

Cullum Ridgwell

The Watchers of the Plains: A Tale of the Western Prairies



Ridgwell Cullum

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	12
CHAPTER IV	17
CHAPTER V	22
CHAPTER VI	27
CHAPTER VII	30
CHAPTER VIII	34
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	38

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CHAPTER I

A LETTER

A solitary hut, dismal, rectangular, stands on the north bank of the White River. Decay has long been at work upon it, yet it is still weather-proof. It was built long before planks were used in the Bad Lands of Dakota. It was built by hands that aimed only at strength and durability, caring nothing for appearances. Thus it has survived where a lighter construction must long since have been demolished.

And it still affords habitation for man. The windows have no glass; the door is a crazy affair; there is an unevenness in the setting of the lateral logs which compose its walls; the reed thatching has been patched where the weather has rotted it; and here and there small spreads of tarpaulin lend their aid in keeping out the snows of winter and the storms of summer. It occupies its place, a queer, squat sentry, standing midway between the cattle ford and the newer log wagon-bridge lower down the river toward its mouth, where it joins the giant Missouri some two hundred miles distant. It backs into the brush fringing the wood-lined river bank, and is dangerously sheltered from the two great Indian Reservations on the other side of the river. Dangerously, because it is at all times dangerous to live adjacent to woods when so near such a restless race as the Indians on the Rosebud and the Pine Ridge Reservations. Still, it has stood there so long, and yet bears no sign of hostile action directed against it by the warlike Sioux, that it seems safe to reckon it will continue to stand there in peace until decay finishes it off. And the fact is significant.

Those who lived in that hut must have had reason to know that they dwelt there in safety.

The present tenant of the hut is a white man. He is seated on the tread of his crazy doorway, holding an open letter in one hand, while he stares in an unpleasantly reflective manner out across the prairie in front of him.

And the letter, which is slowly crumpling under the clutch of his nervous fingers, is worthy of attention, for it is written on crested paper which is blue. And the ink is blue, too, and might reasonably indicate the tone of the blood of the sender, though hardly of the recipient.

Still appearances are deceptive on the prairie with regard to human beings, even more so perhaps than elsewhere. This man has a something about him which speaks of a different life – a life where people live in greater ease and more refined surroundings. But even so, his face is very mean and narrow; an appearance in nowise improved by its weather-stained, unwashed condition.

Nevil Steyne – for that is the man's name – has read the letter, and now he is thinking about it. And as he thinks, and mentally digests that which a right-minded man would accept as its overwhelmingly kindly tone, his anger rises slowly at first, but ever higher and higher, till it culminates in a bitter, muttered exclamation.

“The crawler!” he said under his breath.

Suddenly he looked down at the paper, and proceeded to straighten it out. And his pale blue eyes were glittering as he read the letter again from beginning to end. The very crest at the top was an aggravation to him. And he conjured meaning between the lines as he went, where meaning lay only in what was written.

The heading bore a date at New York. It had been written on the second of June – ten days earlier. And it was a letter that should have put joy into his heart, rather than have raised his anger and hatred.

“My dear Brother (it ran) —

“It is possible that a letter from me may not be as welcome as I try to hope. I can only trust that your resentment against me has abated in these long twelve years since you cut yourself out of my life. I know you blamed me for what happened at our father’s death. You said nothing, would not see me, or the whole thing could have been adjusted then. You went off believing what was not true. Whether father treated you justly or unjustly you are the best judge. From my point of view it was the latter. It was always a mystery to me that he cut you out of his will. I was as disappointed as you, and it is for that reason that, for twelve years, I have been seeking you, to restore to you your share of the property. My dear boy, I’m sure you cannot imagine what joy it is to me that at last I am able to write this, that at last I shall be able to say it to you. We both know what a martinet father was, and what a disappointment it was to him when you refused to adopt the army and join me in following in the old boy’s footsteps, but, unless there was something else between you, that was insufficient reason for the injustice of his will.

“Well, all that is past now. What I have set aside as your share is untouched, and has been accumulating all these years. It is waiting for you. If you refuse it, I shall never touch it. In that case it remains tied up for my little daughter, at such time as she shall marry. But of course I have done this only as an emergency. You will not, I know, refuse it.

“Thank God, I have found you at last, dear old boy! Now, listen! I have set my plans with great care, and hope you will appreciate them. I do not want to subject you to any curiosity among our friends — you know how inquisitive people are — so I have come out here ostensibly on a big game shoot in the Rockies. Alice, my wife — you remember Alice Travers — and little Marjorie, our daughter, are with me. They know nothing of my secret. We shall break our journey at Sioux City, and then come across to you by road. And, lo! when we arrive my little surprise for them — Marjorie finds an uncle, Alice a brother.

“In conclusion, I hope to be with you on the 16th at latest; we shall come by way of the south bank of the Missouri River, then across the Pine Ridge Reservation, and so on to Beacon Crossing. I hope to find you as young in spirit as ever. I have many gray hairs, but no matter, so long as I find you well I shall be more than satisfied. *Au revoir*.

“Your affectionate

“Landor.”

“*Au revoir*,” muttered the man, as he viciously tore the letter into the minutest fragments, and ground them into the hard earth with a ruthless heel. “*Au revoir*,” he said again, and louder. Then he laughed. “But we haven’t met yet. Why should I take a share when you and your wife, and your brat are the only people who stand between me and the lot?”

And after that he relapsed into silence, and his thoughts flew on apace. The unwashed face grew meaner and more brooding, the fair brows drew closer over the large blue eyes, the jaws were shut as tight as they well could be, for he was painfully overshot, and his chin was almost hidden, so far receding was it under the long, drooping, tobacco-stained moustache.

That letter, it would seem, required no depth of thought, unless it were the happy thought that he possessed such a brother. It seemed to be a moment for nothing but happiness. And in such a man one might reasonably have expected to see him mount the horse tethered a few yards away in front of the hut, and ride into Beacon Crossing, where he could tell his associates of his good fortune, and celebrate it in the usual manner.

But there was nothing of happiness in the face that stared so steadily out at the hazy sky-line in the direction of the Cheyenne Reservation away to the north. There was a hard look, such as is to be seen only in pale blue eyes; – a look of unyielding hatred and obstinacy; a look which, combined with the evident weakness of character displayed in his features, suggested rather the subtle treachery of a coward than the fierce resentment of a brave man.

Never was a character more fully laid bare than was his at that moment. He was conscious of his isolation. There was no one to see. He hated his brother as a weak nature hates a strong. He hated him because years ago he, Nevil, had refused to go into the army for the reason of an obstinate cowardice, while his younger brother gladly embraced the profession of which their father, the stern old general, had been such an honored member. And so he had eschewed his mother country, leaving England, when he had been disinherited, for the wilderness of South Dakota, and had become one of those stormy petrels which, in those days, were ever to be found hovering about the territory set apart for the restless Indians. Yes, and with his destruction of that kindly, simple letter his resolve had been taken. He would have nothing at the hands of the man who had ousted him.

It was not thoughts of his resolve that gave his face its look of treacherous cunning now, but something else. Something which kept him sitting on his door-step thinking, thinking, until the sun had set and the twilight darkened into night. Something which, during that time, brought cruel smiles to his lips, and made him glance round on either side at the brush that marked the boundary of the Sioux camping ground.

Something which at last made him rise from his hard seat and fetch out his saddle from within the hut. Then he brought his horse in from its tethering ground, and saddled it, and rode off down to the ford, and on to the tepee of old Big Wolf, the great chief, the master mind that planned and carried out all the bloody atrocities of the Pine Ridge Indian risings.

“*Au revoir*, eh?” this tall renegade muttered, as he dismounted before the smoke-begrimed dwelling. “There’s only we two, Landor; and your precious wife and child, and they are – no, we haven’t met yet.” And he became silent as he raised the hide door of the tepee, and, without announcing himself, stepped within.

The dark, evil-smelling interior was lit only by the smouldering embers of a small wood-fire in the centre of the great circle. Though it was summer these red heritors of the land could not do without their fire at night-time, any more than they could do without their skins and frowsy blankets. Nevil Steyne glanced swiftly over the dimly outlined faces he saw looming in the shadows. The scene was a familiar one to him, and each face he beheld was familiar. The puffy, broad face of the great chief, the fierce, aquiline features of the stripling who was sitting beside him, and who was Big Wolf’s fifteen-year-old son, and the dusky, delicate, high-caste features of the old man’s lovely daughter, Wanaha.

He saw all these and entered in silence, leaving his well-trained horse to its own devices outside. He closed up the doorway behind him, and squatted upon his haunches in their midst.

Big Wolf removed the long-stemmed, red-clay pipe from his lips and held it out to the newcomer. The newcomer took it while the other said “How.” And all those about him followed suit and welcomed the white man in chorus with this customary greeting.

Then a conversation started which lasted far into the night. It entailed much subtle argument on the part of the visitor, and the introduction of many dusky warriors into the tepee, who also smoked the pipe in council, with many deliberate grunts of approval at the words of wisdom the white adviser spoke.

And all this was the result of that crested letter.

CHAPTER II

ON THE PLAINS

There is no place in the world which affords more cheerful solitude than the prairie. One may be miles and miles away from human habitation and yet there is an exhilaration in the very sunlight, in the long nodding grass, in the dusty eddies of the breeze which is never actually still on the plains. It is the suggestion of freedom in a great boundless space. It grips the heart, and one thanks God for life. This effect is not only with the prairie novice. It lasts for all time with those who once sniff the scent of its delicious breath.

Dakota and the more southern Nebraska are not the finest examples of the American plains, but they will do. What is better they will make one ask for more, and that is an excellent sign.

It is curious to gaze out over this wonderful virgin grass-land and seek for signs of other human beings. Not a speck in view, except perchance a grazing steer or horse. Not a movement but the eddying whirls of dust, and the nodding of the bowing grass heads as they bend to the gentle pressure of the lightest of zephyrs. And yet no doubt there are human beings about; aye, even within half a mile. For flat as those plains may seem they are really great billows rolling away on every hand into the dim distance, hiding men and cattle and houses in their vast, open troughs.

A little party of six had just appeared over the brow of a rising, which was the last great wave toppling monstrosly down toward that great expanse of the shallow valley, in the midst of which flows the Missouri. This tiny party, so meagre and insufficient-looking as they faced the sun-bound plains, had just left the river route to strike in a more westerly direction. As they topped the rise a great, wholesome love for the wide world about them welled up in the heart of the woman who was riding in the wagon, and found vent in a low, thrilling exclamation.

“Wonderful!” Then louder and with eyes sparkling: “Beautiful!”

A child of about eleven summers, with fair curling ringlets flowing loosely beneath a wide, flat sun-hat, whose wide-open violet eyes stared a little awe-struck at the vast world which greeted them, nestled closer to the woman’s side on the seat of the jolting wagon without comment, but with a sharp little intake of breath. She had no words to add to her mother’s.

At that moment one of three men riding ahead detached himself from the others and dropped back to the wagon, to speak to the woman and child. It was easy to understand the relationship between them by the affectionate smile that greeted him. He was a tall man and much tanned by a life spent largely in military camps in hot countries. He had the well-set-up figure of a fighting soldier.

“Well, dearie,” he said cheerfully to his wife, “how do you like the prairie?”

The woman nodded.

“I’m so glad we came on by road, Landor. The hotel people were quite bothersome about the restlessness of the Indians. I suppose that is a bogey they thrust before all strangers. I am glad you did not change your mind.”

The man understood his wife’s strong character, and her reply made him feel as though his responsibilities had been suddenly increased. He looked at his companions riding in scout fashion in front. They were pointing at something on the horizon, and he followed the direction indicated.

At last he looked round and encountered the gaze of his wife’s gray eyes.

“I thought you would be, Al,” he said quietly. “You see the Indians are always restless. Besides, if I –”

“Yes.”

The man laughed happily.

“No not yet, dear. My secret must remain a little longer. You are a wonder, Al. You have known that I have a secret for nearly two months, and still you refrain from questioning me.”

Alice shook her head, and stooped to readjust their daughter's hat. Her action hid the smile at her husband's simplicity. A good wife learns many things without questioning.

"You see I know I shall be told when it becomes expedient. How would you like to make hay in these lovely open fields, Marjorie?" she asked the violet-eyed child, gazing so steadfastly at this new world about her.

But Marjorie shook her head. She was a little overpowered.

"It's so big, mamma," she murmured, doubtfully.

At that moment one of the two horsemen ahead beckoned to the man a little peremptorily, and he rode off. Then the child turned to her mother.

"What did you mean about the Indians, mamma?"

But the mother did not answer; she was watching her husband, who had just joined the others, and she saw that all three were watching something that looked like smoke on the northwestern horizon.

"Don't Indians eat people, mamma?" asked the child presently.

Her mother laughed shortly, and answered, "No." The answer came a little more sharply than she usually spoke. Suddenly she leant forward and touched the driver on the shoulder. He turned round instantly.

"What is that smoke on the horizon, Jim?" she asked.

The man looked into her steady gray eyes. Then he glanced down at the beautiful child at her side, and, in a moment, his gaze came back to the handsome dark face of the mother; but instantly he turned back to the horses.

"Don't know," he threw back brusquely over his shoulder.

And the woman who learned so much without asking questions knew that he lied.

The vehicle creaked on. The steady jog of the horses kept the neck-yoke rattling in the harness with a sound that was almost musical. The sun was very hot, and the sweat was caked in white streaks all over the hard-working animals' flanks. Mother and child sat on in silence. Those two pairs of lovely eyes were looking out ahead. The child interested, and the mother thinking hard and swiftly. Curiously that smoke on the horizon had set her thinking of her husband and child, but mostly of the child. The driver chirruped at his horses as he had done from the start. He munched his tobacco, and seemed quite at his ease. Only every now and then his keen eyes lifted to the smoke. He was an old prairie hand.

The horsemen on ahead had halted where a higher billow of grass-land than usual had left a sharp, deep hollow. A hundred yards to the right of the trail there was a small clump of undergrowth. The men had dismounted. When the wagon came up the husband stepped to its side.

"We are going to camp here, Alice," he said quietly. "There is good water close by. We can spare the time; we have come along well."

Alice glanced at the faces of the others while he was speaking. One of the men was a long-haired prairie scout; his keen black eyes were intent upon her face. The other was a military "batman," a blue-eyed Yorkshireman. His eyes were very bright – unusually bright. The teamster was placidly looking round his horses.

"Very well," she answered, and passed little Marjorie out into her father's arms. Then she sprang lightly to the ground.

Then the teamster drove the horses away into the brush, and the wagon was hidden from view. The scout and the batman pitched two "A" tents, and the mother noticed that they were so placed as to be utterly hidden in the thick foliage. The horses were off-saddled, and, contrary to custom, were tethered further still from the road, down by the water.

Little Marjorie went off with the men who were securing the horses, and Alice stood watching her husband's movements. She was a beautiful woman of that strong, dark Celtic type, so common in Ireland. Her strong supple figure was displayed to perfection in a simple tweed suit with a jacket

of the Norfolk pattern. She stood for some moments watching with deep contemplative eyes. Then she abruptly turned away.

“I will gather some fire-wood,” she said deliberately to her husband.

He looked up from his work and their eyes met.

“Don’t bother,” he said; “we will use the oil stove.”

And without further explanation the camp was arranged. There was no bustle or excitement. Yet each member of that little party, with the exception of the child, knew that the camp had been made in emergency – grave emergency.

A hearty meal was partaken of. Then the man and the scout disappeared. The others occupied themselves around the camp. The afternoon wore on. At tea the scout and his companion reappeared. The wife still asked no verbal questions. Her eyes told her all she wished to know.

During the evening meal little Marjorie made a discovery.

“Mamma,” she exclaimed, “you’ve got a belt on like daddy’s. What are these?” And she fingered a revolver holster, of which her mother’s belt supported two.

It was the rough, long-haired scout who saved the woman a deliberate falsehood.

“Guess them’s playthings,” he said, with a sombre laugh. “B’t don’t figger they’re fer kiddies to monkey with.”

After supper the man and the scout again disappeared. Three hours later the moon was high in the starlit sky. It was a glorious summer moon, and the whole country was bright with its silvery light.

Two men were lying upon their stomachs conning the northwestern sky-line.

The scout at last spoke in his slow drawling way.

“Guess it’s played out, Colonel,” he said. “We’re up agin it.”

It didn’t seem clear to what he referred, but the other understood him.

“Yes, they’re working this way,” he replied. “See, something has been fired away to the right front. They may be working round that way and will miss us here. What are our chances?”

“Nix,” responded the scout decidedly. “Them critturs hev got to git around this way. They’re on a line that’ll strike Fort Randall, wi’ a heap more military ’n they’ll notion. They’ll strike south an’ sweep round sheer through to Wyoming. We’re dead in their line.”

“Then we’d best get back and prepare. Mrs. Raynor and Marjorie will have turned in; we can do it quietly.”

“Yup.”

They rose and returned to camp.

Colonel Raynor had intended to avoid his wife’s tent. But Alice was waiting for him on the outskirts of the camp. The scout saw her and discreetly passed on, and husband and wife were left together.

“Well?”

The woman’s tone was quite steady. She was used to a soldier’s life. Besides, she understood the man’s responsibility and wished to help him. And Landor Raynor, looking into the gray eyes that were to him the gates of the heart of purest womanhood, could not resort to subterfuge.

“They will be on us before morning, dearest,” he said, and it was only by the greatest effort he could check a tide of self-accusation. But the woman understood and quickly interposed.

“I feared so, Landor. Are you ready? I mean for the fight?”

“We are preparing. I thought of sending you and little Marjorie south with Jim, on saddle horses, but – ”

“No. I would not go. I am what you men call ‘useful with a gun.’” She laughed shortly.

There was a silence between them for some moments. And in that silence a faint and distant sound came to them. It was like the sound of droning machinery, only very faint.

The wife broke the silence. “Landor, we are old campaigners, you and I.”

“Yes, Al.”

The woman sighed ever so lightly.

“The excitement of the foreknowledge of victory is not in me to-night. Everything seems – so ordinary.”

“Yes.”

“When the moment comes, Landor, I should not like to be taken prisoner.”

“Nor shall you be, Al. There are four good fighting men with you. All old campaigners like – you.”

“Yes. I wasn’t thinking of that.” The gray eyes looked away. The man shifted uneasily.

There was a prolonged silence. Each was thinking over old scenes in old campaigns.

“I don’t think I am afraid of much,” the woman said slowly, at last. “Certainly not of death.”

“Don’t talk like that, Al.” The man’s arm linked itself through his wife’s. The woman smiled wistfully up into the strong face bending over her.

“I was thinking, dearest, if death faced us, little Marjorie and me, in any form, we should not like it at the hands of an Indian. We should both prefer it from some one we know and – love.”

Another silence followed, and the sound of machinery was nearer and louder. The man stooped down and kissed the upturned face, and looked long into the beautiful gray depths he loved so well.

“It shall be as you wish, Al – as a last resource. I will go and kiss Marjorie. It is time we were doing.”

He had spoken so quietly, so calmly. But in his soldier’s heart he knew that his promise would be carried out to the letter – as a last resource. He left the woman, the old campaigner, examining the revolvers which looked like cannons in her small white hands.

One brief hour has passed. The peace of that lonely little trail-side camp has gone. War, a thousand times more fierce than the war of civilized nations, is raging round it in the light of the summer moon. The dead bodies of three white men are lying within a few yards of the tent which belongs to the ill-fated colonel and his wife. A horde of shouting, shrieking savages encircle that little white canopy and its two remaining defenders. Every bush is alive with hideous painted faces waiting for the last order to rush the camp. Their task has been less easy than they supposed. For the defenders were all “old hands.” And every shot from the repeating rifles has told. But now it is different. There are only two defenders left. A man of invincible courage – and a woman; and behind them, a little, awe-struck child in the doorway of the tent.

The echoing war-whoop sounds the final advance, and the revolvers of those two desperate defenders crack and crack again. The woman’s ammunition is done. The man’s is nearly so. He turns, and she turns to meet him. There is one swift embrace.

“Now!” she says in a low, soft voice.

There is an ominous crack of a revolver, but it is not fired in the direction of the Indians whom the man sees are within a few yards of him. He sees the woman fall, and turns swiftly to the tent door. The child instinctively turns and runs inside. The man’s gun is raised with inexorable purpose. His shot rings out. The child screams; and the man crashes to the earth with his head cleft by a hatchet from behind.

CHAPTER III

AN ALARM IN BEACON CROSSING

A horseman riding from White River Homestead to Beacon Crossing will find himself confronted with just eighty-two miles of dreary, flat trail; in summer time, just eighty-two miles of blistering sun, dust and mosquitoes. The trail runs parallel to, and about three miles north of the cool, shady White River, which is a tantalizing invention of those who designed the trail.

In the whole eighty-two miles there is but one wayside house; it is called the “half-way.” No one lives there. It, like the log hut of Nevil Steyne on the bank of the White River, stands alone, a relic of the dim past. But it serves a good purpose, for one can break the journey there, and sleep the night in its cheerless shelter. Furthermore, within the ruins of its old-time stockade is a well, a deep, wide-mouthed well full of cool spring water, which is the very thing needed.

It is sunrise and a horseman has just ridden away from this shelter. He is a man of considerable height, to judge by the length of his stirrups, and he has that knack of a horseman in the saddle which comes only to those who have learned to ride as soon as they have learned to run.

He wears fringed chapps over his moleskin trousers, which give him an appearance of greater size than he possesses, for, though stout of frame, he is lean and wiry. His face is wonderfully grave for a young man, which may be accounted for by the fact that he has lived through several Indian risings. And it is a strong face, too, with a decided look of what people term self-reliance in it, also, probably, a product of those dreaded Indian wars. He, like many men who live through strenuous times, is given much to quick thought and slow speech, which, though excellent features in character, do not help toward companionship in wild townships like Beacon Crossing.

Seth is well thought of in that city – whither he is riding now – but he is more respected than loved. The truth is he has a way of liking slowly, and disliking thoroughly, and this is a disposition the reckless townsmen of Beacon Crossing fail to understand, and, failing to understand, like most people, fail to appreciate.

Just now he is more particularly grave than usual. He has ridden from White River Farm to execute certain business in town for his foster-parents, Rube Sampson and his wife; a trifling matter, and certainly nothing to bring that look of doubt in his eyes, and the thoughtful pucker between his clean-cut brows. His whole attention is given up to a contemplation of the land beyond the White River, and the distance away behind him to the left, which is the direction of the Rosebud Indian Reservation.

Yesterday his attention had been called in these directions, and on reaching the “half-way” he had serious thoughts of returning home, but reflection had kept him to his journey if it had in no way eased his mind.

Yesterday he had observed a smoky haze spreading slowly northward on the lightest of breezes; and it was coming across the Reservation. It was early June, and the prairie was too young and green to burn yet.

The haze was still hanging in the bright morning air. It had spread right across his path in the night, and a strong smell of burning greeted him as he rode out.

He urged his horse and rode faster than he had ridden the day before. There was a silent sympathy between horse and rider which displayed itself in the alertness of the animal’s manner; he was traveling with head held high, nostrils distended, as though sniffing at the smell of burning in some alarm. And his gait, too, had become a little uneven, which, in a horse, means that his attention is distracted.

Before an hour had passed the man’s look changed to one of some apprehension. Smoke was rising in a new direction. He had no need to turn to see it, it was on his left front, far away beyond the

horizon, but somewhere where the railroad track, linking the East with Beacon Crossing, cut through the plains of Nebraska. Suddenly his horse leapt forward into a strong swinging gallop. He had felt the touch of the spur. Seth pulled out a great silver timepiece and consulted it.

"I ken make it in two hours an' a haf from now," he muttered. "That'll be haf past eight. Good! Put it along, Buck."

The last was addressed to the horse; and the dust rose in great heavy clouds behind them as the willing beast stretched out to his work.

Beacon Crossing is called a city by those residents who have lived in it since the railway brought it into existence. Chance travelers, and those who are not prejudiced in its favor, call it a hole. It certainly has claims in the latter direction. It is the section terminal on the railway; and that is the source of its questionable prosperity.

There is a main street parallel to the railroad track with some stores facing the latter. It has only one sidewalk and only one row of buildings; the other side of the street is given up to piles of metal rails and wooden ties and ballast for the track. The stores are large fronted, with a mockery which would lead the unenlightened to believe they are two-storied; but this is make-believe. The upper windows have no rooms behind them. They are the result of overweening vanity on the part of the City Council and have nothing to do with the storekeepers.

The place is unremarkable for anything else, unless it be the dirty and unpaved condition of its street. True there are other houses, private residences, but these are set indiscriminately upon the surrounding prairie, and have no relation to any roads. A row of blue gum trees marks the front of each, and, for the most part, a clothes-line, bearing some articles of washing, indicates the back. Beacon Crossing would be bragged about only by those who helped to make it.

The only building worth consideration is the hotel, opposite the depot. This has a verandah and a tie-post, and there are always horses standing outside it, and always men standing on the verandah, except when it is raining, then they are to be found inside.

It was only a little after eight in the morning. Breakfast was nearly over in the hotel, and, to judge by the number of saddle-horses at the tie-post, the people of Beacon Crossing were very much astir. Presently the verandah began to fill with hard-faced, rough-clad men. And most of them as they came were filling their pipes, which suggested that they had just eaten.

Nevil Steyne was one of the earliest to emerge from the breakfast room. He had been the last to go in, and the moment he reappeared it was to survey swiftly the bright blue distance away in the direction of the Indian Reservations, and, unseen by those who stood around, he smiled ever so slightly at what he beheld. The two men nearest him were talking earnestly, and their earnestness was emphasized by the number of matches they used in keeping their pipes alight.

"Them's Injun fires, sure," said one, at the conclusion of a long argument.

"Maybe they are, Dan," said the other, an angular man who ran a small hardware store a few yards lower down the street. "But they ain't on this side of the Reservation anyway."

The significant selfishness of his last remark brought the other round on him in a moment.

"That's all you care for, eh?" Dan said witheringly. "Say. I'm working for the 'diamond P's,' and they run their stock that aways. Hev you been through one o' them Injun risings?"

The other shook his head.

"Jest so."

Another man, stout and florid, Jack McCabe, the butcher, joined them.

"Can't make it out. There ain't been any Sun-dance, which is usual 'fore they get busy. Guess it ain't no rising. Big Wolf's too clever. If it was spring round-up or fall round-up it 'ud seem more likely. Guess some feller's been and fired the woods. Which, by the way, is around Jason's farm. Say, Dan Lawson, you living that way, ain't it right that Jason's got a couple of hundred beeves in his corrals?"

“Yes,” replied Dan of the “diamond P’s.” “He bought up the ‘flying S’ stock. He’s holding ‘em up for rebrandin’. Say, Nevil,” the cowpuncher went on, turning to the wood-cutter of White River, “you oughter know how them red devils is doin’. Did you hear or see anything?”

Nevil turned with a slight flush tingeing his cheeks. He didn’t like the other’s tone.

“I don’t know why I should know or see anything,” he said shortly.

“Wal, you’re kind o’ livin’ ad-jacent, as the sayin’ is,” observed Dan, with a shadowy smile.

The other men on the verandah had come around, and they smiled more broadly than the cowpuncher. It was easy to see that they were not particularly favorable toward Nevil Steyne. It was as Dan had said; he lived near the Reservation, and, well, these men were frontiersmen who knew the ways of the country in which they lived.

Nevil saw the smiling faces and checked his anger. He laughed instead.

“Well,” he said, “since you set such store by my opinions I confess I had no reason to suspect any disturbance, and, to illustrate my faith in the Indians’ peaceful condition, I am going home at noon, and to-morrow intend to cut a load or two of wood on the river.”

Dan had no more to say. He could have said something but refrained, and the rest of the men turned to watch the white smoke in the distance. Decidedly Steyne had scored a point and should have been content; but he wasn’t.

“I suppose you fellows think a white man can’t live near Indians without ‘taking the blanket,’” he pursued with a sneer.

There was a brief silence. Then Dan answered him slowly.

“Jest depends on the man, I guess.”

There was a nasty tone in the cowpuncher’s voice and trouble seemed imminent, but it was fortunately nipped in the bud by Jack McCabe.

“Hello!” the butcher exclaimed excitedly, “there’s a feller pushin’ his plug as tho’ them Injuns was on his heels. Say, it’s Seth o’ White River Farm, and by the gait he’s travelin’, I’d gamble, Nevil, you don’t cut that wood to-morrow. Seth don’t usually ride hard.”

The whole attention on the verandah was centred on Seth, who was riding toward the hotel from across the track as hard as his horse could lay foot to the ground.

In a few moments he drew up at the tie-post and flung off his horse. And a chorus of inquiry greeted him from the bystanders.

The newcomer raised an undisturbed face to them, and his words came without any of the excitement that the pace he had ridden in at had suggested.

“The Injuns are out,” he said, and bent down to feel his horse’s legs. They seemed to be of most interest to him at the moment.

Curiously enough his words were accepted by the men on the verandah without question. That is, by all except Steyne. No doubt he was irritated by what had gone before, but even so, it hardly warranted, in face of the fires in the south, his obstinate refusal to believe that the Indians were out on the war-path. Besides, he resented the quiet assurance of the newcomer. He resented the manner in which the others accepted his statement, disliking it as much as he disliked the man who had made it. Nor was the reason of this hatred far to seek. Seth was a loyal white man who took his life in his own hands and fought strenuously in a savage land for his existence, a bold, fearless frontiersman; while he, Nevil, knew in his secret heart that he had lost that caste, had thrown away that right – that birthright. He had, as these men also knew, “taken the blanket.” He had become a white Indian. He lived by the clemency of that people, in their manner, their life. He was one of them, while yet his skin was white. He was regarded by his own race as an outcast. He was a degenerate. So he hated – hated them all. But Seth he hated most of all because he saw more of him, he lived near him. He knew that Seth knew him, knew him down to his heart’s core. This was sufficient in a nature like his to set him hating, but he hated him for yet another reason. Seth was as strong, brave, honest as he was the reverse. He belonged to an underworld which nothing could ever drag a nature such as Seth’s down to.

He knocked his pipe out aggressively on the wooden floor of the verandah.

"I don't believe it," he said loudly, in an offensive way.

Seth dropped his broncho's hoof, which he had been examining carefully, and turned round. It would be impossible to describe the significance of his movement. It suggested the sudden rousing of a real fighting dog that had been disturbed in some peaceful pursuit. He was not noisy, he did not even look angry. He was just ready.

"I guess you ought to know, Nevil Steyne," he said with emphasis. Then he turned his head and looked away down the street, as the clatter of hoofs and rattle of wheels reached the hotel. And for the second time within a few minutes, trouble, such as only Western men fully understand, was staved off by a more important interruption.

A team and buckboard dashed up to the hotel. Dan Somers, the sheriff, and Lal Price, the Land Agent, were in the conveyance, and as they drew up, one of the horses dropped to the ground in its harness. The men, watching these two plainsmen scrambling from the vehicle, knew that life and death alone could have sent them into town at a pace sufficient to kill one of their horses.

"Boys!" cried the sheriff at once. "Who's for it? Those durned Injuns are out; they're gittin' round Jason's place. I'm not sure but the woods are fired a'ready. They've come from the south, I guess. They're Rosebuds. Ther's old man Jason and his missis; and ther's the gals – three of 'em. We can't let 'em – "

Seth interrupted him.

"And we ain't going to," he observed. He knew, they all knew, what the sheriff would have said.

Seth's interruption was the cue for suggestions. And they came with a rush, which is the way with men such as these, all eager and ready to help in the rescue of a white family from the hands of a common foe. There was no hesitation, for they were most of them old hands in this Indian business, and, in the back recesses of their brains, each man held recollections of past atrocities, too hideous to be contemplated calmly.

Those who were later with their breakfast now swelled the crowd on the verandah. The news seemed to have percolated through to the rest of the town, for men were gathering on all sides, just as men gather in civilized cities on receipt of news of national importance. They came at once to the central public place. The excitement had leapt with the suddenness of a conflagration, and, like a conflagration, there would be considerable destruction before it died down. The Indians in their savage temerity might strike Beacon Crossing. Once the Indians were loose it was like the breaking of a tidal wave on a low shore.

The sheriff was the man they all looked to, and, veteran warrior that he was, he quickly got a grip on things. One hard-riding scout, a man as wily as the Indian himself, he despatched to warn all outlying settlers. He could spare no more than one. Then he sent telegraphic messages for the military, whose fort a progressive and humane government had located some two hundred miles away. Then he divided his volunteers, equipped with their own arms, and all the better for that, and detailed one party for the town's defence, and the other to join him in the work of rescue.

These things arranged, then came the first check. It was discovered that the driver of the only locomotive in the place was sick. The engine itself, a rusty looking ancient machine, was standing coldly idle in the yards.

A deputation waited upon the sick man, while others went and coupled up some empty trucks and fired the engine. Seth was among the latter. The deputation returned. It was fever; and the man could not come. Being ready campaigners, their thoughts turned on their horses.

The sheriff was a blank man for the moment. It was a question of time, he knew. He was standing beside the locomotive which had already begun to snort, and which looked, at that moment, in the eyes of those gathered round it, despite its rustiness, a truly magnificent proposition. He was about to call for volunteers to replace the driver, when Seth, who all the time had been working in the cab, and who had heard the news of the trouble, leant over the rail that protected the foot-plate.

“Say, Dan,” he said. “If none of the boys are scared to ride behind me, and I don’t figger they are, I’ll pump the old kettle along. Guess I’ve fired a traction once. I don’t calc’late she’ll have time to bust up in forty miles. I’ll take the chances if they will.”

The sheriff looked up at the thoughtful face above him. He grinned, and others grinned with him. But their amusement was quite lost on Seth. He was trying to estimate the possible result of putting the “kettle,” as he called the locomotive, at full steam ahead, disregarding every other tap and gauge on the driving plate, and devoting himself to heaping up the furnace. These things interested him, not as a source of danger, but only in the matter of speed.

“Good for you, Seth,” cried Dan Somers. “Now, boys, all aboard!”

And Seth turned to the driving plate and sounded a preliminary whistle.

CHAPTER IV

ROSEBUD

It is nearly midday, and the Indians round the blazing woods on the southern spur of the Black Hills are in full retreat. Another desperate battle, such as crowd the unwritten history of the United States, has been fought and won. The history of the frontiersman's life would fill a record which any soldier might envy. It is to the devotion of such men that colonial empires owe their being, for without their aid, no military force could bring peace and prosperity to a land. The power of the sword may conquer and hold, but there its mission ends. It is left to the frontiersman to do the rest.

The battle-field is strewn with dead and dying; but there are no white faces staring blankly up at the heavens, only the painted, seared features of the red man. Their opponents are under cover. If they have any dead or dying they are with the living. These men fight in the manner of the Indian, but with a superior intelligence.

But though the white men have won the battle their end is defeated. For the blazing woods have swept across the homestead of "old man" Jason, for years a landmark in the country, and now it is no more. A mere charred skeleton remains; smoking, smouldering, a witness to the white man's daring in a savage country.

The blazing woods are approachable only on the windward side, and even here the heat is blistering. It is still impossible to reach the ruins of the homestead, for the wake of the fire is like a superheated oven. And so the men who came to succor have done the only thing left for them. They have fought and driven off the horde of Indians, who first sacked the ranch and then fired it. But the inmates; and amongst them four women. What of them? These rough plainsmen asked themselves this question as they approached the conflagration; then they shut their teeth hard and meted out a terrible chastisement before pushing their inquiries further. It was the only way.

A narrow river skirts the foot of the hills, cutting the homestead off from the plains. And along its bank, on the prairie side, is a scattered brush such as is to be found adjacent to most woods. The fire has left it untouched except that the foliage is much scorched, and it is here that the victors of an unrecorded battle lie hidden in the cover. Though the enemy is in full retreat, and the rearmost horsemen are fast diminishing against the horizon, not a man has left his shelter. They are men well learned in the craft of the Indians.

Dan Somers and Seth are sharing the same cover. The sheriff is watching the last of the braves as they desperately hasten out of range. At last he moves and starts to rise from his prone position. But Seth's strong hand checks him and pulls him down again.

"Not yet," he said.

"Why?"

But the sheriff yielded nevertheless. In spite of his fledgling twenty-two years, Seth was an experienced Indian fighter, and Dan Somers knew it; no one better. Seth's father and mother had paid the life penalty seventeen years ago at the hands of the Cheyennes. It was jokingly said that Seth was a white Indian. By which those who said it meant well but put it badly. He certainly had remarkable native instincts.

"This heat is hellish!" Somers protested presently, as Seth remained silent, gazing hard at a rather large bluff on the river bank, some three hundred yards ahead. Then he added bitterly, "But it ain't no use. We're too late. The fire's finished everything. Maybe we'll find their bodies. I guess their scalps are elsewhere."

Seth turned. He began to move out of his cover in Indian fashion, wriggling through the grass like some great lizard.

"I'll be back in a whiles," he said, as he went. "Stay right here."

He was back in a few minutes. No Indian could have been more silent in his movements.

“Well?” questioned the sheriff.

Seth smiled in his own gradual manner. “We’re going to draw ’em, I guess,” he said. “Fill up.”

And the two men recharged the magazines of their Winchesters.

Presently Seth pointed silently at the big bluff on the river bank. The next moment he had fired into it, and his shot was followed at once by a perfect hail of lead from the rest of the hidden white men. The object of his recent going was demonstrated.

For nearly two minutes the fusilade continued, then Seth’s words were proved. There was a rush and scrambling and breaking of brush. Thirty mounted braves dashed out of the hiding and charged the white men’s cover. It was only to face a decimating fire. Half the number were unhorsed, and the riderless ponies fled in panic in the direction of those who had gone before.

But while others headed these howling, painted fiends Seth’s rifle remained silent. He knew that this wild rush was part of a deliberate plan, and he waited for the further development. It came. His gun leapt to his shoulder as a horse and rider darted out of the brush. The man made eastward, attempting escape under cover of his staunch warriors’ desperate feint. Seth had him marked down. He was the man of all whom he had looked for. But the aim had to be careful, for he was carrying a something that looked like woman’s clothes in his arms, and, besides, this man must not go free. Seth was very deliberate at all times; now he was particularly so. And when the puff of smoke passed from the muzzle of his rifle it was to be seen that the would-be fugitive had fallen, and his horse had gone on riderless.

Now the few remaining braves broke and fled, but there was no escape for them. They had defeated their own purpose by approaching too close. Not one was left to join the retreating band. It was a desperate slaughter.

The fight was done. Seth left his cover, and, followed by the sheriff, went across to where the former’s victim had fallen.

“Good,” exclaimed Somers, as they came up. “It is Big Wolf – What?” He broke off and dropped to his knees.

But Seth was before him. The latter had dragged the body of the great chief to one side, and revealed, to the sheriff’s astonished eyes, the dainty clothing, and what looked like the dead form of a white girl child. They both held the same thought, but Somers was the first to put it into words.

“Tain’t Jason’s. They’re all grown up,” he said.

Seth was looking down at the child’s beautiful pale face. His eyes took in the thick, fair ringlets of flowing hair all matted with blood. He noted even the texture of the clothes. And, suddenly stooping, he gathered her into his arms.

“She’s mine now,” he said. Then his thoughtful, dark eyes took on their slow smile again. “And she ain’t dead, though pretty nigh, I’m thinking.”

“How’d you know?” asked Somers curiously.

“Can’t say. I’ve jest a notion that aways.”

The others came up, but not another word passed Seth’s lips. He walked off in the direction of the track where the engine was standing at the head of its trucks. And by the time he reached his destination he was quite weighted down, for this prize of his was no infant but a girl of some years. He laid her tenderly in the cab of the engine, and quickly discovered a nasty scalp wound on the back of her head. Just for a moment he conceived it to be the result of his own shot, then he realized that the injury was not of such recent infliction. Nevertheless it was the work of a bullet; which discovery brought forth a flow of scathing invective upon the head of the author of the outrage.

With that care which was so characteristic of this thoughtful plainsman, he fetched water from the tank of the locomotive, tore off a large portion of his own flannel shirt, and proceeded to wash the wound as tenderly as might any devoted mother. He was used to a rough treatment of wounds, and,

by the time he had bandaged the pretty head, he found that his supply of shirt was nearly exhausted. But this in no way disturbed him.

With great resource he went back to the prairie and tore out great handfuls of the rank grass, and so contrived a comparatively luxurious couch for his foundling on the foot-plate of the engine.

By this time the men were returning from their search for the bodies at the ruins of the ranch. The story was quickly told. The remains had been found, as might have been expected, charred cinders of bone.

There was no more to be done here, and Somers, on his return to the track, sounded the true note of their necessity.

“We must git back. Them durned Injuns ’ll make tracks fer Beacon Crossing, or I’m a Dago.”

Then he looked into the cab where the still form of the prairie waif lay shaded by a piece of tarpaulin which Seth had found on the engine. He observed the bandage and the grass bed, and he looked at the figure bending to the task of firing.

“What are you goin’ to do with her?” he asked.

Seth worked on steadily.

“Guess I’ll hand her over to Ma Sampson,” he said, without turning.

“Maybe she has folks. Maybe ther’s the law.”

Seth turned now.

“She’s mine now,” he cried over his shoulder. Then he viciously aimed a shovelful of coal at the open furnace door.

All his years of frontier life had failed to change a naturally tender heart in Seth. Whatever he might do in the heat of swift-rising passion it had no promptings in his real nature. The life of the plains was his in all its varying moods, but there was an unchanging love for his kind under it all. However, like all such men, he hated to be surprised into a betrayal of these innermost feelings, and this is what had happened. Somers had found the vulnerable point in his armor of reserve, but, like the sensible man he was, he kept his own counsel.

At the saloon in Beacon Crossing the men were less careful. Their curiosity found vent in questionable pleasantries, and they chaffed Seth in a rough, friendly way.

On their arrival Seth handed the still unconscious child over to the wife of the hotel-keeper for an examination of her clothes. He did this at Dan Somers’ suggestion, as being the most legal course to pursue, and waited with the sheriff and several others in the bar for the result.

Good news had greeted the fighting party on their return. The troops were already on the way to suppress the sudden and unaccountable Indian rising. Eight hundred of the hard-riding United States cavalry had left the fort on receipt of the message from Beacon Crossing. The hotel-keeper imparted the news with keen appreciation; he had no desire for troublesome times. Plainsmen had a knack of quitting his execrable drink when there was fighting to be done – and Louis Roiheim was an Israelite.

A silence fell upon the bar-room on the appearance of Julie Roiheim. She saw Seth, and beckoned him over to her.

“There are initials on the little one’s clothing. M. R.,” she said. And Seth nodded.

“Any name?” he asked.

The stout old woman shook her greasy head.

“But she’s no ordinary child, Seth. Not by a lot. She belongs East, or my name’s not Julie. That child is the girl of some millionaire in Noo York, or Philadelphia. She’s got nothing on her but what is fine lawn and *real* lace!”

“Ah!” murmured the plainsman, without any responsive enthusiasm, while his dark eyes watched the triumphant features of the woman to whom these things were of such consequence. “And has the Doc. got around?”

“He’s fixin’ her up,” Julie Roiheim went on. “Oh, yes, you were right, she’s alive, but he can’t wake her up. He says if she’s to be moved, it had best be at once.”

“Good.” Just for one brief instant Seth’s thoughtful face lit up. He turned to old Louis. “Guess I’ll borrow your buckboard,” he went on. “I’ll need it to take the kiddie out.”

The hotel-keeper nodded, and just then Nevil Steyne, who at that moment had entered the bar, and had only gleaned part of the conversation, made his way over to where Seth was standing.

“Who is she?” he asked, fixing his cold blue eyes eagerly on the face of the man he was addressing.

“Don’t know,” said Seth shortly. Then as an afterthought, “Clothes marked M. R.”

The blue eyes lowered before the other’s steady gaze.

“Ah,” murmured Nevil. Then he, too, paused. “Is she alive?” he asked at last. And there was something in his tone which suggested a dry throat.

“Yes, she is,” replied Seth. “And,” he said, with unusual expansiveness, “I guess she’ll keep right on doing that same.”

Seth had again betrayed himself.

Nevil seemed half inclined to say more. But Seth gave him no chance. He had no love for this man. He turned on his heel without excuse and left the hotel to attend to the preparation of the buckboard himself.

On his way home that afternoon, and all the next day, the Indians were in his thoughts only so far as this waif he had picked up was concerned. For the most part he was thinking of the child herself, and those to whom he was taking her. He pictured the delight with which his childless foster-parents would receive her. The bright-faced little woman whom he affectionately called “Ma”; the massive old plainsman, Rube, with his gurgling chuckle, gruff voice and kindly heart. And his thoughts stirred in him an emotion he never would have admitted. He thought of the terrible lot he had saved this child from, for he knew only too well why she had been spared by the ruthless Big Wolf.

All through that long journey his watchfulness never relaxed. He looked to the comfort of his patient although she was still unconscious. He protected her face from the sun, and kept cool cloths upon her forehead, and drove only at a pace which spared the inanimate body unnecessary jolting. And it was all done with an eye upon the Reservations and horizon; with a hearing always acute on the prairie, rendered doubly so now, and with a loaded rifle across his knees.

It was dusk when he drove up to the farm. A certain relief came over him as he observed the peaceful cattle grazing adjacent to the corrals, the smoke rising from the kitchen chimney, and the great figure of Rube smoking reflectively in the kitchen doorway.

He did not stop to unhitch the horses, just hooking them to the corral fence. Then he lifted the child from the buckboard and bore her to the house.

Rube watched him curiously as he came with his burden. There was no greeting between these two. Both were usually silent men, but for different reasons. Conversation was a labor to Rube; a twinkling look of his deep-set eyes, and an expressive grunt generally contented him. Now he removed his pipe from his lips and stared in open-mouthed astonishment at the queer-looking bundle Seth was carrying.

“Gee!” he muttered. And made way for his foster son. Any questions that might have occurred to him were banished from his slow-moving thoughts.

Seth laid his charge upon the kitchen table, and Rube looked at the deathlike face, so icy, yet so beautiful. A great broad smile, not untouched with awe, spread over his bucolic features.

“Where’s Ma?” asked Seth.

Rube indicated the ceiling with the stem of his pipe.

“Ma,” cried Seth, through the doorway, up the narrow stairs which led to the rooms above. “Come right down. Guess I’ve kind o’ got a present for you.”

“That you, Seth?” called out a cheery voice from above.

“Guess so.”

A moment later a little woman, with gray hair and a face that might have belonged to a woman of thirty, bustled into the room.

“Ah, Seth,” she cried affectionately, “you jest set to it to spoil your old mother.” Then her eyes fell on the figure on the kitchen table. “La sakes, boy, what’s – what’s this?” Then as she bent over the unconscious child. “Oh, the pore – pore little beauty!”

Rube turned away with a chuckle. His practical little wife had been astonished out of her wits. And the fact amused him immensely.

“It’s a gal, Ma,” said Seth. He too was smiling.

“Gracious, boy, guess I’ve got two eyes in my head!”

There was a long pause. Ma fingered the silken curls. Then she took one of the cold hands in hers and stroked it softly.

“Where – where did you git her?” she asked at last.

“The Injuns. I shot Big Wolf yesterday. They’re on the war-path.”

“Ah.” The bright-eyed woman looked up at this tall foster son of hers.

“War-path – you shot Big Wolf?” cried Rube, now roused to unwonted speech. “Then we’d best git busy.”

“It’s all right, father,” Seth reassured him. “The troops are on the trail.”

There was another considerable pause while all eyes were turned on the child. At last Mrs. Sampson looked up.

“Who is she?” she asked.

Seth shook his head.

“Don’t know. Maybe she’s yours – an’ mine.”

“Don’t you know wher’ she come from?”

Again Seth shook his head.

“An’ – an’ what’s her name?”

“Can’t say – leastways her initials are M. R. You see I got her from – there that’s it. I got her from the Rosebuds. That’s her name. Rosebud!”

CHAPTER V

A BIRTHDAY GIFT

Rosebud struggled through five long months of illness after her arrival at White River Farm. It was only the untiring care of Rube and his wife, and Seth, that pulled her through. The wound at the base of the skull had affected her brain as well as body, and, until the last moment when she finally awoke to consciousness, her case seemed utterly without hope.

But when at last her convalescence came it was marvelously rapid. It was not until the good old housewife began to question her patient that the full result of the cruel blow on her head was realized. Then it was found that she had no recollection of any past. She knew not who she was, her name, her age, even her nationality. She had a hazy idea of Indians, which, as she grew stronger, became more pronounced, until she declared that she must have lived among Indians all her life.

It was this last that roused Seth to a sense of what he conceived to be his duty. And with that deliberateness which always characterized him, he set about it at once. From the beginning, after his first great burst of pitying sorrow for the little waif, when he had clasped her in his arms and almost fiercely claimed her for his own, his treasure trove, he had realized that she belonged to some other world than his own. This thought stayed with him. It slumbered during the child's long illness, but roused to active life when he discovered that she had no knowledge of herself. Therefore he set about inquiries. He must find out to whom she belonged and restore her to her people.

There was no one missing for two hundred miles round Beacon Crossing except the Jasons. It was impossible that the Indians could have gone farther afield, for they had not been out twenty-four hours when Rosebud was rescued. So his search for the child's friends proved unavailing.

Still, from that day on he remained loyal to her. Any clue, however frail, was never too slight for him to hunt to its source. He owed it to her to restore her to her own, whatever regret it might cost him to lose her. He was not the man to shirk a painful duty, certainly not where his affections were concerned.

During the six years, while Rosebud was growing to womanhood, Seth's hands were very full. Those wonderful violet eyes belonged to no milk and water "miss." From the very beginning the girl proved herself spirited and wilful. Not in any vicious way. A "madcap" best describes her. She had no thought of consequences; only the delight of the moment, the excitement and risk. These were the things that plunged her into girlish scrapes from which it fell to the lot of Seth to extricate her. All her little escapades were in themselves healthy enough, but they were rarely without a smack of physical danger.

She began when she learned to ride, a matter which of course devolved upon Seth.

Once she could sit a wild, half-tamed broncho her career in the direction of accident became checkered. Once, after a day's search for her, Seth brought her home insensible. She had been thrown from her horse, an animal as wildly wilful as herself.

A little private target practice with a revolver resulted in the laming of a cow, and the killing of a chicken, and in nearly terminating Rube's career, when he ran out of the house to ascertain the meaning of the firing. Once she was nearly drowned in the White River, while bathing with the Indian children after service at the Mission. She was never free from the result of childish recklessness. And this feature of her character grew with her, though her achievements moderated as the years passed.

It was by these wild means that she endeared herself to the folks on the farm. Seth's love grew apace. He made no attempt to deceive himself. He loved her as a child, and that love changed only in its nature when she became a woman. He made no attempt to check it. He knew she was not for him; never could be. He, a rough, half-educated plainsman; she, a girl who displayed, even in her most reckless moods, that indelible stamp which marked the disparity between the social worlds to which

they belonged. He was convinced, without disparaging himself, that to attempt to win her would be an outrage, an imposition on her. Worse, it would be rankly dishonest.

So the man said nothing. All that lay within his heart he kept hidden far out of sight. No chance word or weak moment should reveal it. No one should ever know, least of all Rosebud.

But in all this Seth reckoned without his host. Such glorious eyes, such a charming face as Rosebud possessed were not likely to belong to a girl devoid of the instincts of her sex. As she grew up her perspective changed. She saw things in a different light. Seth no longer appealed to her as a sort of uncle, or even father. She saw in him a young man of medium good looks, a strong, fine figure. A man who had no idea of the meaning of the word fear; a man who had a way of saying and doing things which often made her angry, but always made her glad that he said and did them. Furthermore, she soon learned that he was only twenty-eight. Therefore, she resented many things which she had hitherto accepted as satisfactory. She made up her wilful mind that it didn't please her to call him "Daddy" Seth any longer.

Those six years brought another change; a change in the life of the wood-cutter of White River. He still lived in his log hut, but he had taken to himself a wife, the beautiful orphaned daughter of Big Wolf, and sister of the reigning chief, Little Black Fox. Whatever may have been Nevil Steyne's position before, he was completely ostracized by his fellows now, that is by all but the folk at White River Farm. Men no longer suggested that he had "taken the blanket"; they openly asserted it.

The reason of Nevil Steyne's toleration by the White River Farm people was curious. It was for Rosebud's sake; Rosebud and Wanaha, the wife of the renegade wood-cutter. The latter was different from the rest of her race. She was almost civilized, a woman of strong, honest character in spite of her upbringing. And between Rosebud and this squaw a strong friendship had sprung up. Kindly Rube and his wife could not find it in their hearts to interfere, and even Seth made no attempt to check it. He looked on and wondered without approval; and wonder with him quickly turned into keen observation.

And it is with this strange friendship that we have to deal now.

Inside the log hut on the White River, Wanaha was standing before a small iron cook-stove preparing her husband's food. It was the strangest sight imaginable to see her cooking in European fashion. Yet she did it in no uncertain manner. She learned it all because she loved her white husband, just as she learned to speak English, and to dress after the manner of white women. She went further. With the assistance of the missionary and Rosebud she learned to read and sew, and to care for a house. And all this labor of a great love brought her the crowning glory of legitimate wifedom with a renegade white man, and the care of a dingy home that no white girl would have faced. But she was happy. Happy beyond all her wildest dreams in the smoke-begrimed tepee of her father.

Nevil Steyne had just returned from Beacon Crossing, whither he had gone to sell a load of cord-wood, and to ask for mail at the post-office. Strange as it may seem, this man still received letters from England. But to-day he had returned with only a packet of newspapers.

He entered the hut without notice or greeting for Wanaha, who, in true Indian fashion, waited by the cook-stove for her lord to speak first.

He passed over to the bedstead which occupied the far end of the room, and sat himself down to a perusal of his papers. He was undoubtedly preoccupied and not intentionally unkind to the woman.

Wanaha went steadily on with her work. For her this was quite as it should be. He would speak presently. She was satisfied.

Presently the man flung his papers aside, and the woman's deep eyes met his as he looked across at her.

"Well, Wana," he said, "I've sold the wood and got orders for six more cords. Business is booming."

The man spoke in English. Yet he spoke Wanaha's tongue as fluently as she did herself. Here again the curious submissive nature of the woman was exemplified. He must speak his own tongue. It was not right that he should be forced to use hers.

"I am much happy," she said simply. Then her woman's thought rose superior to greater issues. "You will eat?" she went on.

"Yes, Wana. I'm hungry – very."

"So." The woman's eyes smiled into his, and she eagerly set the food on a table made of packing cases.

Steyne began at once. He was thoughtful while he ate. But after a while he looked up, and there was a peculiar gleam in his blue eyes as they rested on the warm, rich features of his willing slave.

"Pretty poor sort of place – this," he said. "It's not good enough for you, my Wana."

The woman had seated herself on a low stool near the table. It was one of her few remaining savage instincts she would not give up. It was not fitting that she should eat with him.

"How would you like a house, a big house, like – White River Farm?" he went on, as though he were thinking aloud. "And hundreds, thousands, of steers and cows? And buggies to ride in? And farm machinery? And – and plenty of fine clothes to wear, like – like Rosebud?"

The woman shook her head and indicated her humble belongings.

"This – very good. Very much good. See, you are here. I want you."

The man flushed and laughed a little awkwardly. But he was well pleased.

"Oh, we're happy enough. You and I, my Wana. But – we'll see."

Wanaha made no comment; and when his meat was finished she set a dish of buckwheat cakes and syrup before him.

He devoured them hungrily, and the woman's eyes grew soft with delight at his evident pleasure. At last his thoughtfulness passed, and he put an abrupt question.

"Where's your brother, now?"

"Little Black Fox is by his tepee. He goes hunting with another sun. Yes?"

"I must go and see him this afternoon."

Steyne pushed his plate away, and proceeded to fill his pipe.

"Yes?"

The expressive eyes of the woman had changed again. His announcement seemed to give her little pleasure.

"Yes, I have things to pow-wow with him."

"Ah. Rosebud? Always Rosebud?"

The man laughed.

"My Wana does not like Little Black Fox to think of Rosebud, eh?"

Wanaha was silent for a while. Then she spoke in a low tone.

"Little Black Fox is not wise. He is very fierce. No, I love my brother, but Rosebud must not be his squaw. I love Rosebud, too."

The blue eyes of the man suddenly became very hard.

"Big Wolf captured Rosebud, and would have kept her for your brother. Therefore she is his by right of war. Indian war. This Seth kills your father. He says so. He takes Rosebud. Is it for him to marry her? Your brother does not think so."

Wanaha's face was troubled. "It was in war. You said yourself. My brother could not hold her from the white man. Then his right is gone. Besides – "

"Besides – ?"

"A chief may not marry a white girl."

"You married a white man."

"It is different."

There was silence for some time while Wanaha cleared away the plates. Presently, as she was bending over the cook-stove, she spoke again. And she kept her face turned from her husband while she spoke.

“You want Rosebud for my brother. Why?”

“I?” Nevil laughed uneasily. Wanaha had a way of putting things very directly. “I don’t care either way.”

“Yet you pow-wow with him? You say ‘yes’ when he talks of Rosebud?”

It was the man’s turn to look away, and by doing so he hid a deep cunning in his eyes.

“Oh, that’s because Little Black Fox is not an easy man. He is unreasonable. It is no use arguing with him. Besides, they will see he never gets Rosebud.” He nodded in the direction of White River Farm.

“I have said he is very fierce. He has many braves. One never knows. My brother longs for the war-path. He would kill Seth. For Seth killed our father. One never knows. It is better you say to him, ‘Rosebud is white. The braves want no white squaw.’”

But the man had had enough of the discussion, and began to whistle. It was hard to understand how he had captured the loyal heart of this dusky princess. He was neither good-looking nor of a taking manner. His appearance was dirty, unkempt. His fair hair, very thin and getting gray at the crown, was long and uncombed, and his moustache was ragged and grossly stained. Yet she loved him with a devotion which had made her willing to renounce her people for him if necessary, and this means far more in a savage than it does amongst the white races.

Steyne put on his greasy slouch hat and swung out of the house. Wanaha knew that what she had said was right, Nevil Steyne encouraged Little Black Fox. She wondered, and was apprehensive. Nevertheless, she went on with her work. The royal blood of her race was strong in her. She had much of the stoicism which is, perhaps, the most pronounced feature of her people. It was no good saying more than she had said. If she saw necessity she would do, and not talk.

She was still in the midst of her work when a sound caught her ear which surely no one else could have heard. In response she went to the door. A rider, still half a mile away, was approaching. She went back to her washing-up, smiling. She had recognized the rider even at that distance. Therefore she was in nowise surprised when, a few minutes later, she heard a bright, girlish voice hailing her from without.

“Wana, Wana!” The tone was delightfully imperious. “Why don’t you have some place to tie a horse to?”

It was Rosebud. Wanaha had expected her, for it was the anniversary of her coming to White River Farm, and the day Ma Sampson had allotted for her birthday.

Wanaha went out to meet her friend. This greeting had been made a hundred times, on the occasion of every visit Rosebud made to the woman’s humble home. It was a little joke between them, for there was a large iron hook high up on the wall, just out of the girl’s reach, set there for the purpose of tying up a horse. The squaw took the girl’s reins from her hands, and hitched them to the hook.

“Welcome,” she said in her deep voice, and held out a hand to be shaken as white folk shake hands, not in the way Indians do it.

“What is it I must say to you?” she went on, in a puzzled way. “Oh, I know. ‘Much happy return.’ That is how you tell me the last time you come.”

The squaw’s great black eyes wore their wonderful soft look as they gazed down upon her visitor. It was a strange contrast they made as they stood there in the full light of the summer afternoon sun.

Both were extremely handsome of figure, though the Indian woman was more natural and several inches taller. But their faces were opposite in every detail. The squaw was dark, with clear velvety skin, and eyes black and large and deeply luminous; she had a broad, intelligent forehead over which her straight black hair fell from a natural centre parting, and was caught back from her face at about the level of her mouth with two bows of deep red braid. Her features might have been chiseled

by a sculptor, they were so perfectly symmetrical, so accurately proportioned. And there were times, too, when, even to the eyes of a white man, her color rather enhanced her beauty; and this was when her slow smile crept over her face.

Rosebud had no classical regularity of feature, but she had what is better. Her face was a series of expressions, changing with almost every moment as her swift-passing moods urged her. One feature she possessed that utterly eclipsed anything the stately beauty of the other could claim. She had large, lustrous violet eyes that seemed like wells of ever-changing color. They never looked at you with the same shade in their depths twice. They were eyes that madden by reason of their inconsistency. They dwarfed in beauty every other feature in the girl's face. She was pretty in an irregular manner, but one never noticed anything in her face when her eyes were visible. These, and her masses of golden hair, which flowed loosely about her head in thick, rope-like curls, were her great claims to beauty.

Now, as she stood smiling up into the dark face above her, she looked what she was; a girl in the flush of early womanhood, a prairie girl, wild as the flowers which grow hidden in the lank grass of the plains, as wayward as the breezes which sweep them from every point of the compass.

"Mayn't I come in?" asked Rosebud, as the woman made no move to let her pass.

Wanaha turned with some haste. "Surely," she said. "I was thinking. What you call 'dreaming.'"

She eagerly put a stool for the girl to sit upon. But Rosebud preferred the table.

"Well, Wana," said the girl, playfully, "you said you wanted me particularly to-day, so, at great inconvenience to myself, and mother, I have come. If it isn't important you'll get into grave trouble. I was going to help Seth hoe the potatoes, but –"

"Poor Seth." Wanaha had caught something of the other's infectious mood.

"I don't think he needs any pity, either," said Rosebud, impulsively. "Seth's sometimes too much of a good thing. He said I ought to learn to hoe. And I don't think hoeing's very nice for one thing; besides, he always gets angry if I cut out any of the plants. He can just do it himself."

"Seth's a good man. He killed my father; but he is good, I think."

"Yes." For the moment Rosebud had become grave. "I wonder what would have –" She broke off and looked searchingly into her friend's face. "Wana," she went on abruptly, "why did you send for me to-day? I can't stay. I really can't, I must go back and help Seth, or he'll be so angry."

Rosebud quite ignored her own contradictions, but Wanaha didn't.

"No, and it is not good to make Seth angry. He – what-you-call – he very good by you. See, I say come to me. You come, and I have – ah – ah," she broke off in a bewildered search for a word. "No – that not it. So, I know. Birthday pre – sent."

Wanaha gave a triumphant glance into Rosebud's laughing face and went to a cupboard, also made of packing cases, and brought forth a pair of moose-hide moccasins, perfectly beaded and trimmed with black fox fur. She had made them with her own hands for her little friend, a labor of love into which she had put the most exquisite work of which she was capable.

Rosebud's delight was unfeigned. The shoes were perfect. The leather was like the finest kid. It was a present worthy of the giver. She held out her hands for them, but the Indian laughed and shook her head.

"No," she said playfully. "No, you white woman! Your folk not carry things so," and she held the tiny shoes out at arm's length. "You put paper round, so." She picked up one of her husband's newspapers and wrapped the present into a clumsy parcel. "There," she exclaimed, handing it to the girl, "I wish you much happy!"

As she put the parcel into the outstretched hands, Rosebud sprang from the table and flung her arms round the giver's neck, and kissed her heartily.

"You're the dandiest thing in the world, Wana," she cried impulsively, "and I love you."

CHAPTER VI

A NEWSPAPER

Seth was bending over his work among the potatoes. It was a large order, for there were more than five acres of it. Every time he stood erect to ease his back he scanned the distance in the direction of the White River. Each time he bent again over his hoe, it was with a dissatisfied look on his sunburnt face. He made up his mind that Rosebud was playing truant again. He cared nothing for the fact of the truancy, but the direction in which his eyes turned whenever he looked up displayed his real source of dissatisfaction. Rosebud had been out since the midday dinner, and he guessed where she was. The mosquitoes worried him to-day, which meant that his temper was ruffled.

Suddenly he paused. But this time he didn't look round. He heard the sound of galloping hoofs racing across the prairie. Continuing his work, he roughly estimated the distance the rider was away. He gave no sign at all until Rosebud's voice called to him.

"Seth, I've come to help you hoe," she said.

The man saw that the horse was standing pawing the ground among the potatoes.

"I take it friendly of you," he said, eyeing the havoc the animal was creating. "Guess that horse o' yours has intentions that aways too. They're laud'ble, but misplaced."

The girl checked the creature, and turned him off the patch. Then she quietly slid to the ground and removed her saddle and bridle, and drove him off out on the prairie for a roll.

"I'm so sorry, Seth! I'm afraid he's made a mess of these plants."

Rosebud stooped and tried to repair the damage her horse had done. She did not look in Seth's direction, but her smiling face conveyed nothing of her regret. Presently she stood up and stepped gingerly along the furrows toward the man.

"Did you bring a hoe out for me?" she asked innocently.

But her companion was used to the wiles of this tyrant.

"Guess not," he said quietly. "Didn't reckon you'd get back that soon. Say, Rosebud, you'd best git out o' those fixin's if you're going to git busy with a hoe. Ma has her notions."

"Ye-es. Do you think I'm getting any better with a hoe?"

The eyes that looked up into Seth's face were candidly inquiring. There was not a shadow of a smile on the man's face when he answered.

"I've a notion you have few equals with a hoe."

"I was afraid –"

"Ah, that's always the way of folks wi' real talent. Guess you're an eddication with a hoe."

Seth went on with his work until Rosebud spoke again. She was looking away out across the prairie, and her eyes were just a trifle troubled.

"Then I'd best get my things changed and – bring out a hoe. How many rows do you think I could do before tea?"

"That mostly depends on how many p'tater plants git in your way, I guess."

The girl's face suddenly wreathed itself in smiles.

"There, you're laughing at me, and – well, I was going to help you, but now I shan't. I've been down to see my Wanaha. Seth, you ought to have married her. She's the sweetest creature – except Ma – I know. I think it's a pity she married Nevil Steyne. He's a queer fellow. I never know what to make of him. He's kind to her, and he's kind to me – which I'm not sure I like – but I somehow don't like his eyes. They're blue, and I don't like blue eyes. And I don't believe he ever washes. Do you?"

Seth replied without pausing in his work. He even seemed to put more force into it, for the hoe cut into the earth with a vicious ring. But he avoided her direct challenge.

“Guess I haven’t a heap of regard for no Injuns nor squaws. I’ve no call to. But I allow Wanaha’s a good woman.”

Just for a moment the girl’s face became very serious.

“I’m glad you say that, Seth. I knew you wouldn’t say anything else; you’re too generous. Wanaha is good. Do you know she goes to the Mission because she loves it? She helps us teach the little papooses because she believes in the ‘God of the white folks,’ she says. I know you don’t like me to see so much of her, but somehow I can’t help it. Seth, do you believe in foreboding?”

“Can’t say I’d gamble a heap that aways.”

“Well, I don’t know, but I believe it’s a good thing that Wanaha loves me – loves us all. She has such an influence over people.”

Seth looked up at last. The serious tone of the girl was unusual. But as he said nothing, and simply went on with his work, Rosebud continued.

“Sometimes I can’t understand you, Seth. I know, generally speaking, you have no cause to like Indians, while perhaps I have. You see, I have always known them. But you seem to have taken exception only to Little Black Fox and Wanaha as far as I am concerned. You let me teach the Mission children, you even teach them yourself, yet, while admitting Wanaha’s goodness, you get angry with me for seeing her. As for Little Black Fox, he is the chief. He’s a great warrior, and acknowledged by even the agent and missionary to be the best chief the Rosebuds have ever had. Quite different from his father.”

“Guess that’s so.”

“Then why – may I not talk to them? And, oh, Seth” – the girl’s eyes danced with mischief – “he is such a romantic fellow. You should hear him talk in English. He talks – well, he has much more poetry in him than you have.”

“Which is mostly a form of craziness,” observed Seth, quite unruffled.

“Well, I like craziness.”

“Ah!”

Seth’s occasional lapses into monosyllables annoyed Rosebud. She never understood them. Now there came a gleam of anger into her eyes, and their color seemed to have changed to a hard gray.

“Well, whether you like it or not, you needn’t be so ill-tempered about it.”

Seth looked up in real astonishment at this unwarrantable charge, and his dark eyes twinkled as he beheld Rosebud’s own evident anger.

He shook his head regretfully, and cut out a bunch of weeds with his hoe.

“Guess I’m pretty mean,” he said, implying that her assertion was correct.

“Yes.” Rosebud’s anger was like all her moods, swift rising and as swift to pass. Now it was approaching its zenith. “And to show you how good Wanaha is, look at this.” She unfolded her parcel and threw the paper down, disclosing the perfect moccasins the Indian had made for her. “Aren’t they lovely? She didn’t forget it was my birthday, like – like – ”

“Ah, so it is.” Seth spoke as though he had just realized the fact of her birthday.

“Aren’t they lovely?” reiterated the girl. Her anger had passed. She was all smiles again.

“Indian,” said Seth, with a curious click of the tongue, which Rosebud was quick to interpret into an expression of scorn.

“Yes,” she exclaimed, firing up again, and her eyes sparkling. “And I like Indian things, and I like Indian people, and I like Little Black Fox. He’s nice, and isn’t always sneering. And I shall see them all when I like. And – and you can do the hoeing yourself.”

She walked off toward the house without the least regard for the potatoes, which now suffered indiscriminately. Her golden head was held very high, but she had less dignity than she thought, for she stumbled in the furrows as she went.

She went straight into the house and up to her room; but she could not fling herself upon her bed and cry, as she probably intended to do. Three large parcels occupied its entire narrow limits.

Each was addressed to her, wishing her all happiness on her birthday, and the biggest of the three was from Seth. So, failing room anywhere else, she sat in her rocking-chair, and, instead of an angry outburst, she shed a few quiet, happy tears.

Meanwhile Seth continued his work as though nothing had interrupted him. It was not until supper-time, and he was making his way to the house, that he happened to observe the newspaper which Rosebud had left lying among the potatoes. He stepped across the intervening furrows and picked it up. Newspapers always interested him, he saw so few.

This one, he saw at once, was an English paper. And from London at that. He glanced at the date, and saw that was nearly a month old, and, at the same time, he saw that it was addressed to Nevil Steyne, and beside the address was a note in blue pencil, "Page 3."

His curiosity was aroused, and he turned over to the page indicated. There was a long paragraph marked by four blue crosses. It was headed —

"The Estate of the Missing Colonel Raynor."

Seth read the first few lines casually. Then, as he went on, a curious look crept into his dark eyes, his clean-shaven face took on an expression of strained interest, and his lips closed until they were lost in a straight line which drew down at the corners of his mouth. He read on to the end, and then quietly folded up the paper, and stuffed it into the bosom of his shirt. Once he turned and looked away in the direction in which Nevil Steyne's hut lay tucked away on the river bank. Then he shouldered his hoe and strolled leisurely homeward.

CHAPTER VII

AN INDIAN POW-WOW

Nevil Steyne was indifferent to such blessings as a refreshing thunder-shower at sundown on a hot summer's day. It is doubtful if he would have admitted the beneficence of Providence in thus alleviating the parching heat of the day. He had no crops to think of, which made all the difference. Now, as he walked along through the brush on the north bank of the White River, in the direction of the log bridge, with the dripping trees splashing all round him, and his boots clogging with the heavy, wet loam, he openly cursed the half-hour's drenching. His vindictiveness was in no way half-measured. He cursed those who were glad of it, and who, when in direst necessity, occasionally remembered to offer up prayers for it.

This man had no love for the woods; no love even for the prairie, or his life on it. He lived a grudging existence. From his manner nothing in life seemed to give him real joy. But there is no doubt but that he had purpose of a sort which had much to do with his associations with his Indian neighbors. With him purpose served for everything else, and made existence tolerable.

There was purpose in his movements now. He could just as easily have made his way to the bridge through the open, but he chose the woods, and put up with the wet while he railed at it. And there was some haste in his slouching, loose-jointed gait which gave to his journey a suggestion of furtiveness.

At the bridge he paused, gave a quick look round, and then crossed it more rapidly still. For at this point he was in full view of the prairie. Once on the Indian Reservation, which began beyond the bridge, he again took to the cover the park-like land afforded him. Nor did he appear again in the open until he had passed the Mission and the Agency.

Once clear of these, however, he gave no more heed to secrecy, and walked boldly along open paths in the full, bright evening light. He passed in and out among the scattered tepees, speaking a word here and there to the men as he passed, or nodding a greeting. The latter being the more frequent of the two, for the Indian is a silent man.

The life amidst which he was walking was too familiar to cause such a man as he any unusual interest. Perhaps it was because he felt he had a certain underhand power with these people; like a person who loses interest in the thing which he has mastered. Certain it is that the busy homes he beheld were all unnoticed. The smoke-begrimed tepees with their great wooden trailers propped against them; the strings of drying meats stretching along under the boughs of adjacent trees. The bucks huddled, in spite of the warmth of summer, in their parti-colored blankets, gazing indolently at their squaws pounding the early berries into a sort of muddy preserve, or dressing a skin for manufacture into leggings, moccasins, or buckskin shirt. He gave no heed to the swarms of papooses, like so many flies buzzing round the tepees, whooping in imitation of their father braves, or amusing themselves with the pursuit of one of the many currish camp dogs, which, from their earliest years, they love to persecute to the limits of the poor beasts' endurance. The totem poles with their hideous carved heads had no meaning for him, just as the dried scalps which hung from the tepee poles might have been rabbit skins for all he thought of them.

Just now his purpose was to reach the house of Little Black Fox, and this he came to at last. It was a large building; next to the Mission and Agency it was by far the largest house on the Reservation. It was built of logs and thatch and plaster, and backed into a thick clump of shady maple trees. The son was more lavish than the father. Big Wolf had always been content to live in a tepee. He was an older type of chief. The son moved with the times and was given to display.

Nevil raised the latch of the door and walked in, and his manner was that of a privileged visitor. He entered the spacious living-room without word for those he beheld gathered there. He walked

to a certain vacant place, and sat down upon the mud floor. It was at once plain that he had been expected. More, it was evident that he belonged by right to that gathering.

Despite the display in the dimensions of Little Black Fox's house the interior revealed the old savage. There was nothing civilized about the council-chamber. There was the central fire of smouldering logs, without which no Indian can exist in summer or winter. The smoke passed out through a square chimney in the middle of the roof.

In a large circle the chief's councilors sat perched upon their haunches and swathed in their blankets. There was not a seat or table there. They sat in their councils as their forefathers had done before them, their leader in their midst with nothing but his youth to distinguish him from those who were his subjects.

The debate proceeded in its spasmodic fashion. There was no haste, no heat like in the debates of civilized folk. Each man was listened to in respectful silence, which might have served as an example to modern legislatures. Nevil spoke like the rest in their low, musical tongue. Whenever he spoke it was noticeable that the great, wild eyes of the chief were turned upon him with interest. But even he seemed a mere unit in the debate, no more and no less, unless it were that Little Black Fox was more influenced by what he said than by what was said by the others.

At length, well on into the night, the meeting drew to a close. The business in hand had been threshed out and a decision arrived at. The warriors and the men of "medicine" filed slowly out. Even in this there was a certain formality and precedence. Each man addressed his chief, shook hands, and passed through the door. And no two went out together.

When the last had gone Nevil and the chief remained alone in the bare room. Little Black Fox rose from his pile of skins and stood erect. He was a mere youth, but of such shape and appearance that one could easily understand the epithet "romantic" Rosebud had applied to him. He stood at least four inches over six feet, and dwarfed even Nevil's height. But it was in the perfect symmetry of his lithe, sinuous body, and the keen, handsome, high-caste face where his attractions lay.

His eyes were the eyes of the untamed savage, but of a man capable of great thought as well as great reckless courage. There was nothing sinister in them, but they were glowing, live eyes which might blaze or soften in two succeeding moments, which exactly expresses the man's character. He was handsome as Indian men go. Not like the women. They are often beautiful in a way that appeals to any artistic eye, but the men are a type for study before they can be appreciated.

This chief was in the first flush of manhood, and had attained nothing of the seared, bloated appearance which comes to the Indian later in life. His face was almost as delicately chiseled as his sister's, but it was strong as well as high caste. The eagle beakishness of his nose matched the flashing black eyes. His mouth was sensitive and clean-cut. His forehead was high and broad, and his cheeks were delicately round.

Nevil became a wretched, unkempt type of manhood in comparison. In form, at least, this chief of twenty-one years was a veritable king.

He smiled on his white councilor when the last of his own people had departed. He thrust out a slim, strong hand, and the two men shook hands heartily.

"It is slow with many in council," the chief said, in his own smooth-flowing tongue. "You, white man, and I can settle matters quickly. Quicker than these wise men of my father."

There was a flash of impatience in his speaking eyes. Nevil nodded approval.

"They think much before they speak," he replied, in the language in which he had been addressed. He, too, smiled; and in their manner toward each other it was plain the excellent understanding they were on.

"Sit, my white brother, we have many things for talk. Even we, like those others, must sit if we would pow-wow well. It is good. Sit." Little Black Fox laughed shortly, conceiving himself superior in thought to the older generation of wise men. He was possessed of all the vanity of his years.

They both returned to the ground, and the chief kicked together the embers of the council-fire.

“Tell me, brother, of Wanaha,” this still unproved warrior went on, in an even, indifferent voice; “she who was the light of our father’s eyes; she who has the wisdom of the rattlesnake, and the gentle heart of the summer moon.”

“She is well.” Nevil was not expansive. He knew the man had other things to talk of, and he wanted him to talk.

“Ah. And all the friends of my white brother?”

The face smiled, but the eyes were keenly alight.

“They are well. And Rosebud – ”

“Ah.”

“She grows fairer every day.”

There was a truly Indian pause. The fire sputtered and cast shadows upon the dark, bare walls. The two men gazed thoughtfully into the little flame which vauntingly struggled to rear itself in the dense atmosphere. At last the Indian spoke.

“That man who killed my father is a great brave.”

“Yes,” nodded Nevil, with a reflective smile in his pale eyes. “And Rosebud is a ripe woman. Beautiful as the flower which is her name.”

“Hah!” Then the Indian said slowly with an assumed indifference, “She will be his squaw. This white brave.”

“That is how they say.” It might have puzzled Nevil to apply names to those represented by “they.” “He is a great brave, truly. He fought for her. He killed your father. That is how these things go. She is for him surely.”

A frown had settled on the fierce young chief’s face.

“My father was old,” he said.

Nevil glanced at the speaker out of the corner of his eyes, and then continued his watch on the flame still struggling so ardently to devour the half-green wood. He knew when to hold his tongue.

“Yes,” the young man went on. “My father was a wise chief, but he was old – too old. Why did he keep the white girl alive?”

“He took her for you. You only had fifteen summers. The white girl had eleven or thereabouts. He was wise. It was good med’cine.”

Then the chief stirred himself. And Nevil, who lost no movement on the other’s part, detected the restless action of one who chafes under his thought. Little Black Fox prefixed his next remark with another short laugh.

“My people love peace now. It is good. So good that your people come and teach us. They show our squaws how to make things like the white squaws make. And the papooses forget our tongue, and they make words out of strange drawings which the white med’cine man makes on a board. Tchah! We forget our fathers. We feed when your people give us food, and our young men are made to plough. We only hunt when we are told to hunt. Our life is easy, but it is not a brave’s life.”

Nevil nodded, and chose his reply carefully.

“So,” he said, “it is a life of ease. You choose your life. And naturally you choose a life where you have all you want, and do not have to trouble. After all, what is the old life? A life of much danger, and little ease. You fight, you kill, or you are killed. You risk much and gain little. But you are men, brave men, great warriors, I grant you. And the squaws like brave men – even white squaws. But I say it is wise, though not brave, to live in the tepee. It is so easy. Your braves have their squaws always with them. They grow fat till their sides shake. They no longer care to hunt. Why should they? Many papooses come, and they grow up like their fathers. There are no Sun-Dances to make braves, because none want to be braves. There are no Ghost-Dances, because the white men keep the Evil Spirits away, and there is no need. So. The Indian lies upon his blankets, and he lives with the squaw always. They all become squaw-men. Never was there such peace for the Indian.”

Nevil had drawn his peaceful picture with care; also the tail of his eye told him that his companion was listening. And his movements, every now and then, had in them something of the spasmodic movements of a chained wild beast. This lithe youth had certain resemblance to the puma. He seemed to burn with a restless craving spirit. The puma never ceases to seek his prey. This man would be the same were he once to begin.

"Yes. You say well," he observed moodily, "we are all squaw-men. The white squaws love braves, you say. I know all squaws love braves. The squaws of our people will soon spit in our faces."

"You have no squaw to do that," observed Nevil, bending over and pushing the fire together.

"No."

"You are chief. You should have many."

"Yes."

"Then give the word to your people and you can have them."

"I do not want them – yet."

Nevil looked round. The chief turned to the fire uncertainly. His fierce eyes were half veiled.

"This Rosebud, she was for me," he went on. "She is fair as the summer sky. Her eyes are like the stars, and her laugh is like the ripple of the waters when the sun and the wind make play with them. She is so fair that no squaw can compare with her. Even Wanaha is as night to day."

"You cannot have her. She is for the man who killed your father."

The young chief leapt to his feet with a cry that told of a spirit which could no longer be restrained. And he towered threateningly over the undisturbed wood-cutter.

"But I will!" he cried vehemently, while his eyes flashed in the dying light of the fire. "You are my white brother, and to you I can say what is in my thoughts. This squaw, I love her. I burn for her! She is with me night and day. I will have her, I tell you! There shall be no peace till my father is avenged. Ha, ha!" And the ferocity of that laugh brought a smile to the hidden lips of the listening man.

He looked up now, and his words came thoughtfully.

"You are a great chief, Little Black Fox," he said. "But, see, there is no need to go on the war-path. Sit, like those wise councilors of yours. It is good to pow-wow."

The headstrong youth sat down again, and the pow-wow went forward. It was daylight again when Nevil returned to Wanaha. For Indian pow-wows are slow moving, ponderous things, and Little Black Fox was no better than the rest of his race when deliberations of grave import were on.

CHAPTER VIII

SETH WASHES A HANDKERCHIEF

Seth was not in the habit of making very frequent visits to Beacon Crossing. For one thing there was always plenty to do at the farm. For another the attractions of the fledgling city were peculiarly suited to idle folk, or folk who had money to spend. And this man was neither the one nor the other.

White River Farm was a prosperous farm, but it was still in that condition when its possibilities were not fully developed, and, like the thrifty, foresighted farmers Rube and his adopted son were, they were content to invest every available cent of profit in improvements. Consequently, when the latter did find his way to Roiheim's hotel it was always with a definite purpose; a purpose as necessary as any of his duties in his day's labor.

Riding into the township one evening he made straight for the hotel, and, refusing the stablehand's offer of care for his horse, sat down quietly on the verandah and lit his pipe. Beyond the loungers in the saloon and old Louis Roiheim no one worth any remark approached him. He sat watching the passers-by, but went on smoking idly. There were some children playing a sort of "King-of-the-Castle" game on a heap of ballast lying beside the track, and these seemed to interest him most. The sheriff stopped and spoke to him, but beyond a monosyllabic reply and a nod Seth gave him no encouragement to stop. An Indian on a big, raw-boned broncho came leisurely down the road and passed the hotel, leaving the township by the southern trail.

Seth waited until the sun had set. Then he stepped off the verandah and tightened the cinches of his saddle, and readjusted the neatly rolled blanket tied at the cantle. The proprietor of the hotel was lounging against one of the posts which supported the verandah.

"Goin'?" he asked indifferently. Seth was not a profitable customer.

"Yes."

"Home?"

"No. So long."

Seth swung into the saddle and rode off. And he, too, passed out of the town over the southern trail.

Later he overhauled the Indian. It was Jim Crow, the chief of the Indian police.

"Where do we sleep to-night?" he asked, after greeting the man.

Jim Crow, like all his race who worked for the government, never spoke his own language except when necessary. But he still retained his inclination to signs. Now he made a movement suggestive of three rises of land, and finished up with the word "Tepee."

"I must get back the day after to-morrow," Seth said. "Guess I'll hit back through the Reservations. I want to see Parker."

"Good," said the Indian, and relapsed into that companionable silence which all prairie men, whether Indian or white, so well understand.

That night the two men sheltered in the tepee belonging to Jim Crow. It was well off the Reservation, and was never pitched in the same place two nights running. Jim Crow's squaw looked after that. She moved about, acting under her man's orders, while the scout went about his business.

After supper a long talk proceeded. Seth became expansive, but it was the Indian who gave information.

"Yes," he said, in answer to a question the white man had put. "I find it after much time. Sa-sa-mai, my squaw. She find it from old brave. See you. Big Wolf and all the braves who come out this way, you make much shoot. So. They all kill. 'Cep' this one ol' brave. He live quiet an' say nothing. Why? I not say. Some one tell him say nothing. See? This Big Wolf. Before you kill him maybe. So

he not say. Bimeby Sa-sa-mai, she much 'cute. She talk ol' brave. Him very ol'. So she learn, an' I go. I show you. You give me fi' dollar, then I, too, say nothing."

"Ah." Seth pulled out a five-dollar bill and handed it to the scout, and went on smoking. Presently he asked, "Have you been there?"

"No." Jim Crow smiled blandly. He had the truly Indian ambiguity of expression.

"Then you don't know if there's any traces, I guess."

"See. I go dis place. Little Black Fox hear. He hear all. So. There are devils on the Reservation. Jim Crow much watched. So. They know. These red devils."

Seth noted the man's air of pride. He was keenly alive to his own importance and exaggerated it, which is the way of his class. Jim Crow was a treacherous rascal, but it paid him to work for the white folk. He would work for the other side just as readily if it paid him better.

"That's so," observed Seth, seriously; but it was his pipe that absorbed his attention. "Wal, to-morrow, I guess," he added after a while. And, knocking his pipe out, he rolled over on his blanket and slept.

On the morrow the journey was continued, and at sundown they neared the great valley of the Missouri. Their route lay over a trail which headed southeast, in the direction of Sioux City. The sun had just dropped below the horizon when Jim Crow suddenly drew rein. Whatever character he might bear as a man he was a master scout. He had a knowledge and instinct far greater than that of a bloodhound on a hot scent. He glanced around him, taking in the lay of the land at every point of the compass. Then he finally pointed at a brush growing a few hundred yards from the trail.

"The bluff," he said. "It may be what we look for. Sa-sa-mai, she tell me. Ow."

The last was a grunt which expressed assurance.

The horses left the trail for the prairie. The eyes of both men were turned upon the ground, which is the habit of such men when out on the trail. It is the soil over which the prairie man passes which is the book. The general scene is only the illustration.

At the bluff the men dismounted. Seth now took the lead. He did not plunge haphazard into his search. He still studied the brush and the ground. But it was the scout whose trained instincts were the first to discover the signs they sought. And he found it in the dead, broken twigs which marked the course of a wagon.

The two followed the lead; followed it unerringly. With every foot of the way the task became easier. Once they had turned the cover the book had become the simplest reading. In a few minutes they came to a clearing well screened from the road. Now they parted company. The scout went on toward the water further on, but the white man turned to the clearing. Herein was displayed the difference in the men. Seth had come to the point where imagination served him. The other was only a craftsman.

The grass was tall in the clearing. There was a low scrub too, but it was a scrub that might be trodden under foot. In two minutes Seth was stooping examining a tent-peg, discolored by weather, but intact, and still holding in the earth where it had been driven. It was but four yards from this to a place where two distinct piles of human bones were lying hidden in the rank grass.

Seth was on his knees pulling the grass aside, but he did not touch the bones. The skeletons were far from complete. Fortunately the skulls were there, and he saw that they were those of a man and a woman. While he contemplated the ghastly remains his thoughts conjured up many scenes. He saw the bullet hole through the woman's skull, and the horrid rift in the man's. The absence of many of the bones of the extremities made him think of the coyotes, those prairie scavengers who are never far off when death stalks the plains.

After a few moments he was searching the long grass in every direction. He looked for remnants of clothing; for anything to give him a sign. In his search he was joined by the scout who had returned from the water, where he had discovered further traces of an encampment.

At last the examination was completed. There was nothing left to indicate the identity of the bones.

The two men now stood by the bones of the unfortunate man and woman. Seth was staring out at the surrounding brush.

"I guess the Injuns cleaned things up pretty well," he said, while his eyes settled on one little bush apart from the rest.

The scout shook his head.

"That's not Injuns' work," he said.

"No?" Seth queried casually.

"No. Everything gone. So. That not like Injun."

Seth made no response, but walked over to the bush he had been looking at. The scout saw him thrust a hand in amongst the branches and withdraw it holding something.

"What you find?" he asked, when Seth came back.

"Only a rag."

Then, a moment later, Seth asked suddenly: "How far from here to – Jason's old place?"

"Six – eight – nine hour," Jim Crow said, with his broad smile that meant nothing.

Seth looked long and thoughtfully at the split skull on the ground. Then his eyes sought the bullet hole in the woman's skull. But he said nothing.

A little later the two men went back to the horses and mounted.

"Guess I'll git on to see the Agent," Seth observed, while the horses moved away from the bluff.

"You go by Reservation?"

"Yes."

Jim Crow surveyed the prospect in silence. They reached the trail, and their horses stood preparatory to parting company.

"S'long," said Seth.

The Indian turned and looked away to the north. It was the direction in which lay the great Reservations. Then he turned back, and his black, slit-like eyes shot a sidelong glance at his companion.

"You go – alone?" he asked.

The other nodded indifferently.

"Then I say sleep little and watch much – I, Jim Crow."

The two men parted. The scout moved off and his hand went to the pocket of his trousers where his fingers crumpled the crisp five-dollar bill he had received for his services. Nothing else really mattered to him. Seth rode away humming a tune without melody.

All the way to the Agent's house he carried out the scout's advice of watchfulness; but for a different reason. Seth had no personal fear of these stormy Indians. His watchfulness was the observation of a man who learns from all he sees. He slept some hours on the prairie while his horse rested, and arrived at the Agency the next day at noon.

Jimmy Parker, as he was familiarly called, greeted him cordially in his abrupt fashion.

"Ah, howdy," he said. "Prowling, Seth?" His words were accompanied by a quick look that asked a dozen questions, all of which he knew would remain unanswered. Seth and he were old friends and understood one another.

"Takin' a spell off," replied the farmer.

"Ah. And putting it in on the Reservation."

The Agent smiled briefly. His face seemed to have worn itself into a serious caste which required effort to change.

"Many huntin' 'passes' these times?" Seth inquired presently.

"None. Only Little Black Fox says he's going hunting soon." The Agent's eyes were fixed on the other's face.

“See you’ve got Jim Crow workin’ around – south.” Seth waved an arm in the direction whence he had come.

“Yes.” Again came the Agent’s swiftly passing smile. “We’re a good distance from the southern boundary. Jim Crow’s smart enough. How did you know?”

“Saw his tepee.”

“Ah. You’ve been south?”

“Yes. There’s a fine open country that aways.”

They passed into the Agency, and Parker’s sister and housekeeper brought the visitor coffee. The house was very plain, roomy, and comfortable. The two men were sitting in the office.

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