

# THE CHALLENGERS

JO LUNDY



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY



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## CHAPTER 1

### Small Blue Canoe

A blue-stained Indian dugout slid silently through the hurrying water of the creek. The paddle dipped warily. Now it sent the canoe near the willow-lined shore; now it held poised on the sliding current.

The October sun scattered through the tangled willow and alder. It shone on the swinging black braids of the kneeling paddler and brought a glint to the color of the beads and ribbon. The only sound was an occasional splash from the clumsy oars of a skiff near the bend of the creek up ahead.

In the skiff, a big man in tattered buckskin narrowed his eyes and studied the screening bushes downstream. Joe Meek knew that he was being trailed. Someone in a canoe had been sneaking up the creek behind him ever since he'd turned from the Willamette River. He hadn't yet

caught a glimpse of the craft. If he had been in the Rockies, where any Indian could be an enemy, he might have been alarmed. But Oregon Indians were peaceful, or had been, so far.

Being trailed in a boat was the thing that bothered him. Joe was a trapper, a “mountain man.” Big-boned, long-legged, he could run faster than any Indian he’d ever met. He could shoot straighter than any man with whom he’d been matched. He could ride the wildest mountain pony ever roped. But almost anybody could handle a boat better than he could.

Try as he would to get used to the Oregon custom of traveling by boat, Joe still was uneasy without good solid earth under his feet. He would be at a disadvantage on the water if that was an enemy following him.

But who could the enemy be? One of the Hudson’s Bay Company men? Had the British fur-trading company set someone to spy on him to see if he was trapping animals they claimed for their own? Were they following him merely because he was an American and active among the American settlers? Were they trying to get information about the settlers’ meeting?

Joe Meek knew that the Company considered him a troublemaker, but he didn’t think they took him seriously enough to set spies on his trail. Yet somebody in a canoe was after him, and somebody with a good heart wouldn’t be likely to be so sly about it.

With sudden resolution, Joe Meek dug in an oar to turn his skiff to the bank. He caught up his gun and checked her priming. Then he stepped ashore and faded into the brush.

He was leaning on the overhanging limb of an alder when the blue canoe glided cautiously near the shore. He

got a clear view of the young paddler intently watching the stream ahead. Then he chuckled with surprise. His “enemy” was an Indian girl, twelve or thirteen years old, fine in beads and white doeskin, high-laced moccasins, and ribbon-tied braids.

But she was following, all right. She caught sight of his skiff beached ahead and frowned and searched the shore with puzzled eyes.

Joe decided to give the girl a scare. “Lookin’ for me, young ’un?” he shouted.

The girl jumped, so startled that she almost upset the canoe. Joe reached down with a big hand to steady it. The girl whirled, her braids swinging wildly, as she raised her paddle club-like. For a minute she looked wild as a forest animal, glaring at him. Then she let the paddle drop and sighed with relief.

“You are Joe Meek,” she declared. “You are friend. Your wife is Indian woman, Nez Perce. I have been told you are a mighty hunter, a brave of great heart.”

Joe cleared his throat and tried to look modest. He wondered how the girl knew so much about him. She talked nearly as good American as he did, so likely she came from Jason Lee’s Mission back on the Willamette River. Twenty or thirty Indian youngsters boarded and studied there.

“I am named Keetow,” she volunteered. “I thought it was you in that boat. I hoped you would lead me to the village of my people, the Chinooks.”

Chinooks? That was a tribe living near the coast at the mouth of the Columbia River, more than a hundred miles away by water. Joe scowled doubtfully. “You ain’t dressed like a Chinook,” he said. “Only Horse Indian women wear clothes like you’ve got on.”

She smoothed her doeskin skirt, pleased that Joe had noticed her pretty beaded dress. “My teacher at the Mission who has visited the Cayuse tribes helped me to sew it,” she explained.

Joe pushed his broad-brimmed black hat to the back of his head. Plainly the youngster was running away. The missionaries wouldn’t let a girl start out hunting for her tribe by herself when she didn’t even know the way to go. Joe had a small half-Indian daughter at Marcus Whitman’s Mission School in the Walla Walla country. He wouldn’t like to think she’d run away, as this youngster was doing, traveling so bold in her little painted dugout canoe. He frowned at the figure of a fawn carved on the prow.

“Were they mean to you at the Mission?” he demanded.

Keetow shook her head. “Very kind. Very good.”

“Then I reckon I’d better take you back.”

She broke into cries of protest, part in English and part in an Indian tongue. She could not return to the Mission, she said. They were planning to send her on a great ship to the land of the white people. They wanted to show the Easterners how well she had learned at the Mission school.

Her teacher, Mrs. Garret, was going to take her in that ship. That was why the beautiful dress had been made. That was why she had been set to studying day and night to learn the language well. That was why she was running away.

She’s plumb scared of the whole idea, thought Joe. And he wouldn’t blame her. He would likely have been scared of such a trip himself at her age. Any youngster might shy at going around the Horn, six months at sea, then to be stared at by thousands of strangers.

Joe had been near eighteen when he skipped out from his Virginia home and headed for St. Louis on the edge of

the frontier. He'd felt himself full-grown at eighteen. Even so, he'd been plenty uneasy.

But if he encouraged the girl in running away to the tribe, it would seem as if he were working against the people at the Mission. Joe wasn't a church-going man himself, but he admired the fine job Jason Lee was doing in Oregon. He not only taught the native Indians, but he also helped bring Americans here to settle. Jason Lee worked every way he could to bring settlers—American settlers—to the country.

Four years ago, in 1838, he had carried a petition for Territorial Government to Washington. When he made the trip East, he had taken three Indian boys from his Mission to show off to folks back home. The boys had done more to interest Congress in Oregon than any number of petitions.

But Keetow wouldn't understand that. She would only see that the three boys had not returned. That scared her, no doubt. It wouldn't be a matter easily explained.

As he studied the problem, the girl watched him with fawn-like staring eyes. Joe didn't rightly know what to do. Chinook village was a far ways off, and he had things to attend to down in this direction. He was on his way now to take word to Ambrose Brandt, up-creek a ways, about the settlers' meeting being called to "palaver" this government business.

It might be that Ambrose, for all he was a newcomer, would have an idea what to do with the young 'un. Ambrose was always stewing over what was right and wrong for his own two children, fourteen-year-old Tackett and that yellow-haired baby, Debbie. Their mother had been killed in a wagon accident on the trip west. That

made Ambrose take family worries twice as hard as most men did.

Joe continued upstream in the direction he had been traveling. “Just keep a-followin’,” he said. “There’s some folks above might know how to help ye.”

An hour or so later, Joe Meek helped the girl beach her canoe next to his skiff and led the way along a trampled path up to the Brandts’ cabin.

The raw little cabin was set at one end of a clearing. To the side stretched a rough-plowed field with the wheat just stirring above ground. To the north, space had been fenced in to form a sort of corral, penning in a rangy, longhorned red cow and a newborn calf.

As Keetow followed Joe to the clearing, she saw a tall, black-bearded man and a reedy boy busily lashing willow poles to the corral fence. Nearby, on the muddy earth, a tow-headed baby girl played with some sticks and stones.

Joe Meek strode ahead, grinning from ear to ear. “By the great shaggy mountain,” he shouted, “you’re a farmer for sure, Ambrose. Now you got a cow!”

“She’s Tackett’s cow,” the man called back, “providing, that is, that nobody claims her. The boy found her and brought her in a week ago.”

Joe Meek laughed as he came striding forward. “I saw the ‘found’ notice you posted at the Trading House at Champoeg. You’re bound to be lawful, ain’t ye, Ambrose? Even in a land where there’s no law!”

“The cow’s got no brand on her,” the boy put in hurriedly. “And anyhow, the calf belongs to me. It was born right here, and this here’s American land.”

Suddenly, Tackett Brandt stopped talking and stared wide-eyed at the Indian girl at Joe’s heels.

Keetow was staring, too. She looked from one strange face to the other, from the little baby girl to the black-bearded man with sad, sunken eyes. Then her gaze took in Tackett's long hair, growing "mountain-man" style, his stubborn jaw, warm blue eyes, his shoulders too narrow for his height. Suddenly, she moved forward and dropped her bundle of belongings square at Tackett's feet.

"This is good place," she said to Joe. "This is better than my village." Her eyes went back admiringly to Tackett. "This is good place," she repeated. "I will stay here, please."

Tackett jumped back as if he'd been stung by a wasp. His face flushed scarlet. He glared down at the toes of his boots and edged away from the bundle Keetow had dropped before him.

Joe Meek slapped his thigh and shouted. Mr. Brandt laughed, too. Even little Debbie sent up a crow of laughter, seeing that laughter was in the air.

Keetow looked startled, and Ambrose, noticing this, said kindly, "Don't mind, we're not laughing at you."

She beamed. "Laughter is good. Among my own people, I remember, there is much joke and laughter."

"That's one thing you can't say for the missionaries," Joe Meek remarked. "They don't joke much, I bet, at the Mission where you came from; but they pray plenty."

"Prayer, too, is good," advised Keetow firmly.

"Tell her she can't stay here, Pa," Tackett muttered.

She flashed a glance, not admiring now. "I hear you well," she said in an icy voice.

"I caught Keetow sneakin' after me on the creek," Joe said. "I need advice how to handle her problem."

Joe pushed his hat back. He was fumbling for words when Deborah furnished a welcome interruption. She



had been staring, owl-eyed, at the strange girl in the brightly beaded dress. Now she rose and darted forward. Her hands clung to Keetow's fringed skirt; without words she begged to be taken up.

Tackett watched, amazed. Since they had come to Oregon, Debbie had made friends with no one. She wouldn't trust anybody but her father and himself; yet now she was begging this Indian girl to hold her. Since their mother had died, Debbie had not been in the arms of a woman.

"Wow," Tackett said. "She likes you."

"Yes," Keetow agreed matter-of-factly. Her hand

touched Debbie's hair. "Little yellow-head, you are very dirty. Come, I will wash you."

Tackett glared as Keetow carried the child toward the cabin. Dirty? Why, he had washed Debbie carefully just last night. It wasn't truthful to say the baby was dirty. That Indian girl was just trying to put him in the wrong.

"Who is she?" Ambrose asked in a low voice.

"One of the Mission young 'uns," Joe Meek explained. "A prize one, I reckon. She says they're bound to take her East, to show her off to the Missionary Board. But she's scared to go. Wanted me to help her get plumb away, to the Chinook village."

Keetow slowed her step, half-turned, her head cocked to listen.

"Are they planning to travel overland to the States?" Ambrose asked.

Joe Meek shook his head. "There's a missionary ship due this month. Mrs. Garret is figuring to board it."

Ambrose ran his fingers through his curly black beard and glanced toward the two figures making their slow way to the cabin. He had been wishing there was a way that he could send Deborah back to the States. This wild, lonely settlement was no place for a motherless little girl.

After their hard journey across the Rockies and the accident that had ended in his wife's death, Ambrose Brandt would never let Deborah go overland again. But if she could journey by ship . . . "I'd give a pretty penny for a chance like that to send Debbie East," he said.

At the cabin door, Keetow looked back over her shoulder in time to see Tackett's head jerk up defiantly. She saw the alarm spring up in the boy's eyes at the mention of sending this baby to the East. "Truly," she murmured, as she went into the cabin, "it must be a fearsome place."

Tackett swallowed hard. "Passage would cost a heap more than a penny, Pa!" he said.

Ambrose nodded, understanding his son's alarm. He knew that it would half-kill Tackett to have Debbie sent away. But it worried the father that she had no woman to care for her. It was in his mind that his own mother could give Debbie a real home and a woman's loving care. But his mother was far away, in Philadelphia. As Tackett said, ship passage cost a heap of money.

"I doubt if I could scrape up fifty cents," he sighed.

Joe Meek was still trying to study out the problem of Keetow. "What do you reckon we ought to do about that Indian girl, Ambrose?" He jerked a thumb toward the cabin. "She's plumb scared to go East."

Ambrose hesitated. "It would be a remarkable experience for her. And certainly she would not be happy now in a Chinook village. She has learned to live as white people do."

"You make sense," Joe agreed. "Likely 'twould be best to fetch her back to the Mission."

Tackett looked down at the bundle Keetow had dropped. He pushed it just a little aside and, with a sigh of relief, went back to lashing the poles on his fence.

Joe Meek took his knife from its sheath and began marking in the soft earth. "There's to be a settlers' meeting at Caleb Wilkins' place," he said softly. "Tuesday next."

Ambrose was poised to go to work again. He paused, frowning. "Another petition to Congress? Will it do any more good than the others have?"

The mountain man shrugged his shoulders. "We ain't figurin' on petitioning for Territorial Government this time."

“Just as well,” Ambrose answered. “They might send us another Indian Agent.”

Both men laughed. The only answers Congress had made to the petitions of the settlers had been to appoint Elijah White as agent to the Indians in this region. White had been to Oregon earlier as a missionary. When he had returned with his appointment, he had acted as though he were a governor. The settlers had demanded his authority. When he could produce none, they had laughed him out of office. How could they have a governor without a government?

Ambrose leaned against the fence and prepared to give his full attention to Joe Meek. Joe launched at once into talk about the meeting. He was full of it, and presently the two men walked off toward the woods, leaving Tackett to finish lashing the willow poles.

The boy was glad to see Joe Meek filling his father’s mind with settlers’ problems. He hoped there would be no room left for that crazy idea of sending Debbie away.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t taken good care of his little sister—even if that Indian girl had stepped in, saying Debbie was dirty. Of course she had a little mud on her hands and face from playing on the ground—a body couldn’t be watching every minute while fencing in a cow!



# THE CHALLENGERS

JO LUNDY

**J**oe Meek has always enjoyed living in the Oregon Territory, despite political contentions, illnesses, and wild animal attacks that come as the territory expands. However, his life is complicated in ways he never would have imagined when he comes across a young Indian girl named Keetow, a runaway from the Mission. Packed with adventure and educational value, this historical fiction book gives an insightful window into the challenges and triumphs of a growing nation.

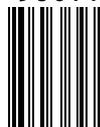


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