange, or incomprehensible behavior. He was familiar with the obvious signs of starvation and injury, and, to some degree, the phenomenon of delirium; he understood the reasons for rationing well enough but knew nothing at all about what we now call traumatic shock. White, trying to cope with its crippling effects, was equally ignorant. Despite the confusion he must have felt, one thing was paramount: his strong obligation to his rescuers. His conscience would not allow him to refuse Ferry’s request. He reluctantly agreed and, later that evening, his rescuers began the first of many friendly interrogations.