

McCarter Margaret Hill

The Price of the Prairie: A Story of Kansas



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PROEM

"Nature never did betray the heart that loved her"

I can hear it always – the Call of the Prairie. The passing of sixty Winters has left me a vigorous man, although my hair is as white as the January snowdrift in the draws, and the strenuous events of some of the years have put a tax on my strength. I shall always limp a little in my right foot – that was left out on the plains one freezing night with nothing under it but the earth, and nothing over it but the sky. Still, considering that although the sixty years were spent mainly in that pioneer time when every day in Kansas was its busy day, I am not even beginning to feel old. Neither am I sentimental and inclined to poetry. Life has given me mostly her prose selections for my study.

But this love of the Prairie is a part of my being. All the comedy and tragedy of these sixty years have had them for a setting, and I can no more put them out of my life than the Scotchman can forget the heather, or the Swiss emigrant in the flat green lowland can forget the icy passes of the glacier-polished Alps. Geography is an element of every man's life. The prairies are in the red corpuscles of my blood. Up and down their rippling billows my memory runs. For always I see them, – green and blossom-starred in the Springtime; or drenched with the driving summer deluge that made each draw a brimming torrent; or golden, purple, and silver-rimmed in the glorious Autumn. I have seen them gray in the twilight, still and tenderly verdant at noonday, and cold and frost-wreathed under the white star-beams. I have seen them yield up their rich yellow sheaves of grain, and I have looked upon their dreary wastes marked with the dull black of cold human blood. Plain practical man of affairs that I am, I come back to the blessed prairies for my inspiration as the tartan warmed up the heart of Argyle.

CHAPTER I

SPRINGVALE BY THE NEOSHO

Sweeter to me than the salt sea spray, the fragrance of summer rains;
Nearer my heart than the mighty hills are the wind-swept Kansas
plains.

Dearer the sight of a shy wild rose by the road-side's dusty way,
Than all the splendor of poppy-fields ablaze in the sun of May.
Gay as the bold poinsettia is, and the burden of pepper trees,
The sunflower, tawny and gold and brown, is richer to me than these;
And rising ever above the song of the hoarse, insistent sea,
The voice of the prairie calling, calling me.

– *ESTHER M. CLARKE.*

Whenever I think of these broad Kansas plains I think also of Marjie. I cannot now remember the time when I did not care for her, but the day when O'mie first found it out is as clear to me as yesterday, although that was more than forty years ago. O'mie was the reddest-haired, best-hearted boy that ever laughed in the face of Fortune and made friends with Fate against the hardest odds. His real name was O'Meara, Thomas O'Meara, but we forgot that years ago.

"If O'mie were set down in the middle of the Sahara Desert," my Aunt Candace used to say, "there'd be an oasis a mile across by the next day noon, with never failing water and green trees right in the middle of it, and O'mie sitting under them drinking the water like it was Irish rum."

O'mie would always grin at this saying and reply that, "by the nixt day noon follerin' that, the rascally gover'mint at Washin'ton would come along an' kick him out into the rid san', claimin' that that particular oasis was an Injun riservation, specially craayted by Providence fur the dirthy Osages, – the bastes!"

O'mie hated the Indians, but he was a friend to all the rest of mankind. Indeed if it had not been for him I should not have had that limp in my right foot, for both of my feet would have been mouldering these many years under the curly mesquite of the Southwest plains. But that comes later.

We were all out on the prairie hunting for our cows that evening – the one when O'mie guessed my secret. Marjie's pony was heading straight to the west, flying over the ground. The big red sun was slipping down a flame-wreathed sky, touching with fire the ragged pennons of a blue-black storm cloud hanging sullenly to the northward, and making an indescribable splendor in the far southwest.

Riding hard after Marjie, coming at an angle from the bluff above the draw, was an Osage Indian, huge as a giant, and frenzied with whiskey. I must have turned a white despairing face toward my comrades, and I was glad afterward that I was against the background of that flaming sunset so that my features were in the shadow. It was then that O'mie, who was nearest me, looking steadily in my eyes said in a low voice:

"Bedad, Phil! so that's how it is wid ye, is it? Then we've got to kill that Injun jist fur grandeur."

I knew O'mie for many years, and I never saw him show a quiver of fear, not even in those long weary days when, white and hollow-cheeked, he waited for his last enemy, Death, – whom he vanquished, looking up into my face with eyes of inexpressible peace, and murmuring softly,

"Safe in the arms of Jasus."

Old men are prone to ramble in their stories, and I am not old. To prove that, I must not jiggle with these heads and tails of Time, but I must begin earlier and follow down these eventful years as if I were a real novel-writer with consecutive chapters to set down.

Springvale by the Neosho was a favorite point for early settlers. It nestled under the sheltered bluff on the west. There were never-failing springs in the rocky outcrop. A magnificent grove of huge oak trees, most rare in the plains country, lined the river's banks and covered the fertile lowlands. It made a landmark of the spot, this beautiful natural forest, and gave it a place on the map as a meeting-ground for the wild tribes long before the days of civilized occupation. The height above the valley commands all that wide prairie that ripples in treeless fertility from as far as even an Indian can see until it breaks off with that cliff that walls the Neosho bottom lands up and down for many a mile. To the southwest the open black lowlands along Fingal's Creek beckoned as temptingly to the settler as did the Neosho Valley itself. The divide between the two, the river and its tributary, coming down from the northwest makes a high promontory. Its eastern side is the rocky ledge of the bluff. On the west it slopes off to the fertile draws of Fingal's Creek, and the sunset prairies that swell up and away beyond them.

Just where the little stream joins the bigger one Springvale took root and flourished amazingly. It was an Indian village site and trading-point since tradition can remember. The old tepee rings show still up in the prairie cornfield where even the plough, that great weapon of civilization and obliteration, has not quite made a dead level of the landmarks of the past. I've bumped across those rings many a time in the days when we went from Springvale up to the Red Range schoolhouse in the broken country where Fingal's Creek has its source. It was the hollow beyond the tepee ring that caused his pony to stumble that night when Jean Pahasca, the big Osage, was riding like fury between me and that blood-red sky.

The early Indians always built on the uplands although the valleys ran close beneath them. They had only arrows and speed to protect them from their foes. It was not until they had the white man's firearms that they dared to make their homes in the lowlands. Black Kettle in the sheltered Washita Valley might never have fallen before General Custer had the Cheyennes kept to the high places after the custom of their fathers. But the early white settlers had firearms and skill in building block-houses, so they took to the valleys near wood and water.

On the day that Kansas became a Territory, my father, John Baronet, with all his household effects started from Rockport, Massachusetts, to begin life anew in the wild unknown West. He was not a poor man, heaven bless his memory! He never knew want except the pinch of pioneer life when money is of no avail because the necessities are out of reach. In the East he had been a successful lawyer and his success followed him. They will tell you in Springvale to-day that "if Judge Baronet were alive and on the bench things would go vastly better," and much more to like effect.

My mother was young and beautiful, and to her the world was full of beauty. Especially did she love the sea. All her life was spent beside it, and it was ever her delight. It must have been from her that my own love of nature came as a heritage to me, giving me capacity to take and keep those prairie scenes of idyllic beauty that fill my memory now.

In the Summer of 1853 my father's maiden sister Candace had come to live with us. Candace Baronet was the living refutation of all the unkind criticism ever heaped upon old maids. She was a strong, comely, unselfish woman who lived where the best thoughts grow.

One day in late October, a sudden squall drove landward, capsizing the dory in which my mother was returning from a visit to old friends on an island off the Rockport coast. She was in sight of home when that furious gust of wind and rain swept across her path. The next morning the little waves rippled musically against the beach whither they had borne my dead mother and left her without one mark of cruel usage. Neither was there any sign of terror on her face, white and peaceful under her damp dark hair.

I know now that my father and his sister tried hard to suppress their sorrow for my sake, but the curtains on the seaward side of the house were always lowered now and my father's face looked more and more to the westward. The sea became an unbearable thing to him. Yet he was a brave, unselfish man and in all the years following that one Winter he lived cheerfully and nobly – a sunshiny life.

In the early Spring he gave up his law practice in Rockport.

"The place for me is on the frontier," he said to my Aunt Candace one day. "I'm sick of the sight of that water. I want to try the prairies and I want to be in the struggle that is beginning beyond the Missouri. I want to do one man's part in the making of the West."

Aunt Candace looked steadily into her brother's face.

"I am sick of the sea, too, John," she said. "Will the prairies be kinder to us, I wonder."

I did not know till long afterward, when the Kansas blue-grass had covered both their graves, that the blue Atlantic had in its keeping the form of the one love of my aunt's life. Rich am I, Philip Baronet, to have had such a father and such a mother-hearted aunt. They made life full and happy for me with never from that day any doleful grieving over the portion Providence had given them. And the blessed prairie did bring them peace. Its spell was like a benediction on their lives who lived to bless many lives.

It was late June when our covered wagon and tired ox-team stopped on the east bluff above the Neosho just outside of Springvale. The sun was dropping behind the prairie far across the river valley when another wagon and ox-team with pioneers like ourselves joined us. They were Irving Whately and his wife and little daughter, Marjory. I was only seven and I have forgotten many things of these later years, but I'll never forget Marjie as I first saw her. She was stiff from long sitting in the big covered wagon, and she stretched her pudgy little legs to get the cramp out of them, as she took in the scene. Her pink sun-bonnet had fallen back and she was holding it by both strings in one hand. Her rough brown hair was all in little blowsy ringlets round her face and the two braids hanging in front of her shoulders ended each in a big blowsy curl. Her eyes were as brown as her hair. But what I noted then and many a time afterward was the exceeding whiteness of her face. From St. Louis I had seen nothing but dark-skinned Mexicans, tanned Missourians, and Indian, Creole, and French Canadian, all coppery or bronze brown, in this land of glaring sunshine. Marjie made me think of Rockport and the pink-cheeked children of the country lanes about the town. But most of all she called my mother back, white and beautiful as she looked in her last peaceful sleep, the day the sea gave her to us again. "Star Face," Jean Pahasca used to call Marjie, for even in the Kansas heat and browning winds she never lost the pink tint no miniature painting on ivory could exaggerate.

We stood looking at one another in the purple twilight.

"What's your name?"

"Marjory Whately. What's yours?"

"Phil Baronet, and I'm seven years old." This, a shade boastfully.

"I'm six," Marjory said. "Are you afraid of Indians?"

"No," I declared. "I won't let the Indians hurt you. Let's run a race," pointing toward where the Neosho lay glistening in the last light of day, a gap in the bluff letting the reflection from great golden clouds illumine its wave-crumpled surface.

We took hold of hands and started down the long slope together, but our parents called us back. "Playmates already," I heard them saying.

In the gathering evening shadows we all lumbered down the slope to the rock-bottomed ford and up into the little hamlet of Springvale.

That night when I said my prayers to Aunt Candace I cried softly on her shoulder. "Marjie makes me homesick," I sobbed, and Aunt Candace understood then and always afterward.

The very air about Springvale was full of tradition. The town had been from the earliest times a landmark of the old Santa Fé trail. When the freighters and plainsmen left the village and climbed to the top of the slope and set their faces to the west there lay before them only the wilderness wastes. Here Nature, grown miserly, offered not even a stick of timber to mend a broken cart-pole in all the thousand miles between the Neosho and the Spanish settlement of New Mexico.

Here the Indians came with their furs and beaded garments to exchange for firearms and fire-water. People fastened their doors at night for a purpose. No curfew bell was needed to call in the

children. The wooded Neosho Valley grew dark before the evening lights had left the prairies beyond the west bluff, and the waters that sang all day a song of cheer as they rippled over the rocky river bed seemed always after nightfall to gurgle murderously as they went their way down the black-shadowed valley.

The main street was as broad as an Eastern boulevard. Space counted for nothing in planning towns in a land made up of distances. At the end of this street stood the "Last Chance" general store, the outpost of civilization. What the freighter failed to get here he would do without until he stood inside the brown adobe walls of the old city of Santa Fé. Tell Mapleson, the proprietor of the "Last Chance," was a tall, slight, restless man, quick-witted, with somewhat polished manners and a gift of persuasion in his speech.

Near this store was Conlow's blacksmith shop, where the low-browed, black-eyed Conlow family have shod horses and mended wagons since anybody can remember. They were the kind of people one instinctively does not trust, and yet nobody could find a true bill against them. The shop had thick stone walls. High up under the eaves on the north side a long narrow slit, where a stone was missing, let out a bar of sullen red light. Old Conlow did not know about that chink for years, for it was only from the bluff above the town that the light could be seen.

Our advent in Springvale was just at the time of its transition from a plains trading-post to a Territorial town with ambition for settlement and civilization. I can see now that John Baronet deserved the place he came to hold in that frontier community, for he was a State-builder.

"I should feel more dacent fur all etarnity jist to be buried in the same cimet'ry wid Judge Bar'net," O'mie once declared. "I should walk into kingdom-come, dignified and head up, saying to the kaper av the pearly gates, kind o' careless-like, 'I'm from that little Kansas town av Springvale an' ye'll check up my mortal remains over in the cimet'ry, be my neighbor, Judge Bar'net, if ye plaze.'"

It was O'mie's way of saying what most persons of the community felt toward my father from the time he drove into Springvale in the purple twilight of that June evening in 1854.

Irving Whately's stock of merchandise was installed in the big stone building on the main corner of the village, where the straggling Indian trails from the south and the trail from the new settlement out on Fingal's Creek converged on the broad Santa Fé trail. Amos Judson, a young settler, became his clerk and general helper. In the front room over this store was John Baronet's law office, and his sign swinging above Whately's seemed always to link those two names together.

Opposite this building was the village tavern. It was a wide two-story structure, also of stone, set well back from the street, with a double veranda along the front and the north side. A huge oak tree grew before it, and a flagstone walk led up to the veranda steps. In big black lettering its inscription over the door told the wayfarer on the old trail that this was

THE CAMBRIDGE HOUSE

C. C. GENTRY, PROP

Cam Gentry (his real name was Cambridge, christened from the little Indiana town of Cambridge City) was a good-souled, easy-going man, handicapped for life by a shortness of vision no spectacle lens could overcome. It might have been disfiguring to any other man, but Cam's clear eye at close range, and his comical squint and tilt of the head to study out what lay farther away, were good-natured and unique. He was in Kansas for the fun of it, while his wife, Dollie, kept tavern from pure love of cooking more good things to eat than opportunity afforded in a home. She was a Martha whose kitchen was "dukedom large enough." Whatever motive, fine or coarse, whatever love of spoils or love of liberty, brought other men hither, Cam had come to see the joke – and he saw it. While as

to Dollie, "Lord knows," she used to say, "there's plenty of good cooks in old Wayne County, Indiana; but if they can get anything to eat out here they need somebody to cook it for 'em, and cook it right."

Doing chores about the tavern for his board and keep was the little orphan boy, Thomas O'Meara, whose story I did not know for many years. We called him O'mie. That was all. Marjie and O'mie and Mary Gentry, Cam and Dollie's only child, were my first Kansas playmates. Together we waded barefoot in the shallow ripples of the Neosho, and little by little we began to explore that wide, sweet prairie land to the west. There was just one tree standing up against the horizon; far away to us it seemed, a huge cottonwood, that kept sentinel guard over the plains from the highest level of the divide.

Whately built a home a block or more beyond that of his young clerk, Amos Judson. It was farther up the slope than any other house in Springvale except my father's. That was on the very crest of the west bluff, overlooking the Neosho Valley. It fronted the east, and across the wide street before it the bluff broke precipitously four hundred feet to the level floor of the valley below. Sometimes the shelving rocks furnished a footing where one could clamber down half way and walk along the narrow ledge. Here were cunning hiding-places, deep crevices, and vine-covered heaps of jagged stone outcrop invisible from the height above or the valley below. It was a bit of rugged, untamable cliff rarely found in the plains country; and it broke so suddenly from the level promontory sloping down to the south and away to the west, that a stranger sitting by our east windows would never have guessed that the seeming bushes peering up across the street were really the tops of tall trees with their roots in the side of the bluff not half way to the bottom.

From our west window the green glory of the plains spread out to the baths of sunset. No wonder this Kansas land is life of my life. The sea is to me a wavering treachery, but these firm prairies are the joy of my memory.

Our house was of stone with every corner rounded like a turret wall. It was securely built against the winter winds that swept that bluff when the Kansas blizzard unchained its fury, for it stood where it caught the full wrath of the elements. It caught, too, the splendor of all the sunrise beyond the mist-filled valley, and the full moon in the level east above the oak treetops made a dream of chastened glory like the silver twilight gleams in Paradise.

"I want to watch the world coming and going," my father said when his house was finished; "and it is coming down that Santa Fé trail. It is State-making that is begun here. The East doesn't understand it yet, outside of New England. And these Missourians, Lord pity them! they think they can kill human freedom with a bullet, like thrusting daggers into the body of Julius Cæsar to destroy the Roman Empire. What do they know of the old Puritan blood, and the strength of the grip of a Massachusetts man? Heaven knows where they came from, these Missouri ruffians; but," he added, "the devil has it arranged where they will go to."

"Oh, John, be careful," exclaimed Aunt Candace.

"Are you afraid of them, Candace?"

"Well, no, I don't believe I am," replied my aunt.

She was not one of those blustering north-northwest women. She squared her life by the admonition of Isaiah, "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." But she was a Baronet, and although they have their short-comings, fear seems to have been left out of their make-up.

CHAPTER II

JEAN PAHUSCA

In even savage bosoms
There are longings, yearnings, strivings
For the good they comprehend not.

– *LONGFELLOW.*

The frontier broke all lines of caste. There was no aristocrat, autocrat, nor plutocrat in Springvale; but the purest democracy was among the children. Life was before us; we loved companionship, and the same dangers threatened us all. The first time I saw Marjie she asked, "Are you afraid of Indians?" They were the terror of her life. Even to-day the mere press despatch of an Indian uprising in Oklahoma or Arizona will set the blood bounding through my veins and my first thought is of her.

I shall never forget the day my self-appointed guardianship of her began. Before we had a schoolhouse, Aunt Candace taught the children of the community in our big living-room. One rainy afternoon, late in the Fall, the darkness seemed to drop down suddenly. We could not see to study, and we were playing boisterously about the benches of our improvised schoolroom, Marjie, Mary Gentry, Lettie and Jim Conlow, Tell Mapleson, – old Tell's boy, – O'mie, both the Mead boys, and the four Anderson children. Suddenly Marjie, who was watching the rain beating against the west window, called, "Phil, come here! What is that long, narrow, red light down by the creek?"

Marjie had the softest voice. Amid the harsh jangle of the Andersons and Bill Mead's big whooping shouts it always seemed like music to me. I stared hard at the sullen block of flame in the evening shadows.

"I don't know what it is," I said.

She slipped her fingers into the pocket of my coat as I turned away, and her eyes looked anxiously into mine. "Could it be an Indian camp-fire?" she queried.

I looked again, flattening my nose against the window pane. "I don't know, Marjie, but I'll find out. Maybe it's somebody's kitchen fire down west. I'll ask O'mie."

In truth, that light had often troubled me. It did not look like the twinkling candle-flare I could see in so many windows of the village. I turned to O'mie, who, with his face to the wall, waited in a game of hide-and-seek. Before I could call him Marjie gave a low cry of terror. We all turned to her in an instant, and I saw outside a dark face close against the window. It was gone so quickly that only O'mie and I caught sight of it.

"What was it, Marjie?" the children cried.

"An Indian boy," gasped Marjie. "He was right against the window."

"I'll bet it was a spook," shouted Bill Mead.

"I'll bet it wasn't nothin' at all," grinned Jim Conlow. "Possum Conlow" we called him for that secretive grin on his shallow face.

"I'll bet it wath a whole gang of Thiennes," lisped tow-headed Bud Anderson.

"They ain't no Injuns nearer than the reserve down the river, and ain't been no Injuns in Springvale for a long time, 'cept annuity days," declared Tell Mapleson.

"Well, let's foind out," shouted O'mie, "I ain't afraid av no Injun."

"Neither am I," I cried, starting after O'mie, who was out of the door at the word.

But Marjie caught my arm, and held it.

"Let O'mie go. Don't go, Phil, please don't."

I can see her yet, her brown eyes full of pleading, her soft brown hair in rippling waves about her white temples. Did my love for her spring into being at that instant? I cannot tell. But I do know that it was a crucial moment for me. Sixty years have I seen, and my life has grown practical and barren of sentiment. But I know that the boy, Phil Baronet, who stood that evening with Marjie and the firelight and safety on one side, and darkness and uncertainty on the other, had come to one of those turning-points in a life, unrecognized for the time, whose decision controls all the years that follow. For suddenly came the query "How can I best take care of her? Shall I stay with her in the light, or go into the dark and strike the danger out of it?" I didn't frame all this into words. It was all only an intense feeling, but the mental judgment was very real. I turned from her and cleared the doorstep at a leap, and in a moment was by O'mie's side, chasing down the hill-slope toward town.

We never thought to run to the bluff's edge and clamber down the shelving, precipitous sides. Here was the only natural hiding-place, but like children we all ran the other way. When we had come in again with the report of "No enemy in sight," and had shut the door against the rain, I happened to glance out of the east window. Climbing up to the street from the cliff I saw the lithe form of a young Indian. He came straight to the house and stood by the east window where he could see inside. Then with quick, springing step he walked down the slope. I crossed to the west window and watched him shutting out that red bar of light now and then, till he melted into the shadows.

Meanwhile the children were chattering like sparrows and had not noticed me.

"Would you know it, Marjie, if you thaw it again?" lisped Bud Anderson.

"Oh, yes! His hair was straight across like this." Marjie drew one hand across her curl-shaded forehead, to show how square the black hair grew about the face she had seen.

"That's nothin'," said Bill Mead. "They change scalps every time they catch a white man, – just take their own off an' put his on, an' it grows. There's lots of men in Kansas look like white men's just Injuns growed a white scalp on 'em."

"Really, is there?" asked Mary Gentry credulously.

"Sure, I've seen 'em," went on Bill with a boy's love of that kind of lying.

"Wouldn't a Injun look funny with my thcalp?" Bud Anderson put in. "I'll bet I'm jutht a Injun mythelf."

"Then you've got some little baby girl's scalp," grinned Jim Conlow.

"'Tain't no 'pothum'th, anyhow," rejoined Bud; and we laughed our fears away.

That evening Aunt Candace sent me home with Marjie to take some fresh doughnuts to Mrs. Whately. I can see the little girl now as we splashed sturdily down Cliff Street through the wet gloom, her face like a white blossom in the shadowy twilight, her crimson jacket open at the throat, and the soft little worsted scarf about her damp fluffy curls making a glow of rich coloring in the dim light.

"You'll never let the Indians get you, will you, Phil?" she asked, when we stood a moment by the bushes just at the steepest bend of the street.

I stood up proudly. I was growing very fast in this gracious climate. "The finest-built boy in Springvale," the men called me. "No, Marjie. The Indians won't get me, nor anybody else I don't want them to have."

She drew close to me, and I caught her hand in mine a moment. Then, boylike, I flipped her heavy braid of hair over her shoulder and shook the wettest bushes till their drops scattered in a shower about her. Something, a dog we thought, suddenly slid out from the bush and down the cliff-side. When I started home after delivering the cakes, Marjie held the candle at the door to light my way. As I turned at the edge of the candle's rays to wave my hand, I saw her framed in the doorway. Would that some artist could paint that picture for me now!

"I'll whistle up by the bushes," I cried, and strode into the dark.

On the bend of the crest, where the street drops down almost too steep for a team of horses to climb, I turned and saw Marjie's light in the window, and the shadow of her head on the pane. I gave a long, low whistle, the signal call we had for our own. It was not an echo, it was too near and clear,

the very same low call in the bushes just over the cliff beside me as though some imitator were trying to catch the notes. A few feet farther on my path I came face to face with the same Indian whom I had seen an hour before. He strode by me in silence.

Without once looking back I said to myself, "If you aren't afraid of me, I'm not afraid of you. But who gave that whistle, I wonder. That's my call to Marjie."

"Marjie's awful 'fraid of Injuns," I said to Aunt Candace that night. "Didn't want me to find who it was peeked, but I went after him, clear down to Amos Judson's house, because I thought that was the best way, if it was an Injun. She isn't afraid of anything else. She's the only girl that can ride Tell Mapleson's pony, and only O'mie and Tell and I among the boys can ride him. And she killed the big rattlesnake that nearly had Jim Conlow, killed it with a hoe. And she can climb where no other girl dares to, on the bluff below town toward the Hermit's Cave. But she's just as 'fraid of an Injun! I went to hunt him, though."

"And you did just right, Phil. The only way to be safe is to go after what makes you afraid. I guess, though, there really was nobody. It was just Marjie's imagination, wasn't it?"

"Yes, there was, Auntie; I saw him climb up from the cliff over there and go off down the hill after we came in."

"Why didn't you say so?" asked my aunt.

"We couldn't get him, and it would have scared Marjie," I answered.

"That's right, Phil. You are a regular Kansas boy, you are. The best of them may claim to come from Massachusetts," – with a touch of pride, – "but no matter where they come from, they must learn how to be quick-witted and brave and manly here in Kansas. It's what all boys need to be here."

A few days later the door of our schoolroom opened and an Indian boy strode in and seated himself on the bench beside Tell Mapleson. He was a lad of fifteen, possibly older. His dress was of the Osage fashion and round his neck he wore a string of elk teeth. His face was thoroughly Indian, yet upon his features something else was written. His long black hair was a shade too jetty and soft for an Indian's, and it grew squarely across his forehead, suggesting the face of a French priest. We children sat open-mouthed. Even Aunt Candace forgot herself a moment. Bud Anderson first found his voice.

"Well, I'll thwan!" he exclaimed in sheer amazement.

Bill Mead giggled and that broke the spell.

"How do you do?" said my aunt kindly.

"How," replied the young brave.

"What is your name, and what do you want?" asked our teacher.

"Jean Pahasca. Want school. Want book – " He broke off and finished in a jargon of French and Indian.

"Where is your home, your tepee?" queried Aunt Candace.

The Indian only shook his head. Then taking from his beads a heavy silver cross, crudely shaped and wrought, he rose and placed it on the table. Taking up a book at the same time he seated himself to study like the rest of us.

"He has paid his tuition," said my aunt, smiling. "We'll let him stay."

So Jean Pahasca was established in our school.

CHAPTER III

THE HERMIT'S CAVE

The secret which the mountains kept
The river never told.

The bluff was our continual delight. It was so difficult, so full of surprises, so enchanting in its dangers. All manner of creeping things in general, and centipedes and rattlesnakes in particular, made their homes in its crevices. Its footing was perilous to the climber, and its hiding-places had held outlaws and worse. Then it had its haunted spots, where tradition told of cruel tragedies in days long gone by; and of the unknown who had found here secret retreat, who came and went, leaving never a name to tell whom they were nor what their story might be. All these the old cliff had in its keeping for the sturdy boys and girls of parents who had come here to conquer the West.

Just below the town where the Neosho swings away to the right, the bottom lands narrow down until the stream sweeps deep and swift against a stone wall almost two hundred feet in height. From the top of the cliff here the wall drops down nearly another hundred feet, leaving an inaccessible heap of rough cavernous rocks in the middle stratum.

Had the river been less deep and dangerous we could not have gotten up from below; while to come down from above might mean a fall of three hundred feet or more to the foam-torn waters and the jagged rocks beneath them. Here a stranger hermit had hidden himself years before. Nobody knew his story, nor how he had found his way hither, for he spoke in a strange tongue that nobody could interpret. That this inaccessible place was his home was certain. Boys bathing in the shallows up-stream sometimes caught a glimpse of him moving about among the bushes. And sometimes at night from far to the east a light could be seen twinkling half way up the dark cliff-side. Every boy in Springvale had an ambition to climb to the Hermit's Cave and explore its mysteries; for the old man died as he had lived, unknown. One winter day his body was found on the sand bar below the rapids where the waters had carried him after his fall from the point of rock above the deep pool. There was no mark on his coarse clothing to tell a word of his story, and the Neosho kept his secret always.

What boy after that would not have braved any danger to explore the depths of this hiding-place? But we could not do it. Try as we might, the hidden path leading up, or down, baffled us.

After Jean Pahasca came into our school we had a new interest and for a time we forgot that tantalizing river wall below town. Jean was irregular in his attendance and his temper. He learned quickly, for an Indian. Sometimes he was morose and silent; sometimes he was affable and kind, chatting among us like one of our own; and sometimes he found the white man's fire-water. Then he murdered as he went. He was possessed of a demon to kill, kill the moment he became drunk. Every living thing in his way had to flee or perish then. He would stop in his mad chase to crush the life out of a sleeping cat, or to strike at a bird or a chicken. Whiskey to him meant death, as we learned to our sorrow. Nobody knew where he lived. He dressed like an Osage but he was supposed to make his home with the Kaws, whose reservation was much nearer to us. Sometimes in the cool weather he slept in our sheds. In warm weather he lay down on the ground wherever he chose to sleep. There was a fascination about him unlike all the other Indians who came up to the village, many of whom we knew. He could be so gentle and winning in his manner at times, one forgot he was an Indian. But the spirit of the Red Man was ever present to overcome the strange European mood in a moment.

"He's no Osage, that critter ain't," Cam Gentry said to a group on his tavern veranda one annuity day when the tribes had come to town for their quarterly allowances. "He's second cousin on his father's side to some French missionary, you bet your life. He's got a gait like a Jessut priest. An'

he's not Osage on't other side, neither. I'll bet his mother was a Kiowa, an' that means his maternal grandad was a rattlesnake, even if his paternal grandpop was a French markis turned religious an' gone a-missionaryin' among the red heathen. You dig fur enough into that buck's hide an' you'll find cussedness big as a sheep, I'm tellin' you."

"Where does he live?" inquired my father.

"Lord knows!" responded Cam. "Down to the Kaws' nests, I reckon."

"He was cuttin' east along the Fingal Creek bluff after he'd made off to the southwest, the other night, when I was after the cows," broke in O'mie, who was sitting on the lowest step listening with all his ears. "Was cuttin' straight to the river. Only that's right by the Hermit's Cave an' he couldn't cross to the Osages there."

"Reckon he zigzagged back to town to get somethin' he forgot at Conlow's shop," put in Cam. "Didn't find any dead dogs nor children next mornin', did ye, O'mie?"

Conlow kept the vilest whiskey ever sold to a poor drink-thirsty Redskin. Everybody knew it except those whom the grand jury called into counsel. I saw my father's brow darken.

"Conlow will meet his match one of these days," he muttered.

"That's why we are runnin' you for judge," said Cam. "This cussed country needs you in every office it's got to clean out that gang that robs an' cheats the Injuns, an' then makes 'em ravin' crazy with drinkin'. They's more 'n Conlow to blame, though, Judge. Keep one eye on the Government agents and Indian traders."

"I wonder where Jean did go anyhow," O'mie whispered to me. "Let's foind out an' give him a surprise party an' a church donation some night."

"What does he come here so much for, anyhow?" I questioned.

"I don't know," replied O'mie. "Why can't he stay Injun? What'll he do wid the greatest common divisor an' the indicative mood an' the Sea of Azov, an' the Zambezi River, when he's learned 'em, anyhow? Phil, begorra, I b'lave that cussed Redskin is in this town fur trouble, an' you jist remember he'll git it one av these toimes. He ain't natural Injun. Uncle Cam is right. He's not like them Osages that comes here annuity days. All that's Osage about him is his clothes."

While we were talking, Jean Pahasca came silently into the company and sat down under the oak tree shading the walk. He never looked less like an Indian than he did that summer morning lounging lazily in the shade. The impenetrable savage face had now an expression of ease and superior self-possession, making it handsome. Unlike the others of his race who came and went about Springvale, Jean's trappings were always bright and fresh, and his every muscle had the poetry of motion. In all our games he was an easy victor. He never clambered about the cliff as we did, he simply slid up and down like a lizard. Jim Conlow was built to race, but Jean skimmed the ground like a bird. He could outwrestle every boy except O'mie (nobody had ever held that Irishman if he wanted to get away), and his grip was like steel. We all fought him by turns and he defeated everyone until my turn came. From me he would take no chance of defeat, however much the boys taunted him with being afraid of Phil Baronet. For while he had a quickness that I lacked, I knew I had a muscular strength he could not break. I disliked him at first on Marjie's account; and when she grew accustomed to his presence and almost forgot her fear, I detested him. And never did I dislike him so much before as on this summer morning when we sat about the shady veranda of the Cambridge House. Nobody else, however, gave any heed to the Indian boy picturesquely idling there on the blue-grass.

Down the street came Lettie Conlow and Mary Gentry with Marjory Whately, all chatting together. They turned at the tavern oak and came up the flag-stone walk toward the veranda. I could not tell you to-day what my lady wears in the social functions where I sometimes have the honor to be a guest. I am a man, and silks and laces confuse me. Yet I remember three young girls in a frontier town more than forty years ago. Mary Gentry was slender – "skinny," we called her to tease her. Her dark-blue calico dress was clean and prim. Lettie Conlow was fat. Her skin was thick and muddy, and there was a brown mole below her ear. Her black, slick braids of hair were my especial dislike. She

had no neck to speak of, and when she turned her head the creases above her fat shoulders deepened. I might have liked Lettie but for her open preference for me. Everybody knew this preference, and she annoyed me exceedingly. This morning she wore a thin old red lawn cut down from her mother's gown. A ruffle of the same lawn flopped about her neck. As they came near, her black eyes sought mine as usual, but I saw only the floppy red ruffle – and Marjie. Marjie looked sweet and cool in a fresh starched gingham, with her round white arms bare to the elbows, and her white shapely neck, with its dainty curves and dimples. The effect was heightened by the square-cut bodice, with its green and white gingham bands edged with a Hamburg something, narrow and spotless. How unlike she was to Lettie in her flimsy trimmings! Marjie's hair was coiled in a knot on the top of her head, and the little ringlets curved about her forehead and at the back of her neck. Somehow, with her clear pink cheeks and that pale green gown, I could think only of the wild roses that grew about the rocks on the bluff this side of the Hermit's Cave.

Marjie smiled kindly down at Jean as she passed him. There was always a tremor of fear in that smile; and he knew it and gloried in it.

"Good-morning, Jean," she said in that soft voice I loved to hear.

"Good-morning, Star-face," Jean smiled back at her; and his own face was transfigured for the instant, as his still black eyes followed her. The blood in my veins turned to fire at that look. Our eyes met and for one long moment we gazed steadily at each other. As I turned away I saw Lettie Conlow watching us both, and I knew instinctively that she and Jean Pahasca would sometime join forces against me.

"Well, if you lassies ain't a sight good for sore eyes, I'll never tell it," Cam shouted heartily, squinting up at the girls with his good-natured glance. "You're cool as October an' twicet as sweet an' fine. Go in and let Dollie give you some hot berry pie."

"To cool 'em off," O'mie whispered in my ear. "Nothin' so coolin' as a hot berry pie in July. Let's you and me go to the creek an' thaw out."

That evening Jean Pahasca found the jug supposed to be locked in Conlow's chest of tools inside his shop. I had found where that red forge light came from, and had watched it from my window many a night. When it winked and blinked, I knew somebody inside the shop was passing between it and the line of the chink. I did not speak of it. I was never accused of telling all I knew. My father often said I would make a good witness for my attorney in a suit at law.

Among the Indians who had come for their stipend on this annuity day was a strong young Osage called Hard Rope, who always had a roll of money when he went out of town. I remember that night my father did not come home until very late; and when Aunt Candace asked him if there was anything the matter, I heard him answer carelessly:

"Oh, no. I've been looking after a young Osage they call Hard Rope, who needed me."

I was sleepy, and forgot all about his words then. Long afterwards I had good reason for knowing through this same Hard Rope, how well an Indian can remember a kindness. He never came to Springvale again. And when I next saw him I had forgotten that I had ever known him before. However, I had seen the blinking red glare down the slope that evening and I knew something was going on. Anyhow, Jean Pahasca, crazed with drink, had stolen Tell Mapleson's pony and created a reign of terror in the street until he disappeared down the trail to the southwest.

"It's a wonder old Tell doesn't shoot that Injun," Irving Whately remarked to a group in his store. "He's quick enough with firearms."

"Well," said Cam Gentry, squinting across the counter with his shortsighted eyes, "there's somethin' about that 'Last Chance' store and about this town I don't understand. There's a nigger in the wood-pile, or an Injun in the blankets, somewhere. I hope it won't be long till this thing is cleared up and we can know whether we do know anything, or don't know it. I'm gettin' mystified daily." And Cam sat down chuckling.

"Anyhow, we won't see that Redskin here for a spell, I reckon," broke in Amos Judson, Whately's clerk. And with this grain of comfort, we forgot him for a time.

One lazy Saturday afternoon in early August, O'mie and I went for a swim on the sand-bar side of the Deep Hole under the Hermit's Cave. I had something to tell O'mie. All the boys trusted him with their confidences. We had slid quietly down the river; somehow, it was too hot to be noisy, and we were lying on a broad, flat stone letting the warm water ripple over us. A huge boulder on the sand just beyond us threw a sort of shadow over our brown faces as we rested our heads on the sand.

"O'mie," I began, "I saw something last night."

"Well, an' phwat did somethin' do to you?" He was blowing at the water, which was sliding gently over his chest.

"That's what I want to tell you if you will shut up that red flannel mouth a minute."

"The crimson fabric is now closed be order av the Coort," grinned O'mie.

"O'mie, I waked up suddenly last night. It was clear moonlight, and I looked out of the window. There right under it, on a black pony just like Tell Mapleson's, was Jean Pahasca. He was staring up at the window. He must have seen me move for he only stayed a minute and then away he went. I watched him till he had passed Judson's place and was in the shadows beyond the church. He had on a new red blanket with a circle of white right in the middle, a good target for an arrow, only I'd never sneak up behind him. If I fight him I'll do it like a white man, from the front."

"Then ye'll be dead like a white man, from the front clear back," declared O'mie. "But hadn't ye heard? This mornin' ould Tell was showin' Tell's own pony he said he brought back from down at Westport. He got home late las' night. An' Tell, he pipes up an' says, 'There was a arrow fastened in its mane when I see it this mornin', but his dad took no notice whatsoever av the boy's sayin'; just went on that it was the one Jean Pahasca had stole when he was drunk last. What does it mean, Phil? Is Jean hidin' out round here again? I wish the cuss would go to Santy Fee with the next train down the trail an' go to Spanish bull fightin'. He's just cut out for that, begorra; fur he rides like a Comanche. It ud be a sort av disgrace to the bull though. I've got nothin' agin bulls."

"O'mie, I don't understand; but let's keep still. Some day when he gets so drunk he'll kill one of the grand jury, maybe the rest of them and the coroner can indict him for something."

We lay still in the warm water. Sometimes now in the lazy hot August afternoons I can hear the rippling song of the Neosho as it prattled and gurgled on its way. Suddenly O'mie gave a start and in a voice low and even but intense he exclaimed:

"For the Lord's sake, wud ye look at that? And kape still as a snake while you're doin' it."

Lying perfectly still, I looked keenly about me, seeing nothing unusual.

"Look up across yonder an' don't bat an eye," said O'mie, low as a whisper.

I looked up toward the Hermit's Cave. Sitting on a point of rock overhanging the river was an Indian. His back was toward us and his brilliant red blanket had a white circle in the centre.

"He's not seen us, or he'd niver set out there like that," and O'mie breathed easier. "He could put an arrow through us here as aisy as to snap a string, an' nobody'd live to tell the tale. Phil Bar'net, he's kapin' den in that cave, an' the devil must have showed him how to git up there."

A shout up-stream told of other boys coming down to our swimming place. You have seen a humming bird dart out of sight. So the Indian on the rock far above us vanished at that sound.

"That's Bill Mead comin'; I know his whoop. I wish I knew which side av that Injun's head his eyes is fastened on," said O'mie, still motionless in the water. "If he's watchin' us up there, I'm a turtle till the sun goes down."

A low peal of thunder rolled out of the west and a heavy black cloud swept suddenly over the sun. The blue shadow of the bluff fell upon the Neosho and under its friendly cover we scrambled into our clothes and scudded out of sight among the trees that covered the east bottom land.

"Now, how did he ever get to that place, O'mie?" I questioned.

"I don't know. But if he can get there, I can too."

Poor O'mie! he did not know how true a prophecy he was uttering.

"Let's kape this to oursilves, Phil," counselled my companion. "If too many knows it Tell may lose another pony, or somebody's dead dog may float down the stream like the ould hermit did. Let's burn him out av there oursilves. Then we can adorn our own tepee wid that soft black La Salle-Marquette-Hennepin French scalp."

I agreed, and we went our way burdened by a secret dangerous but fascinating to boys like ourselves.

CHAPTER IV IN THE PRAIRIE TWILIGHT

The spacious prairie is helper to a spacious life.
Big thoughts are nurtured here, with little friction.

– *QUAYLE*.

By the time I was fifteen I was almost as tall and broad-shouldered as my father. Boy-like, I was prodigal of my bounding vigor, which had not tempered down to the strength of my mature manhood. It was well for me that a sobering responsibility fell on me early, else I might have squandered my resources of endurance, and in place of this sturdy story-teller whose sixty years sit lightly on him, there would have been only a ripple in the sod of the curly mesquite on the Plains and a little heap of dead dust, turned to the inert earth again. The West grows large men, as it grows strong, beautiful women; and I know that the boys and girls then differed only in surroundings and opportunity from the boys and girls of Springvale to-day. Life is finer in its appointments now; but I doubt if it is any more free or happy than it was in those days when we went to oyster suppers and school exhibitions up in the Red Range neighborhood. Among us there was the closest companionship, as there needs must be in a lonely and spacious land. What can these lads and lasses of to-day know of a youth nurtured in the atmosphere of peril and uncertainty such as every one of us knew in those years of border strife and civil war? Sometimes up here, when I see the gay automobile parties spinning out upon the paved street and over that broad highway miles and miles to the west, I remember the time when we rode our Indian ponies thither, and the whole prairie was our boulevard.

Marjie could ride without bridle or saddle, and she sat a horse like a cattle queen. The four Anderson children were wholesome and good-natured, as they were good scholars, and they were good riders. They were all tow-headed and they all lisped, and Bud was the most hopeless case among them. Flaxen-haired, baby-faced youngster that he was, he was the very first in all our crowd to learn to drop on the side of his pony and ride like a Comanche. O'mie and I also succeeded in learning that trick; Tell Mapleson broke a collar-bone, attempting it; and Jim Conlow, as O'mie said, "knocked the 'possum' aff his mug thryin' to achave the art." He fractured the bones of his nose, making his face a degree more homely than it was before. Then there were the Mead boys to be counted on everywhere. Dave went West years ago, made his fortune, and then began to traffic with the Orient. His name is better known in Hong-Kong now than it is in Springvale. He never married, and it used to be said that a young girl's grave up in the Red Range graveyard held all his hope and love. I do not know; for he left home the year I came up to Topeka to enlist, and Springvale was like the bitter waters of Marah to my spirit. But that comes later.

Bill Mead married Bessie Anderson, and the seven little tow-headed Meads, stair-stepping down the years, played with the third generation here as we used to play in the years gone by. Bill is president of the bank on the corner where the old Whately store stood and is a share-holder in several big Kansas City concerns. Bessie lost her rosy cheeks years ago, but she has her seven children; the youngest of them, Phil, named for me, will graduate from the Kansas University this year. Lettie Conlow was always on the uncertain list with us. No Conlow could do much with a horse except to put shoes under it. It was a trick of hers to lag behind and call to me to tighten a girth, while Marjie raced on with Dave Mead or Tell Mapleson. Tell liked Lettie, and it rasped my spirit to be made the object of her preference and his jealousy. Once when we were alone his anger boiled hot, and he shook his fist at me and cried:

"You mean pup! You want to take my girl from me. I can lick you, and I'm going to do it."

I was bigger than Tell, and he knew my strength.

"I wish to goodness you would," I said. "I'd rather be licked than to have a girl I don't care for always smiling at me."

Tell's face fell, and he grinned sheepishly.

"Don't you really care for Lettie, Phil? She says you like Bess Anderson."

Was that a trick of Lettie's to put Marjie out of my thought, I wondered, or did she really know my heart? I distrusted Lettie. She was so like her black-eyed father. But I had guarded my own feelings, and the boys and girls had not guessed what Marjie was to me.

It was about this time that Father Le Claire, a French priest who had been a missionary in the Southwest, began to come and go about Springvale. His work lay mostly with the Osages farther down the Neosho, but he labored much among the Kaws. He was a kindly-spirited man, reserved, but gentle and courteous ever, and he was very fond of children. He was always in town on annuity days, when the tribes came up for their quarterly stipend from the Government. Mapleson was the Indian agent. The "Last Chance," unable to compete with its commercial rival, the Whately house, had now a drug store in the front, a harness shop in the rear and a saloon in the cellar. It was to this "Last Chance" that the Indians came for their money; and it was Father Le Claire who piloted many of them out to the trails leading southward and started them on the way to their villages, sober and possessed of their Government allowance or its equivalent in honest merchandise.

From the first visit the good priest took to Jean Pahasca, and he helped to save the young brave from many a murdering spell.

To O'mie and myself, however, remained the resolve to drive him from Springvale; for, boylike, we watched him more closely than the men did, and we knew him better. He was not the only one of our town who drank too freely. Four decades ago the law was not the righteous force it is to-day, and we looked upon many sights which our children, thank Heaven, never see in Kansas.

"Keep out of that Redskin's way when he's drunk," was Cam Gentry's advice to us. "You know he'd scalp his grandmother if he could get hold of her then."

We kept out of his way, but we bided our time.

Father Le Claire had another favorite in Springvale, and that was O'mie. He said little to the Irish orphan lad, but there sprang up a sort of understanding between the two. Whenever he was in town, O'mie was not far away from him; and the boy, frank and confidential in everything else, grew strangely silent when we talked of the priest. I spoke of this to my father one day. He looked keenly at me and said quietly:

"You would make a good lawyer, Phil, you seem to know what a lawyer must know; that is, what people think as well as what they say."

"I don't quite understand, father," I replied.

"Then you won't make a good lawyer. It's the understanding that makes the lawyer," and he changed the subject.

My mind was not greatly disturbed over O'mie, however. I was young and neither I nor my companions were troubled by anything but the realities of the day. Limited as we were by circumstances in this new West, we made the most of our surroundings and of one another. How much the prairies meant to us, as they unrolled their springtime glory! From the noonday blue of the sky overhead to the deep verdure of the land below, there ranged every dainty tint of changeful coloring. Nature lavished her wealth of loveliness here, that the dream of the New Jerusalem might not seem a mere phantasy of the poet disciple who walked with the Christ and was called of Him "The Beloved."

The prairies were beautiful to me at any hour, but most of all I loved them in the long summer evenings when the burst of sunset splendor had deepened into twilight. Then the afterglow softened to that purple loveliness indescribably rare and sweet, wreathed round by gray cloudfolds melting into exquisite pink, the last far echo of the daylight's glory. It is said that any land is beautiful to us only

by association. Was it the light heart of my boyhood, and my merry comrades, and most of all, the little girl who was ever in my thoughts, that gave grandeur to these prairies and filled my memory with pictures no artist could ever color on canvas? I cannot say, for all these have large places in my mind's treasury.

From early spring to late October it was a part of each day's duty for the youngsters of Springvale to go in the evening after the cows that ranged on the open west. We went together, of course, and, of course, we rode our ponies. Sometimes we went far and hunted long before we found the cattle. The tenderest grasses grew along the draws, and these often formed a deep wrinkle on the surface where our whole herd was hidden until we came to the very edge of the depression. Sometimes the herd was scattered, and every one must be rounded up and headed toward town before we left the prairie. And then we loitered on the homeward way and sang as only brave, free-spirited boys and girls can sing. And the prairie caught our songs and sent them rippling far and far over its clear, wide spaces.

As the twilight deepened, we drew nearer together, for comradeship meant protection. Some years before, a boy had been stolen out on these prairies one day by a band of Kiowas, and that night the mother drowned herself in the Neosho above town. Her home had been in a little stone cabin round the north bend of the river. It was in the sheltered draw just below where the one lone cottonwood tree made a landmark on the Plains – a deserted habitation now, and said to be haunted by the spirit of the unhappy mother. The child's father, a handsome French Canadian, had turned Plainsman and gone to the Southwest and had not been heard of afterwards. While we had small grounds for fear, we kept our ponies in a little group coming in side by side on the home stretch. All the purple shadows of those sweet summer twilights are blended with the memories of those happy care-free hours.

In the long summer days the cows ranged wider to the west, and we wandered farther in our evening jaunts and lingered later in the fragrant draws where the sweet grasses were starred with many brilliant blossoms. That is how we happened to be away out on the northwest prairie that evening when Jean Pahasca found us, the evening when O'mie read my secret in my tell-tale face. Even today a storm cloud in the northwest with the sunset flaming against its jagged edges recalls that scene. The cattle had all been headed homeward, and we were racing our ponies down the long slope to the south. On the right the draw, watched over by the big cottonwood, breaks through the height and finds its way to the Neosho. The watershed between the river and Fingal's Creek is here only a high swell, and straight toward the west it is level as a floor.

The air of a hot afternoon had begun to ripple in cool little waves against our faces. All the glory of the midsummer day was ending in the grandeur of a crimson sunset shaded northward by that threatening thundercloud. With our ponies lined up for one more race we were just on the point of starting, when a whoop, a savage yell, and Jean Pahasca rose above the edge of the draw behind us and dashed toward us headlong. We knew he was drunk, for since Father Le Claire's coming among us he had come to be a sort of gentleman Indian when he was sober; and we caught the naked gleam of the short sharp knife he always wore in a leather sheath at his belt. We were thrown into confusion, and some ponies became unmanageable at once. It is the way of their breed to turn traitor with the least sign of the rider's fear. At Jean's second whoop there was a stampede. Marjie's pony gave a leap and started off at full gallop toward the level west. Hers was the swiftest horse of all, but the Indian coming at an angle had the advantage of space, and he singled her out in a moment. Her hair hung down in two heavy braids, and as she gave one frightened glance backward I saw her catch them both in one hand and draw them over her shoulder as if to save them from the scalping knife.

My pony leaped to follow her but my quick eye caught the short angle of the Indian's advantage. I turned, white and anguish-stricken, toward my companions. Then it was that I heard O'mie's low words:

"Bedad, Phil, an' that's how it is wid ye, is it? Then we've got to kill that Injun, just for grandeur."

His voice set a mighty force tingling in every nerve. The thrill of that moment is mine after all these years, for in that instant I was born again. I believe no terror nor any torture could have stayed me then, and death would have seemed sublime if only I could have flung myself between the girl and this drink-crazed creature seeking in his irresponsible madness to take her life. It was not alone that this was Marjie, and there swept over me the full realization of what she meant to me. Something greater than my own love and life leaped into being within me. It was the swift, unworded comprehension of a woman's worth, of the sacredness of her life, and her divine right to the protection of her virtue; a comprehension of the beauty and blessing of the American home, of the obedient daughter, the loving wife, the Madonna mother, of all that these mean as the very foundation rock of our nation's strength and honor. It swept my soul like a cleansing fire. The words for this came later, but the force of it swayed my understanding in that instant's crisis. Some boys grow into manhood as the years roll along, and some leap into it at a single bound. It was a boy, Phil Baronet, who went out after the cows that careless summer day so like all the other summer days before it. It was a man, Philip Baronet, who followed them home that dark night, fearing neither the roar of the angry storm cloud that threshed in fury above us, nor any human being, though he were filled with the rage of madness.

At O'mie's word I dashed after Marjie. Behind me came Bud Anderson and Dave Mead, followed by every other boy and girl. O'mie rode beside me, and not one of us thought of himself. It was all done in a flash, and I marvel that I tell its mental processes as if they were a song sung in long-metre time. But it is all so clear to me. I can see the fiery radiance of that sky blotted by the two riders before me. I can hear the crash of the ponies' feet, and I can even feel the sweep of wind out of that storm-cloud turning the white under-side of the big cottonwood's leaves uppermost and cutting cold now against the hot air. And then there rises up that ripple of ground made by the ring of the Osage's tepee in the years gone by. Marjie deftly swerved her pony to the south and skirted that little ridge of ground with a graceful curve, as though this were a mere racing game and not a life-and-death ride. Jean's horse plunged at the tepee ring, leaped to the little hollow beyond it, stumbled and fell, and, pellmell, like a stampede of cattle, we were upon him.

I never could understand how Dave Mead headed the crowd back and kept the whole mass from piling up on the fallen Indian and those nearest to him. Nor do I understand why some of us were not crushed or kicked out of life in that *mêlée* of ponies and riders struggling madly together. What I do know is that Bud Anderson, who was not thrown from his horse, caught Jean's pony by the bridle and dragged it clear of the mass. It was O'mie's quick hand that wrested that murderous knife from the Indian's grasp, and it was my strong arm that held him with a grip of iron. The shock sobered him instantly. He struggled a moment, and then the cunning that always deceived us gained control. The Indian spirit vanished, and with something masterful in his manner he relaxed all effort. Lifting his eyes to mine with no trace of resentment in their impenetrable depths, he said evenly:

"Let me go. I was drunk. I was fool."

"Let him go, Phil. He did act kinder drunk," Bill Mead urged, and I loosed my hold. I knew instinctively that we were safe now, as I knew also that this submission of Jean Pahasca's must be paid for later with heavy interest by somebody.

"Here'th your horth; s'pothe you thkite," lisped Bud Anderson.

Jean sprang upon his pony and dashed off. We watched him ride away down the long slope. In a few moments another horseman joined him, and they took the trail toward the Kaw reservation. It was Father Le Claire riding with the Indian into the gathering shadows of the south.

I turned to Marjie standing beside me. Her big brown eyes were luminous with tears, and her face was as white as my mother's face was on the day the sea left its burden on the Rockport sands. It was hate that made Jean Pahasca veil his countenance for me a moment before. Something of which hate can never know made me look down at her calmly. O'mie's hand was on my shoulder and his eyes were on us both. There was a quaint approval in his glance toward me. He knew the self-control I needed then.

"Phil saved you, Marjie," Mary Gentry exclaimed.

"No, he saved Jean," put in Lettie.

"And O'mie saved Phil," Bess Anderson urged. "Just grabbed that knife in time."

"Well, I thaved mythelf," Bud piped in.

He never could find any heroism in himself who, more than any other boy among us, had a record for pulling drowning boys out of the Deep Hole by the Hermit's Cave, and killing rattlesnakes in the cliff's crevices, and daring the dark when the border ruffians were hiding about Springvale.

An angry growl of thunder gave us warning of the coming storm. In our long race home before its wrath, in the dense darkness wrapping the landscape, we could only trust to the ponies to keep the way. Marjie rode close by my side that night, and more than once my hand found hers in the darkness to assure her of protection. O'mie, bless his red head! crowded Lettie to the far side of the group, keeping Tell on the other side of her.

When I climbed the hill on Cliff Street that night I turned by the bushes and caught the gleam of Marjie's light. I gave the whistling call we had kept for our signal these years, and I saw the light waver as a good-night signal.

That night I could not sleep. The storm lasted for hours, and the rain swept in sheets across the landscape. The darkness was intense, and the midsummer heat of the day was lost in the chill of that drouth-breaking torrent. After midnight I went to my father's room. He had not retired, but was sitting by the window against which the rain beat heavily. The light burned low, and his fine face was dimly outlined in the shadows. I sat down beside his knee as I was wont to do in childhood.

"Father," I began hesitatingly, "Father, do you still love my mother? Could you care for anybody else? Does a man ever –" I could not say more. Something so like tears was coming into my voice that my cheeks grew hot.

My father's hand rested gently on my head, his fingers stroking the ripples of my hair. White as it is now, it was dark and wavy then, as my mother's had been. It was the admiration of the women and girls, which admiration always annoyed and embarrassed me. In and out of those set waves above my forehead his fingers passed caressingly. He knew the heart of a boy, and he sat silent there, letting me feel that I could tell him anything.

"Have you come to the cross-roads, Phil?" he asked gently. "I was thinking of you as I sat here. Maybe that brought you in. Your boyhood must give way to manhood soon. These times of civil war change conditions for our children," he mused to himself, rather than spoke to me. "We expect a call to the front soon, Phil. When I am gone, I want you to do a man's part in Springvale. You are only a boy, I know, but you have a man's strength, my son."

"And a man's spirit, too," I cried, springing up and standing erect before him. "Let me go with you, Father."

"No, Phil, you must stay here and help to protect these homes, just as we men must go out to fight for them. To the American people war doesn't mean glory nor conquest. It means safety and freedom, and these begin and end in the homes of our land."

The impulse wakened on the prairie that evening at the sight of Marjie's peril leaped up again within me.

"I'll do my best. But tell me, Father," I had dropped down beside him again, "do you still love my mother? Does a man love the same woman always?"

Few boys of my age would have asked such a question of a man. My father took both of my hands into his own strong hands and in the dim light he searched my face with his keen eyes.

"Men differ in their natures, my boy. Even fathers and sons do not always think alike. I can speak only for myself. Do I love the woman who gave you birth? Oh, Phil!"

No need for him to say more. Over his face there swept an expression of tenderness such as I have never seen save as at long intervals I have caught it on the face of a sweet-browed mother bending above a sleeping babe. I rose up before him, and stooping, I kissed his forehead. It was a

sacred hour, and I went out from his presence with a new bond binding us together who had been companions all my days. My dreams when I fell asleep at last were all of Marjie, and through them all her need for a protector was mingled with a still greater need for my guardianship. It came from two women who were strangers to me, whose faces I had never seen before.

CHAPTER V

A GOOD INDIAN

Underneath that face like summer's ocean,
Its lips as moveless, and its brow as clear,
Slumbers a whirlwind of the heart's emotion,
Love, hatred, pride, hope, sorrow, – all save fear.

Cast in the setting of to-day, after such an attempt on human life as we broke up on the prairie, Jean Pahasca would have been hiding in the coverts of Oklahoma, or doing time at the Lansing penitentiary for attempted assault with intent to kill. The man who sold him the whiskey would be in the clutches of the law, carrying his case up to the Supreme Court, backed by the slush fund of the brewers' union. The Associated Press would give the incident a two-inch heading and a one-inch story; and the snail would stay on the thorn, and the lark keep on the wing.

Even in that time Springvale would not have tolerated the Indian among us had it not been that the minds of the people were fermenting with other things. We were on the notorious old border between free and slave lands, whose tragedies rival the tales of the Scottish border. Kansas had been a storm centre since the day it became a Territory, and the overwhelming theme was negro slavery. Every man was marked as "pro" or "anti." There was no neutral ground. Springvale was by majority a Free-State town. A certain element with us, however, backed up by the Fingal's Creek settlement, declared openly and vindictively for slavery. It was from this class that we had most to fear. While the best of our people were giving their life-blood to save a nation, these men connived with border raiders who would not hesitate to take the life and property of every Free-State citizen. When our soldiers marched away to fields of battle, they knew they were leaving an enemy behind them, and no man's home was safe. Small public heed was paid then to the outbreak of a drunken Indian boy who had been overcome in a scrap out on the prairie when the youngsters were hunting their cows.

Where the bushes grow over the edge of the bluff at the steep bend in Cliff Street, a point of rock projects beyond the rough side. By a rude sort of stone steps beside this point we could clamber down many feet to the bush-grown ledge below. This point had been a meeting-place and playground for Marjie and myself all those years. We named it "Rockport" after the old Massachusetts town. Marjie could hear my call from the bushes and come up to the half-way place between our two homes. The stratum of rock below this point was full of cunning little crevices and deep hiding-places. One of these, known only to Marjie and myself, we called our post-office, and many a little note, scrawled in childish hand, but always directed to "Rockport" like a real address on the outside fold, we left for each other to find. Sometimes it was a message, sometimes it was only a joke, and sometimes it was just a line of childish love-making. We always put our valentines in this private house of Uncle Sam's postal service. Maybe that was why the other boys and girls did not couple our names together oftener. Everybody knew who got valentines at the real post-office and where they came from.

On the evening after the storm there was no loitering on the prairie. While we knew there was no danger, a half-dozen boys brought the cows home long before the daylight failed. At sunset I went down to "Rockport," intending to whistle to Marjie. How many a summer evening together here we had watched the sunset on the prairie! To-night, for no reason that I could give, I parted the bushes and climbed down to the ledge below, intending in a moment to come up again. I paused to listen to the lowing of some cows down the river. All the sweet sounds and odors of evening were in the air, and the rain-washed woodland of the Neosho Valley was in its richest green. I did not notice that the bushes hid me until, as I turned, I caught a glimpse of a red blanket, with a circular white centre,

sliding up that stairway. An instant later, a call, my signal whistle, sounded from the rock above. I stood on the ledge under the point, my heart the noisiest thing in all that summer landscape full of soft twilight utterances. I was too far below the cliff's edge to catch any answering call, but I determined to fling that blanket and its wearer off the height if any harm should even threaten. Presently I heard a light footstep, and Marjie parted the bushes above me. Before she could cry out, Jean spoke to her. His voice was clear and sweet as I had never heard it before, and I do not wonder it reassured her.

"No afraid, Star-face, no afraid. Jean wants one word."

Marjie did not move, and I longed to let her know how near I was to her, and yet I dared not till I knew his purpose.

"Star-face," he began, "Jean drink no more. Jean promise Padre Le Claire, never, never, Star-face, not be afraid anymore, never, never. Jean good Indian now. Always keep evil from Star-face."

How full of affection were his tones. I wondered at his broken Indian tongue, for he had learned good English, and sometimes he surpassed us all in the terse excellence and readiness of his language. Why should he hesitate so now?

"Star-face," – there was a note of self-control in his pleading voice, – "I will never drink again. I would not do harm to you. Don't be afraid."

I heard her words then, soft and sweet, with that tremor of fear she could never overcome.

"I hope you won't, Jean."

Then the bushes crackled, as she turned and sped away.

I was just out of sight again when that red blanket slipped down the rocks and disappeared over the side of the ledge in the jungle of bushes below me.

A little later, when Mary Gentry and O'mie and I sat with Marjie on the Whately doorstep, she told us what Jean had said.

"Do you really think he will be good now?" asked Mary. She was always credulous.

"Yes, of course," Marjie answered carelessly.

Her reply angered me. She seemed so ready to trust the word of this savage who twenty-four hours before had tried to scalp her. Did his manner please Marjie? Was the foolish girl attracted by this picturesque creature? I clenched my fists in the dark.

"Girls are such silly things," I said to myself. "I thought better of Marjie, but she is like all the rest." And then I blushed in the dark for having such mean thoughts.

"Don't you think he will be good now, Phil?"

I did not know how eagerly she waited for my answer. Poor Marjie! To her the Indian name was always a terror. Before I could reply O'mie broke in:

"Marjory Whately, ye'll excuse me fur referrin' to it, but I ain't no bigger than you are."

O'mie had not grown as the most of us had, and while he had a lightning quickness of movement, and a courage that never faltered, he was no match for the bigger boys in strength and endurance. Marjie was rounding into graceful womanhood now, but she was not of the slight type. She never lost her dimples, and the vigorous air of the prairies gave her that splendid physique that made her a stranger to sickness and kept the wild-rose bloom on her fair cheeks. O'mie did not outweigh her.

"Ye'll 'scuse me," O'mie went on, "fur the embarrassin' statement; but I ain't big, I run mostly to brains, while Phil here, an' Bill, an' Dave, an' Bud, an' Possum Conlow runs mostly to beef; an' yet, bein' small, I ain't afraid none of your good Injun. But take this warnin' from me, an old friend that knew your grandmother in long clothes, that you kape wide of Jean Pahasca's trail. Don't you trust him."

Marjie gave a little shiver. Had I been something less a fool then I should have known that it was a shiver of fear, but I was of the age to know everything, and O'mie sitting there had learned my heart in a moment on the prairie the evening before. And then I wanted Marjie to trust to me. Her eyes were like stars in the soft twilight, and her white face lost its color, but she did not look at me.

"Don't you trust that mock-turtle Osage, Marjorie, don't." O'mie was more deeply in earnest than we thought.

"But O'mie," Marjie urged, "Jean was just as earnest as you are now; and you'd say so, too, Phil, if you had heard him."

She was right. The words I had heard from above the rock rang true.

"And if he really wants to do better, what have we all been told in the Sunday-school? 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'"

I could have caught that minor chord of fear had I been more master of myself at that moment.

"Have ye talked wid Father Le Claire?" asked O'mie. "Let's lave the baste to him. Phil, whin does your padre and his Company start to subdue the rebellious South?"

"Pretty soon, father says."

"My father is going too," Marjie said gently, "and Henry Anderson and Cris Mead, and all the men."

"Oh, well, we'll take care of the widders an' orphans." O'mie spoke carelessly, but he added, "It's grand whin such min go out to foight fur a country. Uncle Cam wants to go if he's aqual to the tests; you know he's too near-sighted to see a soldier. Why don't you go too, Phil? You're big as your dad, an' not half so essential to Springvale. Just lave it to sich social ornimints as me an' Marjie's 'good Injun.'"

Again Marjie shivered.

"I want to go, but father won't let me leave – Aunt Candace."

"An' he's right, as is customary wid him. You nade your aunt to take care of you. He couldn't be stoppin' the battle to lace up your shoes an' see that you'd washed your neck. Come, Mary, little girls must be gettin' home." And he and Mary trotted down the slope toward the twinkling lights of the Cambridge House.

Before I reached home, O'mie had overtaken me, saying:

"Come, Phil, let's rest here a minute."

We were just by the bushes that shut off my "Rockport," so we parted them and sat down on the point of rock. The moon was rising, red in the east, and the Neosho Valley below us was just catching its gleams on the treetops, while each point of the jagged bluff stood out silvery white above the dark shadows. A thousand crickets and katydids were chirping in the grass. It was only on the town side that the bushes screened this point. All the west prairie was in that tender gloom that would roll back in shadowy waves before the rising moon.

"Phil," O'mie began, "don't be no bigger fool than nature cut you out fur to be. Don't you trust that 'good Injun' of Marjie's, but kape one eye on him comin' an' t' other 'n on him goin'."

"I don't trust him, O'mie, but he has a voice that deceives. I don't wonder, being a girl, Marjie is caught by it."

"An' you, bein' a boy," O'mie mimicked, – "Phil, you're enough to turn my hair rid. But never mind, ye can't trust him. Fur why? He's not to be trusted. If he was aven Injun clean through you could a little, maybe. Some Osages has honor to shame a white man, – aven an Irishman, – but he's not Osage. He's a Kiowa, the kind that stole that little chap years ago up toward Rid Range. An' he ain't Kiowa altogether nather. The Injun blood gives him cuteness, but half his cussedness is in that soft black scalp an' that soft voice sayin', 'Good Injun.' There's some old Louis XIV somewhere in his family tree. The roots av it may be in the Plains out here, but some branch is a graft from a Orleans rose-bush. He's got the blossoms an' the thorns av a Frenchman. An' besides," O'mie added, "as if us two wise men av the West didn't know, comes Father Le Claire to me to-day. He's Jean's guide an' counsellor. An' Phil, begorra, them two looks alike. Same square-cut kind o' foreheads they've got. Annyhow, I was waterin' the horses down to the ford, an' Father Le Claire comes on me sudden, ridin' up on the Kaw trail from the south. He blessed me wid his holy hand and then says quick:

"O'mie, ye are a lad I can trust!"

"I nodded, not knowin' why annybody can't be trusted who goes swimmin' once a week, an' never tastes whiskey, an' don't practise lyin', nor shirkin' his stunt at the Cambridge House."

"'O'mie,' says he, 'I want to tell you who you must not trust. It is Jean Pahunca,' says he; 'I wish I didn't nade to say it, but it is me duty to warn ye. Don't mistreat him, but O'mie, for Heaven's sake, kape your eyes open, especially when he promises to be good.' It's our stunt, Phil, to watch him close now he's took to reformin' to the girls."

"O'mie, we know, and Father Le Claire knows, but how can we make those foolish girls understand? Mary believes everything that's said to her anyhow, and you heard Marjie to-night. She thinks she should take Jean at his word."

"Phil, you are all right, seemin'ly. You can lick any av us. You've got the build av a giant, an' you've beautiful hair an' teeth. An' you are son an' heir to John Bar'net, which is an asset some av us would love to possess, bein' orphans, an' the lovely ladies av Springvale is all bewitched by you; but you are a blind, blitherin' ijit now an' again."

"Well, you heard what Marjie said, and how careless she was."

"Yes, an' I seen her shiver an' turn white the instant too. Phil, she's doin' that to kape us from bein' unaisy, an' it's costin' her some to do it. Bless her pretty face! Phil, don't be no bigger fool than ye can kape from."

In less than a week after the incident on the prairie my father's Company was called to the firing line of the Civil War and the responsibilities of life fell suddenly upon me. There was a great gathering in town on the day the men marched away. Where the opera house stands now was the corner of a big vacant patch of ground reaching out toward the creek. To-day it was filled with the crowd come to see the soldiers and bid them good-bye. A speaker's stand was set up in the yard of the Cambridge House and the boys in blue were in the broad street before it. It was the last civilian ceremony for many of them, for that Kansas Company went up Missionary Ridge at Chattanooga, led the line as Kansans will ever do, and in the face of a murderous fire they drove the foeman back. But many of them never came home to wear their laurels of victory. They lie in distant cemeteries under the shadow of tall monuments. They lie in old neglected fields, in sunken trenches, by lonely waysides, and in deep Southern marshes, waiting all the last great Reunion. If I should live a thousand years, the memory of that bright summer morning would not fade from my mind.

Dr. Hemingway, pastor of the Presbyterian Church, presided over the meeting, and the crowd about the soldiers was reinforced by all the countryside beyond the Neosho and the whole Red Range neighborhood.

Skulking about the edge of the company, or gathered in little groups around the corners just out of sight, were the pro-slavery sympathizers, augmented by the Fingal's Creek crowd, who were of the Secession element clear through. In the doorway of the "Last Chance" sat the Rev. Dodd, pastor of the Springvale Methodist Church South, taking no part in this patriotic occasion. Father Le Claire was beside Dr. Hemingway. He said not a word, but Springvale knew he was a power for peace. He did not sanction bloodshed even in a righteous cause. Neither would he allow those who followed his faith to lift a hand against those who did go out to battle. We trusted him and he never betrayed that trust. This morning I recalled what O'mie had said about his looking like Jean Pahunca. His broad hat was pushed back from his square dark forehead; and the hair, soft and jetty, had the same line about the face. But not one feature there bespoke an ignoble spirit. I did not understand him, but I was drawn toward him, as I was repelled by the Indian from the moment I first saw his head above the bluff on the rainy October evening long ago.

How little the Kansas boys and girls to-day can understand what that morning meant to us, when we saw our fathers riding down the Santa Fé Trail to the east, and waving good-bye to us at the far side of the ford! How the fire of patriotism burned in our hearts, and how the sudden loss of all our strongest and best men left us helpless among secret cruel enemies! And then that spirit of manhood leaped up within us, the sudden sense of responsibility come to "all the able-

bodied boys" to stand up as a wall of defence about the homes of Springvale. Too well we knew the dangers. Had we not lived on this Kansas border in all those plastic years when the mind takes deepest impressions? The ruffianism of Leavenworth and Lawrence and Osawatomie had been repeated in the unprotected surroundings of Springvale. The Red Range schoolhouse had been burned, and the teacher, a Massachusetts man, had been drowned in a shallow pool near the source of Fingal's Creek, his body fastened face downward so that a few inches of water were enough for the fiendish purpose. Eastward the settlers had fled to our town, time and again, to escape the border raiders, whose coming meant death to the free-spirited father, and a widow and orphans left destitute beside the smoking embers of what had been a home. Those were busy days in Kansas, and the memory of them can yet stir the heart of a man of sixty years.

That morning Dr. Hemingway offered prayer, the prayer of a godly man, for the souls of men about to be baptized with a baptism of blood that other men might be free, and a peaceful generation might walk with ease where their feet trod red-hot ploughshares; a prayer for the strong arm of God Almighty, to uphold every soldier's hands until the cause of right should triumph; a prayer for the heavenly Father's protection about the homes left fatherless for the sake of His children.

And then he prayed for us, "for Philip Baronet, the strong and manly son of his noble father, John Baronet; for David and William Mead, for John and Clayton and August Anderson." He prayed for Tell Mapleson, too (Tell was always square in spite of his Copperhead father), and for "Thomas O'Meara." We hardly knew whom he meant.

Bud Anderson whispered later, "Thay, O'mie, you'll never get into kingdom come under an athumed name. Better thtick to 'O'mie.'"

And last of all the good Doctor prayed for the wives and daughters, that they "be strong and very courageous," doing their part of working and waiting as bravely as they do who go out to stirring action. Then ringing speeches followed. I remember them all; but most of all the words of my father and of Irving Whately are fixed in my mind. My father lived many years and died one sunset hour when the prairies were in their autumn glory, died with his face to the western sky, his last earthly scene that peaceful prairie with the grandeur of a thousand ever-changing hues building up a wall like to the walls of the New Jerusalem which Saint John saw in a vision on the Isle of Patmos. There was

No moaning of the bar
When he put out to sea

for he died beautifully, as he had lived. I never saw Irving Whately again, for he went down before the rebel fire at Chattanooga; but the sound of his voice I still can hear.

The words of these men seemed to lift me above the clouds, and what followed is like a dream. I know that when the speeches were done, Marjie went forward with the beautiful banner the women of Springvale had made with their own hands for this Company. I could not hear her words. They were few and simple, no doubt, for she was never given to display. But I remember her white dress and her hair parted in front and coiled low on her neck. I remember the sweet Madonna face of the little girl, and how modestly graceful she was. I remember how every man held his breath as she came up to the group seated on the stage, how pink her cheeks were and how white the china aster bloom nestling against the ripples of her hair, and how the soldiers cheered that flag and its bearer. I remember Jean Pahusca, Indian-like, standing motionless, never taking his eyes from Marjie's face. It was that flag that this Company followed in its awful charge up Missionary Ridge. And it was Irving Whately who kept it aloft, the memory of his daughter making it doubly sacred to him.

And then came the good-byes. Marjie's father gripped my hand, and his voice was full of tears.

"Take care of them, Phil. I have no son to guard my home, and if we never come back you will not let harm come to them. You will let me feel when I am far away that you are shielding my little girl from evil, won't you, Phil?"

I clenched his hand in mine. "You know I'll do that, Mr. Whately." I stood up to my full height, young, broad-shouldered, and muscular.

"It will be easier for me, Phil, to know you are here."

I understood him. Mrs. Whately was, of all the women I knew, least able to do for herself. Marjie was like her father, and, save for her fear of Indians, no Kansas girl was ever more capable and independent. It has been my joy that this father trusted me. The flag his daughter put into his hands that day was his shroud at Chattanooga, and his last moments were happier for the thought of his little girl in my care.

Aunt Candace and I walked home together after we had waved the last good-byes to the soldiers. From our doorway up on Cliff Street we watched that line of men grow dim and blend at last into the eastern horizon's purple bound. When I turned then and looked down at the town beyond the slope, it seemed to me that upon me alone rested the burden of its protection. Driven deep in my boyish soul was the sense of the sacredness of these homes, and of a man's high duty to keep harm from them. My father had gone out to battle, not alone to set free an enslaved race, but to make whole and strong a nation whose roots are in the homes it defends. So I, left to fill his place, must be the valiant defender of the defenceless. Such moments of exaltation come to the young soul, and by such ideals a life is squared.

That evening our little crowd of boys strolled out on the west prairie. The sunset deepened to the rich afterglow, and all the soft shadows of evening began to unfold about us. In that quiet, sacred time, standing out on the wide prairie, with the great crystal dome above us, and the landscape, swept across by the free winds of heaven, unrolled in all its dreamy beauty about us, our little company gripped hands and swore our fealty to the Stars and Stripes. And then and there we gave sacred pledge and promise to stand by one another and to give our lives if need be for the protection and welfare of the homes of Springvale.

Busy days followed the going of the soldiers. Somehow the gang of us who had idled away the summer afternoons in the sand-bar shallows beyond the Deep Hole seemed suddenly to grow into young men who must not neglect school nor business duties. Awkwardly enough but earnestly we strove to keep Springvale a pushing, prosperous community, and while our efforts were often ludicrous, the manliness of purpose had its effect. It gave us breadth, this purpose, and broke up our narrow prejudices. I believe in those first months I would have suffered for the least in Springvale as readily as for the greatest. Even Lettie Conlow, whose father kept on shoeing horses as though there were no civil strife in the nation, found such favor with me as she had never found before. I know now it was only a boy's patriotic foolishness, but who shall say it was ignoble in its influence? Marjie was my especial charge. That Fall I did not retire at night until I had run down to the bushes and given my whistle, and had seen her window light waver a good-night answer, and I knew she was safe. I was not her only guardian, however. One crisp autumn night there was no response to my call, and I sat down on the rocky outcrop of the steep hill to await the coming of her light in the window. It was a clear starlight night, and I had no thought of being unseen as I was quietly watching. Presently, up through the bushes a dark form slid. It did not stand erect when the street was reached, but crawled with head up and alert in the deeper shadow of the bluff side of the road. I knew instinctively that it was Jean Pahasca, and that he had not been expecting me to be there after my call and had failed to notice me in his eagerness to creep unseen down the slope. Sometimes in these later years in a great football game I have watched the Haskell Indians crawling swiftly up and down the side-lines following the surge of the players on the gridiron, and I always think of Jean as he crept down the hill that night. It was late October and the frost was glistening, but I pulled off my boots in a moment and silently followed the fellow. Inside the fence near Marjie's window was a big circle of lilac bushes, transplanted years ago from the old Ohio home of the Whatelys. Inside this clump Jean crept, and I knew by the quiet crackle of twigs and dead leaves he was making his bed there. My first thought was to drag him out and choke him. And then my better judgment prevailed. I slipped away to find O'mie for a council.

"Phil, I'd like to kill him wid a hoe, same as Marjie did that other rattlesnake that had Jim Conlow charmed an' flutterin' toward his pisen fangs, only we'd better wait a bit. By Saint Patrick, Philip, we can't hang up his hide yet awhoile. I know what the baste's up to annyhow."

"Well, what is it?" I queried eagerly.

"He's bein' a good Injun he is, an' he's got a crude sort o' notion he's protectin' that dear little bird. She may be scared o' him, an' he knows it; but bedad, I'd not want to be the border ruffian that went prowlin' in there uninvited; would you?"

"Well, he's a dear trusty old Fido of a watchdog, O'mie. We will take Father Le Claire's word, and keep an eye on him though. He will sleep where he will sleep, but we'll see if the sight of water affects him any. A dog of his breed may be subject to rabies. You can't always trust even a 'good Injun.'"

After that I watched for Jean's coming and followed him to his lilac bed, a half-savage, half-educated Indian brave, foolishly hoping to win a white girl for his own.

All that Fall Jean never missed a night from the lilac bush. As long as he persisted in passing the dark hours so near to the Whately home my burden of anxiety and responsibility was doubled. In silent faithfulness he kept sentinel watch. I dared not tell Marjie, for I knew it would fill her nights with terror, and yet I feared her accidental discovery of his presence. Jean was doing more than this, however. His promise to be good seemed to belie Father Le Claire's warning. In and out of the village all that winter he went, orderly, at times even affable, quietly refusing every temptation to drunkenness. "A good Indian" he was, even to the point where O'mie and I wondered if we might not have been wrong in our judgment of him. He was growing handsomer too. He stood six feet in his moccasins, stalwart as a giant, with grace in every motion. Somehow he seemed more like a picturesque Gypsy, a sort of semi-civilized grandee, than an Indian of the Plains. There was a dominant courtliness in his manner and his bearing was kingly. People spoke kindly of him. Regularly he took communion in the little Catholic chapel at the south edge of town on the Kaw trail. Quietly but persistently he was winning his way to universal favor. Only the Irish lad and I kept our counsel and, waited.

After the bitterly cold New Year's Day of '63 the Indian forsook the lilac bush for a time. But I knew he never lost track of Marjie's coming and going. Every hour of the day or night he could have told just where she was. We followed him down the river sometimes at night, and lost him in the brush this side the Hermit's Cave. We did not know that this was a mere trick to deceive us. To make sure of him we should have watched the west prairie and gone up the river for his real landing place. How he lived I do not know. An Indian can live on air and faith in a promise, or hatred of a foe. At last he lulled even our suspicion to sleep.

"Ask the priest what to do," I suggested to O'mie when we grew ashamed of our spying. "They are together so much the rascal looks and walks like him. See him on annuity day and tell him we feel like chicken thieves and kidnappers."

O'mie obeyed me to the letter, and ended with the query to the good Father:

"Now phwat should a couple of young sleuth-hounds do wid such a dacent good Injun?"

Father Le Claire's reply stunned the Irish boy.

"He just drew himself up a mile high an' more," O'mie related to me, "just stood up like the angel av the flamin' sword, an' his eyes blazed a black, consumin' fire. 'Watch him,' says the praist, 'for God's sake, watch him. Don't ask me again phwat to do. I've told you twice. Thirty years have I lived and labored with his kind. I know them.' An' then," O'mie went on, "he put both arms around me an' held me close as me own father might have done, somewhere back, an' turned an' left me. So there's our orders. Will ye take 'em?"

I took them, but my mind was full of queries. I did not trust the Indian, and yet I had no visible reason to doubt his sincerity.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN THE HEART BEATS YOUNG

A patch of green sod 'neath the trees brown and bare,
A smell of fresh mould on the mild southern air,
A twitter of bird song, a flutter, a call,
And though the clouds lower, and threaten and fall —
There's Spring in my heart!

— *BERTA ALEXANDER GARVEY.*

When the prairies blossomed again, and the Kansas springtime was in its daintiest green, when a blur of pink was on the few young orchards in the Neosho Valley, and the cottonwoods in the draws were putting forth their glittering tender leaves — in that sweetest time of all the year, a new joy came to me. Most girls married at sixteen in those days, and were grandmothers at thirty-five. Marjie was no longer a child. No sweeter blossom of young womanhood ever graced the West. All Springvale loved her, except Lettie Conlow. And Cam Gentry summed it all up in his own quaint way, brave old Cam fighting all the battles of the war over again on the veranda of the Cambridge House, since his defective range of vision kept him from the volunteer service. Watching Marjie coming down the street one spring morning Cam declared solemnly:

"The War's done decided, an' the Union has won. A land that can grow girls like Marjory Whately's got the favorin' smile of the Almighty upon it."

For us that season all the world was gay and all the skies were opal-hued, and we almost forgot sometimes that there could be sorrow and darkness and danger. Most of all we forgot about an alien down in the Hermit's Cave, "a good Indian" turned bad in one brief hour. Dear are the memories of that springtide. Many a glorious April have I seen in this land of sunshine, but none has ever seemed quite like that one to me. Nor waving yellow wheat, nor purple alfalfa bloom, nor ramparts of dark green corn on well-tilled land can hold for me one-half the beauty of the windswept springtime prairie. No sweet odor of new-ploughed ground can rival the fragrance of the wild grasses in their waving seas of verdure.

We were coming home from Red Range late one April day, where we had gone to a last-day-of-school affair. The boys and girls did not ride in a group now, but broke up into twos and twos sauntering slowly homeward. The tender pink and green of the landscape with the April sunset tinting in the sky overhead, and all the far south and west stretching away into limitless waves of misty green blending into the amethyst of the world's far bound, gave setting for young hearts beating in tune with the year's young beauty.

Tell Mapleson and Lettie had been with Marjie and me for a time, but at last Tell had led Lettie far away. When we reached the draw beyond the big cottonwood where Jean Pahasca threw us into such disorder on that August evening the year before, we found a rank profusion of spring blossoms. Leading our ponies by the bridle rein we lingered long in the fragrant draw, gathering flowers and playing like two children among them. At length Marjie sat down on the sloping ground and deftly wove into a wreath the little pink blooms of some frail wild flower.

"Come, Phil," she cried, "come, crown me Queen of May here in April!"

I was as tall then as I am now, and Marjie at her full height came only to my shoulder. I stooped to lay that dainty string of blossoms above her brow. They fell into place in her wavy hair and nestled there, making a picture only memory can keep. The air was very sweet and the whole prairie about the little draw was still and dewy. The purple twilight, shot through with sunset coloring, made an

exquisite glory overhead, and far beyond us. It is all sacred to me even now, this moment in Love's young dream. I put both my hands gently against her fair round cheeks and looked down her into her brown eyes.

"Oh, Marjie," I said softly, and kissed her red lips just once.

She said never a word while we stood for a moment, a moment we never forgot. The day's last gleam of gold swept about us, and the ripple of a bird's song in the draw beyond the bend fell upon the ear. An instant later both ponies gave a sudden start. We caught their bridle reins, and looked for the cause. Nothing was in sight.

"It must have been a rattlesnake in that tall grass, Phil," Marjie exclaimed. "The ponies don't like snakes, and they don't care for flowers."

"There are no snakes here, Marjie. This is the garden of Eden without the Serpent," I said gayly.

All the homeward way was a dream of joy. We forgot there was a Civil War; that this was a land of aching hearts and dreary homes, and bloodshed and suffering and danger and hate. We were young, it was April on the prairies, and we had kissed each other in the pink-wreathed shadows of the twilight. Oh, it was good to live!

The next morning O'mie came grinning up the hill.

"Say, Phil, ye know I cut the chape Neosho crowd last evening up to Rid Range fur that black-eyed little Irish girl they call Kathleen. So I came home afterwhoile behind you, not carin' to contaminate meself wid such a common set after me pleasant company at Rid Range."

"Well, we managed to pull through without you, O'mie, but don't let it happen again. It's too hard on the girls to be deprived of your presence. Do be more considerate of us, my lord."

O'mie grinned more broadly than ever.

"Well, I see a sight worth waitin' fur on my homeward jaunt in the gloamin'."

"What was it, a rattlesnake?"

"Yes, begorra, it was just that, an' worse. You remember the draw this side of the big cottonwood, the one where the 'good Injun' come at us last August, the time he got knocked sober at the old tepee ring?"

I gave a start and my cheeks grew hot. O'mie pretended not to notice me.

"Well," he went on, "just as I came beyont that ring on this side and dips down toward the draw where Jean come from when he was aimin' to hang a certain curly brown-haired scalp – "

A thrill of horror went through me at the picture.

"Ye needn't shiver. Injuns do that; even little golden curls from babies' heads. You an' me may live to see it, an' kill the Injun that does it, yit. Now kape quiet. In this draw aforesaid, just like a rid granite gravestone sat a rid granite Injun, 'a good Injun,' mind you. In his hands was trailin' a broken wreath of pink blossoms, an' near as an Injun can, an' a Frenchman can't, he was lovin' 'em fondly. My appearance, unannounced by me footman, disconcerted him extramely. He rose up an' he looked a mile tall. They moved some clouds over a little fur his head up there," pointing toward the deep blue April sky where white cumulus clouds were heaped, "an' his eyes was one blisterin' grief, an' blazin' hate. He walks off proud an' erect, but some like a wounded bird too. But mostly and importantly, remember, and renew your watchfulness. It's hate an' a bad Injun now. Mark my words. The 'good Injun' went out last night wid the witherin' of them pink flowers lyin' limp in his cruel brown hands."

"But whose flower wreath could it have been?" I asked carelessly.

"O, phwat difference! Just some silly girl braided 'em up to look sweet for some silly boy. An' maybe he kissed her fur it. I dunno. Annyhow she lost this bauble, an' looking round I found it on the little knoll where maybe she sat to do her flower wreathin'."

He held up an old-fashioned double silver scarf-pin, the two pins held together by a short silver chain, such as shawls were fastened with in those days. Marjie had had the pin in the light scarf she carried on her arm. It must have slipped out when she laid the scarf beside her and sat down to make the wreath. I took the pin from O'mie's hand, my mind clear now as to what had frightened the ponies.

A new anxiety grew up from that moment. The "good Indian" was passing. And yet I was young and joyously happy that day, and I did not feel the presence of danger then.

The early May rains following that April were such as we had never known in Kansas before. The Neosho became bank-full; then it spread out over the bottom lands, flooding the wooded valley, creeping up and up towards the bluffs. It raced in a torrent now, and the song of its rippling over stony ways was changed to the roar of many waters, rushing headlong down the valley. On the south of us Fingal's Creek was impassable. Every draw was brimming over, and the smaller streams became rivers. All these streams found their way to the Neosho and gave it impetus to destroy – which it did, tearing out great oaks and sending them swirling and plunging, in its swiftest currents. It found the soft, uncertain places underneath its burden of waters and with its millions of unseen hands it dugged and scooped and shaped the thing anew. When at last the waters were all gone down toward the sea and our own beautiful river was itself again, singing its happy song on sunny sands and in purple shadows, the valley contour was much changed. To the boys who had known it, foot by foot, the differences would have been most marked. Especially would we have noted the change about the Hermit's Cave, had not that Maytime brought its burden of strife to us all.

That was the black year of the Civil War, with Murfreesboro, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Chattanooga and Chickamauga all on its record. Here in Kansas the minor tragedies are lost in the great horror of the Quantrill raid at Lawrence. But the constant menace of danger, and the strain of the thousand ties binding us to those from every part of the North who had gone out to battle, filled every day with its own care. When the news of Chancellorsville reached us, Cam Gentry sat on the tavern veranda and wept.

"An' to think of me, strong, an' able, an' longin' to fight for the Union, shut out because I can only see so far."

"But Uncle Cam," Dr. Hemingway urged, "Stonewall Jackson was killed by his own men just when victory was lost to us. You might do the same thing, – kill some man the country needs. And I believe, too, you are kept here for a purpose. Who knows how soon we may need strong men in this town, men who can do the short-range work? The Lord can use us all, and your place is here. Isn't that true, Brother Dodd?"

I was one of the group on the veranda steps that evening where the men were gathered in eager discussion of the news of the great Union loss at Chancellorsville, brought that afternoon by the stage from Topeka. I glanced across at Dodd, pastor of the Methodist Church South. A small, secretive, unsatisfactory man, he seemed to dole out the gospel grudgingly always, and never to any outside his own denomination.

He made no reply and Dr. Hemingway went on: "We have Philip here, and I'd count on him and his crowd against the worst set of outlaws that ever rode across the border. Yet they need your head, Uncle Cam, although their arms are strong."

He patted my shoulder kindly.

"We need you, too," he continued, "to keep us cheered up. When the Lord says to some of us, 'So far shalt thou see, and no farther,' he may give to that same brother the power to scatter sunshine far and wide. Oh, we need you, Brother Gentry, to make us laugh if for nothing else."

Uncle Cam chuckled. He was built for chuckling, and we all laughed with him, except Mr. Dodd. I caught a sneer on his face in the moment.

Presently Father Le Claire and Jean Pahasca joined the group. I had not seen the latter since the day of O'mie's warning. Indian as he was, I could see a change in his impassive face. It made me turn cold, me, to whom fear was a stranger. Father Le Claire, too, was not like himself. Self-possessed always, with his native French grace and his inward spiritual calm, this evening he seemed to be holding himself by a mighty grip, rather than by that habitual self-mastery that kept his life in poise.

I tell these impressions as a man, and I analyze them as a man, but, boy as I was, I felt them then with keenest power. Again the likeness of Indian and priest possessed me, but raised no query within

me. In form, in gait and especially in the shape of the head and the black hair about their square foreheads they were as like as father and son. Just once I caught Jean's eye. The eye of a rattlesnake would have been more friendly. O'mie was right. The "good Indian" had vanished. What had come in his stead I was soon to know. But withal I could but admire the fine physique of this giant.

While the men were still full of the Union disaster, two horsemen came riding up to the tavern oak. Their horses were dripping wet. They had come up the trail from the southwest, where the draws were barely fordable. Strangers excited no comment in a town on the frontier. The trail was always full of them coming and going. We hardly noted that for ten days Springvale had not been without them.

"Come in, gentlemen," called Cam. "Here, Dollie, take care of these friends. O'mie, take their horses."

They passed inside and the talk outside went eagerly on.

"Father Le Claire, how do the Injuns feel about this fracas now?" inquired Tell Mapleson.

The priest spoke carefully.

"We always counsel peace. You know we do not belong to either faction."

His smile was irresistible, and the most partisan of us could not dislike him that he spoke for neither North nor South.

"But," Tell persisted, "how do the Injuns themselves feel?"

Tell seemed to have lost his usual insight, else he could have seen that quick, shrewd, penetrating glance of the good Father's reading him through and through.

"I have just come from the Mission," he said. "The Osages are always loyal to the Union. The Verdigris River was too high for me to hear from the villages in the southwest."

Tell was listening eagerly. So also were the two strangers who stood in the doorway now. If the priest noted this he gave no sign. Mr. Dodd spoke here for the first time.

"Well," he said in his pious intonation, "if the Osages are loyal, that clears Jean here. He's an Osage, isn't he?"

Jean made no reply; neither did Le Claire, and Tell Mapleson turned casually to the strangers, engaging them in conversation.

"We shall want our horses at four sharp in the morning," one of the two came out to say to Cam. "We have a long hard day before us."

"At your service," answered Cam. "O'mie, take the order in your head."

"Is that the biggest hostler you've got?" looking contemptuously at little O'mie standing beside me. "If you Kansas folks weren't such damned abolitionists you'd have some able-bodied niggers to do your work right."

O'mie winked at me and gave a low whistle. Neither the wink nor the whistle was lost on the speaker, who frowned darkly at the boy.

Cam squinted up at the men good-naturedly. "Them horses dangerous?" he asked.

"Yes, they are," the stranger replied. "Can we have a room downstairs? We want to go to bed early. We have had a hard day."

"You can begin to say your 'Now I lay me' right away in here if you like," and the landlord led the way into a room off the veranda. One of the two lingered outside in conversation with Mapleson for a brief time.

"Come, go home with me, O'mie," I said later, when the crowd began to thin out.

"Not me," he responded. "Didn't ye hear, 'four A. M. sharp'? It's me flat on me bed till the dewy morn an' three-thirty av it. Them's vicious horses. An' they'll be to curry clane airly. Phil," he added in a lower voice, "this town's a little overrun wid strangers wid no partic'lar business av their own, an' we don't need 'em in ours. For one private citizen, I don't like it. The biggest one of them two men in there's named Yeager, an' he's been here three toimes lately, stayin' only a few hours each toime."

O'mie looked so little to me this evening! I had hardly noted how the other boys had outgrown him.

"You're not very big for a horseman after all, my son, but you're grit clear through. You may do something yet the big fellows couldn't do," I said affectionately.

He was Irish to the bone, and never could entirely master his brogue, but we had no social caste lines, and Springvale took him at face value, knowing his worth.

At Marjie's gate I stopped to make sure everything was all right. Somehow when I knew the Indian was in town I could never feel safe for her. She hurried out in response to my call.

"I'm so glad to see you to-night, Phil," she said, a little tremulously. "I wish father were here. Do you think he is safe?"

She was leaning on the gate, looking eagerly into my eyes. The shadows of the May twilight were deepening around us, and Marjie's white face looked never so sweet to me as now, in her dependence on my assurance.

"I'm sure Mr. Whately is all right. It is the bad news that gets here first. I'm so glad our folks weren't at Chancellorsville."

"But they may be in as dreadful a battle soon. Oh, Phil, I'm so – what? lonesome and afraid to-night. I wish father could come home."

It was not like Marjie, who had been a dear brave girl, always cheering her dependent mother and hopefully expecting the best. To-night there swept over me anew that sense of the duty every man owes to the home. It was an intense feeling then. Later it was branded with fire into my consciousness. I put one of my big hands over her little white hand on the gate.

"Marjie," I said gently, "I promised your father I would let no harm come to you. Don't be afraid, little girl. You can trust me. Until he comes back I will take care of you."

The twilight was sweet and dewy and still. About the house the shadows were darkening. I opened the gate, and drawing her hand through my arm, I went up the walk with her.

"Is that the lilac that is so fragrant?" I caught a faint perfume in the air.

"Yes," sadly, "what there is of it." And then she laughed a little. "That miserable O'mie came up here the day after we went to Red Range and persuaded mother to cut it all down except one straight stick of a bush. He told her it was dying, and that it needed pruning, and I don't know what. And you know mother. I was over at the Anderson's, and when I came home the whole clump was gone. I dreamed the other night that somebody was hiding in there. It was all dead in the middle. Do you remember when we played hide-and-seek in there?"

"I never forget anything you do, Marjie," I answered; "but I'm glad the bushes are thinned out."

She broke off some plumes of the perfumy blossoms.

"Take those to Aunt Candace. Tell her I sent them. Don't let her think you stole them," she was herself now, and her fear was gone.

"May I take something else to Aunt Candace, too, Marjie?"

"What else?" She looked up innocently into my face. We were at the door-step now.

"A good-night kiss, Marjie."

"I'll see her myself about that," she replied mischievously but confusedly, pushing me away. I knew her cheek was flushed as my own, and I caught her hand and held it fast.

"Good-night, Phil." That sweet voice of hers I could not disobey. In a moment I was gone, happy and young and confident. I could have fought the whole Confederate army for the sake of this girl left in my care – my very own guardianship.

CHAPTER VII

THE FORESHADOWING OF PERIL

O clear-eyed Faith, and Patience thou
So calm and strong!
Lend strength to weakness, teach us how
The sleepless eyes of God look through
This night of wrong!

– WHITTIER.

While these May days were slipping by, strange history was making itself in Kansas. I marvel now, as I recall the slender bonds that stayed us from destruction, that we ever dared to do our part in that record-building day. And I rejoice that we did not know the whole peril that menaced us through those uncertain hours, else we should have lost all courage.

Father Le Claire held himself neutral to the North and the South, and was sometimes distrusted by both factions in our town; but he went serenely on his way, biding his time patiently. At sunrise on the morning after O'mie had surprised Jean Pahusca with Marjie's wreath of faded blossoms held caressingly in his brown hands, Le Claire met him in the little chapel. What he confessed led the priest to take him at once to the Osages farther down on the Neosho.

"I had hoped to persuade Jean to stay at the Mission," Le Claire said afterwards. "He is the most intelligent one of his own tribe I have ever known, and he could be invaluable to the Osages, but he would not stay away from Springvale. And I thought it best to come back with him."

The good man did not say why he thought it best to keep Jean under his guardianship. Few people in Springvale would have dreamed how dangerous a foe we had in this superbly built, picturesque, handsome Indian.

In the early hours of the morning after his return, the priest was roused from a sound sleep by O'mie. A storm had broken over the town just after midnight. When it had spent itself and roared off down the valley, the rain still fell in torrents, and O'mie's clothes were dripping when he rushed into Le Claire's room.

"For the love av Heaven," he cried, "they's a plot so pizen I must git out of me constitution quick. They're tellin' it up to Conlow's shop. Them two strangers, Yeager and his pal, that's s'posed to be sleepin' now to get an airy start, put out 'fore midnight for a prowl an' found theirselves right up to Conlow's. An' I wint along behind 'em – respectful," O'mie grinned; "an' there was Mapleson an' Conlow an' the holy Dodd, mind ye. M. E. South's his rock o' defence. An' Jean was there too. They're promisin' him somethin', the strangers air. Tell an' Conlow seemed to kind o' dissent, but give in finally."

"Is it whiskey?" asked the priest.

"No, no. Tell says he can't have nothin' from the 'Last Chance.' Says the old Roman Catholic'll fix his agency job at Washington if he lets Jean get drunk. It's somethin' else; an' Tell wants to git aven with you, so he gives in."

The priest's face grew pale.

"Well, go on."

"There's a lot of carrion birds up there I never see in this town. Just lit in there somehow. But here's the scheme. The Confederates has it all planned, an' they're doin' it now to league together all the Injun tribes av the Southwest. They's more 'n twinty commissioned officers, Rebels, ivery son av 'em, now on their way to meet the chiefs av these tribes. An' all the Kansas settlements down the river

is to be fell upon by the Ridskins, an' nobody to be spared. Wid them Missouri raiders on the east and the Injuns in the southwest where'll anybody down there be, begorra, betwixt two sich grindin' millstones? I couldn't gather it all in, ye see. I was up on a ladder peeking in through a long hole laid down sideways. But that's the main f'ature av the rumpus. They're countin' big on the Osages because the Gov'mint trusts 'em to do scout duty down beyont Humboldt, and Jean says the Osages is sure to join 'em. Said it is whispered round at the Mission now. And phwat's to be nixt?"

Father Le Claire listened intently to O'mie's hurried recital. Then he rose up before the little Irishman, and taking both of the boy's hands in his, he said: "O'mie, you must do your part now."

"Phwat can I do? Show me, an' bedad, I'll do it."

"You will keep this to yourself, because it would only make trouble if it were repeated now, and we may outwit the whole scheme without any unnecessary anxiety and fright. Also, you must keep your eyes and ears open to all that's done and said here. Don't let anything escape you. If I can get across the Neosho this morning I can reach the Mission in time to keep the Osages from the plot, and maybe break it up. Then I'll come back here. They might need me if Jean" – he did not finish the sentence. "In two days I can do everything needful; while if the word were started here now, it might lead to a Rebel uprising, and you would be outnumbered by the Copperheads here, backed by the Fingal's Creek crowd. You could do nothing in an open riot."

"I comprehend ye," said O'mie. "It's iverything into me eyes an' ears an' nothin' out av me mouth."

"Meanwhile," the priest spoke affectionately, "you must be strong, my son, to choose the better part. If it's life or death, – O God, that human life should be held so cheap! – if it's left to you to choose who must be the sacrifice, you will choose right. I can trust you. Remember, in two or three days at most, I can be back; but keep your watch, especially of Jean. He means mischief, but I cannot stay here now, much less take him with me. He would not go."

So it happened that Father Le Claire hurried away in the darkness and the driving rain, and at a fearful risk swam his horse across the Neosho, and hastened with all speed to the Mission.

When that midnight storm broke over the town, on the night when O'mie followed the strangers and found out their plot, I helped Aunt Candace to fasten the windows and make sure against it until I was too wide awake to go to bed. I sat down by my window, in the lightning flashes watching the rain, wind-driven across the landscape. The night was pitch black. In all the southwest there was only one light, a sullen red bar of flame that came up from Conlow's forge fire. I watched it indifferently at first because it was there. Then I began to wonder why it should gleam there red and angry at this dead hour of darkness. As I watched, the light flared up as though it were fanned into a blaze. Then it began to blink and I knew some one was inside the shop. It was blotted out for a time, then it glowed again, as if there were many passing and re-passing. I wondered what it could all mean in such an hour, on such a night as this. Then I thought of old Conlow's children, of "Possum" in his weak, good-natured homeliness, and of Lettie. How I disliked her, and wished she would keep out of my way, which she never would do. Her face was clear to me, there in the dark. It grew malicious; then it hardened into wickedness, and I slipped from watching into a drowsy, half-waking sleep in my chair. The red bar of light became the flame of cannon on a battlefield, I saw our men in a life-and-death struggle with the enemy on a rough, wild mountainside. Everywhere my father was leading them on, and by his side Irving Whately bore the Springvale flag aloft. And then beside me lay the color-bearer with white, agonized face, pleading with me. His words were ringing in my ears, "Take care of Marjie, Phil; keep her from harm."

I woke with a start, stiff and shivering. With one half-dazed glance at the black night and that sullen tell-tale light below me, I groped my way to my bed and slept then the dreamless sleep of vigorous youth.

The rain continued for many hours. Yeager and his company could not get away from town on account of the booming Neosho. Also several other strange men seemed to have rained down from

nobody asked where, and while the surface of affairs was smooth there was a troubled undercurrent. Nobody seemed to know just what to expect, yet a sense of calamity pervaded the air. Meanwhile the rain poured down in intermittent torrents. On the second evening of this miserable gloom I strolled down to the tavern stables to find O'mie. Bud and John Anderson and both the Mead boys were there, sprawled out on the hay. O'mie sat on a keg in the wagon way, and they were all discussing affairs of State like sages. I joined in and we fought the Civil War to a finish in half an hour. In all the "solid North" there was no more loyal company on that May night than that group of brawny young fellows full of the fire of patriotism, who swore anew their eternal allegiance to the Union.

"It's a crime and a disgrace," declared Dave Mead, "that because we're only boys we can't go to the War, and every one of us, except O'mie here, muscled like oxen; while older, weaker men are being shot down at Chancellorsville or staggering away from Bull Run."

"O'mie 'thgot the thtuff in him though. I'd back him againth David and Goliath," Bud Anderson insisted.

"Yes, or Sodom and Gomorrah, or some other Bible characters," observed Bill Mead. "You'd better join the Methodist Church South, Bud, and let old Dodd labor with you."

Then O'mie spoke gravely:

"Boys, we've got a civil war now in our middust. Don't ask me how I know. The feller that clanes the horses around the tavern stables, trust him fur findin' which way the Neosho runs, aven if he is small an' insignificant av statoor. I've seen an' heard too much in these two dirty wet days."

He paused, and there came into his eyes a pathetic pleading look as of one who sought protection. It gave place instantly to a fearless, heroic expression that has been my inspiration in many a struggle. I know now how he longed to tell us all he knew, but his word to Le Claire held him back.

"I can't tell you exactly phwat's in the air, fur I don't know it all yit. But there's trouble brewin' here, an' we must be ready, as we promised we would be when our own wint to the front."

O'mie had hit home. Had we not sworn our fealty to the flag, and protection to our town in our boyish patriotism the Summer before?

"Boys," O'mie went on, "if the storm breaks here in Springvale we've got to forgit ourselves an' ivery son av us be a hero for the work that's laid before him. Safe or dangerous, it's duty we must be doin', like the true sons av a glorious commonwealth, an' we may need to be lightnin' swift about it, too."

Tell Mapleson and Jim Conlow had come in as O'mie was speaking. We knew their fathers were bitter Rebels, although the men made a pretence to loyalty, which kept them in good company. But somehow the boys had not broken away from young Tell and Jim. From childhood we had been playmates, and boyish ties are strong. This evening the two seemed to be burdened with something of which they dared not or would not speak. There was a sort of defiance about them, such as an enemy may assume toward one who has been his friend, but whom he means to harm. Was it the will of Providence made O'mie appeal to them at the right moment?

"Say, boys," he had a certain Celtic geniality, and a frank winning smile that was irresistible. "Say, boys, all av the crowd's goin' to stand together no matter what comes, just as we've done since we learned how to swim in the shallows down by the Deep Hole. We're goin' to stand shoulder to shoulder, an' we'll save this town from harm, whatever may come in betwane, an' whoever av us it's laid on to suffer, in the ind we'll win. For why? We are on the right side, an' can count on the same Power that's carried men aven to the inds av the earth to fight an' die fur what's right. Will ye be av us, boys? We've niver had no split in our gang yet. Will ye stay wid us?"

Tell and Jim looked at each other. Then Tell spoke. He had the right stuff in him at the last test always.

"Yes, boys, we will, come what will come."

Jim grinned at Tell. "I'll stand by Tell, if it kills me," he declared.

We put little trust in his ability. It is the way of the world to overlook the stone the Master Builder sometimes finds useful for His purpose.

"An' you may need us real soon, too," Tell called back as the two went out.

"By cracky, I bet they know more 'n we do," Bud Anderson declared.

Dave Mead looked serious.

"Well, I believe they'll hold with us anyhow," he said. "What they know may help us yet."

The coming of another tremendous downpour sent us scampering homeward. O'mie and I had started up the hill together, but the underside of the clouds fell out just as we reached Judson's gate, and by the time we had come to Mrs. Whately's we were ready to dive inside for shelter. When the rain settled down for an all-night stay, Mrs. Whately would wrap us against it before we left her. She put an old coat of Mr. Whately's on me. I had gone out in my shirt sleeves. Marjie looked bravely up at my tall form. I knew she was thinking of him who had worn that coat. The only thing for O'mie was Marjie's big water proof cloak. The old-fashioned black-and-silver mix with the glistening black buttons, such as women wore much in those days. It had a hood effect, with a changeable red silk lining, fastened at the neck. To my surprise O'mie made no objection at all to wearing a girl's wrap. But I could never fully forecast the Irish boy. He drew the circular garment round him and pulled the hood over his head.

"Come, Philip, me strong protector," he called, "let's be skiting."

At the door he turned back to Marjie and said in a low voice, "Phil will mistake me fur a girl an' be wantin' me to go flower-huntin' out on the West Prairie, but I won't do it."

Marjie blushed like the June roses, and slammed the door after him. A moment later she opened it again and held the light to show us the dripping path to the gate. Framed in the doorway with the light held up by her round white arm, the dampness putting a softer curl in every stray lock of her rich brown hair, the roses still blooming on her cheeks, she sent us away. Too young and sweet-spirited she seemed for any evil to assail her in the shelter of that home.

Late at night again the red light of the forge was crossed and re-crossed by those who moved about inside the shop. Aunt Candace and I had sat long together talking of the War, and of the raiding on the Kansas border. She was a balm to my spirit, for she was a strong, fearless woman, always comforting in the hour of sorrow, and self-possessed in the face of danger. I wonder how the mothers of Springvale could have done without her. She decked the brides for their weddings, and tenderly laid out the dead. The new-born babe she held in her arms, and dying eyes looking back from the Valley of the Shadow, sought her face. That night I slept little, and I welcomed the coming of day. When the morning dawned the world was flooded with sunshine, and a cool steady west wind blew the town clear of mud and wet, the while the Neosho Valley was threshed with the swollen, angry waters.

With the coming of the sunshine the strangers disappeared. Nowhere all that day were there any but our own town's people to be seen. Some of these, however, I knew afterwards, were very busy. I remember seeing Conlow and Mapleson and Dodd sauntering carelessly about in different parts of the town, especially upon Cliff Street, which was unusual for them. Just at nightfall the town was filled with strangers again. Yeager and his companion, who had been water-bound, returned with half a dozen more to the Cambridge House, and other unknown men were washed in from the west. That night I saw the red light briefly. Then it disappeared, and I judged the shop was deserted. I did not dream whose head was shutting off the light from me, nor whose eyes were peering in through that crevice in the wall. The night was peacefully beautiful, but its beauty was a mockery to me, filled as I was with a nameless anxiety. I had no reason for it, yet I longed for the return of Father Le Claire. He had not taken Jean with him, and I judged that the Indian was near us somewhere and in the very storm centre of all this uneasiness.

At midnight I wakened suddenly. Outside, a black starless sky bent over a cool, quiet earth. A thick darkness hid all the world. Dead stillness everywhere. And yet, I listened for a voice to speak

again that I was sure I had heard as I wakened. I waited only a moment. A quick rapping under my window, and a low eager call came to my ears. I sprang up and groped my way to the open casement.

"What's the matter down there?" I called softly.

"Phil, jump into your clothes and come down just as quick as you can." It was Tell Mapleson's voice, full of suppressed eagerness. "For God's sake, hurry. It's life and death. Hurry! Hurry!"

"Run to the side door, Tell, and call Aunt Candace. She'll let you in."

I heard him make a plunge for the side door. By the time my aunt wakened to open it, I was down stairs. Tell stood inside the hallway, white and haggard. Our house was like a stone fort in its security, and Aunt Candace had fastened the door behind him. She seemed a perfect tower of strength to me, standing there like a strong guardian of the home.

"Stop a minute, Tell. We'll save time by knowing what we are about. What's the matter?" My aunt's voice gave him self-control.

He held himself by a great effort.

"There's not a second to lose, but we can't do anything without Phil. He must lead us. There's been a plot worked up here for three nights in Conlow's shop, to burn' every Union man's house in town. Preacher Dodd and that stranger named Yeager and the other fellow that's been stayin' at the tavern are backin' the whole thing. The men that's been hanging round here are all in the plot. They're to lay low a little while, and at two o'clock the blazin's to begin. Jim's run to Anderson's and Mead's, but we'll do just what Phil says. We'll get the boys together and you'll tell us what to do. The men'll kill Jim an' me if they find out we told, but we swore we'd stay by you boys. We'll help clear through, but don't tell on us. Don't never tell who told on 'em. Please don't." Tell never had seemed manly to me till that moment. "They're awful against O'mie. They say he knows too much. He heard 'em talking too free round the stables. They're after you too, Phil. They think if they get you out of the way, they can manage all the rest. I heard old Dodd tell 'em to make sure of John Baronet's cub. Said you were the worst in town, to come against. They'll kill you if they lay hands on you. They'll come right here after you."

"Then they'll go back without him," my aunt said firmly.

"They say the Indians are to come from the south at daylight," Tell hurried on, "an' finish up all that's left without homes. They're the Kiowas. They'll not get here till just about daylight." Tell's teeth were chattering, and he trembled as with an ague.

"Worst of all," – he choked now, – "Whately's home's to be left alone, and Jean's to get Marjie and carry her off. They hate her father so, they've let Jean have her. They know she was called over to Judson's late to stay with Mrs. Judson. He's away, water-bound, and the baby's sick, and just as she gets home, he's to get her. If she screams, or tries to get away, he'll scalp her."

I heard no more. My heart forgot to beat. I had seen Marjie's signal light at ten o'clock and I was sure of her safety. The candle turned black before me. The cry of my dreams, Irving Whately's pleading cry, rang in my ears: "Take care of Marjie, Phil! Keep her from harm!"

"Phil Baronet, you coward," Tell fairly hissed in my ear, "come and help us! We can't do a thing without you."

I, a coward! I sprang to the door and with Tell beside me we sped away in the darkness. A faint light glimmered in the Whately home. At the gate, Dave Mead hailed us.

"It's too late, boys," he whispered, "Jean's gone and she's with him. He rode by me like the devil, going toward the ford. They'll be drowned and that's better than for her to live. The whole Indian Territory may be here by morning."

I lifted my face to the pitiless black sky above me, and a groan, the agony of a breaking heart, burst from my lips. In that instant, I lived ages of misery.

"Oh, Phil, what shall we do? The town's full of helpless folks." Dave caught my arm to steady himself. "Can't you, can't you put us to work?"

Could I? His appeal brought me to myself. In the right moment the Lord sends us to our places, and forsakes us not until our task is finished. On me that night, was laid the duty of leadership in a great crisis; and He who had called me, gave me power. Every Union household in the town must be roused and warned of the impending danger. And whatever was done must be done quickly, noiselessly, and at a risk of life to him who did it. My plan sprang into being, and Dave and Tell ran to execute it. In a few minutes we were to meet under the tavern oak. I dashed off toward the Cambridge House. Uncle Cam had not yet gone to bed.

"Where's O'mie?" I gasped.

"I dunno. He flew in here ten minutes or more ago, but he never lit. In ten seconds he was out again an' gone. He's got some sense an' generally keeps his red head level. I'm waitin' to see what's up."

In a word I gave Cam the situation, all except Jean's part. As I hurried out to meet the boys at the oak, I stumbled against something in the dense darkness. Cam hastened after me. The flare of the light from the opening of the door showed a horse, wet and muddy to the throat latch. It stared at the light in fright and then dashed away in the darkness.

All the boys, Tell and Jim, the Meads, John, Clayton, and Bud Anderson, – all but O'mie, met in the deep shadow of the oak before the tavern door. Our plans fell into form with Cam's wiser head to shape them here and there. The town was districted and each of us took his portion. In the time that followed, I worked noiselessly, heroically, taking the most dangerous places for my part. The boys rallied under my leadership, for they would have it so. Everywhere they depended on my word to direct them, and they followed my direction to the letter. It was not I, in myself, but John Baronet's son on whom they relied. My father's strength and courage and counsel they sought for in me. But all the time I felt myself to be like a spirit on the edge of doom. I worked as one who feels that when his task is ended, the blank must begin. Yet I left nothing undone because of the dead weight on my soul.

What happened in that hour, can never all be told. And only God himself could have directed us among our enemies. Since then I have always felt that the purpose crowns the effort. In Springvale that night was a band of resolute lawless men, organized and armed, with every foot of their way mapped out, every name checked, the lintel of every Union doorway marked, men ready and sworn to do a work of fire and slaughter. Against them was a group of undisciplined boys, unorganized, surprised, and unequipped, groping in the darkness full of unseen enemies. But we were the home-guard, and our own lives were nothing to us, if only we could save the defenceless.

CHAPTER VIII

THE COST OF SAFETY

In the dark and trying hour,
In the breaking forth of power,
In the rush of steeds and men,
His right hand will shield thee then.

– *LONGFELLOW.*

It was just half past one o'clock when the sweet-toned bell in the Presbyterian Church steeple began to ring. Dr. Hemingway was at the rope in the belfry. His part was to give us our signal. At the first peal the windows of every Union home blazed with light. The doors were flung wide open, and a song – one song – rose on the cool still night.

O say, can you see by the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming? —
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight
O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming!
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

It was sung in strong, clear tones as I shall never hear it sung again; and the echoes of many voices, and the swelling music of that old church bell, floated down the Neosho Valley, mingling with the rushing of the turbulent waters.

It was Cam Gentry's plan, this weapon of light and song. The Lord did have a work for him to do, as Dr. Hemingway had said.

"Boys," he had counselled us under the oak, "we can't match 'em in a pitched battle. They're armed an' ready, and you ain't and you can't do nothing in the dark. But let every house be ready, just as Phil has planned. Warn them quietly, and when the church bell rings, let every winder be full of light, every door wide open, and everybody sing."

He could roar bass himself to be heard across the State line, and that night he fairly boomed with song.

"They're dirty cowards, and can't work only in the dark and secret quiet. Give 'em light and song. Let 'em know we are wide awake and not afraid, an' if Gideon ever had the Midianites on the hike, you'll have them pisen Copperheads goin'. They'll never dast to show a coil, the sarpents! cause that's not the way they fight; an' they'll be wholly onprepared, and surprised."

Just before the ringing of the signal bell, the boys had met again by appointment under the tavern oak. Two things we had agreed upon when we met there first. One was a pledge of secrecy as to the part of young Tell and Jim in our work and to the part of Mapleson and Conlow in the plot, for the sake of their boys, who were loyal to the town. The other was to say nothing of Jean's act. Marjie was the light of Springvale, and we knew what the news would mean. We must first save the homes, quietly and swiftly. Other calamities would follow fast enough. In the darkness now, Bud Anderson put both arms around me.

"Phil," he whispered, "you're my king. You muth go to her mother now. In the morning, your Aunt Candathe will come to her. Maybe in the daylight we can find Marjie. He can't get far, unleth the river – "

He held me tight in his arms, that manly, tender-hearted boy. Then I staggered away like one in a dream toward the Whately house. We had not yet warned Mrs. Whately, for we knew her home was to be spared, and our hands were full of what must be done on the instant. Time never seemed so precious to me as in those dreadful minutes when we roused that sleeping town. I know now how Paul Revere felt when he rode to Lexington.

But now my cold knuckles fell like lead against Mrs. Whately's door, and mechanically I gave the low signal whistle I had been wont to give to Marjie. Like a mockery came the clear trill from within. But there was no mockery in the quick opening of the casement above me, where a dim light now gleamed, nor in the flinging up of the curtain, and it was not a spirit but a real face with a crown of curly hair that was outlined in the gloom. And a voice, Marjie's sweet voice, called anxiously:

"Is that you, Phil? I'll be right down." Then the light disappeared, and I heard the patter of feet on the stairs; then the front door opened and I walked straight into heaven. For there stood Marjie, safe and strong, before me – my Marjie, escaped from the grave, or from that living hell that is worse than death, captivity in the hands of an Indian devil.

"What's the matter, Phil?"

"Marjie, can it be you? How did you ever get back?"

She looked at me wonderingly.

"Why, I was only down there at Judson's. The baby's sick and Mrs. Judson sent for me after ten o'clock. I didn't come away till midnight. She may send for me again at any minute, – that's why I'm not in bed. I wanted to stay with her, but she made me come home on mother's account. I ran home by myself. I wasn't afraid. I heard a horse galloping away just before I got up to the gate. But what is the matter, Phil?"

I stood there wholly sure now that I was in Paradise. Jean had not tried to get her after all. She was here, and no harm had touched her. Tell had not understood. Jean had been in the middle of this night's business somewhere, I felt sure, but he had done no one any harm. After all he had been true to his promise to be a good Indian, and Le Claire had misjudged him.

"You didn't see who was on the horse, did you?"

"No. Just as I started from Mrs. Judson's, O'mie came flying by me. He looked so funny. He had on the waterproof cloak I loaned him last night, hood and all, and his face was just as white as milk. I thought he was a girl at first. He called to me almost in a whisper. 'Don't hurry a bit, Marjie,' he said; 'I'm taking your cloak home.' But I couldn't find it anywhere about the door. O'mie is always doing the oddest things!"

Just then the church bell began to ring, and together we put on the lights and joined in the song. Its inspiration drove everything before it. I did not stay long with Marjie, however, for there was much for me to do, and I seemed to have stepped from a world of horror and darkness into a heaven of light. How I wished O'mie would come in! I had not found him in all that hour, ages long to us, in which we had done this much of our work for the town. But I was sure of O'mie.

"He's doing good business somewhere," I said. "Bless his red head. He'll never quit so long as there's a thing to do."

There was no rest for anybody in Springvale that night. As Cam Gentry had predicted, not a torch blazed; and the attacking party, thrown into confusion by the sudden blocking of their secret plan of assault, did not rally. Our next task was to make sure against the Indians, the rumor of whose coming grew everywhere, and the fear of a daybreak massacre kept us all keyed to the pitch of terrible expectancy.

The town had four strongholds, the tavern, the Whately store, the Presbyterian Church, and my father's house. All these buildings were of stone, with walls of unusual thickness. Into these the women and children were gathered as soon as we felt sure the enemy in our midst was outdone. Dr. Hemingway took command of the church. Cam Gentry at his own door was a host.

"I can see who goes in and out of the Cambridge House; I reckon, if I can't tell a Reb from a Bluecoat out in a battle," he declared, as he opened his doors to the first little group of mothers and children who came to him for protection. "I can see safety for every one of you here," he added with that cheery laugh that made us all love him. Aunt Candace was the strong guardian in our home up on Cliff Street. We looked for O'mie to take care of the store, but he was nowhere to be seen and that duty was given to Grandpa Mead, whose fiery Union spirit did not accord with his halting step and snowy hair.

A patrol guard was quickly formed, and sentinels were stationed on the south and west. On the north and east the flooded Neosho was a perfect wall of water round about us.

Since that Maytime, I have lived through many days of peril and suffering, and I have more than once walked bravely as I might along the path at whose end I knew was an open grave, but never to me has come another such night of terror. In all the town there were not a dozen men, loyal supporters of the Union cause, who had a fighting strength. On the eight stalwart boys, and the quickness and shrewdness of little O'mie, the salvation of Springvale rested. After that awful night I was never a boy again. Henceforth I was a man, with a man's work and a man's spirit.

The daylight was never so welcome before, and never a grander sunrise filled the earth with its splendor. I was up on the bluff patrolling the northwest boundary when the dawn began to purple the east. Oh, many a time have I watched the sunrise beyond the Neosho Valley, but on this rare May morning every shaft of light, every tint of roseate beauty along the horizon, every heap of feathery mist that decked the Plains, with the Neosho, bank-full, sweeping like molten silver below it – all these took on a new loveliness. Eagerly, however, I scanned the southwest where the level beams of day were driving back the gray morning twilight, and the green prairie billows were swelling out of the gloom. Point by point, I watched every landmark take form, waiting to see if each new blot on the landscape might not be the first of the dreaded Indian bands whose coming we so feared.

With daybreak, came assurance. Somehow I could not believe that a land so beautiful and a village so peaceful could be threshed and stained and blackened by the fire and massacre of a savage band allied to a disloyal, rebellious host. And yet, I had lived these stormy years in Kansas and the border strife has never all been told. I dared not relax my vigilance, so I watched the south and west, trusting to the river to take care of the east.

And so it happened that, sentinel as I was, I had not seen the approach of a horseman from the northwest, until Father Le Claire came upon me suddenly. His horse was jaded with travel, and he sat it wearily. A pallor overspread his brown cheeks. His garments were wet and mud-splashed.

"Oh, Father Le Claire," I cried, "nobody except my own father could be more welcome. Where have you been?"

"I am not too late, then!" he exclaimed, ignoring my question. His eyes quickly took in the town. No smoke was rising from the kitchen fires this morning, for the homes were deserted. "You are safe still?" He gave a great gasp of relief. Then he turned and looked steadily into my eyes.

"It has been bought with a price," he said simply. "Three days ago I left you a boy. I come back to find you a man. Where's O'mie?"

"D – down there, I think."

It dawned on me suddenly that not one of us had seen or heard of O'mie since he left Tell and Jim at the shop just before midnight. Marjie had seen him a few minutes later, and so had Cam Gentry. But where was he after that? Much as we had needed him, we had had no time to hunt for him. Places had to be filled by those at hand in the dreadful necessity before us. We could count on O'mie, of course. He was no coward, nor laggard; but where could he have kept himself?

"What has happened, Philip?" the priest asked.

Briefly I told him, ending with the story of the threatening terror of an Indian invasion.

"They will not come, Philip. Do not fear. That danger is cut off. The Kiowas, who were on their way to Springvale, have all turned back and they are far away. I know."

His assurance was balm to my soul. And my nerves, on the rack for these three days, with the culmination of the last six hours seemed suddenly to snap within me.

"Go home and rest now," said Father Le Claire. "I will take the word along the line. Come down to the tavern at nine o'clock."

Aunt Candace had hot coffee and biscuit and maple syrup from old Vermont, with ham and eggs, all ready for me. The blessed comfort of a home, safe from harm once more, filled me with a sense of rest. Not until it was lifted did I realize how heavy was the burden I had carried through those May nights and days.

Long before nine o'clock, the tavern yard was full of excited people, all eagerly talking of the events of the last few hours. We had hardly taken our bearings yet, but we had an assurance that the perils of the night no longer threatened us. The strange men who had filled the town the evening before had all disappeared, but in the company here were many whom we knew to be enemies in the dark. Yet they mingled boldly with the others, assuming a loyalty for their own purposes. In the crowd, too, was Jean Pahasca, impenetrable of countenance, indifferent to the occasion as a thing that could not concern him. His red blanket was gone and his leather trousers and dark flannel shirt displayed his superb muscular form. There was no knife in his belt now, and he carried no other weapon. With his soft dark hair and the ruddy color showing in his cheeks, he was dangerously handsome to a romantic eye. Among all its enemies, he had been loyal to Springvale. My better self rebuked my distrust, and my heart softened toward him. His plan with the raiders to seize Marjie must have been his crude notion of saving her from a worse peril. When he knew she was safe he had dropped out of sight in the darkness.

The boys who had done the work of the night before suddenly became heroes. Not all of us had come together here, however. Tell was keeping store up at the "Last Chance," and Jim was seeing to the forge fire, while the father of each boy sauntered about in the tavern yard.

"You won't tell anybody about father," Tell pleaded before he left us. "He never planned it, indeed he didn't. It was old man Dodd and Yeager and them other strangers."

I can picture now the Reverend Mr. Dodd, piously serious, sitting on the tavern veranda at that moment, a disinterested listener to what lay below his spiritual plane of life. Just above his temple was a deep bruise, and his right hand was bound with a white bandage. Five years later, one dark September night, by the dry bed of the Arickaree Creek in Colorado, I heard the story of that bandage and that bruise.

"And you'll be sure to keep still about my dad, too, won't you?" Jim Conlow urged. "He's bad, but – " as if he could find no other excuse, he added grinning, "I don't believe he's right bright; and Tell and me done our best anyhow."

Their best! These two had braved the worst of foes, with those of their own flesh and blood against them. We would keep their secret fast enough, nor should anyone know from the boys who of our own townspeople were in the plot. I believe now that Conlow would have killed Jim had he suspected the boy's part in that night's work. I have never broken faith with Jim, although Heaven knows I have had cause enough to wish never to hear the name of Conlow again.

One more boy was not in our line, O'mie, still missing from the ranks, and now my heart was heavy. Everybody else seemed to forget him in the excitement, however, and I hoped all was well.

On the veranda a group was crowding about Father Le Claire, listening to what he had to say. Nobody tried to do business in our town that day. Men and women and children stood about in groups, glad to be alive and to know that their homes were safe. It was a sight one may not see twice in a lifetime. And the thrill within me, that I had helped a little toward this safety, brought a pleasure unlike any other joy I have ever known.

"Where's Aunt Candace?" I asked Dollie Gentry, who had grasped my arm as if she would ring it from my shoulder.

"Hadn't you heard?" Dollie's eyes filled with tears. "Judson's baby died this mornin'. Judson he can't get across Fingal's Creek or some of the draws, to get home, and the fright last night was too much for Mis' Judson. She fainted away, an' when she come to, the baby was dead. I'm cookin' a good meal for all of 'em. Land knows, carin' for the little corpse is all they can do without botherin' to cook."

Good Mrs. Gentry used her one talent for everybody's comfort. And as for the Judsons, theirs was one of the wayside tragedies that keep ever alongside the line of civil strife.

They made room for us on the veranda, six husky Kansas bred fellows, hardly more than half-way through our teens, and we fell in with the group about Father Le Claire. He gave us a searching glance, and his face clouded. Good Dr. Hemingway beside him was eager for his story.

"Tell us the whole thing," he urged. "Then we can understand our part in it. Surely the arm of the Lord was not shortened for us last night."

"It is a strange story, Dr. Hemingway, with a strange and tragic ending," replied the priest. He related then the plot which O'mie had heard set forth by the strangers in our town. "I left at once to warn the Osages, believing I could return before last night."

"Them Osages is a cussed ornery lot, if that Jean out on the edge of the crowd there is a sample," a man from the west side of town broke in.

"They are true blue, and Jean is not an Osage; he's a Kiowa," Le Claire replied quietly.

"What of him ain't French," declared Cam Gentry. "That's where his durned meanness comes in biggest. Not but what a Kiowa's rotten enough. But sence he didn't seem to take part in this doings last night, I guess we can stand him a little while longer."

Father Le Claire's face flushed. Then a pallor overspread the flame. His likeness to the Indian flashed up with that flush. So had I seen Pahasca flush with anger, and a paleness cover his coppery countenance. Self-mastery was a part of the good man's religion, however, and in a voice calm but full of sympathy he told us of the tragic events whose evil promise had overshadowed our town with an awful peril.

It was a well-planned, cold-blooded horror, this scheme of the Southern Confederacy, to unite the fierce tribes of the Southwest against the unprotected Union frontier. And with the border raiders on the one side and the hostile Indians on the other, small chance of life would have been left to any Union man, woman, or child in all this wide, beautiful Kansas. In the four years of the Civil War no cruelty could have exceeded the consequences of this conspiracy.

Unity of purpose has ever been lacking to the red race. No federation has been possible to it except as that federation is controlled by the European brain. The controlling power in the execution of this dastardly crime lay with desperate but eminently able white men. Their appeal to the Osages, however, was a fruitless one. For a third of a century the faithful Jesuits had labored with this tribe. Not in vain was their seed-sowing.

Le Claire reached the Osages only an hour before an emissary from the leaders of this infamous plot came to the Mission. The presence of the priest counted so mightily, that this call to an Indian confederacy fell upon deaf ears, and the messenger departed to rejoin his superiors. He never found them, for a sudden and tragic ending had come to the conspiracy.

It was a busy day in Kansas annals when that company of Rebel officers came riding up from the South to band together the lawless savages and the outlawed raiders against a loyal commonwealth. Humboldt was the most southern Union garrison in Kansas at that time. South of it the Osages did much scout duty for the Government, and it held them responsible for any invasion of this strip of neutral soil between the North and the South. Out in the Verdigris River country, in this Maytime, a little company of Osage braves on the way from their village to visit the Mission came face to face with this band of invaders in the neutral land. The presence of a score of strange men armed and mounted, though they were dressed as Union soldiers, must be accounted for, these Indians reasoned.

The scouts were moved only by an unlettered loyalty to the flag. They had no notion of the real purpose of these invaders. The white men had only contempt for the authority of a handful of red men calling them to account, and they foolishly fired into the Indian band. It was a fatal foolishness. Two braves fell to the earth, pierced by their bullets. The little body of red men dropped over on the sides of their ponies and were soon beyond gun range, while their opponents went on their way. But briefly only, for, reinforced by a hundred painted braves, the whole fighting strength of their little village, the Osages came out for vengeance. Near a bend in the Verdigris River the two forces came together. Across a scope five miles wide they battled. The white men must have died bravely, for they fought stubbornly, foot by foot, as the Indians drove them into that fatal loop of the river. It is deep and swift here. Down on the sands by its very edge they fell. Not a white man escaped. The Indians, after their savage fashion, gathered the booty, leaving a score of naked, mutilated bodies by the river's side. It was a cruel bit of Western warfare, yet it held back from Kansas a diabolical outrage, whose suffering and horror only those who know the Southwest tribes can picture. And strangely enough, the power that stayed the evil lay with a handful of faithful Indian scouts.

The story of the massacre soon reached the Mission. Dreadful as it was, it lifted a burden from Le Claire's mind; but the news that the Comanches and the Kiowas, unable to restrain their tribes, were already on the war-path, filed him with dread.

A twenty-four hours' rain, with cloudbursts along the way, was now sending the Neosho and Verdigris Rivers miles wide, across their valleys. It was impossible for him to intercept these tribes until the stream should fall. The priest perfected his plans for overtaking them by swift messengers to be sent out from the Mission at the earliest moment, and then he turned his horse upstream toward Springvale. All day he rode with all speed to the northward. The ways were sodden with the heavy rains, and the smaller streams were troublesome to the horseman. Night fell long before he had come to the upper Neosho Valley. With the darkness his anxiety deepened. A thousand chances might befall to bring disaster before he could reach us.

The hours of the black night dragged on, and northward still the priest hurried. It was long after midnight when he found himself on the bluff opposite the town. Between him and Springvale the Neosho rushed madly, and the oak grove of the bottom land was only black treetops above, and water below. All hope of a safe passage across the river here vanished, for he durst not try the angry waters.

"There must have been heavier rains here than down the stream," he thought. "Pray Heaven the messengers may reach the Kiowas before they fall upon any of the settlements in the south. I must go farther up to cross. O God, grant that no evil may threaten that town over there!"

Turning to look once more at the dark valley his eye caught a gleam of light far down the river.

"That must be Jean down at the Hermit's Hole," he said to himself. "I wonder I never tried to follow him there. But if he's down the river it is better for Springvale, anyhow."

All this the priest told to the eager crowd on the veranda of the Cambridge House that morning. But regarding the light and his thought of it, he did not tell us then, nor how, through all and all, his great fear for Springvale was on account of Jean Pahasca's presence there. He knew the Indian's power; and now that the fierce passion of love for a girl and hatred of a rival, were at fever pitch, he dared not think what might follow, neither did he tell us how bitterly he was upbraiding himself for having charged O'mie with secrecy.

He had not yet caught sight of the Irish boy; and Jean, who had himself kept clear of the evil intent against Springvale the night before, had studiously kept the crowd between the priest and himself. We did not note this then, for we were spell-bound by the story of the Confederate conspiracy and of Father Le Claire's efforts for our safety.

"The Kiowas, who were on the war-path, have been cut off by the Verdigris," he concluded. "The waters, that kept me away from Springvale on this side, kept them off in the southwest. The Osages did us God's service in our peril, albeit their means were cruel after the manner of the savage."

A silence fell upon the group on the veranda, as the enormity of what we had escaped dawned upon us.

"Let us thank God that in his ways, past finding out, He has not forsaken his children." Dr. Hemingway spoke fervently.

I looked out on the broad street and down toward the river shining in the May sunlight. The air was very fresh and sweet. The oak trees, were in their heaviest green, and in the glorious light of day the commonest things in this little frontier town looked good to me. Across my vision there swept the picture of that wide, swift-flowing Verdigris River, and of the dead whose blood stained darkly that fatal sand-bar, their naked bodies hacked by savage fury, waiting the coming of pitiful hands to give them shelter in the bosom of the earth. And then I thought of all these beautiful prairies which the plough was beginning to subdue, of the homesteads whose chimney smoke I had seen many a morning from my windows up on Cliff Street. I thought of the little towns and unprotected villages, and of what an Indian raid would mean to these, – of murdered men and burning houses, and women dragged away into a slavery too awful to picture. I thought of Marjie and of what she had escaped. And then clear, as if he were beside me, I heard O'mie's voice:

"Phil, oh, Phil, come, come!" it pleaded.
I started up and stared around me.

CHAPTER IX

THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSING

Also Time runnin' into years —
A thousand Places left be'ind;
An' Men from both two 'emispheres
Discussin' things of every kind;
So much more near than I 'ad known,
So much more great than I 'ad guessed —
An' me, like all the rest, alone,
But reachin' out to all the rest!

— *KIPLING.*

"Uncle Cam, where is O'mie? I haven't seen him yet," I broke in upon the older men in the council. "Could anything have happened to him?"

The priest rose hurriedly.

"I have been hoping to see him every minute," he said. "Has anybody seen him this morning?"

A flurry followed. Everybody thought he had seen somebody else who had been with O'mie, but nobody, first hand, could report of him.

"Why, I thought he was with the boys," Cam Gentry exclaimed. "Nobody could keep track of nobody else last night."

"I thought I saw him this morning," said Dr. Hemingway. "But" — hesitatingly — "I do not believe I did either. I just had him in mind as I watched Henry Anderson's boys go by."

"All three of us are not equal to one O'mie," Clayton Anderson declared.

"What part of town did he have, Philip?" asked Le Claire.

"No part," I answered. "We had to take the boys that were out there under the oak."

Dr. Hemingway called a council at once, and all who knew anything of the missing boy reported. I could give what had been told to Aunt Candace and myself only in a general way, in order to shield Tell Mapleson. Cam had seen O'mie only a minute, just before midnight.

"He went racin' out draggin' somethin' after him, an' jumped over the porch railin' here," pointing to the north, "stid o' goin' down the steps. O'mie's double-gear'd lightin' for quickness anyhow, but last night he jist made lightnin' seem slow the way he got off the reservation an' into the street. It roused me up. I was half asleep settin' here waitin' to put them strangers to bed again. So I set up an' waited fur the boy to show up an' apologize fur his not bein' no quicker, when in comes Phil; an' ye all know the rest. I've not laid an eye on O'mie sence, but bein' short on range I took it he was here but out of sight. Oh, Lord!" Cam groaned, "can anything have happened to him?"

While Cam was speaking I noticed that Jean Pahunca who had been loafing about at the far side of the crowd, was standing behind Father Le Claire. No one could have told from his set, still face what his thoughts were just then.

The last one who had seen O'mie was Marjie.

"I had left the door open so I could find the way better," she said. "At the gate O'mie came running up. I thought he was a girl, for he had my cloak around him and the hood over his head. His face was very white.

"I supposed it was just the light behind me, made it look so, for he wasn't the least bit scared. He called to me twice. 'Don't hurry,' he said; 'I'm taking your cloak home.' Mrs. Judson shut the door just

then, thinking I had gone on, and I ran home, but O'mie flew ahead of me. Just before I came around the corner I heard a horse start up and dash off to the river. I ran in to mother and shut the door."

"I met a horse down by the river as I ran to grandpa's after Bill. He was staying over there last night." It was Dave Mead who spoke. "I made a grab at the rein. I was crazy to think of such a thing, but – " Dave didn't say why he tried to stop the horse, for that would mean to repeat what Tell had told us, and we had to keep Tell's part to ourselves. "The horse knocked me twenty feet and tore off toward the river."

And then for the first time we noticed Dave Mead's right arm in a sling. Too much was asked of us in those hours for us to note the things that mark our common days.

"It put my shoulder out of place," Dave said simply. "Didn't get it in again for so long, it's pretty sore. I was too busy to think about it at first."

Dave Mead never put his right hand to his head again. And to-day, if the broad-shouldered, fine-looking American should meet you on the streets of Hong Kong, he would offer you his left hand. For hours he forgot himself to save others. It is his like that have filled Kansas and made her story a record of heroism like to the story of no other State in all the nation.

But as to O'mie we could find nothing. There was something strange and unusual about his returning the borrowed cloak at that late hour. The whole thing was so unlike O'mie.

"They've killed him and put him in the river," wailed Dollie Gentry.

"I'm afraid he's been foully dealt with. They suspected he knew too much," and Dr. Hemingway bowed his head in sorrow.

"He's run straight into a coil of them pisen Copperheads an' they've made way with him; an' to think we hadn't missed him," sobbed Cam in his chair.

Father Le Claire gripped his hands, and his face grew as expressionless as the Indian's behind him. It dawned upon us now that O'mie was lost, there was no knowing how. O'mie, who belonged to the town and was loved as few orphan boys are loved. Oh, any of us would have suffered for him, and to think that he should be made the victim of rebel hate, that the blow should fall on him who had given no offence. All his manliness, his abounding kindness, his sunny smile and joy in living, swept up in memory in the instant. Instinctively the boys drew near to one another, and there came back to me the memory of that pathetic look in his eyes as we talked of our troubles down in the tavern stables two nights before: "Whoever it's laid on to suffer," I could almost hear him saying it. And then I did hear his voice, low and clear, a faint call again, as I had heard it before.

"Phil, oh Phil, come!"

It shot through my brain like an arrow. I turned and seized Le Claire by the hand.

"O'mie's not dead," I cried. "He's alive somewhere, and I'm going to find him."

"You bet your life he'th not dead," Bud Anderson echoed me. "Come on."

The boys with Le Claire started in a body through the crowd; a shout went up, a sudden determination that O'mie must be alive seemed to possess Springvale.

"Stay with Cam and Dollie," Le Claire turned Dr. Hemingway back with a word. "They need you now. We can do all that can be done."

He strode ahead of us; a stalwart leader of men he would make in any fray. It flashed into my mind that it was not the Kiowa Indian blood that made Jean Pahasca seem so stately and strong as he strode down the streets of Springvale. A red blanket over Le Claire's broad shoulders would have deceived us into thinking it was the Indian brave leading on before us.

The river was falling rapidly, and the banks were slimy. Fingal's Creek was almost at its usual level and the silt was crusting along its bedraggled borders. Just above where it empties into the Neosho we noted a freshly broken embankment as though some weight had crushed over the side and carried a portion of the bank with it. Puddles of water and black mud filled the little hollows everywhere. Into one of these I stepped as we were eagerly searching for a trace of the lost boy. My

foot stuck to something soft like a garment in the puddle. I kicked it out, and a jet button shone in the ooze. I stooped and lifted the grimy thing. It was Marjie's cloak.

"This is the last of O'mie," Dave Mead spoke reverently.

"Here's where they pushed him in," said John Anderson pointing to the break in the bank.

There was a buzzing in my ears, and the sunlight on the river was dancing in ten thousand hideous curls and twists. The last of O'mie, until maybe, a bloated sodden body might be found half buried in some flood-wrought sand-bar. The May morning was a mockery, and every green growing leaf seemed to be using the life force that should be in him.

"Yes, there's where he went in." It was Father Le Claire's voice now, "but he fought hard for his life."

"Yeth, and by George, yonder'th where he come out. Thee that thaplin' on the bank? It'th thplit, but it didn't break; an' that bank'th brokener'n thith."

Oh, blessed Bud! His tow head will always wear a crown to me.

On the farther bank a struggle had wrenched the young trees and shrubs away and a slide of slime marked where the victim of the waters had fought for life. We knew how to swim, and we crossed the swollen creek in a rush. But here all trace disappeared. Something or somebody had climbed the bank. A horse's hoofs showed in the mud, but on the ground beyond the horse's feet had not seemed to leave a track. The cruel ruffians must have pushed him back when he tried to gain the bank here. We hunted and hunted, but to no avail. No other mark of O'mie's having passed beyond the creek could be found.

It was nearly sunset before we came back to town. Not a mouthful had been eaten, and with the tenseness of the night's excitement stretching every nerve, the loss of sleep, the constant searching, and the heaviness of despair, mud-stained, wearied, and haggard, we dragged ourselves to the tavern again. Other searchers had been going in different directions. In one of these parties, useful, quick and wisely counselling, was Jean Pahasca. His companions were loud in their praise of his efforts. The Red Range neighborhood had received the word at noon and turned out in a mass, women and children joining in the quest. But it was all in vain. Wild theories filled the air, stories of strangers struggling with somebody in the dark; the sound of screams and of some one running away. But none of these stories could be substantiated. And all the while what Tell Mapleson had said to Aunt Candace and me when he came to warn us, kept repeating itself to me. "They're awful against O'mie. They think he knows too much."

Early the next morning the search was renewed, but at nightfall no further trace of the lost boy had been discovered. On the second evening, when we gathered at the Cambridge House, Dr. Hemingway urged us to take a little rest, and asked that we come later to a prayer meeting in the church.

"O'mie is our one sacrifice beside the dear little babe of Judson's. All the rest of us have been spared to life, and our homes have been protected. We must look to the Lord for comfort now, and thank Him for His goodness to us."

Then the Rev. Mr. Dodd spoke sneeringly:

"You've made a big ado for two days about a little coward who cut and run at the first sound of danger. Disguised himself like a girl to do it. He will come sneaking in fast enough when he finds the danger is over. A lot of us around town are too wise to be deceived. The Lord did save us," how piously he spoke, "but we should not disgrace ourselves."

He got no further. I had been leaning limply against the veranda post, for even my strength was giving way, more under the mental strain than the physical tax. But at the preacher's words all the blood of my fighting ancestry took fire. There was a Baronet with Cromwell's Ironsides, the regiment that was never defeated in battle. There was a Baronet color-bearer at Bunker Hill and later at Saratoga, and it was a Baronet who waited till the last boat crossed the Delaware when Washington led his forces to safety. There were Baronets with Perry on Lake Erie, and at that moment my father

was fighting for the life of a nation. I cleared the space between us at a bound, and catching the Reverend Dodd by throat and thigh, I lifted him clear of the railing and flung him sprawling on the blue-grass.

"If you ever say another word against O'mie I'll break your neck," I cried, as he landed.

Father Le Claire was beside him at once.

"He's killed me," groaned Dodd.

"Then he ought to bury his dead," Dr. Hemingway said coldly, which was the only time the good old man was ever known to speak unkindly to any one among us.

The fallen preacher gathered himself together and slipped away.

Dollie Gentry had a royal supper for everybody that night. Jean Pahasca sat by Father Le Claire with us at the long table in the dining-room. Again my conscience, which upbraided me for doubting him, and my instinct, which warned me to beware of him, had their battle within me.

"I just had to do something or I'd have jumped into the Neosho myself," Dollie explained in apology for the abundant meal, as if cooking were too worldly for that grave time. "I know now," she said, "how that poor woman felt whose little boy was took by the Kiowas years ago out on the West Prairie. They said she did jump into the river. Anyhow, she disappeared."

"Did you know her or her husband?" Father Le Claire asked quietly.

"Yes, in a way," Dollie replied. "He was a big, fine-looking man built some like you, an' dark. He was a Frenchman. She was a little, small-boned woman. I saw her in the 'Last Chance' store the day she got here from the East. She was fair and had red hair, I should say; but they said the woman that drowned herself was a black-haired French woman. She didn't look French to me. She lived in that little cabin up around the bend toward Red Range, poor dear! That cabin's always been haunted, they say."

"Was she never heard of again?" the priest went on. We thought he was keeping Dollie's mind off O'mie.

"Ner him neither. He cut out west toward Santy Fee with some Mexican traders goin' home from Westport. I heard he left 'em at Pawnee Rock, where they had a regular battle with the Kiowas; some thought he might have been killed by the Kiowas, and others by the Mexicans. Anyhow, he never was heard of in Springvale no more."

"Mrs. Gentry," Le Claire asked abruptly, "where did you find O'mie?"

"Why, we've had him so long I forget we never hadn't him." Dollie seemed confused, for O'mie was a part of her life. "He was brought up here from the South by a missionary. Seems to me he found the little feller (he was only five years old) trudgin' off alone, an' sayin' he wouldn't stay at the Mission 'cause there was Injuns there. Said the Injuns killed his father, an' he kicked an' squalled till the missionary just brought him up here. He was on his way to St. Mary's, up on the Kaw, an' he was takin' the little one on with him. He stopped here with O'mie an' the little feller was hungry –"

"And you fed him; naked, and you clothed him," the priest added reverently.

"Poor O'mie!" and Dollie made a dive for the kitchen to weep out her grief alone.

It seemed to settle upon Springvale that O'mie was lost; had been overcome in some way by the murderous raiders who had infested our town.

In sheer weariness and hopelessness I fell on my bed, that night, and sleep, the "sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care," fell upon me. Just at daybreak I woke with a start. I had not dreamed once all night, but now, wide awake, with my face to the open east window where the rose tint of a grand new day was deepening into purple on the horizon's edge, feeling and knowing everything perfectly, I saw O'mie's face before me, white and drawn with pain, but gloriously brave. And his pleading voice, "Phil, ye'll come soon, won't ye?" sounded low and clear in my ears.

I sprang up and dressed myself. I was so sure of O'mie, I could hardly wait to begin another search. Something seemed to impel me to speed. "He won't last long," was a vague, persistent thought that haunted me.

"What is it, Phil?" my aunt called as I passed her door.

"Aunt Candace, it's O'mie. He's not dead yet, I'm sure. But I must go at once and hunt again."

"Where will you go now?" she queried.

"I don't know. I'm just being led," I replied.

"Phil," Aunt Candace was at the door now, "have you thought of the Hermit's Cave?"

Her words went through me like a sword-thrust.

"Why, why, – oh, Aunt Candace, let me think a minute."

"I've been thinking for twelve hours," said my aunt. "Until you try that place don't give up the hunt."

"But I don't know how to get there."

"Then make a way. You are not less able to do impossible things than the Pilgrim Fathers were. If you ever find O'mie it will be in that place. I feel it, I can't say why. But, Phil, you will need the boys and Father Le Claire. Take time to get breakfast and get yourself together. You will need all your energy. Don't squander it the first thing."

Dear Aunt Candace! This many a year has her grave been green in the Springvale cemetery, but greener still is her memory in the hearts of those who knew her. She had what the scholars of to-day strive to possess – the power of poise.

I ate my breakfast as calmly as I could, and before I left home Aunt Candace made me read the Ninety-first Psalm. Then she kissed me good-bye and bade me God-speed. Something kept telling me to hurry, hurry, as I tried to be deliberate, and quickened my thought and my step. At the tavern Cam Gentry met us.

"It ain't no use to try, boys, O'mie's down in the river where the cussed Copperheads put him; but you're good to keep tryin'." He sat down in a helpless resignation, so unlike his natural buoyant spirit it was hard to believe that this was the same Cam we had always known.

"Judson's baby's to be buried to-day, but we can't even bury O'mie. Oh, it's cruel hard." Cam groaned in his chair.

The dew had not ceased to glitter, and the sun was hardly more than risen when Father Le Claire and the crowd of boys, reinforced now by Tell Mapleson and Jim Conlow, started bravely out, determined to find the boy who had been missing for what seemed ages to us.

"If we find O'mie, we'll send word by the fastest runner, and you must ring the church bell," Le Claire arranged with Cam. "All the town can have the word at once then."

"We'll go to the Hermit's Cave first," I announced.

The company agreed, but only Bud Anderson seemed to feel as I did. To the others it was a wasted bit of heroism, for if none of us had yet found the way to this retreat, why should we look for O'mie there? So the boys argued as we hurried to the river. The Neosho was inside its banks again, but, deep and swift and muddy, it swept silently by us who longed to know its secrets.

"Philip, why do you consider the cave possible?" Le Claire asked as we followed the river towards the cliff.

"Aunt Candace says so," I replied.

"Well, it's worth the trial if only to prove a woman's intuition – or whim," he said quietly.

The same old cliff confronted us, although the many uprooted trees showed a jagged outcrop this side the sheer wall. We looked up helplessly at the height. It seemed foolish to think of O'mie being in that inaccessible spot.

"If he is up there," Dave Mead urged, "and we can get to him, it will be to put him alongside Judson's baby this afternoon."

All the other boys were for turning back and hunting about Fingal's Creek again, all except Bud. Such a pink and white boy he was, with a dimple in each cheek and a blowsy tow head.

"Will you stay with me, Bud, till I get up there?" I asked him.

"Yeth thir! or down there. Let'th go round an' try the other thide."

"Well, I guess we'll all stay with Phil, you cottontop," Tell Mapleson put in.

We all began to circle round the bluff to get beyond this steep, forbidding wall. Our plan was to go down the river beyond the cave, and try to climb up from that point. Crossing along by the edge of the bluff we passed the steepest part and were coming again to where the treetops and bushes that clung to the side of the high wall reached above the crest, as they do across the street from my own home. Just ahead of us, as we hurried, I caught sight of a flat slab of the shelving rock slipped aside and barely balancing on the edge, one end of it bending down the treetops as if newly slid into that place. All about the stone the thin sod of the bluff's top was cut and trampled as if a struggle had been there. We examined it carefully. A horse's tracks were plainly to be seen.

"Something happened here," Le Claire said. "Looks like a horse had been urged up to the very edge and had kept pulling back."

"And that stone is just slipped from its place," Clayton Anderson declared. "Something has happened here since the rains."

As we came to the edge, we saw a pile of earth recently scraped from the stone outcrop above.

"Somebody or something went over here not long ago," I cried.

"Look out, Phil," Bill Mead called, "or somebody else will follow somebody before 'em – "

Bill's warning came too late. I had stepped on the balanced slab. It tipped and went over the side with a crash. I caught at the edge and missed it, but the effort threw me toward the cliff and I slid twenty feet. The bushes seemed to part as by a well-made opening and I caught a strong limb, and gained my balance. I looked back at the way I had come. And then I gave a great shout. The anxious faces peering down at me changed a little.

"What is it?" came the query.

I pointed upward.

"The nicest set of hand-holds and steps clear up," I called. "You can't see for the shelf. But right under there where Bud's head is, is the best place to get a grip and there's a foothold all the way down." I stared up again. "There's a rope fastened right under there. Bend over, Bud, careful, and you'll find it. It will let you over to the steps. Swing in on it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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