

LIFE AND TIMES OF NED BUNTLINE

BY STEWART H. HOLBROOK

NED BUNTLINE invented the dime novel and wrote 410 of them to prove that a new art form had arrived. He also invented the character of "Buffalo Bill" and draped it on William F. Cody, who ever after lived in a thick fog of wonder, honestly incapable of discriminating between what actually had happened in his life and what Buntline swore had happened. Buntline's own life was more exciting than any of the fiction he wrote, and also gamier by far. He lived, as the phrase had it, a full life, and died at sixty-three, probably from the effects of extended lead poison from the many bullets still in his body when at last he turned his face toward the wall.

Ned Buntline was really Edward Zane Carroll Judson, born in 1823 in Stamford, New York, on a night, says one of his biographers, that was wild and fearful to behold, when the floodgates of heaven opened wide and added to the fury of a tremendous electric storm of such power as to make spectators tremble. This kind of night was much favored by biographers of the day to usher in the birth of an adventurous soul such as Judson was to become, and none more deserved a turbulent and tempestuous introduction than he.

Judson's father, Levi, was a stern

and unyielding man of old Yankee stock who tried to run his nineteenth-century home according to the rules and customs set up in Massachusetts Bay Colony two hundred years before. Young Judson did not like the restrictions. He loved to fish and hunt. His folks did manage to keep him in school for portions of a few years, but when his father told the son he was to study for the law, the boy ran off to Philadelphia and there shipped as a cabin boy for a trip around the Horn.

Young Judson liked the sea. On his return he enlisted as an apprentice in the United States Navy. For courage and resourcefulness in rescuing several members of the crew who had been run down in a long-boat by a Fulton Ferry steamer in the East River, he was commissioned midshipman by President Martin Van Buren. In 1842, after a number of escapades which had brought disciplinary measures, he resigned from the Navy. In the meantime, under the signature of Ned Buntline, he had written an account of an incident on shipboard which appeared as a small book, *The Captain's Pig*. The book made something of a noise and attracted the attention of Lewis Gaylord Clark, editor of the *Knickerbocker Magazine*. For this pe-

riodical he did several more stories.

During 1843-44 Judson was probably where he claimed to have been — a sort of free-booting soldier and marine in the Seminole War. Next he appeared in the Far West as an employee of the Northwest Company, and claimed to have done a prodigious amount of hunting, killing many bison, mountain goats and a few grizzlies. He couldn't have been a commercial hunter very long, for in 1844 he started a periodical, *Ned Buntline's Own*, in Cincinnati. Apparently only one issue appeared. For the next six months he edited six numbers of Lucius Hines' bid for culture, *Western Literary Journal*, and then decamped, leaving Hines to pay the numerous bills.

Presently Judson turned up in Eddyville, Kentucky, where he married a woman described for posterity only as "Seberina," who died within a few weeks; and at Gallatin performed the notable feat of going into the woods to pursue three men wanted in connection with a particularly atrocious murder. He overtook two of them, tied them to trees, then went on to chase the third who, however, got away. Judson took the two wanted men to Gallatin and received six hundred dollars reward.

With the reward cash in his pocket, Judson went to Nashville, Tenn., and again tried the publishing business with a second version of *Ned Buntline's Own*, a sheet devoted largely to matter of a scandalous nature. It was not long, however, before the venture was

interrupted by what he termed "distractions incident to moving the periodical to New York City." This was a gross understatement: the "distractions" actually referred to one Robert Porterfield, a quick-triggered scion of Southern nobility who accused Judson of tampering with the affections of Mrs. Porterfield. Mr. P. made the grievous error of waving a revolver while talking to Mr. Judson.

Now, if a man were quick enough, he might shoot Judson; but it did not do any good simply to display a gun, for Judson did not frighten easily, or at all. On this occasion he very promptly shot and killed Mr. Porterfield, then surrendered to the authorities, saying the killing was the result of a formal duel. While he was being arraigned in a Nashville courtroom, Porterfield's brother entered, shooting as he came, and putting three bullets into Judson. Not having a gun handy, Judson tore out of the courtroom and took refuge in a nearby hotel; and right behind him came Porterfield leading a mob. Bleeding from his wounds, and still unarmed, Judson was chased down the hotel corridor by the mob, then leaped out a third-story window and crashed onto the street.

Now the mob had him. They threw a rope over the beam of a sidewalk awning, and strung Ned Buntline Judson as high as Haman, though not quite so well. His neck failed to snap, and before he could quite strangle to death the sheriff cut him down and was permitted by the mob to cart

away what they believed to be the dead body of a loathsome Yankee.

Although Judson admitted his neck was a trifle sore, he appeared again in the courtroom, this time to face the grand jury, which refused to indict him. Thus were his Nashville "distractions" ended, and Judson gladly moved on to New York, where he rented a room on Spruce Street and resumed publication of *Ned Buntline's Own*. He also started turning out paperback books that sold for ten cents and presently became known as dime novels. Among the earliest were included *The Black Avenger*, *The Virgin of the Sun* and *The Volunteer*, all of which appeared in 1847. Judson was a fast worker.

In the meantime, Judson's periodical took on a new flavor. Instead of scandalmongering, Editor Judson came out strong for the Common Man, specifically the common, white, native American man who, so Judson said, must organize his kind or go down before the hordes of German and Irish immigrants then flooding the country. Taking on Marcus Cicero Stanley, one of the ornaments of the *National Police Gazette*, as an associate editor, Judson fanned the fears of native Americans with some of the hottest jingo literature of the period. With editorial, cartoon and fictional "news stories" masquerading as fact, he prepared the natives of the eastern states for the coming of the Native American or Know-Nothing political party, soon to sweep the nation.

During a few months in the Mexi-

can War period, Judson was away from New York and may well have been where he said he was — serving as a spy and scout in Mexico. One can never be sure about Judson. In any case, he was soon back in New York, beating his drum, this time with at least one specific menace with which to inflame his readers. The menace was a distinguished English actor named William C. Macready.

II

The Bowery idol of the 1840s was a native American actor, Edwin Forrest, a Herculean figure of a man with the voice of a bull and no little vanity, who had been certified at numerous banquets over the years as America's first man of the theatre. Incidentally, Forrest was also the first American actor to have invaded the British Isles, where he had been treated most hospitably by Macready, England's first tragedian, but had also been hissed on several occasions. And now, in 1849, Macready was making a tour of the United States, playing Shakespeare and other alleged highbrow plays. It might be pertinent to mention that Macready was probably as vain as Forrest and as quick of temper.

Editor Judson, as already noted, was using *Ned Buntline's Own* to muster native Americans against the damned foreigners. He had also, oddly enough, become something of a hero to the members of Mike Walsh's Empire Club, a Tammany Hall affiliate, by knocking cold a couple of Walsh's

gorillas in a Bowery barrel-house. Although a goodly portion of the lower levels of Tammany were "foreigners" who had been born in Ireland, Judson saw nothing inconsistent in using them for a demonstration against English foreigners. His periodical was presently pointing with horror to the fact that so-called Americans were paying money to see an English actor. This, he indicated, was subversive to the Republic.

Judson and Edwin Forrest had been warm friends for several years. Whether or not Forrest egged Judson into his attacks on Macready is not known. Judson was perfectly capable of finding his own targets anyway; and he proceeded to snipe at Macready as the Englishman toured New England and the midwest and, at last, in April of 1849, came to New York City. Here he was to fill an engagement at the new and rather swell Astor Place theatre, built the year before at the point of the triangle formed by Lafayette Place, Eighth Street and Astor Place. That same April Forrest was appearing at the Broadway theatre, near Pearl Street.

The Astor Place house had proved to be a white elephant. Its eighteen hundred seats were seldom filled, partly because of a rumor that you could not occupy a seat there unless you appeared in evening clothes. This was quite untrue, but the rumor is important because it helps to set the scene for what was about to happen by indicating the snooty reputation of the Astor Place house.

Editor Judson continued to remark in his periodical, and often in CAPITAL LETTERS, which semi-literates always find inflaming, that British actors were taking the bread out of honest American actors' mouths. On the morning of April 23, the day Macready was to open at the Astor Place, a leading plug-ugly of the Empire Club was on hand, when the box office opened, to purchase fifty tickets; and all day long men who did not look like Astor Place habitués continued to buy tickets in twos, in fours, and in dozens. When the curtain went up that night on *Macbeth* a drama critic present remarked that at least one third of the audience patently did not belong there.

Macready made his first appearance in the third scene. Eggs, old shoes, then chairs rained upon the stage, accompanied by cheers for Edwin Forrest and groans for Macready. After trying vainly to get on with the show, Macready rang down the curtain. The morning papers took Macready's side, and one of them said that Forrest was the instigator of the disturbance. As for Macready, he said he had had enough of New York; but when Washington Irving and a group of the city's most eminent men had signed a public petition, asking him to go on with his engagement, the actor agreed to resume.

On the day Macready was to reopen at the Astor Place house placards suddenly appeared on walls throughout Manhattan. They asked if Americans or Englishmen were to

rule New York, and went on to announce that the crew of a British Cunarder then in port had threatened all Americans "who shall dare to express their opinions this night at the English Aristocratic Opera House," by which the Astor Place theatre was meant. Then the placards sounded the tocsin: "Workingmen, Freemen, Stand by Your Rights!"

It is possible, even probable, that Judson wrote and published the placards. Incidentally, there was absolutely no truth in the allegation about the British sailors.

The Astor Place management, however, prepared for trouble. They battened down the hatches as well as possible, boarding up the theatre windows and asking the city for a detail of 200 policemen. Somebody in authority also called for troops, and a regiment of militia took up positions in the street.

The performance opened with every seat filled. Mr. Bennett's man from the *Herald* noted that only seven of the eighteen hundred seats were occupied by women. This was to be an evening for males. Heckling began as soon as the curtain went up. The cops pulled the hecklers from their seats and took them to the theatre basement, where a sort of guard room had been improvised. On went the show, with only minor disturbances until, suddenly, the planks over one of the windows gave way and cobble stones rained into the house from the street. Outside a vast mob was on the loose. Beaten with clubs and stones,

the militia at last opened fire in deadly earnest. The mob broke and dispersed, leaving twenty-three dead or dying in the street, and twice as many wounded. Among the hundred or so persons arrested was Editor Judson, who denounced what he termed interference with a gentleman of the working press.

Actor Macready was smuggled out the stage door in disguise, then mounted a horse and rode as fast as he could to New Rochelle. From there, next day, he went to Boston, and so home to England.

For a man who ordinarily was both vocal and eloquent, Judson acted in an odd manner at his trial, at which he was charged with inciting and leading the attack on the theatre. He refused to take the witness stand. He was found guilty and fined \$250, and received sentence of a year in the jail on Blackwell's Island. Throughout his incarceration Judson remained a hero to the Bowery boys, and his release was an event of the first magnitude. He was met at the door of the jail by an immense crowd, many of whose members had managed to struggle into clean shirts with neckties. Two brass bands played exultantly. This escort saw Judson safely back in Manhattan where a monster testimonial banquet was staged, with oratory until all hours.

III

Judson now became a leading organizer of the Native American or Know-Nothing party, which offered candi-

dates for every office in the land from county sheriff to President of the United States. He went to St. Louis in 1852 to "help" with a city election there, and was presently indicted for causing a riot during which a number of citizens were killed, two houses burned and much other property destroyed. He got out of this jam by skipping bail.

When the Know-Nothing party collapsed in 1856, Judson bought some wild land in the Adirondacks and there built a big house which he called the Eagle's Nest and which he used as headquarters for many hunting and fishing expeditions. Meanwhile, he had continued to turn out dime novels by the bale — *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, *Cruisings Afloat and Ashore*, *The Red Avenger*, *Life on the Plains* and many others.

During this period he once wrote a book of 610 pages in sixty-two hours, neither eating nor sleeping until it was done. He told a friend he always thought up a good title for a story, then wrote the story, swiftly. "I take a bound book of blank paper," he said, "then set my title at the head of it. I push ahead as fast as I can, never blotting out anything and never making a correction or a modification. . . . If a book does not suit me when I have finished with it, I simply throw it into the fire, and begin all over again without reference to the discarded text." Judson earned a lot of money by this method.

He got into the Civil War rather

late, enlisting in September of 1862 in the First New York Mounted Rifles. His war record is quite obscure, but it is certain he was discharged in August of 1864 on a War Department special order. His record was "thoroughly discreditable." Upon discharge he set out at once for New York where he announced to his many admirers he had served in the war "as chief of scouts with the rank of colonel." Thereafter he was known as Colonel Judson.

In 1869 Colonel Judson performed the greatest service of his long and busy career. On a buffalo hunt out of Fort McPherson, Neb., he met a tall, lithe, unknown and very handsome plainsman named William Frederick Cody. Judson was charmed, and presently Cody became Buffalo Bill, the remarkable hero of a remarkable series of stories by Ned Buntline. A bit later Judson persuaded Cody to meet him in Chicago. Here, in the space of four hours, Judson wrote a whole play, "The Scouts of the Prairies," rehearsed it twice, engaged a theatre, and produced a show featuring Buffalo Bill that ran, in Chicago and New York combined, for more than two years.

When the run was over, Buffalo Bill was a national character, a glorious symbol of Frontier America, and so he remained until his death almost half a century later, a creature out of the uninhibited imagination of Colonel Judson, alias Ned Buntline.

Judson lived on until 1886, still writing tripe at the Eagle's Nest, still

fishing and hunting and entertaining lavishly. His character must have been more than commonly filled with confictions, for his friends and enemies were both many and staunch. He appears to have been a good friend himself, and an implacable enemy. He was, said Fred M. Pond (Will Wildwood), who knew him well, a big-hearted, genial and always entertaining soul.

Judson died with his boots off, as nearly as I can surmise from various accounts, from a large number of

bullets which had at various times been shot into him by outlaws, mobsters, assorted gangsters, Confederate soldiers, Indians, and relatives or husbands of seduced maidens and wives. There were also a few complications, including sciatica, angina pectoris and liver complaint. Taken all together, they were enough to lay him by the heels who was apparently immune to hemp and hot lead. At least two of his four wives survived him, and so did the most magnificent character he had ever created, Buffalo Bill.

THE POOL

BY BIANCA BRADBURY

Be still, be like a pool.
The brook runs all the day,
Skipping, glinting and flighty,
And nothing to say.

The pool snares fern-fringed skies
In its possessive mirror,
And what it holds in its clear depths
It holds forever.

Be patient, like the pool.
Let beauty come
And curl inside your waiting heart
And be at home.