

EYSTER WILLIAM REYNOLDS

FREE TRAPPER'S PASS

William Eyster
Free Trapper's Pass

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William R. Eyster

Free Trapper's Pass / or, the Gold-seeker's Daughter!

CHAPTER I.

THE RAID OF THE BLACKFEET

On a tributary of the Yellowstone River, and near to the Bighorn Mountains, there stood, at the time our story opens, a cabin. Though roughly constructed, there was an air of nicety and comfort about it, which could hardly be expected in a frontier log-house. On the outside, the walls presented a comparatively smooth surface, though a glance would be sufficient to satisfy one that the work was of the axe and not of the plane. On the inside, the walls seemed to be plastered with a material, which, in its primitive state, resembled stiff brown clay; and it was through a chimney of the same substance that the smoke of the fire within found vent.

A fair girl stood in the shadow of the rude doorway. Her hair, golden as the memory of childhood's days, floated in soft ringlets over her exquisitely-formed shoulders, half concealing in its wavy flow her lovely cheeks, mantling with the rich hue of life – cheeks which, long ago, might have been tinged with the sun's brown dye, but which now, miracle though it might seem, bore little trace of old Sol's scorching hand, or tell-tale mark of western marches. Blue eyes she had, and a lovely light lingered in their liquid depths, while her form was one corresponding to her face, slender, but lithe and springing, well calculated to endure, along with a stout heart, the privations which must come upon one thus so strangely out of place.

Half turning, she threw up one beautiful arm, and with her hand shaded her eyes from the glare of the sun, at the same time glancing to the right. As she did so, she gave a slight start, for, in the distance, she had caught sight of an approaching horseman. As cause for fear was, however, quickly removed, as she almost immediately recognized him as a friend. Murmuring lightly to herself:

"Ah, John Howell! What can he be after?" She watched with some interest his onward progress. Why was it that he so suddenly halted? Why did horse and rider remain mute and motionless, gazing in the direction of a mound which lay not far distant from the cabin?

From behind its concealing shade, with a horrid yell, a band of Indian braves at least fifty in number, in single file approached.

The majority of the band came directly toward the house, but the form of Howell, stationed, sentinel like, upon the crest of a knoll, having been speedily observed, a squad of four well-mounted and well-armed braves dashed toward him at full speed.

Half the intervening distance had been traversed before the trapper – for such was the white man – had fully determined whether their advance was friendly or hostile in its nature. When at length he caught fuller glances of their forms, it was with remarkable celerity that he unslung his rifle and brought it to bear upon the nearest of the advancing foes, tersely exclaiming:

"Blackfeet, by mighty!"

At the touch of the finger upon the trigger the weapon was discharged, and he who had been the mark, fell. Without waiting to see the success of his shot, Howell turned his horse and struck the heavy Mexican spurs deep into his sides, speeding in hot haste over the rolling ground, with the three red-skins following in close pursuit.

While these things were transpiring, the main body was marching steadily toward the cabin. Simultaneously with the report of Howell's rifle, the band halted in front of the dwelling.

In front, mounted before a sturdy-looking brave, was a noble-looking white man. Although his hands were tied, yet from time to time they had not scorned to eye him with anxious glances, seemingly fearful that by some Sampsonian attempt he might free himself. Thus, when the party halted, men closed around him, upon either side, guarding against such a catastrophe.

The young girl still stood in the shadow of the door, with the fairy hand shading her eyes; but her face was pale as ashes, and her heart must have throbbed at whirlwind speed, to have corresponded with the way in which her bosom rose and fell. It was very sudden. A single horseman in sight, and he a friend; then to see in a moment more a half a hundred yelling savage foes! For a moment she looked at them, but, as her gaze rested on the captive, she raised the other arm, and stretching forth both, feebly cried:

“Father!” then slowly sunk to the floor.

The prisoner, too, caught sight of the girl, and with a violent wrench sought to free himself from his bands. Strong as is a father's love, the cords of the savage proved yet stronger, and he found himself, perforce, compelled to act as best suited his captors. They, evidently fearing something of an ambuscade, were slow to enter, and with weapon poised with eager eyes, they glanced through the open door. Finding that their fears had no foundation, they dismounted, even allowing and assisting their captive to once more set foot upon the ground. At this close approach the girl somewhat revived. First consciousness of existence came back, then recollection, then strength, and she sprung to her feet, rushed between the two Indians who led the van, and throwing her arms around the neck of her father, exclaimed:

“Father, father! What does this mean? Why are you thus a captive?”

In the background, gazing with a look half inquisitive, half scowling upon these two, was a man, who, though dressed in the garb of the tribe, and his cheek deep tinged by exposure, still gave evidence of being of the white race. He was a short, stoutly-built man, of perhaps thirty years of age. His hair, dressed in the Indian style, was black, eyes small, and set deeply in his head, and the brow, though broad, was low and retreating. From some cause, the end of his nose was wanting, and this, with the wide and disproportionate shape of his mouth, tended to heighten the outlandish expression of his physiognomy.

Toward this person did Major Robison – the captive – turn his eye, and, raising as best he could, his bound hands, pointed with them, at the same time saying, bitterly:

“For this, I may thank you, you renegade, Tom Rutter. It was through his means I was taken; and now that it is done, let him take good care of himself, else I may be speedily avenged.”

“Look a-hear,” interrupted the man thus addressed, a dark scowl sweeping over his brows, “I don't care about havin' you or yer daughter; ain't no interest of mine; 'twon't do me no good. It am accordin' to orders. I don't know as they wants *you* partiklar bad either. Whatever they wants, they're goin' to hev – you hev to go 'long now; and when yer free to locomote again, by-and-bye, we squar accounts. Don't go to sayin' hard words agin me an' them red-skins, if you don't want to be purty affectually rubbed out. Jist keep a cool, civil tongue in that ar head o' yours, make yer tracks in the right manner, and you'll fare well.”

Major Robison, considering that to bandy words at that time would be dangerous and effect nothing, turned to his daughter, and in a low tone inquired what had become of her brother, Hugh. The answer was given in an equally low voice.

“He left me but a short time ago, for a ride across the plains. I know not what else he had in view; but I much fear that he will return before marauders leave, and so fall into their hands.”

“Never fear for Hugh. If he is mounted, and with weapons in his hands, the fleetest horseman in the tribe could scarce overtake him in a day.”

As Robison stated, it did not seem to be the intention of the Blackfeet to remain here long. But a short space of time was occupied in ransacking the dwelling, and as they emerged, bearing in their hands whatever of desirable plunder they had been able to find, Tom Rutter, who seemed to have,

in some sort at least, the command of the expedition, addressed them in words which, if rendered into English, would read:

“I tell you we must be making tracks out of this. We have been successful in our undertaking, but we must not trust to a run of good luck. You understand Blackfeet, what we want the prisoners for. It is for your good more than mine, and they must be taken care of. The girl can't be expected to walk, so one of the braves can take her on his horse. If we had time, we might scout around to find the other young one; but, as we have not, and as he is not necessary, let us be moving at once.”

If this was Rutter's opinion, it appeared to coincide with that of the chiefs who stood around, and preparations were accordingly made to start immediately. Then, with a yell of triumph, the line of march was formed, the captives occupying the middle of the file.

As they wound their way around the clump of trees which lay at the distance of a few hundred yards from the late site of her residence, Adele saw, nearly half-a-mile away, standing on a small elevation, John Howell. He had led his pursuers in a half circle, and having escaped for the time from their range of vision, was evidently bent on discovering what course the Blackfeet intended to pursue with regard to their prisoners. Turning her eye from him, it fell upon a moving object coming over the plain in a direct line toward them. The Indians, too, saw this object, which, it could be easily discerned, was a horseman, riding at a quick rate. A halt was made for a moment, and the renegade, who rode immediately in advance of the captives, half turned on his saddle, and said:

“That ar' person comin' is yer son, Hugh, an' ef he comes a little closer, he'll rush right into our arms. I ain't got nothin' agin ye myself, but it does seem as though luck was down on yer family to-day.”

The bad luck of the family, however, seemed to be partly averted, for, fortunately, the young man had a companion. This person gave token that he was an old *voyageur* on the plains; for his eye, ever on the alert, quickly caught sight of the hollow and the savages therein. Their horses were held in, a long survey taken, and then, to all appearance, satisfied that, for the present, no good could be done by them, the two turned to one side, and pushed their steeds into a quick gallop. About the same time, the detachment which had started in pursuit of Howell, again caught sight of him, and, fired by their success, rode at a sweeping pace toward his station. He, casting a last look at the smoke of the burning cabin – plainly visible from his position – another at the captives, and a third at his pursuers, commenced a rapid flight.

Nothing now remaining for the war-party to mark with their devastating hand, they fell again into file, and marched on under the guidance of Rutter.

Signals had been made to recall the men who were in pursuit of Howell, but their signals, in the excitement of their chase, had not been seen. Perhaps if they had been, they would not have been noticed. One of their number had fallen, and his death demanded vengeance. The scalp of the white man must hang in the belt of a Blackfoot.

The pursued took the chase coolly, carefully managing a horse that already seemed somewhat tired, he lifted him at every stroke, keeping sharp watch that he was not gained upon, and evidently steering for some place of refuge.

A long way off appeared the course of a stream, stretching its slowly winding length from south to north. Directly ahead lay a small, but thickly-studded copse of trees. Could the white man see what lay behind or within it?

There was another cabin there, not very large, but strongly constructed, and just at the edge of the copse, peering anxiously over the plain, a young man of some twenty four years of age. Tall, well-proportioned, with dark-brown hair, and piercing grey eyes, he made no bad appearance as he stood there, holding in his hand a white-brimmed sombrero, garnished with a deep black plume.

“It is time,” he was murmuring, “that Howell came. He has been gone long, and it is not often he delays beyond the appointed hour, yet – ha! Yonder he comes, and comes right gallantly, though

his horse seems weary. By heavens! horsemen are following him – Indians at that! He needs my aid, for three to one is too long an odds, even for him.”

So saying, the young man snatched up his rifle, which was resting against a tree near by, and threw himself upon his ready saddled steed, making the best of his way out of the thicket, starting at reckless speed in the direction of his friend and the three pursuers.

The Blackfeet, seeing a mounted man emerge from the thicket, though the distance was full half-a-mile, partly drew in their animals, as if fearing an ambuscade; then, seeing that no one else appeared, they rushed on with an increased fury. The five men, thus triply divided, were gradually approximating, but the red-skins seemed likely to overtake their intended victim before his friend could come to his assistance; and this likelihood appeared to be reduced to a positive certainty, as the horse of Howell stumbled, rose, and then sank in its track, completely blown. His rider was instantly on his feet, and facing the foes, now within fifty yards of him, and coming on at a rate which must, in a minute more, have brought them to the spot where he stood. But the hardy northern trapper is not a man who shrinks from danger, nor does his courage fail him at a critical period. Howell was one who, in all his eventful career, had never allowed his heart to falter, or his hand to shake. His movements, to be sure, were quick, but not flurried, as he brought his deadly rifle to his shoulder. A careful aim, the trigger was pulled – a flash, a report, and then, with an half-uttered yell, the foremost of the three persons wildly threw up his arms, reeled, pitched heavily off his saddle, and fell with a dull thud to the ground.

The comrades of him who had fallen seemed scarcely to notice the fact, and only hastened on with greater eagerness in order that they might come upon their quarry whilst his rifle was discharged.

Howell gave a rapid glance over his shoulder. His friend, at a furlong's distance, had halted. It formed a perfect picture. The sun rode high in the heavens above the great mountains of the west. In the shade, with the woods and the mountains for a background, his horse motionless, the young man looked keenly through the deadly sights of his long rifle. In front of him, with the broad light of the afternoon streaming over their wild forms, came the swooping braves. The whip-like crack of the rifle broke the charm. Perhaps it was a chance shot, but one of the Indians fell, the leaden messenger of death passing through his heart. Immediately afterwards a crushing blow, dealt by the butt of Howell's gun, swept the third and last of the party from his horse. Half stunned, as he was, he was on his feet in a moment. Bounding towards his white antagonist, he seized him before he had time to draw a weapon, and a confused hand-to-hand encounter ensued. Both fell to the ground, and, tightly clasped in each other's embrace, rolled over and over. The savage accompanied his work with frantic shouts and cries, but the white man held his teeth firm clenched, and in fierce silence essayed to end the contest. Nor was it of long continuance. An arm was suddenly raised, there was a shimmer and a flash of steel, a muffled cry, then the hunter shook himself loose, rose to his feet, took his tired horse by the bridle, and then he walked toward the grove of trees and the cabin before mentioned.

The half-mile which was now to be accomplished was soon passed over, and, as the space in front of the cabin was entered, to the traveller's delight, a fire was seen, with long strings of juicy meat suspended over it, whilst the coffee-pot, that article ever present at the true *voyageur's* meal, bubbled and sang a merry strain of welcome.

The repast was now prepared, and though Howell ate with gusto, yet, with a touch of that taciturnity which at times is visible in men of the wilds, he refused to utter a word. At length, when the repast was over, he raised himself from the floor, on which he had been reclining, and took a long, earnest, and sweeping glance over the plain. Then, returning, he took his former position, and opened a conversation with his companion.

“Wavin' Plume, I was down the river to-day, and turned aside to get orders from the major.”

“Well, what did you see? I've been waiting for you to speak. It looks like danger; yet, if there had been danger you would have spoken.”

Without moving from his seat, Howell pointed over to where the bodies of the dead Indians lay.

“Take it in a bunch, Charley, though it’s mighty rough. The cussed Blackfeet has bin on a fight with the Crows, and comin’ back they just burned the Major’s cabin, and gobbled up him and his darter, nice as you choose.”

As if waiting until he had taken in, and digested the whole of this intelligence, Waving Plume sat silently for a brief time, staring at his companion. Then, leaping to his feet, he exclaimed:

“Saddle your horse, quickly! We must have some token here for the boys, if they come in to-morrow, as they ought to, and then start in pursuit. Linked in, as we are, with Robison, no question of odds can for a moment allow us to think of deserting him and his daughter. We can follow close on them, Hawkins can hurry his men along our trail, and we may be able to attack them before they reach their village.”

“It ain’t no use to get in a flurry. My animal won’t be fit to start for a couple of hours yet, and I always was in favour of taking things cool. Saddle your horse, though, get your traps ready, leave your signal; and when you’re in the saddle, I guess Jack Howell won’t keep you too long awaiting.”

As they could not start for several hours, all their preparations were made with deliberation. Their saddles were first examined, every strap and thong undergoing a close scrutiny. Next their arms were inspected, and those things which might be necessary to them while following the trail, were brought out from the cabin. A moderate supply of provisions, prepared to keep, a canteen for water, a small flask of liquor, a rifle, a pistol, a blanket, and a hunting-knife comprised the equipment of each. With these, and a sufficient stock of ammunition, the hardy hunters and trappers would willingly strike out upon the surface of the broad prairie, or into the deep recess of the rugged mountains, though stirred only by the prospect of a small pecuniary compensation. Having these, the reader may suppose that the two would hardly hesitate as to the course which they were to pursue, when urged on by a strong friendship and a stern sense of duty – and, with one of the two, a still tenderer sentiment.

Howell led the horses out of the thicket, and stood waiting for his companion.

“Come on, Archer! We mustn’t loose too much time or the scent ’ll cold. The black rascals has got a good start on us now, and the sooner we wipe that out the surer we’ll be about our job.”

“Wait a little,” was the reply. “We must leave a note here for Ned and his party, telling him what is up, and what we intend. The Crows, too, if they make any pursuit, will doubtless send a runner here, so that it will be well to show them the direction in which they can find us.”

“Yer right about that last, though I didn’t think of it afore. As for Ned, what’ll ye bet he won’t be on the trail, and closer up than us by to-morrow mornin’?”

With the touch of a good amateur artist, Charles Archer – or Waving Plume, as he had been named, from the feather that, through storm or shine, floated from his sombrero – was busily engaged sketching on the rough door of the little house; and the bit of charcoal was sufficient to convey a rude, but significant hint to the eyes of any beholder. A pair of feet, as black as soft coal could make them, and an arrow pointing in a northward direction.

Simple as this appeared, yet it was abundantly sufficient for the purpose. The Crows, if they saw it, would understand at a glance, that the trappers were not only aware of the presence of the Blackfeet, but had also gone in pursuit. In fact, this idea struck Howell rather forcibly, for he remarked:

“There you are! If Ned comes in, he can understand that without any spectacles at all, and so kin the Injuns, if they come to get our help, which they couldn’t if it was writin’.”

CHAPTER II.

THE STRATAGEM OF THE TRAPPERS

With the privilege of the romancer, let us transfer the reader to a spot some thirty miles distant from the locality mentioned in the preceding chapter. It is a beautiful place. On the west the mountain, on the east and south the plains, on the north a spur of hills running out from the original chain. Here vegetation flourished, and the sweet breath of nature was fresh and dewy. Trees and flowers, and green grass, and sparkling streams greeted the eye, and the soft undertone of winds and waters, so like to silence itself, rang soothingly in the ear.

Hard by a spring of clear water, which bubbled out from under the huge trunk of a fallen tree, a small body of men were encamped around the smouldering embers of the fast-dying fire, on which they had prepared their evening meal. That duty having been disposed of, and their horses seen to, they were, after the manner of their class, engaged in a talk. The subject, too, which claimed their attention, was one of more importance than mere calculations as to peltries, or the ordinary run of camp-fire stories.

"I tell you," said one, the youngest, apparently, of the company; "I tell you that's the trail of a party of Blackfeet on the war-path. You kin see that with half an eye."

"I don't know," chimed in another. "It's nigh into fifteen years since I first crossed this here region, and I calculate that them resembles Injins tracks, an' made by a crowd it 'ud be cussed onhandy for us to meet. They're bent on mischief, and we'd better outen the fire and make a clean break, for we can't tell how many of 'em may be about."

"The Biting Fox is right," said a voice, which seemed to come from their very midst.

Instantly the whole party leaped to their feet, and, with surprise pictured on their faces, gazed in the direction from which the voice proceeded. Right by their fire stood a man, tall of stature, and apparently of the Crow nation. In full war-paint he stood, leaning on his rifle, and gazing intently upon the hunters.

"The Biting Fox is right, for the train is of the Blackfeet. Their number is large, and their blood is warm, for they seek the scalps of the Crows. Three suns ago they passed here; to-night they will return – Antonio waits for them. The fair-haired daughter of the great white Medicine may be with them, and they will pass quickly; but the rifle is long, and the eyes of the young eagles are sharp. Will they wait for them?"

"Yer right," shouted Biting Fox, leaping to his feet. "They'll pass the Major's house, sure as death, an' ef Wavin' Plume an' his chummy ain't along here on their trail, I'll never look through sights agin."

"The white men will need all help. The two braves may come, and the warriors of the great Crow tribe will press hard on behind them, for they are very brave."

The person whom we introduced as the first speaker had been viewing Antonio rather curiously for some time, and now, with a half-puzzled sort of tone, he asked:

"Look-a here, I've got two questions to ask – how did that ar log git thar, an' how did you happen to be in it? Ef you had a bin one of the sneakin' cusses as made that trail you could a knocked both of us over before we could a knowed whar the shots come from."

"The Great Spirit placed the tree there – three suns ago I was here at the spring, when the dogs of the Burnt Stick came, and I crawled into the tree to hide from them. While they were at the spring I heard their plans, and to-night I waited for them to return. I was sleeping, but awoke at the sound of your talking."

This conversation, carried on by two of the party, reassured, as it was intended to do, the rest; and, satisfied that the half-breed was a man to be trusted, they were ready to enter into a discussion

as to what was to be done. One of the first things to decide was as to the probable course which the Blackfeet would pursue. Should they come by this route, would they be likely to have in the possession either the Major or his daughter? If these questions were answered affirmatively, what was to be done?

The discussion was short but harmonious. Only one feeling was manifest – to attempt a rescue. Thus it was that Ned Hawkins – a sharp-witted and experienced hunter, who had command of the men – having spent some little time in thought, and some little more in conversation with Antonio, announced his determination.

Hawkins threw himself upon his horse, making a signal for the men to mount and follow. Without questioning the propriety of his move, they obeyed, and all set out in the direction – nearly at right angles with the trail – of the nearest encampment of the Crows. They held on this course for some distance, until the bed of a stream was reached, and then forward for a few hundred yards, till the hoofs of the horses struck upon hard ground, pointed out by the half-breed, and over which it would be difficult to trace them. Taking, at length, a bend over this, they returned to the stream at some distance from the spot where they had previously crossed it. Halting at the stream, the leader made a sign for the rest to stop, and at the same time taking his blanket from its place, behind his back, he dismounted and advanced to the low, shelving bank, and spreading the blanket carefully along the ascent. The blankets of the others were used in like manner, and soon a sort of bridge was made over the grassy turf, upon which the animals were led. Then the hindmost blankets were raised, and placed in front, the horses proceeded a few steps, and the same process was repeated. A few rods thus passed over brought them into their old trail. Along this they hastily galloped, much time had been consumed in the operation, and if the foe should arrive a little before the expected time, their plans might not admit of a full completion.

At the old camping ground they found Antonio awaiting them; and, by the same means employed at the stream, they begun to transfer their horses to the shade of the clump of timber upon their right.

Antonio leading, they soon came into an opening; but, as man after man defiled into it, from the opposite side came a scream, so shrill, so weird and unearthly, that in mute amazement they halted. Silence brooded over the group, touching all with its icy hand. The horses shrunk back with an irrepressible fear, and not a man was there whose thumb did not strike, with startled quickness, the lock of his rifle.

The levelled pieces were let drop into the hollow of their hands, and Hawkins turned to Antonio with:

“I’ve heerd tell o’ this critter often, an’ I’ve seed him myself, twice afore, but I never heerd, and I never knowed of his gettin’ that close to a man without tryin’ to git closer. They’re an ugly brute, an’ I believe I’d sooner try a rough an’ tumble with a grizzly hisself. What does it mean?”

“It’s a sign,” responded the half-breed.

The men threw themselves down, to await in patience the expected arrival. The trapper, who, on the first apparition of Antonio, had recognized him, was disposed to continue the conversation. Some few words passed, and then the question was asked as to what time the Indians might be expected.

“An hour yet. The horses of the Blackfeet will be wearied; but, when the moon rises, their scouts will be at the spring. If my white brethren had been unwarned, they might have been seen. Then they would have travelled fast. The golden-haired would have been mounted on a swift horse; the road to their land is but short, and a young squaw, given to the Great Spirit, is never seen again.”

“Right, my mighty! You know the red varmints like a book.”

Ned Hawkins, meantime, had been diligently watching the horizon, straining his eye-sight in the endeavour to discover something to repay him for his trouble. Now, more through surprise than the fear of the presence of an enemy, he uttered a warning.

“Sh!” On the plain a long line of dark, moving forms could be seen coming on at a fast pace. There was sufficient light to show to the breathless watchers that they were Indians; but to what tribe they belonged could not be told until they drew nearer, or the moon should fully rise. There was, however, but little doubt in the minds of the trappers that they were the expected enemy. The story of the half-breed had been so far verified.

As they filed, one after another into full view, and no signs of prisoners could be seen, the half-breed shook his head in an unsatisfied manner, while Hawkins said, in a whisper:

“Prairie Wolf, I allow yer sharp in Injun matters an’ death on black critters, but you’ve mistook the thing this time, an’ run us inter a purty snarl asides. Thar’s only about twenty of the red-skins, an’ nary a prisoner.”

“Antonio was right. The band was twice as large when it passed, three suns ago.”

“Ef yer right, it beats me,” put in Stevens, in a gruff, but low tone; “only one way to clear it up. They’ve been whipt like thunder, an’ consequently ther in a bully flame of mind for rubbin’ us out, if they once get the scent.”

“If the pale-faces will wait till they are settled, they shall learn why but half of these who went returned. They look not like men who have been beaten.”

“Waal. I allow it might be some sort o’ a consideration to know about them things, but then, as the Major ’pears safe, there’s other things nearer home to look at.”

This speech, notwithstanding the important facts which it contained, was somewhat dangerous to their safety, for Biting Fox, the speaker, had incautiously let his voice rise to a very loud whisper. Accordingly, Antonio expressed his opinion on the question of “what’s to be done” by admonishing silence.

“Ef we were squaws, who talk, we might be in danger; but we are men who fight, and do not talk. Antonio will creep up to their camp, and hear what they say.”

No dissenting voice was raised to this proposition, and he departed with that quick and stealthy step, for which the aborigines of our country have been so noted. So weird-like was his motion that he seemed like a ghost flitting through the trees. When he reached the edge of the copse he disappeared entirely.

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