

LIGE MOUNTS

FREE
TRAPPER



By
Frank B.
Linderman

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LIGE MOUNTS: FREE TRAPPER

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Sketches from the Northwest

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

LIGE MOUNTS: FREE TRAPPER



There never was another such a morning

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BY
FRANK B. LINDERMAN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOE DE YONG



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CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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1922

TO MY DAUGHTER
VERNE
WHO INSISTED THAT
LIGE MOUNTS
TELL HIS OWN STORY

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FOREWORD

I came to Montana Territory when I was a boy. The country was wild, and essentially a land of youth. Men referred to as "old Bill" or "old Hank" were often in their prime, and proud of their strength and fitness. Their ways were those of a wilderness unspoiled, and primitiveness traditional, a proof of character. An extra blanket or frying-pan in their meagre packs was disgraceful, and in the eyes of his fellows lessened the possessor's worth as a "good man." The life they led fascinated me, and I became a trapper with them, my partner being a man who had grown gray in the wilderness. He felt a pride in owning a fast horse, a dead-centre rifle, the shortest camp-equipment, and the scantiest bed-roll in the Territory; and nothing stirred him as did the sight of a fence. I shall never forget his displeasure and chagrin when he learned that Montana had ceased to be a Territory and had become a State in the Union. "Now she's gone to hell for keeps," he sighed. And I believed him.

He knew the ways of the Indian, and through him I became the Indian's friend, learning more than he had known of their customs and beliefs; although after so many years of acquaintance the Indian remains to me still a man of mystery.

In this book I have sought to tell of life in the very early days of the fur trade on the upper Missouri River, and to show something of the real customs of both the white and red men who lived on

the plains. I am indebted to Captain H. M. Chittenden's "History of the American Fur Trade" for many historical facts, especially for the details of the quarrel between the partners, Fink, Talbot, and Carpenter. The words of the voyageur's song and the "Notice to Enterprising Young Men" have been taken from that work verbatim.

For proof that the Hudson's Bay Company practised questionable methods in dealing with competitors, I refer the reader to the "Journals of Captain Palliser" (1857), and to "Three Years Among the Mexicans and Indians," by General Thomas James (1846).

In order to give the reader an idea of the dignity with which the old-time Indian conversed, I have assumed that in speaking the Cree language, which he had learned perfectly, or in translating conversations from the Cree, Lige Mounts used nearly perfect English.

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LIGE MOUNTS: FREE TRAPPER

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CHAPTER I

I don't remember much about my parents. They both died when I was little. My mother died first; but I was so young I don't remember her at all. Then when I was six years old my father was struck by lightning. I remember that, and how scared I was when the men packed him in out of the dark woods and the rain. The men was dripping wet—so wet the water from their boots left blotches on the puncheon floor between the door and the bed where they laid father. And where Lafe Daws stood, near the foot of the bed, his clothes dripped a regular puddle that ran through the cracks in the floor. I remember I thought it would be fine to be as wet as that.

Lafe Daws said, "He's done for, I reckon," and when he moved a little, another puddle begun to grow about his boots. Then the lightning flashed right with an awful clap of thunder, and Lafe Daws dodged like somebody had struck at him; and I crawled under the bed. My! how the rain poured down! And how dark it was in the house! I cried from fright. But whenever there was a flash of lightning, and that was right often, I could see the big boots and the puddles through my tears.

I was under the bed when Aunt Lib came. She was my mother's sister. And that night I went to live with her and Uncle Eldin Muzzey. I slept with my cousin Eben, who was only four years old; and all night he laid crosswise of the bed; and the

neighbors was coming and going between our house and Aunt Lib's.

The next morning I saw our clock and a candlestick and a picture piled on Aunt Lib's table in her house. "Them's ours," I told her, right scornful, I reckon. But she only sighed, and kissed me on the cheek. "Yes," she said, "they're ours—yers and mine, for ye're goin' to be my little boy now."

That was in Kentucky; but the next spring Uncle Eldin and Aunt Lib moved west, and I went along with them.

I don't remember much of the journey, nor how long it took us to reach Coon Creek, where Uncle Eldin took up land and settled. It was fall before we got moved into the cabin, which was built about thirty yards from the creek; and winter come on by the time a decent patch of land had been cleared for a garden in the spring.

The cabin wa'n't much, but Uncle Eldin said it would have to do for a spell; and right away Aunt Lib begun to plan on the new house. She used to talk a heap about it at first, and I reckon she actually lived in it, too. And it done her good, mebby, but it didn't last. She'd slave to lay by a little towards it, always talking about the raising and the neighbors that would be on hand to he'p when the time come; but strive as she might, poverty hovered about us like a shadow, and whenever her savings had growed to a worth-while, something she'd never thought of would romp in and carry them off long 'fore the amount was big enough to warrant even a beginning. And the children kept coming, too; so that when I was eleven there was six, the oldest nine years; and them having to be fed and clothed made it all the harder to save. Aunt Lib's

savings jar was mighty nigh always empty now, and at last she give up ever having a new house.

The vines, as if to make it up to her, kept growing higher and higher over the little porch we'd added to the old cabin; and each fall when the hickory leaves turned yellow Uncle Eldin or me re-daubed the cracks between the rough logs to make the place snug for winter.

Nobody worked harder than Uncle Eldin. I he'ped him all I could from the beginning, and we'd cleared quite a piece by the time I was twelve—cleared and fenced it, so that there was always crop enough, but no money. Each year we added to the clearing, too, pushing back the timber and grubbing and plowing from daylight to plumb dark, just him and me.

There was a grist-mill at Coon Creek Crossing, and a store and a blacksmith shop, and quite a village besides. Then there was the church where we come sometimes of Sundays to hear Joshua Moulds, the circuit rider, preach. I never let Aunt Lib know—but I never liked to go, myse'f, because it seemed like Joshua Moulds never let people go home happy if he could he'p it. I'd heered him say God was love more'n once, but he never preached about that—only hell-fire and damnation. It seemed right queer that Moulds didn't preach more about good things and let the bad rest up. But he never did.

Coon Creek Crossing was four miles from our place; and when I was eleven Mrs. Hawkins' brother come there from Virginia. His name was Abner Hastings, and he was a schoolmaster. Right away Aunt Lib got me ready to go to school. That winter and the next I walked 'most every day to the Crossing, as we called it, and went to school

there with some other boys and girls. The oldest was nigh to twenty and I was the youngest of the lot.

Abner Hastings was a good man, and I liked him from the start. He was tall and thin and had a mighty bad cough that used to nigh wear him out at times. Folks said he had lung trouble, and I reckon he had. But he liked birds and flowers, and that made me and him right friendly. It was him that gave me Biddle's book about Captain Lewis and Captain Clark and their trip up the Missouri river.

I read it through at least a dozen times till I knowed it 'most by heart. Aunt Lib read it too, but she said it was trash, mostly, and lies that a boy never ought to read. It fretted her so, I took the book back to Abner Hastings after a while; and he was glad to get it, I reckon, for books was mighty scarce.

Just above us on Coon Creek about three miles was the Byers' place. "The Plantation," we called it. Nobody liked Caley Byers very well, and nobody knowed much about him or his family. They had a passel of slaves and come from further south, folks said, and I reckon that was true. But none of the Byerses ever talked about their past or the place they come from to anybody, far as I know. They considered themse'fs real quality-folks, and mebbly they was. But nobody ever come to the plantation to visit a spell from further south, nor the Byerses folks didn't go away from Coon Creek. That was talked about some, for most folks hold a hankering for old friends and old home-places; but Caley Byers didn't seem to have any. Leastways he never showed it if he did. Some folks even

hinted there was reasons why the Byerses never had no visitors nor went back to their old home. There was a yarn that was supposed to have been told by an old slave that died on the Plantation quite a time before we come to live on Coon Creek. And there was a woman in it, of course. But long before I left, the garbled story was plumb wore out, and, as nothing had been added to it since the old nigger died, it wa'n't far from being dead itse'f. The other slaves never talked nor told anything, if they had anything to tell. But nobody liked Caley Byers. And I didn't. I had my own reasons—not borrowed ones either.

A little more'n half way between our place and Coon Creek Crossing there was a small cleared piece that folks called Dan's Clearing. Nobody knowed who Dan had been; and only a deserted cabin with a broken door was left to prove there ever was such a man as Dan. I used to like to go there, and once I found an old bullet-mould in the fireplace of the rickety cabin. I prized my find above everything I possessed, which wa'n't much.

There was a trail that followed along Coon Creek clean to the Crossing and beyond. It mighty seldom left the stream and even crossed it several times where the way was bad, just to get to stay by it, I reckon. It was longer than the wagon road, quite a little, but when I went to the Crossing afoot, which I mostly did, I took the Coon Creek trail because I liked it better than the stumpy wagon road. It was an old deer trail and wa'n't made by men nor laid out to save time.

There was a bad place on the trail, made by a swamp fed from springs at the head of Dan's Clearing; and there the old deer-trail, using the swamp

as an excuse, turned sharp and cut straight across the cleared piece. Somebody had cut a big tree and layed a log on the lower side at the bad place, and while that he'ped some, it made the trail mighty narrow for the length of the log.

One day I was coming home from school, afoot, of course, and I had Jeff Hawkins' spelling book under my arm. Just as I got to the bad place in the trail, here come Caley Byers a-hoss-back, and he made out like he didn't see me; but I saw him see me when he made the sharp turn. I turned out as far as I could without stepping off into the creek to let him by, but just at the narrowest place he pulled his hoss over sudden, and crowded me into the water. Crackey! but I was mad. I picked up a stone and let him have it. It hit him in the back and he turned and come at me. But I was in the creek, and I rocked him good and plenty till he quit. He didn't speak to me, nor I to him. I just pegged him good and he rode off. He never did tell it; nor neither did I. Most likely *he* was ashamed to. But I got water on Jeff Hawkins' spelling book and give him my bullet-mould to make it up to him, though I didn't reckon he cared much about the book. I never had liked Caley Byers, because other folks didn't; but now I hated him on my own account.

I don't know if it was that Biddle's book, but from the time I went to school to Abner Hastings I begun to wish I was a man, and I wished it hard. I only went part of two seasons, for Abner Hastings died. And then I wished I'd kept the Biddle book more'n ever.

I growed pretty fast. Hard work didn't hurt me; and when I was eighteen I was right close to six feet and about as thick's your finger, though

straight, I reckon, as anybody. But I knowed I looked a heap older'n I was. One winter I split rails for Mr. Hawkins at the crossing and earned a rifle. It was brand new and though I didn't call it mine, exactly, I was mighty proud of it. I fetched it home, and Uncle Eldin used it as much as I did; but I always had turned whatever I could earn to Aunt Lib; and so Uncle Eldin reckoned the weapon was part his, and it was. He had a rifle, but it wa'n't half the gun that the new one was. And so his didn't get much use or attention. I tell you, I was proud of that rifle, and every flint I had was a picked one. I reckon I found more pleasure in running bullets for that gun than in any other thing—that and reading a newspaper Mr. Hawkins give me at the Crossing once when I went there with a grist of corn.

The paper was a copy of the Missouri Gazette, and it had a story in it about a bad fight General Ashley had with the Arickara Indians 'way up the river. I fetched the paper home and hid it in a box under the bed. I was ashamed to hide it; but everything about Indians fretted Aunt Lib, and so I hid it. I bet I knowed that story by heart before Aunt Lib found the paper. She give it back, scolding a little about lies and foolish boys. She wa'n't very big—not up to my shoulder then—but she thought she'd ought to scold me, I reckon. Many a night after they was all asleep I lit a tallow dip and re-read that story—not because I needed to, but because I was glad I had it and could read.

My cousin Eben was most as big as I was now, and strong as an ox. And Charles, too, had growed to be a big stout boy. Besides, the girls could he'p Aunt Lib a lot. And I begun to figure I wa'n't

needed much and that mine was another mouth to feed. I'd set sometimes in Dan's Clearing on the way to the mill and wonder if the wild country would all be gone before I got to see it. I had spoke about me doing something for myse'f a heap of times, but Aunt Lib always made a fuss when I did. "The place is plenty big enough, Lige," she'd say, "an' ye're too young yit." Or, "Ye been readin' more of that trash in that paper. I wished you'd never fetched it home."

I didn't like to fret her, but I did want to start out for myse'f and mebby he'p her and Uncle Eldin in the end. I couldn't see any chance to he'p them where I was; and every time I dreamed of doing for myse'f it had to do with making up to Aunt Lib and Uncle Eldin for being good to me. But 'twa'n't no use to talk to Aunt Lib about it.

One day I was plowing corn. It was June and the air was still, and sweet with the breath of growing things in the sunshine. Bees hummed straight across the field to Aunt Lib's hive behind the house, plumb loaded down with the sweet of flowers. And the perfume from the big lilac bush by the gate come clear over to where I was at work. Every live thing was happy, and busy too, either working or playing. If old Becky hadn't knowed her business I'd sure plowed up the corn watching things that was glad they was alive. I remember two gray squirrels chasing each other up one tree and down another, chattering and blackguarding awful. Finally they come tearing across the field, so blind in their play that they run plumb under Becky and over into the yard where the hounds was sleeping. Then one of them climbed the big shag-bark hickory

near the house and begun to bark at the dogs, quaquaquaa! like he wanted to drive them away. The other squirrel wa'n't so brash, and I don't know where he went. The fellow in the tree scolded and barked quite a while, but the dogs didn't wake or notice. I had just turned old Becky at the end of a row—or she turned herse'f; and as I caught the flash of Aunt Lib's red peonies in the yard, I heered the gate creak on its wooden hinges. That set off both the dogs. Bristling and barking like hounds can, they made a rush for the gate, where I saw Caley Byers getting down off his hoss. Then Aunt Lib run out of the house. "You Bugle! come back yer! Bing! Bing! Back with ye!" she called, and ran down towards the gate to meet Byers, wiping her hands on her apron as she went.

Both hounds was friendly, but any good hound will bark. I saw that Caley Byers was squared off to meet them and was looking ornery; although Bugle was wagging his tail, and neither him nor Bing was bristled then. Bugle was a cripple. He only had three legs, having lost one in a trap when he was a pup. He was my dog, and was friendly to everybody. He tried to welcome Byers in good earnest now; but the ornery trash kicked him, and he went yelping back to the house. I didn't hear what Byers was saying to Aunt Lib; but when he kicked Bugle that way for nothing like he did, all my old dislike for the man come loping back, and I was mad clean through. I wrapped the lines around the plow-handles and went down there.

I reckon I was expected anyway, for Aunt Lib with her hand shading her eyes was watching me. And so was Caley Byers.

He didn't wait for me to say a 'howdy,' but

pitched right in. "I want you to keep your damned hawgs off my place," he says, lashing his boots with a riding whip. I wa'n't within decent talking distance even. His chin was stuck out ornery-like, and there was a sneer on his face that would have kept a kitten away from milk.

"Hear me?" he says, louder'n ever.

All the meanness in me come a-surging up and I could feel my hair prickle with it. But I hobbled it quick.

"Yes, sir," I says. "I hear you right plain. But when did our hawgs bother you?"

"Bother me!" he bellered. "Bother me! Why, last night and every night. I won't put up with it another minute. I'll have them killed, every damned one."

"Well," I says, "kill all the hawgs you've a mind to for all o' me, 'cause *our* hawgs ain't bothered you none. All we got is a sow an' seven pigs a week old. I don't reckon they're able to travel so far as your place yet."

I see him weaken plain. I reckon he believed me all right, but he wa'n't the man to admit he was wrong.

"They *are* your hawgs!" he says, making the dust fly out of his boot with his whip. "They *are* your hawgs, and you know it. And you will—"

I stepped up right close. "That's all right, Caley Byers," I says, "but kickin' Bugle the way you-all did, *ain't* all right. That hound is mine, and he's a cripple-dawg with only three laigs. I don't 'low folks to abuse him no time. He never harmed no person, an' he never will."

Cracky! he was mad. "He'll never harm *me*, if

I can catch him off this place once," he cried. "I'll kill him on sight. Hear me?"

I knowed I was mighty nigh a fuss, but I kept hold of myse'f. "I reckon you'd best do the hawg-killin', Caley Byers," I says. And I looked him square in the eyes, so's he'd know I wa'n't fooling.

Then I waited a bit, for it seemed to me it was his say; but he begun to back towards his hoss; and old Becky getting nervous and fighting flies, I went back to the corn.

Byers was muttering to himse'f when he got on and rode off. And I saw Aunt Lib shut the gate and go back to the house. I knowed she was plumb scared and fretting, for she was always afraid of Caley Byers, somehow. He was so high and mighty, I reckon.

I fixed myse'f for a scolding. I never said nothing to Aunt Lib when she scolded me, 'cause I knowed she was trying to do right by me, and everybody else, for that matter. But when at noon I went to the house for dinner, she didn't say a word. I knowed she'd told Uncle Eldin, though. I could tell by his looks; but he never mentioned it and neither did I. All he said was, "How's the co'n looking, Lige?"

I told him it would make a good crop, I reckoned, and that I was nigh done plowing.

Somehow my little rucus with Caley Byers made me want to get away and do for myse'f more'n ever. I was nigh to nineteen and living with other folks yet. It didn't seem right. Something inside me kept saying, "Tell 'em you're going to strike out." But I waited till dinner was pretty nigh over; then I said:

"Uncle Eldin, don't you-all reckon I'd best be up

and doing for myse'f? I'm goin' on for nineteen now and can take care of myse'f. You and Aunt Lib's been powerful good to me, and some day I'll shore make it up to you. But the work's about done, and when it's finished I'd just like to have a look 'round a spell. I've said so before, but you and Aunt Lib reckoned I was too young. Eben's 'most a man, an' can do a man's work a'ready."

"Now Lige, I wished you-all wouldn't talk that a-way," Aunt Lib said, brushing back her hair like she was scared. I knowed just what she would say—every word; and so I says:

"But Aunt Lib, I figure I have been about worth my board and keep up to now. You-all won't need me after this crop's plowed, and the garden weeded. I just itch to be a-findin' a place for myse'f. And I've sure got it to do before I get too old to want to."

I see I was fretting her again, and I quit. But she says, "You talk to him, Eldin. You're a man, and mebbly he'll listen to you."

I knowed she was scared I'd go up the river. I knowed too she'd talked a heap about it to Uncle Eldin.

"Better stay where you be till you find some good chance, Lige," he said, shoving his chair back from the table. "I don't figger you owe us anything, boy—not a red cent," he says. "You've been a big he'p to me, and I don't know what I'd a-done without you. When the time comes for you to go, I won't lay a straw in your way, no matter where it p'int, so long's it's honest." Then he got up for his hat and went back to the timber where he was splitting rails for fencing.

Cracky! There didn't seem to be any use to talk, and I sure did hate to fret Aunt Lib.

I set there a spell, thinking hard. I could see the big lilac bush, all full of purple blossoms, and the cornfield, and the garden, and the wood pile, and Aunt Lib's flowers and vines. What a change we'd made there in the wilderness with two axes and a team since we settled on Coon Creek. It had all took work. And there'd always been the struggle with poverty, ever since I could remember. My mind run on back to chore days and follered along to that very day. I was right sure I hadn't shirked none nor bothered—only mebby fretting Aunt Lib with my talk. Many a time when Uncle Eldin could spare me I'd split rails or cut cord-wood for Hawkins, the storekeeper at the Crossing, and never once kept a red cent of what I'd earned. Well, once, mebby I did, but it was winter time, and Morgan Jackson didn't have no money, noway. I cut eight cords of wood for him. He give me a silver ring to pay for it, and I kept it for myse'f. It had a shield engraved on it, and was mighty pretty. But mostly I'd always turned everything over to Aunt Lib, though I knowed it wa'n't a heap. I was glad I'd done it, too—I'd always a heap ruther work than be idle; for of late when I was loafing I couldn't keep from thinking of the wild country up the big river. And I was mighty afraid it would all be spoiled before I got to it. Eben was stout as I was, and about all the land Uncle Eldin could handle had been cleared; or I wouldn't have thought of going away. It didn't seem as though I could stay much longer. And now it was June two days ago—another June would soon be gone.

Aunt Lib got up and begun to pick the dishes

from the table. She knowed what I was thinking. So I went 'round the house to where Bugle was laying to see if he was hurt much.

Soon's I showed up he come to me, whimpering and limping, though I see right away he was making believe a lot so's I'd pet him. I talked to him a spell and then went back to my plowing.

I finished the corn a good half hour before sundown, and right away I got to thinking again of the upper Missouri river country. I tended to old Becky and then went to the house.

I stopped outside to wash up, figuring how to go to talking to Aunt Lib and not get her started fussing against me going away. It had clouded up a little, so I said it looked some like it would rain.

"Wished it would rain cats and dogs," she says. "It's been so hot all day I cain't seem to get a breath to breathe. Supper's all ready soon's Eldin comes. Here he is now. Hurry and git washed, Eldin. Everything'll get cold as stones."

"Bet we can eat it, hot or cold, cain't we, Lige?" he laughed. And I felt mighty glad neither seemed anxious to talk about me going away. He rolled up his sleeves, good-natured-like and says, "Never did see so many squirrels as they is this year. Must have been more'n a dozen in sight at one time over yonder where I was working to-day."

"There is a right smart of 'em," I told him. I wanted to keep 'em going. So I says, "That old hen-turkey that Mrs. Hawkins give Aunt Lib's a-nestin' in that hazel thicket down by the little spring. I've seen her go in there twice now of mornings."

That fetched Aunt Lib into the talk again. "I been missin' her," she says, coming to the door.

"The huzzey! So that's where she's a-stealin' her nest. I'll just have to ferrit her out of there or some varmit'll get her shore 'nuff. Land of massey! if it ain't one thing it's another, and no rest between 'em. Hurry, Eldin! My land!"

After supper there was chores to do; but when they was done I couldn't he'p getting my paper out of the box under my bed. It was nigh three months old a'ready, dated April, 1822. But it was always new to me. I read the story again. And long after they was all asleep I blew out the tal-low dip and got into my bed to dream.



CHAPTER II

It rained during the night, but when morning come there wa'n't a sign of a cloud nowhere. Everything was fresh and smelled good, and I was mighty glad, for the young corn needed a wetting. I 'lowed to he'p Uncle Eldin over in the timber that day; but when we got set down to the breakfast table, Aunt Lib said, "Somebody's got to take a grist o' co'n to the mill, or we'll be plumb out o' meal soon. To-day's as good's any to go, too. Lige, I wished you'd go. A body cain't feed folks without somethin' in the house."

I reckon she'd got used to me going, instead of Eben or Charles. Having been to school there regular when Abner Hastings was living, I'd got to know folks pretty well, so I brought home more news than the boys would, mebby. Anyway, she mostly sent me; and I was glad of it.

"I'll go, Aunt Lib," I told her, "unless Uncle Eldin wants me at somethin' else worse."

"Might's well go, Lige," Uncle said. "You can ride Becky."

But old Becky needed a rest from the spring work, so I decided to go afoot. I mighty soon found a good sack and filled it nigh half full of corn. Then I divided the grain and swung the sack over my shoulder. I reckoned I'd take the rifle too, and I did.

I'd no sooner stepped 'round the corner of the cabin, when Bugle spied the gun, and right away he forgot Caley Byers' kick. He wa'n't lame at all, and he fell in behind my heels, whining and carry-

ing on. Cracky! I sure thought a heap of that old hound.

In a minute I was on the Coon Creek trail, and Bugle begun ranging a little, snuffing and making out he was mighty busy. I let him, for I was sure there hadn't been a varmi't there for a spell and besides it had just rained. I didn't 'low to let him take up a trail, for sure as he did I'd never get to the mill; so I watched him nosing ahead of me and on both sides, intending to stop him if he got a fresh trail.

The woods smelled sweet as honey and all along the creek was flowers a-plenty, and birds too. I got to thinking of the upper river, and I reckon dreaming, too; for directly, Bowoo-oo! I heered old Bugle, and so durn far away I couldn't make him hear me, either. Cracky! I was mad—mad at him and mad at myse'f. I knowed he'd never quit now, so all I could do was to let him go and forget him till he come in. And I did. But I kept hearing his voice baying 'way off in the timber for a long spell, getting fainter and fainter, till finally I couldn't hear him no more.

The bushes that had growed up in Dan's Clearing was plumb full of birds, when I got there—all singing their thanks for the rain. Brown thrushes, robins, and catbirds, too, made mighty sweet music in the sunlight that was a heap brighter there because of Dan's axe. A little ornery wren with his tail pretty nigh touching his pert little head warbled his sharp song over and over again from the broken door of the old cabin, while just under the edge of the pole roof his mate sat on her nest listening to him.

A big tree had fallen and laid on one side of the clearing about thirty yards from the trail, its rag-

ged roots full of chunks of clay and looking like a turkey-tail fan. On top of one of the crookedest roots was a squirrel looking sharp at the trunk of the tree, or something I couldn't see. He was so stiff and still that at first I thought mebbly I was fooled; but directly he run down onto the trunk and up pretty well towards its middle, where he stopped and begun to bark and scold like fury. Qua-quaquaa! Qua-quaquaa! he said, flipping his tail like he wanted to drive something away from there. Then all of a sudden, like his own daring had scared him to fits, he turned and scampered off like all get out.

I started to see what it was that he wanted to scare. But just as I headed that way an old owl flew out of some bushes near there with a rabbit in his claws. So I didn't go no further.

But if I'd knowed then what I know now—well, like as not I wouldn't have looked, noway—but I sure wouldn't be telling this story.

A kernel of corn had got into my boot and was hurting my foot, so I leaned the rifle against the cabin and set down on a stump to pull off the boot. Then, after I got out the kernel of corn, I saw there was a little hole in the sack. So I mended that and rested before I went on.

The grist mill at the Crossing was the most important of the village institutions; and its big, over-shot water wheel was turning right merry. I could hear the water splash as it fell from its paddles, and the clang of Mat Walker's hammer in his blacksmith shop across the road from Hawkins' store, before I could see either of them. They was about the only noise Coon Creek Crossing owned, anyway, and I always liked to hear them.

There was other visitors in town besides me.

Several saddle hosses was tied to the hitch rack in the street. So as soon's I took my corn to the mill I went over to the Hawkins' store to get the news, if there was any. Aunt Lib would want to know what was going on, and besides I liked to hear what folks had to say, myse'f.

There was seven or eight men in the store, setting on barrels and on the counter. Caley Byers was one of them, and he was reading aloud about another big rucus up the river. I found a place on the counter where I could hear good and listen with the rest.

It had been a bad row, and again the whitemen had got the worst of it. The story was told by one of the wounded trappers that had been fetched into St. Louis more'n a month after the fight.

There was another story in the paper that Caley Byers read, and I heered all that one. It said General Ashley was back in St. Louis. The General had told a lot more about the fight that was in the paper under my bed. He said in that row he'd lost a keel boat loaded with ten thousand dollars' worth of trade goods, besides a passel of men. The part that I liked best was where the General told about the country up the river. Cracky! I did like that part. But finally it was all told and Caley Byers folded up the newspaper and put it in his pocket. I wished I could borrow it a spell; but I'd rot before I'd ask him to lend it. Though I reckon if he'd offered to let me take it, I'd a-forgive him for kicking Bugle, and even crowding me off'n the trail, mebby. Most likely he never thought of it; but I did, a little.

Mr. Hawkins weighed out some tea for Caley Byers, and while Hawkins' back was turned I saw his boy Jeff take a hank of tobacco. I reckoned I

could have made him give me back the bullet-mould then, but I didn't. Both the men was talking about the upper country and the fight. Mr. Hawkins said, "I don't know's I blame them Injins a great sight for fightin'. The country's theirs, an' they'll be drove out of it soon enough, anyway. I'd fight, too, if I was an Injin." Then he weighed out some sugar for his customer and added, "But, right or wrong, if I was young, I'd j'ine up with one of them trappin' an' tradin' parties. But I'm past that now. It's a young man's country, I reckon."

"Yes, you and I are too old, Hawkins," Caley Byers said, but as though he was satisfied. "It's a land for the young—a rich land and wild. It will be wild for a long time yet. And as it opens up St. Louis will grow to be a big city, mark my words. For all the trade of that great wilderness must come to her as it develops."

He leaned against the counter, facing me; but he made out he didn't see me, like he did that morning on the trail, so I didn't even nod nor say 'howdy' to him.

By and by Mat Walker, the blacksmith, come in to get some borax, and right away Caley Byers said, "I must get my hoss shod, Mat. I 'most forgot it."

Then him and Mat went out, and I saw Caley Byers lead his saddle-hoss to the blacksmith shop.

Mr. Hawkins asked about Aunt Lib and Uncle Eldin, like he always did, and I bought some powder and lead; for I'd plumb made up my mind. I shook hands with Mr. Hawkins and said, "Good-bye for a spell."

It surprised him, I reckon, and he asked me if I was going somewheres. I told him I was going to have a look around for myse'f soon's the work was

finished, and that it was mighty nigh done a'ready.

"Take keer o' yourse'f," he says, "an' come back yer' sometime. I wished Jeff'd spruce up an' try to do something 'sides loaf 'round the store where I don't need him."

Right away I felt better'n I had for a year. I knowed I was doing right. And when I got my sack of meal I flung it over my shoulder and struck out for home lickety-split.

The big river was high now, I knowed, and I was afraid it wouldn't stay up till I got there. Outfits would be setting out for the upper country only as long as the river was high, and I was afraid I'd be late.

It's mighty good to get your mind made up to something that's been pestering. I never knowed it before then; but ever since then I've tried to go into camp with a question and settle it quick as I can, for while its teetering around in your mind you ain't fit for much. Most always you do just what you first thought you would, anyway, because you're mighty nigh sure to measure the sides of a question soon's it comes to you—and better'n you think you do, too.

I was sweating like a nigger when I got to Dan's Clearing, and I stopped and shifted the sack of meal. But I didn't stop long. The sun was pretty low, so I hurried on.

It was still as death in the Clearing. The shadows of the tallest trees reached mighty nigh to the middle of it. I saw the old root again, but there wa'n't no squirrel on it this time. A rabbit bobbed across the trail ahead to find a better hiding place in a patch of young hazel brush. The little wren had quit his song and so had the rest of

the birds. I didn't hear a sound, except a yellow-hammer's drumming 'way off in the woods. But I saw an old red-head light on the roof of Dan's cabin, only to go off again, when I come along.

I got to thinking of Bugle, and wondering if he'd quit yet; but I reckoned he hadn't, 'less he'd killed or treed what he was after. Durndest hound that ever did live, Bugle was. Anyway, I knowed he'd come home when he finished his run.

By the time I got to our place the sun was down, and there was some clouds in the west. The wind had come up a little and it felt like it had run onto a shower of rain in its travels; so I thought mebbly it would rain again in the night. When I was letting down the bars I heered an old hen clucking fretful, like, and I hung the sack of meal on the fence to see what was troubling her. She was fussing around over in a patch of hazel brush, and I slipped over that way, parting the bushes careful. Directly I saw her. She was capering and jawing at a skunk sucking her eggs in a nest she'd stole. I pulled down on mister man and killed him. At the crack of the rifle the old hen ran, half flying towards the house, raising the durndest racket she could, and in a minute Aunt Lib was in the door.

"Whatever's the matter, Lige?" she called.

"Nothin' much," I answered. "That ol' fool hen stole her nest in them hazels and a skunk's sucked her aiggs."

"Land o' massey!" she says. "If it ain't one thing it's another. I ferrited out that ol' hen-turkey down by the little spring this afternoon, an' she had fourteen aiggs under her. How many was in the hen's nest, Lige?"

"I didn't count 'em, nor try to, Aunt Lib," I said, going in the house to put up the sack and rifle. "But she won't never go back to 'em noway. It smells mighty bad down there now."

"Massey!" she frets. "Yonder comes Eldin, an' supper ain't nigh ready yit. I wished you'd split some o' that wood finer, Lige. A body cain't cook with a passel o' logs fer kindlin'. Eben's been he'pin' Eldin all day an' so there ain't no kindlin'."

She didn't say anything about Charles splittin' the kindling. She never did. Seems like when boys don't natur'ly he'p their folks they just natur'ly don't ask 'em to. I reckoned that when I'd gone Charles'd wake up and see there was a heap he could do. I reckoned he'd have to.

"Was they many folks down to the Crossin' to-day?" Aunt Lib was asking.

"I didn't see many, Aunt Lib," I said. "No women folks at all." And then I went out to the woodpile.

I'd made up my mind to tell them at supper. I wished it was over with, for I did hate to fret Aunt Lib. But I reckoned this would be the last time I'd have it to do for quite a spell. It seemed as though every minute I waited made it worse. So all of a sudden I picked up an armful of wood and followed Uncle Eldin into the house. Then I come out with it.

"I've made up my mind, folks," I said, trying to keep my voice stiddy and not look at Aunt Lib. "In the mornin'," I says, "I'm goin' to St. Louis an' try to git me a place there."

"Oh, Lige Mounts! You've been a-readin' more trash an' you'll git yerse'f killed, shore nuff. You talk to him, Eldin." And Aunt Lib turned away

in disgust. Cracky! I was glad she was more mad than hurt.

But Uncle Eldin only said, "Well, boy, if ye must ye will, I reckon."

He'd give up. I could see that. And I felt nigh happy.

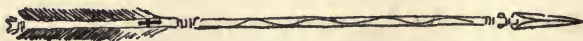
He walked over to hang up his hat. Then he said, "But why all this hurry? St. Louis'll be there when ye git to it, Lige."

"Yes, I reckon it will," I said, "but it's high water now, an' outfits are goin' up the river to trade. I'd hate to be late, so I'm goin' in the mornin'."

There! I felt lots better. He started to whistle. Directly I says, "Uncle Eldin, kin I hev the new rifle?"

He walked over to the wall and looked at it, all slick and clean as a wolf's tooth. "Of course, boy. It's yours more'n mine, anyway. Take it along, an' welcome," he said, right low.

It was sure a dreary meal, supper was. Nobody talked much. Even the littler ones was quiet. I knowed Eben envied me some; but I felt his case was a heap different than mine. I could have no share in the place when Aunt Lib and Uncle Eldin was through with it. There was more'n a plenty to divide it with, leaving me out. And I didn't belong in, noway.



CHAPTER III

I can't forget that night nor the next morning. I could hear Aunt Lib stirring about long after the others was sleeping, and I knowed she was fixing and fussing for me. And again before daylight she was up and at it by candle light.

Although I was anxious to be starting, I hated to get out of my bed, not because I was weakening, but because I'd have to talk to Aunt Lib.

At last I got up and dressed. It promised to be a fine day, though it wa'n't quite light, even then. I found them all at the breakfast table. Jinny had her hair done up high, like she was going some place. She was fourteen and right pretty. She tied a bib 'round Susan's neck and set Alexander Hamilton on his high chair before she set down herse'f. It appeared to me she was he'pin' more'n usual that morning. Then I saw that Jane Ellen had tied a ribbon in her hair; and I felt like they was all bent on seeing me off in style. Jane Ellen was only ten, but I'd always thought a heap of her; she was so kind and thoughtful for a little girl. Eben set right across from me and looked sulky and down in the mouth.

Directly Charles started to talk about Injins, but Aunt Lib shut him up quicker'n scat, and Eben got up and went out to the barn. I kept thinking how pretty Jinny was and how good little Jane Ellen had always been since she was a baby. The little ones, Susan and Alexander Hamilton, didn't know I was going away, and I felt glad enough, for there was plenty to say good-bye to, as it was.

Breakfast was soon over, and I moulded my lead into bullets with the rest watching by the fireplace. Aunt Lib had made a bundle of some clothes and food, and when she give them to me, she couldn't keep back her tears. I felt mighty bad, for I knowed she was fretting a heap; but this was the last time she'd have to worry about me for a long spell.

I kissed her and the girls and said good-bye as quick as I could. Then I shook hands with Uncle Eldin and said, "Good-bye for a spell. One of these days I'll come back, an' if I've been lucky I'll shore divide."

Then I took down the rifle and powder-horn and bullet-pouch and went out of the cabin as quick as I could. They was all gathered in the door, I knowed, but I didn't look back till I climbed the fence on the far side of the corn field. Then I turned and waved my hand. I saw them all, even Bugle—who'd got back in the night—standing there in the door—all except Uncle Eldin. He was on his way to the spring for a bucket of water. I had never knowed him to pack drinking water before.

In a jiffy the timber hid me, and I struck out lickety split, like I was afraid something would catch up and steal my chance of going away. I followed the winding road, that led, folks said, clean to St. Louis, a hundred miles off, till I come to a spring of water. Right away I wanted a drink. It seemed so good to know I could do whatever I pleased that even that little thing demanded attention. So I stopped by the spring.

I hadn't looked back for an hour, I reckon. But from the spring the way I'd come was straight for

more'n a quarter, and far back I could see Bugle comin' on his three old laigs. I forgot all about drinking. In a minute he'd caught up to me, tickled nigh to death. I hadn't the heart to be cross with him. But of course I couldn't be bothered with a hound going to St. Louis, so I patted him first and then sent him back. He didn't want to go, and now that I'd got this far I didn't blame him. "Git home," I says, making believe I'd picked up a rock and was going to throw it.

He turned and hobbled off, looking over his shoulder at me. Cracky! the reproach that was in his eyes! But I stooped again and made him think I'd got another rock, and he went off faster and faster, till he got to the bend down the road, where he set down and just looked back at me. He wouldn't budge further. I felt I was sneaking away from a friend when at last I started on. And I'd forgot to drink. I kept looking back every little while to see if he was followeing, but I didn't see him no more, and was mighty glad.

Gnarled stumps and crooked roots was plenty in the wagon road; so the traveling wa'n't very good. But the sunlight and shade cut all kinds of capers and I got to watching the little blotches of gold that shivered and trembled on the dark ground. The road made me think of a leopard's skin I'd seen in Abner Hastings' natural history book. And all day long there was blue-jays, and from most every hickory squirrels barking at me as I followed the dim wheel tracks; for the road wa'n't much used noway. It was cool in the woods and I traveled pretty fast, always keeping a watch for Bugle, because I couldn't believe he'd quit, once he started.

Mebby he knowed more'n I give him credit for, though.

I come to a clearing pretty soon, just an acre or two, and I reckoned it was the Jesson place. Folks didn't respect Les Jesson much, so I didn't stop. But they was three small children perched on the top rail of the fence around the clearing. I said 'howdy' and the oldest, a boy, answered; then finally, after I was far enough away, he got courage and called "Where ye goin', stranger?" But I made out like I didn't hear him.

Then for hours there wa'n't any clearings or cabins, just the woods and the road to St. Louis.

I couldn't hardly wait to get there. I traveled till plumb dark. Then I built a little fire and ate most half of the food Aunt Lib had give me. After that I went to sleep; for I was tired as a dog, but happy.

First I knowed the sun was in my eyes. Cracky! I jumped up; but I didn't build a fire. I just ate a lunch and away I went, lickety-split. I wanted to make up, for I'd ought to have been on the way long ago. I hit an awful gait, and kept it up till noon, when I passed a right big clearing. There was a store and a mill there, and a lot of hounds and cur-dogs that barked at me when I passed; but I didn't stop. I saw folks looking at me from doors and windows, but I made out like I didn't notice them and kept going.

I was getting right tired by dark, so I knowed I'd most likely made up what I'd lost by oversleeping. And so I built me a fire to roast a squirrel I'd shot just before sundown.

By the time the fire was going good the moon was up, and it looked mighty pretty through the

trees. I'd passed a cabin a little way back; and when I was skinning out the squirrel I heered something, and looking up, saw a man on the other side of my fire.

"Howdy, stranger," he says, cheery-like.

"Howdy," I says, hanging my squirrel on a stick before the blaze.

"Travelin'?"

"Yep."

"Which way?"

"St. Louis," I says. "How fer is it from here?"

"Reckon it's nigh onto thirty-two mile," he says.

"Where'd ye come from?"

"Back yonder nigh to Coon Creek Crossin'."

"By gum! ye've had a right smart hike, ain't ye? Better come right over to the house an' rest yo'se'f."

"No thanks," I says. "I'm plumb comfortable here. Won't ye set down an' have a bite with me?"

"No," he says, "had my supper long ago. What's yer name?"

"Lige Mounts."

"Mounts, hey?" he says, like he'd heered it before. "Well, Mounts, if you won't come over to the house, I reckon I'll be goin' back myse'f. Folks seen yer fire an' kep' a-naggin' an' peckin' at me till I come over to see who built it. Good night," he says, and went off.

I was glad of it. My squirrel was nigh done, and I was tired and hungry.

I mighty nigh finished Aunt Lib's grub. But the squirrel he'ped a lot, and I saved some of it. I filled my pipe and took a smoke; but I went sound asleep setting up straight, with my back against a

hickory tree. And I dreamed. I thought Bugle and I was trying to drive something out from behind the fallen tree in Dan's Clearing, and that the old roots kept moving and was plumb full of squirrels. Then all of a sudden something awful seemed to have happened in Dan's Clearing, and I started in my sleep and fell over. After that I stretched out; but I reckon I'd eaten too much, for I didn't get much sleep. I was glad when I saw that it was getting daylight, and built up my fire right away.

While it was burning up good, I went off into the timber a piece and shot a squirrel for my breakfast. I wondered if the folks in the cabin would hear the shot; but if they did nobody come near me.

I soon got the jacket off my squirrel. And long before it was right good daylight I was making better'n four miles an hour towards St. Louis. I kept it up pretty well, passing more and more cabins and clearings and meeting more and more people. Some wanted to stop and talk and some didn't. And I never did see so many different kinds of cur-dogs, with only now and again a good looking hound among them. I saw two mighty pretty girls in a big clearing 'long about noon. They was both hoss-back and looked right pert and fine. They had awful long riding skirts on and wore hats with feathers in them. They looked mighty fine and pert, I can tell you. They was a heap prettier than Polly Hawkins—both of them. And I'd always believed she had them all beat.

The road kept getting better and better and more used, and by and by it was right dusty and I met a passel of people afoot and hoss-back—all coming from St. Louis, I reckoned. But I couldn't see

where they could all live unless they was a heap more houses somewheres along the road than I'd seen.

I passed a man that was dressed up fit to kill. I reckoned he was mighty well off, for I never had seen such fine clothes. He wore a tall beaver hat that must have set him back a plenty, and he was packing a cane. I wished I knowed who he was. Then by and by I passed a carriage. I'd never seen such a fine team of hosses in my life before—blood bays, a leetle too high-headed, mebby, but full o' mettle, and young. There was a white haired old couple in the carriage, laying back and looking happy, and a nigger driving the rig. The old gentleman waved his hand at me, and I was tickled plenty and answered. Then the old lady bowed, and I took off my hat quicker'n a cat can turn around. I thought it was mighty nice and friendly of them; and I did wish I knowed who they was.

But I can't begin to tell you of all the folks I met that afternoon. I didn't know there was so many on any road as I saw that day. It was worth the walking just to see them; and I reckon I could have stood it for a month, just to get to see them over again—they and others that would come along.

I turned a bend in the road right where it started to go down hill pretty fast; and when I looked, there she was—St. Louis!



CHAPTER IV

I knowed quite a lot about St. Louis, or thought I did. Abner Hastings had been there more'n once, and he'd told me a good deal. But not half—not even a quarter.

I was glad I knowed what I did. It accounted for a heap of things I saw that day. I remembered Abner Hastings had told me that St. Louis was one of the few cities now under our good flag that was older'n the Union itse'f. "Her career," he'd said, "has been as mottled as her population, which, changing somewhat with her allegiance, has still left a portion of both good and bad of the peoples belonging to the three sovereign nations which have of right possessed her during her fifty-nine years of existence." I remembered every word of that, just like he'd said it; and now I knowed it was true—especially the part about the population.

For I never did see such a passel of differences in my life before—not even in a bushel of bad-year potatoes. Most likely people from the three sovereign nations was right there that day. Soon's I got there I begun to meet up with queer-looking folks. Trappers and voyageurs, dressed all in buckskin with fancy head riggin's; bull-whackers in regular old homespun's bad's my own; squaws wearing every bright color I ever did see; half-breeds with rings in their ears and nothin' on their heads but their black bobbed hair; Injins all fine in quill work, and their faces painted fit to scare a varmi't; barefoot niggers clear from New Orleans and naked to the waist; regular dandies from back Boston

way, I reckoned, wearing tall beaver hats and frilled shirts; regular ladies—in carriages and dressed to kill—all happy, or appearing to be, from the noise they was making.

There was groups of men setting everywhere, and the taverns was full to busting. Every door was wide open. I could hardly get past them. And the noise! Why, men was singing in every tavern—or I reckoned they thought they was singing. But it was English and French all jumbled up, and sounded awful to me. More'n half the noise was laughing though, loud and rough, but genuine as pigweed in a garden patch. Everybody seemed to have a language of their own. I'd never heered one of them before; and I was willing to bet there wa'n't another spot on earth where there was so many different ones spoken among friends. It seemed to me, too, that there couldn't be any other place where white folks winked at so many things done in open daylight, and still reckoned themse'fs decent. If Joshua Moulds, our circuit rider, had been there and saw the things I did that day, I wouldn't have listened to him preach afterward—not for a dollar.

But everybody was happy, and I figured that was a heap. I had never heered so much laughing. Everybody wanted to laugh and did—all but one woman, and she was crying. I met up with her about half way down the street and stopped and asked her if I could he'p her any. She started to talk, but I couldn't understand a word she said. Then she took hold of my arm and wanted me to go somewheres with her; but not liking the way she acted I went on about my business.

There was music a-plenty, too, all along the way.

Fiddles was going full tilt in nigh every tavern, and there was dancing in some of the places. I had to go around the groups of Injin women from up the river that was gathered in front of the doors, looking in at the fun and having a great time of their own. Most of them was eating sweets, and all of them wore red or green or yellow silks on their heads—regular bouquets they looked, bunched close in their anxiety to see.

I never did see such a mixing of colors. Aunt Lib's flower beds wa'n't a patchin' to it—not when every blossom was out at one time. Colors seemed to live in St. Louis. Even the cattle in the bull-teams was every color a critter could be—white, bay, black, roan, or spotted; and sometimes there was as many as twenty yoke in a team. Cracky! the loads they was hauling. Wagons piled high with freight from the levees—goods that come from as far off as Philadelphia and New York being hauled to stores or warehouses. Long-lashed bull-whips popped like rifles, and men cussin' like pirates, with sharp goad-sticks, tortured the cattle to mighty nigh bust their yokes pulling the loads. I saw bales and bales of fur and buffalo robes and dried meat being hauled from the river; and I knowed some big outfits had come down with the high water.

I saw men that was rich and men that didn't have a red cent, nor a place to go. These poor fellers had had money but spent it carousin' in St. Louis, raising Ned while their pile lasted. Now they was strapped. But I reckoned from what I'd seen that St. Louis didn't much care what visitors did, so long as they spent what they had; and even if she was obliged to shut one eye, or even both,

while they was spending, she counted herse'f richer when they had gone back up the river to get more to spend.

There was some excuse for the visitors, anyway. They spent long months in the wilds, always in danger and having little comfort. It wa'n't much wonder that when at last they could forget being careful and come in to St. Louis to rest and sell their fur, they dipped too deep in the town's civilization—if that's what it was. Friends met up there, and each was sure to have a yarn to tell; and in the telling liquor finds a place—a big place, sometimes, I reckon.

Directly I saw loads of goods going to the river. Some outfit was getting ready to start out, sure enough. So I followed behind the bull-teams to see what was going on, and mebbly get a place for myse'f.

Then I saw the steamboats, heaps of them, swarming like bees at the levee. And if I thought there was noise up street, I was mistaken. It was like a funeral up there to what it was down by the river. Steamboats coming and going, chowing and churning like mad; whistles blowing so it mighty nigh split my ears; niggers sweatin' and mates a-swearin' like all get out. Everybody was hurryin' an' everybody was liftin' or shovin' something up or down gang planks or on the wharf. There wa'n't room for the bull-teams. I'll bet I saw more'n a thousand cattle in less'n a minute.

Clang, clang! jingle, jingle! would go a bell; and chow-chow-chow! the white steam would spurt out of stacks, as a steamboat backed out to make room for another more noisier than herse'f. I saw a big nigger nigh kill a little one; and I saw a mate

hit another and knock him end-ways. I saw more'n a dozen drunk men sound asleep right there in the noise, and two or three women, too, that was tipsy and making free with niggers like they was white. I met up with a little white boy with a basket on his arm winding in and out among that mess alone. Every minute he'd call out "Sweet cakes! Sweet cakes!" I reckoned he was selling sweet cakes to the men down there.

Pretty soon a dog fight started right on the levee. It was a good one, too—a fox hound and a cur-dog. They made quite a scattering among the men, and the niggers stopped to watch them, till a mad mate threwed a bucket of water on the dogs, and they quit.

I didn't see no keel-boats, nor no chance to ask anybody about them. So I went away, intending to come back after a spell. I knowed I'd go crazy if I stayed there. I couldn't stand the noise; and I crossed the street, to take the other side this time.

And 'twas lucky I did. I hadn't gone far, when I saw a sign in a window, and stopped to read it. I remember every word of it to this day. It said:

NOTICE TO ENTERPRISING YOUNG MEN

The subscriber wishes to engage one hundred young men to ascend the Missouri river to its source, there to be employed for one, two, or three years. For particulars inquire of Major Andrew Henry, who will ascend with and command the party, or of the subscriber near St. Louis.

WILLIAM H. ASHLEY.

General Ashley! The very man that had the fight with the Arickaras! Go with Major Henry? Well, I reckoned I would; and mighty glad to get the chance. I'd see the General right away.

But where could I find him? "Near St. Louis" wa'n't all I needed to know. But I'd ask the first white man I met up with that looked like he was friendly. I made up my mind to that. Mebby Major Henry was handier, though. I turned to read the notice again, careful; and while I was doing it a tall man come up behind me and stopped. I could see him in the window glass without turning around. He was a heap taller'n me, and his hair was light colored like mine but grayed some and hung down onto his shoulders. He read the notice over my head, kinder spelling it out slow. Directly he smiled, and I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"Don't ye do it, son, don't ye do it," he said, slow and easy, like.

It sounded just like home-folks, and I turned around quick to look at him. Cracky! I'll never forget him, nor how he looked to me, a plumb stranger and mighty nigh hungry. I looked right at him, and mighty glad to. And he looked right at my eyes, his'n gray, like, and warm, and not stirrin' a mite. He was all dressed in buckskin, feet and all, and had a red silk tied on his head. His long, fringed buckskin coat-shirt was all worked with colored quills and hung to his knees, and he had fringed leggins and a blue breech-clout made fancy with work.

Directly his smile growed bigger and more welcome, and he leaned a little on the longest rifle I ever did see, but was all of six feet six inches tall, and straight as a ramrod. His lips was thin and

straight-cut and clean looking, and his face was smooth-shaved but marked pretty deep and plenty with straight lines. I couldn't look enough at his eyes. They twinkled so and seemed to be enjoying what was going on inside me.

At last I smiled too. I couldn't he'p it, for his eyes was mighty nigh dancin'.

"Why not, Dad?" I says, dropping my bundle.

His eyes keened a little, I thought. "How'd you know my name, son?" he says, sudden, like.

"Didn't."

"Well, by the shot that got the meat! If that ain't cur'ous. What's yer name, son?"

"Elijah Mounts," I says, and right away I remembered I'd never said 'Elijah' before to anybody, so I says, "But I go by the name of Lige always."

"It's a good name," he says. "Mine's Wash Lamkin, but folks call me Dad up's far's the Black-foot country, anyway—them that's there."

"But why shouldn't I look up Major Henry or General Ashley, Dad?" I asked him, itching to get back to me getting a place and wondering what he had against them.

"Mostly because it ain't a good plan to be beholden to others in a country where yer boss is a king. If ye're goin' up the river, better go as a freeman, son, an' make yer own trails, an' sell yer fur where an' when ye please."

"But I haven't got any money, Dad," I told him. "Not a red cent."

"Shoo! that's different, I cal'late," he says. "A heap different. Best come over to my camp an' hev a bite to eat. Mebby we kin strike a bargain, me an' you. What say?"

He started right off like he knowed I'd come. And I did. I picked up my bundle and away we went, in and out among the folks in the street, past taverns and stores and bull-teams, noisier'n ever. Once he stopped before a tavern. "Hev a little somethin'?" he says.

"Nope."

"Don't ye drink, son?"

"Nope," I says.

"Glad of it. My camp's up yonder by that grove of trees," and he pointed to it.

I kept wondering why he'd been so good to me, a plumb stranger. "Mebby he's lonesome, same's me," I thought.

And then pretty soon we was at his camp. It was a little buffalo-skin lodge, and Injin-painted with queer animals—that is, queer-done with colors, I mean. There was a man inside, and right away Dad said, "Git a fire goin', Joe, an' we'll eat a bite."

He didn't introduce me, but seemed to be thinking while both Joe and him got supper. I saw everything was ready for moving. There was bales all made up snug and nice, and piled around the lodge-wall. And outside was pack-saddles and Spanish rigs they called aparajos, I found out afterwards. Dad didn't talk none while he fixed to eat, and I looked around and learned a lot. The smoke went straight up and out the top of the lodge, like it was a fireplace; but it was hotter'n all time in there for a spell. 'Twa'n't long before Dad said, "Set up—everything's ready." And in no time at all we was through eating.

Then he says to me, "Do ye smoke?" and I said I did.

"Well, fire up an' we'll settle this thing quicker'n

scat. I got a pardner—none better; an' we're leavin' in the mornin'. Leastways, I am. But he ain't finished his spree yit. If he don't come in to-night I'll leave him to trail me up. It's high time we was jiggin'. He'll agree to any bargain I make. And here 'tis: I'll take ye along an' outfit ye with the understandin' that me an' my pardner's to hev half yer ketch as long's we stay together. That's short an' sweet, an' accordin' to right, if I know it. What say?"

Cracky! It was too good to be true. How'd it come that he was so mighty good an' free with me? "Mebby he likes me," I thought. And I sure liked him, so I said, "I agree, Dad. It's heaps more'n I ever expected, an' I'm obliged to you."

Then we shook hands on it, and he says, "That bein' settled without blood-lettin', we'd best go back to town an' git ye some things ye'll need, blankets an' ammunition, mostly. What ye shootin', son?"

"Twenty-eight to the pound, Dad," I says. "Will it do, do ye reckon?"

"I reckon. Let's be a-jiggin'. It's gettin' late."

I felt mighty proud I owned my rifle now, more'n ever.

It was plumb dark a'ready, mostly because of the clouds. Thunder was growling some, and now and then a pale, zig-zag streak of lightning went scallowaggin' across the west, like it does sometimes when the weather's hot. Down below us hundreds and hundreds of little lights like yellow stars showed where the town was, and even from where I was I could hear the noise and some of the music; but 'twas faint and suited me better'n being close.

Directly we was back in the street and 'twas as lively's when we left it—livelier, I reckon. A

group of trappers and rivermen was gathered about three French voyageurs and a half-breed Injin dancing to the music of a curious stringed instrument played by a black looking Spaniard, "Of Manuel Lisa's crew," Dad said. The feller was squatted in the street with his back against a tavern, and under the light of a lantern that looked like it come out of one of Abner Hastings' travel books. It was hung from an iron hook right over the tavern door. The Spaniard's fingers was mighty nimble, and he picked quick tunes out of the strings for the dancers. His head was bound up in green silk, and now and again he'd Yip! to set 'em goin' right good.

Dad stopped to watch, grinning like a possum, and 'twas enough to make a body grin. But just then there come a gust of wind, damp as frog's laigs. It swung the iron lantern till its ring creaked like a stay-chain, and the candle in it flickered like fury and mighty nigh went out. It thundered loud, and right away a rain drop fell on my hand.

"I reckon we'd best be a-jiggin'," Dad said. And we started, him a'lookin' back like he wished he could stay a spell.

"I hanker to watch 'em when I can spare the time," he told me. "They're so devilful an' keerless, like," he says.

When we got to a place called Shipman and Company, Dad says, "Here we be." But just as he was about to go inside, with me following, somebody yelled out, "Jest a minute, please!"

We turned around, and a man run right up to me, pointing his finger. "Is your name Mounts?" he says taking hold of my arm.

"Yes, sir," I says, wondering if I'd ever seen him before.

"Well, I want ye fer killin' Caley Byers. Come along o' me."

My heart just stopped, it seemed. Then it jumped and I got my breath back. "I reckon you've made some mistake," I says, trying to hold my voice stiddy. "I saw Caley Byers four days ago, and—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" the feller's laugh cut in. And it was nasty, like, an' r'iled me. "Yes," he says, "I reckon ye seen him, bein's how ye're s'posed to hev shot him dead in Dan's Clearin' back yonder, jest four days ago. Yer ol' houn' dog was comin' out of the Clearin' when Byers' nigger found the body."

Then I heered Dad saying, "Don't talk none, son—not a word." He took hold of my other arm and pinched hard. "Take it cool, like," he says. "Better go 'long with the officer 'thout fussin'. Shoo! we've plumb got to hev law—got to hev it," he says, and I'd swore I saw him wink at the officer, though I wa'n't dead sure.

They started to lead me away out of the light. I didn't hold back none, but I couldn't make it out. Caley Byers shot dead! And in Dan's Clearing! Who could have done it? I tried to think. Then the story the old nigger told come into my mind, the woman part and all, like I'd heered it. And right away after that I thought of the old root in Dan's Clearing—and the squirrel, and the owl. And even my curious dream by the hickory tree come back. But they didn't tell me nothin', and I was in bad trouble, mighty bad.

I was taken up for murder. And like's not I couldn't *prove* I didn't kill Caley Byers. We'd had words, me and him. And mebbly folks knowed

about it. I wondered if they did. I was mighty glad now I'd never told anybody about rockin' him in the creek. I reckoned it would *look* like I'd shot him easy enough; me being in at the Crossing same time as him, and old Bugle coming through the Clearing just when Byers's nigger was finding the body. I shore wished now I hadn't got to dreamin' and let Bugle go trailing off that a-way. It would a-meant a lot to me now. I was miserable worried and scared. The world had changed for me in a minute. A little while back I was happy—so happy I knowed my luck was too good to be true. I'd wanted so long and so hard to go up the river, when up steps a plumb stranger and offers me my chance. 'Twas like a story in one of Abner Hastings' books, but I'd knowed it couldn't last, and sure enough it hadn't. Things like that is all right in books. But directly they happen in real life you get to thinking something's wrong somehow.

I looked about me. It was all dark. We had left the street and the folks. The noise was all behind, and my shoulders was cold. Then I saw 'twas raining hard, but I'd never noticed before. Directly we stopped before a sort of passage-way that led in between some dark stone buildings covered with dripping vines.

"Here we be," the officer says, tightening his hold on my arm. "I'm obleeged to ye, mister, fer yer company," he says to Dad, "but this is as fer as ye kin go."

I can't make you know how that left me—cold, then hot, then cold again.

Dad says, cheerful, like, "I reckon 'tis. It's fer's I'm hankerin' to go, stranger. Good-night, son," he says, pattin' my shoulder and stepping backward

into the shadow of the stone house. "He's gone back on me," I thought. And I just wilted.

But right away I heered a THUD! and the officer loosened his hold of my arm, and fell in a heap. Dad's rifle had nigh busted his skull.

"Come, son, let's be a-jiggin'." It was Dad whispering in my ear. But I was stunned by what he'd done, I reckon.

"Come! this ain't no place to loaf in," he says, shaking me. And next I knowed we was off through the driving rain, keeping in the shadows and runnin' away, like a couple of bad ones, which I reckoned we was.

Dad knowed where he was going, though. "Here we be," he says, "as our friend the officer said." And he was laughing, low, and inside to himse'f.

The lodge was dark as all get out. Dad called out, "Joe! Joe! Fetch in the line-back buckskin pony, an' saddle him with the spare rig. Shake yerse'f!"

The man come out with a rope, fetched in a hoss, an' saddled him like lightning.

"Git on, son," says Dad, handing up my rifle, quick's I climbed into the saddle. Then he tied a blanket and a sack of dried meat behind me, talkin' slow all the time he worked.

"Now then," he says, "git out o' here. Ride due west till ye strike the river. Then keep off'n the trail that follers it, an' keep a-ridin' stiddy. Don't stop much for two days. If nobody shows up behind ye by that time, camp somewheres out o' sight, an' wait fer me. I'll be along directly. But foller the river after ye strike it, an' ride due west till ye do. Understand, son?"

"But how about you, Dad? Won't they come and

get you? I never killed anybody, Dad," I says, half turning the hoss around to start off, but beginning to think a little.

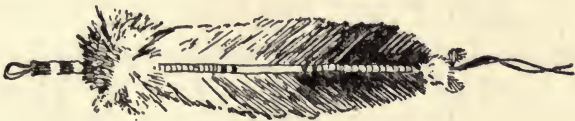
"Shoo! I know you never killed nobody, son," he says, laying his hand on my knee. "Don't you fret about me. They won't never git me. That man, the officer, never did see me before. An' what's more he ain't never goin' to see me agin, neither. Now off with ye, an' ride like I tell ye. I never did quit a pardner yit, son. Adios!"

Cracky! I felt small and ornery then, and I made up my mind I'd tell him, so I out with it.

"Dad, I ain't been fair with you," I says. "When the officer took me up I thought you was goin' to turn agin me. I—I'd a-swore I saw you wink at him there by the store."

He chuckled and slapped my knee. "Son," he says, "suspicion's a cur-dog an' bristles at shadders. Mebby some dust or somethin' blowed in my eye. Git!"

And away I went, feeling better and whiter right away, but not very clear in my mind.



CHAPTER V

The wind and rain was out of the west, and I couldn't see much farther'n the pony's ears, it was so dark. I was headed west; and there wa'n't any trouble to stay that way, only it was hard on my face. But as long as the rain and wind kept me bending my head for shelter I knowed I was riding like Dad told me to, due west. And I was riding fast. Splashety-splash! through puddles in the road for a spell, and then, to keep the wind and go west, leaving the trail and cutting across the country.

At first I passed a few lodges lit up with fires inside, and once a cur-dog run out and barked sharp as I shot past. The pony shied and mighty nigh spilled me, but I hung on and got straightened up again. Then there was nothing after that, only the dark and the rain.

After a while I got used to it, and I begun to think. I saw right away that I hadn't been fair with my hoss, and I pulled him down to mighty nigh a walk.

I was running away. All of a sudden that come rompin' into my head, and I didn't like it. I hadn't done nothing to run for. And Aunt Lib'd be worried and fret again worse'n ever. I mighty nigh turned around. Of course I figured folks'd reckon I did kill Caley Byers, because I'd run away. The officer'd tell it, and tell folks about being hit, too, if he wa'n't killed by the blow he got. And he might even think 'twas me that hit him. Yes, I reckoned he might think that, if he lived to think at all. I couldn't say that it wa'n't me that hit him, for that

would let Dad into the mess, and what he'd done was done to he'p *me*. To tell on him would be lower down than a sheep-killing shepherd-dog so I shut that clean out of my reckoning. If I turned back and give myse'f up I'd have to let Dad know it or he'd be looking for me all the way up the river; and I knowed he wa'n't the kind that would let me take the blame of hitting the officer. If he owned up to it himse'f, then *he'd* be in bad trouble account of me. If he hadn't done what he did I'd sure be in jail for something I didn't do, and with no proof I didn't do it. There wa'n't no way but to run. And that's the way I settled it. I felt better, and whipped up a bit.

The rain had mighty nigh quit, and the wind, too, for that matter. But it was still dark as all get out. At last I saw a blacker streak off to my right and figured it was timber, so I knowed the river was over there. I kept out of the timber, though, and never stopped nor broke a trot, after I whipped up that time when I settled what I'd best do.

By and by the sky showed day was coming, and the wind freshened again. But I didn't need it now, for I knowed as soon's 'twas light enough I'd see the river. And sure enough, when day come on, there it was. I rode into a grove where the trees was thick and where there was an open park, not far from the water. The cottonwoods was plenty and thick all about it, and I was sure nobody could see me from the trail. It was more'n a hundred yards back, and I'd crossed it coming into the grove.

I got down and took off the saddle. The pony wa'n't het up none, nor tired. I never saw anything like it. Soon's I got the saddle off and staked

him, down he went and rolled and rolled. Then, up he got and shook himse'f like a wet dog and went to eating the grass like he was afraid we wa'n't going to stay but a minute. Cracky! I was proud of that little hoss, and I patted his neck and told him so; but he didn't skip a mouthful of grass.

I got out my sack of dried meat and slipped up on a knoll-like place where it was sunny and I could dry out and eat while the little hoss was resting and filling up. It turned out to be a fine morning, and when the sun got warm the timber steamed and so did my clothes. I was feeling fine. I could see the river winding through timbered patches and meadow-places partly covered now with water. Drift logs was coming down, and I wondered how far up they'd been when the river washed them off bars or banks, or up-rooted them off its shores; for some of them had green tops and was alive. It was a mighty big river—as big, it seemed to me, as the Mississippi at St. Louis—and I could follow its course for miles and miles by the fringe of timber and the bluffs. Sometimes a bluff would seem to be standing right crosswise of the stream, like it was disputing its way—the way it would most likely have come if it hadn't been for the bluff.

Somehow, that fetched my trouble back. I hadn't wanted to go like I did. I was forced into it by things I couldn't handle and had no hand in making neither. Mebby the river had easy sailing farther up and could go straight the way it wanted to go—the way I wanted to go—but the river was coming down to St. Louis, and I was going up stream and away—running away, at that. I got to fretting again. But when I remembered how Dad believed I was doing right, I felt better and got to watching the drift logs again.

All of a sudden I saw the smoke of a camp fire, flimsy and thin, and blue as a clematis flower, come trailing out through the tops of the trees on a bend 'way up the river. I figured the fire was fresh-built by the way the smoke climbed up in the still air. I wondered if anybody was after me and had got past that far; but Shucks! they wouldn't have made camp, noway, if they was after a body. So I went back to watching the drift logs.

It was mighty nigh noon and hot. I moved into the shade, for my clothes was dry and the sun was uncomfortable. You can stand it when you're moving, but to sit still and roast is too much. I hadn't much more'n got fixed when I heard singing. Directly I saw two big mackinaw boats coming down the river. Cracky! I slipped down past the little hoss and found me a place in the bushes close to the river where I could see better. And along they come, piled with bales of fur and buffalo robes and dried meat. Their crews was singing French songs and was happy as young kittens. There was plenty of color about their heads and waists; but the silks was soiled and the sashes black with grease and dirt. And I knowed they'd buy new ones the minute they got to St. Louis—most likely before they ate or washed up.

In a minute they was past; and the thought come to me that their journey was mighty nigh ended. That took hold of me; for St. Louis wa'n't far off—not half far enough, so I saddled up and lit out.

I made up my mind if I didn't see anybody coming by the next afternoon, I'd stop and hide out to wait for Dad.

I crossed the trail twice that afternoon, and it was well-worn and plain, but I didn't follow it—

not once. Along in the afternoon I caught the flash of a red blanket over near where I knowed the trail to be, and once I heered a hoss whinny. When I listened, he whinnied again but farther down the river, so I knowed whoever was riding wa'n't looking for me. And I figured the rider wa'n't alone, but with a passel of loose hosses, because a lone hoss don't often whinny. So I figured it was Injins and kept going.

A little after that I heered hosses again—heaps of them, and saw a big band of Injins going along the trail. I could just see them through the trees and brush; but there must have been more'n fifty, all headed for St. Louis. I reckoned white folks mostly traveled by river and only the Injins used the trail. I wondered why Dad did—but I was sure he knowed what he was about.

The sun was getting down pretty well, and I was glad for two reasons—I hadn't seen anybody looking for me, and it was cooler. At last it begun to darken up; but the sky was clear and I stayed off of the trail and kept going, not fast, but a trot the pony liked—a right smart gait, if kept up stiddy. I could see the pony was tiring some, but I didn't stop till I see it was getting day again. Then I rode into another grove quite a ways from the trail but not far from the river, and staked the hoss. He rolled and begun to eat right away like he was used to it. Cracky! I'd seen hosses, but none like him.

I got out my meat sack and filled up, but was tired out and layed down by a big drift log that high water had left some time when there was mighty nigh a flood. That's the last I knowed till I felt the sunlight on my face.

CHAPTER VI

I sat up. For a minute I didn't know where I was.

"Good afternoon, son."

Cracky! I jumped up, and there was Dad, sitting on the log with that old long rifle across his knees.

I was plumb ashamed. "How'd you find me? How long you been here?" I says, brushing off my breeches.

He begun to laugh, that inside kind of his. "Find ye!" he says, sarcastic like. "Why you're as easy to locate as a dead hoss in August. I been waitin' for ye to hev yer nap out fer more'n an hour. Son, ye're keerless; but ye'll git over it soon. If ye don't, yer hair'll be adornin' some Injin's belt in the country we're headin' for. Eat a bite now, an' we'll be a-jiggin'. I reckon it's best to let old Bill an' the camp-keeper fetch up the outfit. Bill overtook us last night, so I thought I'd best look ye up. I'll saddle yer hoss while ye eat a bite. Then we'll be jiggin'."

He'd fetched some corn bread and give it to me. When we started, after a little, he turned into the trail. "We'll foller it," he says. "We kin travel faster, an' there ain't much danger, for if trouble comes, it must hit old Bill first. He'll find a way to turn it back, or send us word it's comin' towards us. I cal'late to make a p'int above here a piece where we can rest the hosses for a night. Then we'll go on a few days more, an' wait fer the outfit to come along."

It was good to be with Dad. I wa'n't worried any more. Seemed as though I'd knowed him all my life. I was sure ashamed of myse'f for thinking he'd turned against me that time in St. Louis—and I did wish he hadn't caught me asleep. That pestered me.

"How old be ye, son?" he asked me after a spell.

"Nineteen next month," I said.

"Run away?"

"Nope," I says. "My father an' mother's both dead. I been livin' with my mother's sister, nigh Coon Creek Crossin' since I was a little feller."

"Where was ye born?"

"Kentucky," I says.

"So was I, son. An' I'm fifty-seven."

"Dad," I says, riding close up, "do you reckon I can get to write a letter back?"

"Well, I cal'late it could be done from the Fort when we git to it. But that's the Ashley-Henry Post at the mouth of the Yellowstone, an' a long ways yit. They ain't no danger of 'em takin' ye up as long's ye stay up the river, noway. Rest easy, son."

I bet I'd write that letter the first chance I got. I was beginning to think of Aunt Lib again. She'd be fretting now, I knowed. Mebby by now, or to-morrow, anyway, she'd hear what happened to the officer and mebby believe I done it. And suppose she'd think I'd done the other—killed Caley Byers. But I was dead sure she'd never believe that—not if Joshua Moulds swore to it on a stack of Bibles higher'n he was.

But I reckoned I couldn't ever go back now. I hadn't thought about that before.

"Dad," I says, directly, "I can't figure Caley

Byers is killed; but if he is, they'll likely find out who killed him, 'cause murder will out, I've always heered."

"I've heered it lots o' times, too," he says, filling his pipe out of a quill-worked pouch. "An' mebbly it's true; but I never believed it," he says. "Killin's are mighty bad things, mostly, but o' course all of 'em ain't murders no more'n all Injins are liars."

We pulled up so's he could light his pipe, and when he'd got out his flint and steel and got fire he says: "In the country where we're headin' for every man makes his own laws, an' while some of 'em's bad ones, it's sartin that any well-balanced human knows mighty well when he's treadin' on other folks' rights an' when he's doin' dirty work. Though jest knowin' it don't keep 'em off always. I figger a man that stays right with himse'f ginerally respects the rights of others and don't bother his neighbors. But neighbors, the best of 'em, will crowd, sometimes, if ye let 'em. Crowdin' " he says, "is a heap like a louse: give it liberty, an' first ye know ye hev to go at it an' make a cleanin'. Never crowd, son, 'less ye intend to play the last card in yer hand—even if ye know somebody's liable to hev to set up with ye fer a spell, afterwards."

I knowed he was right. And I made up my mind I never would crowd, 'less I had it to do, and knowed it.

But I'd always heered that murder *would* out, and believed it. Now Dad said *he* didn't believe it, and that set me to thinking. If it *didn't* out, then how'd folks ever know I didn't kill Caley Byers? Then I says, "Well, mostly, I believe murder *does*

out. If it *don't* I'm in a bad fix, 'cause Caley Byers and I wa'n't friends, and maybe folks knowed it."

"Shoo! if we killed all the folks we didn't like the American trappers an' traders wouldn't be bothered none with Hudson's Bay men, I cal'late. No call to worry 'bout that, son, none 'tall."

I reckoned he was only trying to he'p me stop fretting. Then like lightning a thought that nigh took my breath away come to me. Mebby he thought I *did* kill Caley Byers, and all the time he *did* know murder would out. I looked up at him quick, and felt the blood hot on my ears. But he was looking ahead on the trail, and there wa'n't a thing like I was afraid of in his eyes. I couldn't make it out noway; but I couldn't leave it like that.

"Dad," I says, in a minute, "I've heered a yarn about Caley Byers, and there was a woman in it," I says. "It come up from the South with an old nigger that died at Coon Creek—a nigger that belonged to Caley Byers."

He pulled up to a walk. "Tell me the yarn," he says.

"It ain't much to tell," I says, "but it seems like there was an old family named Sessions that had lived on a big plantation since before the war and generations before Caley Byers' father come there and bought a piece of bottom land that joined theirs and went to raising hosses. The Sessioneses was a big family, and quality folks that didn't have any use for the Byerses, for some reason that started early after they'd become neighbors.

"Anyway, Caley run plumb wild with the hosses, traveling with them and racing with them and spending money like all get out, till he was talked about a heap. And he hated the Sessioneses like

p'ison—all but Lucy Ann, the youngest girl, who liked him. She was mighty afraid her father would find it out, and she used to meet Caley of nights fer a spell. Then one day they was both gone. Nobody knowed where, till old man Sessions got a letter from York State. Lucy Ann was mighty sick and Caley Byers had run off and left her with only a note that said for her to go back home and learn her folks to respect their neighbors. That's what the old nigger told, nigh as I can remember," I says.

"Folks knowed the yarn and talked about it, did they?" he says, putting away his pipe.

"Yes," I told him. "Women folks, and men. But they never knowed any more than what *I've* told, I reckon."

"No, likely not," he says. Then, directly, like he'd plumb settled it in his mind, he says, "That's it, son. Some of his old neighbors got him, and likely he'd lived too long, as it was. There ain't no call to worry, son; none 'tall. They cain't pester ye as long as we stay up the river, an' by the time we get back it's likely they'll know more about it. If they don't, and pester ye, I'll stand by ye. I never did quit a pardner yet, son, noway."

I felt better. I was sure now he didn't think it was me killed Caley Byers; and he'd mighty nigh admitted that murder *would* out. So I dropped it and says, "Do the Hudson's Bay men trouble much?"

"Yes, they do," he says. "They are stealin' this territory, or tryin' to. They keep the Blackfeet agin' us. I'm sure of that. They're Britishers, too, an' belong over the line, but they don't stay there; an' there'll be trouble over it yit."

Trouble! It seemed like it was to be found everywhere. I thought of my own again. "Dad," I says, "do you reckon you killed that officer?"

"Shoo! no. His head'll be sore fer a day or such a matter, that's all. I didn't go fer to kill him, no-way—Yonder's a turkey! Kill him, son, an' we'll hev him fer supper."

I got down off my hoss, an' was drawing a bead on the neck down close to his breast, when Dad whispers, "Head or no meat, son—head or no meat," and I pulled down on the gobbler's old red head mighty careful. Bow! she went. And I see right away I'd done it slick. But Dad didn't say anything. He just got down and picked up the turkey while I was loading up.

We only took the best part of him and then went on again. The country was changing some, I could see, and the river, when we was near it, was prettier'n ever. There was heaps of ducks and wild geese in nigh every bend, and I begun to spot big nests in trees—old snags of trees, mostly. They was built of good-sized sticks and looked rough and ornery. Dad said they was goose nests. At first I thought he was joking me, but he wa'n't. He never did joke that way, never. He said the nests was likely built by fish-hawks, mostly, but that the geese took them over and used them. I'd never heered of geese nesting in trees. It didn't sound just right; so I asked him how in the nation the young goslings got out of the nests without killing theirse'fs. He said the old goose packed them out when the time come. And that's the truth. I've seen them do it many a time since then. And all the way up the river we saw the nests in the old lone snags along the river banks. I figured it out

why the geese nested in the trees, and 'twas plain and good sense. The varmi'ts bothered a heap on the ground, and aside from eagles nothing's got any business in the air with an old wild goose. They're smart's a whip, too.

It was after sundown when Dad left the trail. He headed straight north from it and the river for a spell. Then he turned into a thick grove of quaking aspens where there was a cold spring of water and a mighty snug place to camp, and got down.

"Git a fire goin', son," he said. "I'll stake the hosses. Then we'll eat."

Dad fixed the turkey finer'n any I'd ever tasted, and it didn't take him any time at all. I ate all I could hold and felt fine, and sleepy as all time. Dad went out to look at the hosses before he laid down, and I never saw nor heered him come back. I was sound asleep by the time he got out to them, I reckon.

But I dreamt a heap. Aunt Lib was fretting all through my dreams and Caley Byers and Bugle and Joshua Moulds was all tangled up, so there wa'n't no sense to them—nothing straight or connected, like. I heered Dad get up once and slip out to see if the hosses was all right, but I never heered him come back. He always got up and snooped around the hosses every night like it was a habit, and I reckoned it was.

It wa'n't quite day when he kindled the fire, and I got up and fetched in the hosses while he got ready a bite to eat. In no time, we was back on the trail, sailing along on the little Injin trot the hosses liked and could keep up for a coon's age.

We didn't stop till 'way after noon. I killed another turkey—the only one we'd seen that day. We

was out of the turkey country, Dad said, and it was the last we saw. Dad cooked it good, and we had him for supper. But I was plumb tired again and went right to sleep and slept good till morning, when we was off again on the same old trot.

The country was a heap different now. Trees was getting scarcer and scarcer and the river wa'n't quite so big and was some swifter and not so muddy. Dad said he reckoned we could make the place he figured on stopping at to wait for the outfit, if we traveled right smart. And we did; though it was plumb dark when we got there. Dad staked the hosses and we just ate a cold snack and went to sleep without any fuss of fixing things.

Dad was up and gone when I woke, and it was quite a spell before he come back. I got a fire going and slipped out to the river and shot a goose for breakfast. He was tougher'n all get out, but we managed to eat him, or part of him. Then Dad and I made a brush-lodge down by the river in the prettiest spot there was, and begun to wait for the outfit to come. We set around in the shade and smoked and talked. Dad talked to me right sociable all the time. He told one story after another, and it wa'n't long before I knowed Captain Lewis and Captain Clark hadn't lied in that book of Biddle's. He wouldn't talk much about Injin fights—brushes, he called them. But he'd had a lot of them, I could see. He'd been on the plains for years and years and said he couldn't see any change yet. That made me glad. I was afraid I was too late to see them like they ought to be. I said so, and that tickled him a-plenty.

That evening Dad slipped out and fetched in a deer and we had a big feast. I slept hard and was

plumb rested when morning come, and Dad was humming to himse'f like he felt mighty fit, too.

Along towards noon here comes two big mackinaws down the river, loaded like the ones I saw the first day. The crew was singing, too, like the other fellows, and I watched them sail past without hiding out.

Then the next afternoon along come a keel-boat. She was going *up* the river, creeping close to the other shore like she was having a hard time with the current. Thirty men was towing her by a long thick rope, and they was singing like birds. It was a monster boat, more'n seventy feet long and loaded down, with trade goods and high wines, Dad said. There was a spar up near the boat's prow, and the tow-line was made fast to its top. Then the line was passed from that down and through an iron ring tied to a short piece of rope right in her bow before it went ashore to the men. It was a queer rig, and a queer way of handling a boat, I thought. But she went along steady to the French tunes, and I watched her till she went out of sight around the bend above camp. It looked like a hard job to pull a big heavy boat loaded with freight up the river; but everybody appeared happy about it. "Do they always sing that way, Dad?" I asked him, after the boat was gone and only the tune was scallowaggin' back through the trees.

"Mighty apt to sing when they've got the breath to do it, son," he says. "But they're a bunch of old women in a fight, mostly. One of 'em's worth two or three of our kind on the river, but when it comes to burnin' powder, they won't stand without hitch-in'. They're a people by themse'fs, them fellers, an' they git along with the Injins a heap better'n

most folks does, too. Give 'em an axe or a canoe-paddle or a pole, an' they can work circles around *us*, but we beat 'em all holler when guns bark."

There was nothing to do only look at the river and watch the logs coming down after that; but I didn't tire of it. Nobody come along the trail either way, until late in the afternoon of the fourth day, when here come our outfit—ten loaded mules and three loose hosses, besides the ones the men was riding.

Cracky! I never did see such a sight. Here they come stringing along one behind the other in the trail and loaded down with goods. Some had big, bulky loads and some had little, or none at all, it looked like. Some of the packs was round and others was lumpy and looked lop-sided, though they wa'n't because they balanced. I could see that they did when the hosses walked. First come Bill, then a mare, then the mules, and last Joe, the camp-tender. It was a sight. Here and there an axe handle showed, or the barrel of a trade-gun poked out from under a mantle; and all was rocking even and swinging light and fine, as the mules followed up the trail behind Bill and the mare. The loads *looked* as though they'd been put on mighty careless, but I knowed they wa'n't, or they wouldn't have balanced nor stayed. I made up my mind I'd learn how to do it, for I knowed it was a big trick.

Directly Bill stopped at our camp. Then the mare stopped, and every mule stopped in his tracks when she did. Dad stepped up, and without even a "howdy," begun to unpack, while I watched.

In a jiffy the first mule's pack was on the ground and he was off and rolling fit to kill himse'f. Then up walks another. Slam! his pack was off, and *he*

went out and rolled right in the spot where the first had rolled. Then another and another, was unloaded, and so quick the mules had to wait for the one ahead of them on the rolling-spot to get up, before they could lay down to roll. I never did see the beat. A body'd think there was a law against rolling any place else but in that very spot the first mule picked. And I reckon it is a law—a mule-law, because they never break it. I reckon a mule would be afraid of bad luck if he didn't roll where his partner did. I thought the first mule had away the best of it. He could pick the rolling spot, and if he was spiteful he could play even with an enemy by picking out a bad place and just pretending to roll. It was queer. Dad said burros did the same thing—said it was a jackass trait, anyway.

Everybody knowed just what to do and did it—all except me; and I looked on. In no time the packs was all piled neat and close, but not mixed up. I mean loads was kept separate, so their parts could go together again without fussing to fix them over. I soon saw the smallest looking ones was heavier'n they seemed.

Directly the camp-keeper went off with the hosses and mules. He staked the mare, hobbled the loose hosses and the saddle animals, but left the mules to run loose. It was done so quick and so slick I couldn't see how they managed so good. Dad had pitched in the minute they come, and now he was wiping the sweat off'n his face and laughing.

Directly he says, "Bill, this here's the boy I was tellin' ye 'bout. An' Lige," he says to me, "this here's my pardner an' yours, Bill Hanks."

Bill shook hands warm, like. "Howdy," he says. "I like yer looks. Bet me an' you gits along good."

I liked Bill soon's I saw him. And I liked him better every day after that. He wa'n't nigh so tall as Dad—not quite so tall's me—and I could see he wa'n't so smart's Dad was, but good clean to the bone. His face was kinder fat and his eyes was red some; but he was likelier to laugh than Dad. He'd laugh sometimes when I couldn't see anything worth while. I saw that Dad tied to him; so I knowed right away he was better'n he looked. But beside Dad he seemed stout and fat and not half so quick on his feet, though he was younger, I judged by mighty nigh ten years. His hair was black, but grayer'n Dad's and not so long nor thick. When he took off his head silk that night I saw he was getting bald on the top of his head.

After a little Joe come in from taking care of the stock. I'd seen him in Dad's lodge in St. Louis, and I'd a-knowed him anywhere. When he come up to the fire, Dad says, "Joe, this is Lige Mounts, our new pardner, and, Lige Mounts, this here's Joe Dent, our skinner an' camp-keeper."

We shook hands. Joe was a little man, and quick-moving. He had the nicest eyes I ever see in a man's head, except Dad's. They was blue as a robin's egg and not one mite shifty. He was younger'n Dad or Bill—round thirty somewheres, I judged—and slender-built. He never had much to say, speaking when he did in a voice a heap like Dad's, quiet, like, and sure. He had a scar on his right cheek, straight and about's wide's my little finger. It run clean across his cheek from a mite above his mouth. I figured I'd ask him how he got it, but I never did. Dad said he'd never asked him, but he reckoned it was a bullet-crease. It sure looked like it, and I reckon 'twas, and proof that

he'd been shot at, once, anyway, and mighty nigh got, at that.

We had a big supper with tea and bread and meat and corn syrup and all. Cracky! but it tasted good, and I filled up a-plenty. Then we smoked a while and everybody talked—all but me; and I listened. Directly Joe went out to look after the stock, and Dad went over to the packs and when he come back to the fire, handed me a bundle of clothes.

"I found these among my possibles an' fixin's," he says. "Better put 'em on in the mornin'. They'll make ye look more like ye belonged to the outfit, anyway."



CHAPTER VII

Cracky! I was glad to get the clothes Dad give me. I looked them over right away, though it was dark and I couldn't see very good. They was quill-worked like Dad's, only not so much. I reckoned they'd be pretty big for me; but I knowed buckskin kept gettin' longer and longer when you wore it, so nobody would think anything of it, even if we met up with anybody, which I didn't reckon on much.

It must have been nigh midnight when I got to sleep, but I rested good after I started in to. First I knowed it was morning, and while the men was getting in the stock, I made out to dress up. I popped on the leggings first. They was too long, so I cut off a slice round the tops. Then they was just right. I got the whole riggin' on before Dad come in. He was tickled, or 'peared to be. I couldn't get the hang of the head-silk, which was yellow, so he showed me. Then he took my old clothes and put them in the packs. He said they might come handy, but he didn't know what fer.

Cracky! I felt fine in those clothes—free and loose every place, and mighty pretty, too, I reckoned, all fringed and fine. Besides they showed they had been wore a lot, and that suited me exactly.

I watched the men pack, two working together, one on the off-side and one on the nigh-side, and the nigh-side man throwed the hitch. It made me stare to see how fast they packed the mules, once they was saddled. But they was mighty careful about the saddling, I tell you. Some was saw-buck

saddles and some aparajos, and when they come to one old sorrel mule they throwed a sack over his head before they tackled him. He was ornery as all time; but one of the best in the lot when he was finally packed.

I saddled my hoss and was all ready when they was, the men having saddled their hosses before they begun to pack the mules. So away we went.

The three loose hosses was a heap better'n the ones the men was riding, I noticed, built fine and full of life. One of them was white as snow and built like a quarter-hoss. Anybody could see he could run like all time. Then there was a roan—a fine hoss, but heavier'n the white. The other was a bay. He was mighty nigh a perfect hoss—mighty nigh's good's the roan, I thought; but I'd never seen a hoss like the white gelding, never, big or little.

The country kept changing, and sometimes we was nigh the river and again we'd be quite a piece away from it. I rode up with Dad; and I liked to look back and see the mules coming along on the trail, one right behind the other, and Joe 'way back yonder keeping them knitting along and close up. It sure did look fine. Bill was right behind me leading the mare. Her pack was light—just knick-knacks and clothes and light truck, but every mule'd follow her to certain death, and her tracks was their tracks, no matter where they led. Dad said 'twas another jackass trait. But it was a good one—like most of them is.

It was hotter'n all time that day. But along late in the afternoon it rained some, and that cooled the air. Most every night I learned something new; and every night something would start Dad or Bill to tell a yarn. Some of them was funny, and some

wa'n't. Some was mighty bad accidents or rows. And they talked a heap about the Hudson's Bay Company and the ornery doings of their trappers and traders in our territory.

Joe never talked much, but somehow I got to liking him more every day. And many a time I thought that three better men couldn't be found nowhere, than Dad, Bill and Joe.

We traveled day in and day out for long spells. Then we'd rest a day or two. One morning early in August when the men saddled up, they saddled the three hosses with little pads, and bridled them, too. When they started out, every man was leading a spare hoss, Dad having the white gelding. Soon's we got strung out he says:

"From now on, son, we take no fool chances of havin' visitors, an' nobody's to leave the pack-train or the camp without the rest knowin' about it beforehand. Understand me?"

I did, and said so.

"Any time now," he says, "we're liable to get into it. We are drawin' nigh to the country where there's always been enough trouble to go 'round, an' if we don't find none, we'll be lucky. You'd best ride back yonder with Joe, now, fer a spell."

I did hate to leave Dad. But cracky! I was glad we was getting to the Injin country; or I thought I was. I rode along back and fell in behind Joe with the queerest feeling a man ever had. I was glad and sorry all mixed up, if you know what I mean.

That night when we camped the packs was all strung in a circle with the fire built inside it, small and no-account. As soon's the stock was 'tended to, Joe went on guard on a knoll where he could

see the hosses and mules and the camp, and a good bit of the country around. Before day Dad and Bill took their turns on the knoll; and when morning come, durned if I didn't feel off my feed, everybody was so quiet, like, and careful.

We started out quite a bit before sunup, Dad and Bill riding more'n a quarter ahead and far apart, and Joe and me back with the mules. Both Dad and Bill was leading their spare hosses, and Joe had the extra bay saddled with his pad.

The country was all changed now—all rolling plains with trees down along the river. But that was far away most of the time now, because of the bad-lands, which was hummicky and rough. We begun to see queer flat-topped hills, yellow, like, and with now and then a scrub cedar growing on their sides. Some of the hills was reddish, and others bluish-gray. And there was deep coulees, all leading down into the badlands by the river, their bottoms stony and washed bare by melting spring snows. And cracky! the antelope. There was thousands of them.

As soon's the sun come it got hotter'n all time again and the dust raised by the animals dried my nose and throat. We kept above the coulees but could see them running down to lose theirse'fs in the bad lands; or clear to the river, sometimes. Off ahead was endless plains and knolls and little coulees and bands of antelope. The antelope would stand and watch us till we got mighty nigh to them, then Scat! away they'd go, all white as snow behind. They was pretty and slick, and how they could run! I'd see them start off, hundreds of them, and first I knowed they was gone down in a coulee 'way ahead; then up they'd come on another knoll,

where they'd stand waiting till we got mighty nigh to them, when away they'd go like all get out.

One morning when we started out, Dad and Bill turned their regular saddle-hosses in with the pack train with their saddles on them, and set off afoot, leading the spare hosses with the pads on. All the forenoon we traveled straight across the country, paying no attention to the river or the trail. The sun was blistering hot. Everything was parched and dry as a bone. I wished it was sundown many a time.

It was afternoon, about two o'clock, I reckon, when I saw old Bill 'way up ahead, stop and get on his roan. But I couldn't see Dad at all. "Injins!" says Joe right away. And a squeamish feeling come over me quicker'n scat. "Bunch 'em up! Bunch 'em, up! and head 'em into that coulee yonder quick!" Joe dug his heels into his hoss's sides. And directly we was in the little coulee and couldn't see Bill.

"Git down and tie every mule's nose close to his fetlock—like this," and Joe begun to tie.

So did I, but was awkward. It seemed the raw-hide ropes was bigger'n my arm and stiff as all get out.

Joe says, "Tighten yer cinch, and look sharp!"

Right then I heered lickety-lickety-lickety! and I cocked my rifle. Hosses! I could hear them. Joe heered them too. His riflelock went click-click!

Then all of a sudden something come to the rim of the coulee. It was Dad! and I wilted right down—just seemed to be all tuckered out.

"It's a false alarm, Joe," he says. "Git 'em strung out again. Three whitemen's a-comin'. They been running some buffalo up yonder, an'

when I see the dust an' the movin' herd, I thought 'twas Injins, myself, but we're in luck, I reckon. Bill's gone to meet up with 'em."

Buffalo at last! I forgot my scare.

When we got started again, I could see four hoss-men coming towards us, riding fast. "Looks like Mike Fink and his pardners that's with Bill, Joe," said Dad, gazing hard at the oncoming men. "I know they wintered in these parts. That's jest who 'tis—that's Mike on the buckskin."

I never did see men so glad to meet up with folks as this Mike Fink and his pardners was. They shook hands all around, and was nigh tickled to death.

Mike was fine built, about as tall as Bill. I could see he'd be a hard man to handle in a rough-and-tumble. He had dark hair and black eyes. I didn't like his eyes. They wa'n't good to look at. But he was quick on his feet. One of his pardners, Carpenter, they called him, was about the same size as Fink, but light complected, with pale blue eyes, and a short neck. He was stout and slow-moving, and I could see Fink was quicker-witted then he was. Then there was Talbot, lean and thin, with brown hair and awful hairy arms and hands. He was about as tall as me, and older'n Fink or Carpenter, a little, and not so stout. He was the quietest one of the three, but saw most everything, with his eyes about half-shut, at that. He had big ears, and one of them had a notch out of it. I reckoned it had been bit out or froze out, mebby. They didn't look like our folks, none of them.

They wanted Dad and Bill to turn off to the river where their camp was. They said if we would, they'd go on with us to the Ashley-Henry Post at

the mouth of the Yellowstone. I remember Fink said, "We need yer company, Dad. Me an' Carpenter and Talbot's gittin' plumb tired of each other. There's Injins between here an' the Post, and we kin help ye stand 'em off."

It was soon settled; and we headed towards the river, careless, like, for Fink and his pardners said the country was safe between them and their camp.

"We made a killin' today for tongues," Fink said, "an' when we git to camp we'll feed up good. We made a bully ketch last winter, too, but dranked it all up at the Post this spring—sold out there. We couldn't wait," he laughed. He was full of talk and rattled on like he was wanting to get rid of it to somebody new. "Camp's jest around that p'int of timber on the river," he says. "We'll ride ahead an' git somethin' cookin'. Come on, pardners!" And away they went, Bill with them, leaving Dad and me together.

"That's a bad one—that Mike Fink," Dad said, after they rode away. "He's the best rifle shot I ever see, too; but he ain't right noway. Both his pardners is tarred with the same stick—both of 'em crack shots, especially Carpenter. All of 'em'll fight at the drop of the hat, so don't git into no argument with 'em—they're a bad lot.

"I heered Fink and Carpenter hed hed a bad row last fall," he went on. "Seems they must hev made it up again. They hev all been pardners fer a long spell, an' their doin's are as ornery as they are themse'fs. Carpenter lets Fink shoot a tin cup of whisky off'n his head at seventy yards, and Fink lets Carpenter do the same, each declarin' it shows confidence between 'em. But Mike's a borned rattlesnake. Once I knowed him to shoot the heel off'n

a nigger in St. Louis, 'cause he said the nigger had a homely foot, an' couldn't wear a boot with sech a heel, noway. He's good company, though, when he ain't in liquor, 'an' with 'em we kin stand off a whole passel of Injins. But I jest thought I'd tell ye that none of 'em's the sort I tie to, ginerally. Git up, Badger!" and he sent a rope-end cracking at a lagging mule.

"Fink would be a bad one in a rough-and-tumble," I says, wanting him to talk more, while we was alone.

"He shore is, son; an' everybody knows him fer one bully that will shore enough fight. He'll go in any time, er any way. An' when he goes, he goes to win—kick, bite, gouge, er shoot. Even a knife's a weapon with Mike Fink."

"Dad," I says, "when we get to the Fort I ain't goin' to forget to write that letter back. I been fretting some, account they'll think mebby I killed Caley Byers."

"Shoo! no they won't, son. But write the letter, anyway. We ought to git to the Post in six or seven days, dependin' on how long we stop at Fink's camp."

Just then, whee! there was an awful smell. "Something's dead nigh here," I says, looking up the wind and feeling it was like to turn my stomach.

"Buffalo," says Dad. "Yonder's a bunch of 'em. Been killed fer their tongues. The wolves has got 'em pretty well cleaned up, but they do load the breeze some, shore 'nuff."

I'd heered Fink say they'd made a killing for tongues, but the sight of the big carcasses, plumb

wasted, seemed more'n wicked "Do they just take the tongues, Dad?" I asked him, feeling r'iled.

"Tongues, most always—hides an' tongues, at times," he says, like he didn't want to talk about it. But directly he says, "Does look like provokin' the wrath of the Almighty, son; but they's millions of 'em, millions of 'em. I try not to do useless killin', but I'm a skin-hunter, an' do heaps more'n is in keepin' with my conscience."

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and looked straight at me, as though he had a notion to say something else, but more'n half a mind not to. Then he says: "Son, conscience is like a bird-dog pup, an' kin be learned to forgit natural traits, 'specially when he's runnin' with a pack of hounds. Mine's dulled right smart, I reckon; but the older I grow, the less I like to kill an' the more I like to live where there's echoes sleepin' along the streams an' danger enough to spice the plains. To live here I hev to foller my trade, an' it's that of a killer. But some day I'm goin' to settle down in some pretty spot where the mountains meet the plains, an' where the clear, cold streams are contributin' fresh snow-water to this here river. Then I'll hev 'em all with me, an' jest take what I want an' need out of the herds an' from the waters, same's the Injin did before our kind come here to learn him to he'p rob his own land fer a few yards of bright-colored cloth, er a blanket. There's them among the Injins that sees all this as plain as the rump of an antelope when he's leaving the country, an' it's them that puts the fight in the rest. An' they're the wise ones. It's the ornery ones that only sees the blankets an' the cloth an' the liquor. But civilization—that's what some calls it—is bound to spread, an' the Injin must be

swept before it, as well as the buffalo. There ain't a speck of what's a-botherin' you in civilization, son. It's as hard as old Pharaoh's heart, an' ought to be a trapper.

"It takes the snows to soften us. Any natural boy's a born savage, white, red, er black; an' the ring in the nose an' the ring on the finger ain't so mighty fer apart, noway. We men folks hev quit wearin' 'em in our nose, an' mostly in our ears, but we still buy 'em fer our women—an' they hang 'em in their ears yit. But jest the same we're plumb ready to swear a man's a savage that wears 'em like we used to, 'cause we've swore off, an' *they* ain't quite ready. Yonder's the camp."

The sun was low, and a breeze had sprung up and stirred the grass. The hosses saw the camp as soon as we did, and perked up right away. There was a fire going and some kettles hanging over it, and the cooking meat smelled good.

As soon's the mules was unpacked old Bill got out a flat keg of high wines and treated. Everybody but Dad and me he'ped theirse'fs plenty, an' they all got talking right fast.

I soon saw there was bad blood between Mike Fink and Carpenter. It showed up right away after old Bill got out his flat keg. It's curious how little it takes to find trouble when you're looking for it hard. After drinking two tin cups nigh full, Mike Fink would have mistaken a "howdy" for a cuss word, I reckon.

Carpenter emptied his cup and says, "I'll be bread-maker, an' make some bread."

"Ye will not! I'll tend to the fine p'int, myse'f!"

That was Mike Fink, and his voice was high and angry. Both of them started for our pack where the

meal was, overturning some kettles in the race. They reached the pack together, and stood glaring at each other like a couple of cur-dogs, neither daring to pick up the sack. Mike's fists was doubled tight and his knuckles was white's his face.

"Now, now!" cried Talbot, springing from his seat by a tree and running to his partners. "Now, don't make no fight in yer own camp when there's company 'round yer fire. Ye've made it all up once. Let it stay that way."

He took hold of Carpenter's arm and pulled him away a piece.

"All right, my hearty, *make* the damned bread!" said Fink, spitting cotton. "I'll quit," he says. "I'm a bully good quitter. Everybody knows that!"

He come back to the fire, grabbed up a stick, and stirred the meat in the kettles, jabbing and poking vicious. A magpie come into the grove and lit on a limb near the camp. Mike grabbed up his rifle and cocked it. "Watch me cut the beak off'n that damned bird yonder," he says.

Bow! The poor bird fluttered down with his beak cut clean off next his head. It seemed to relieve Mike. Something or somebody had to settle for his temper, and the bird paid the bill. After that he was cheerful and good-natured as anybody.

But I remembered what Dad had told me about him. I was proud because he'd told me what he thought about things, generally. I liked what he'd said. It seemed to me I'd always thought the same, only I couldn't have put it like he did. I thought about it all a heap and I felt closer to Dad than ever before. I reckoned if he even did settle down like he said, I'd stick by him and settle there, too.

When Mike got r'iled over the break-making, old

Bill had put his keg away, and I was glad. But he got it out again that night while Joe was on guard. It loosened tongues; and the men begun to swap news. Dad and Bill told what they'd learned in St. Louis, and the others told the news of the Post and the plains, which was what I liked to hear. I felt squeamish for fear Fink and Carpenter would get at it again, but old Bill was careful. And I reckon Dad had a hand in his stinginess, for he didn't offer to treat very often.

"Where's Little Pete this season?" asked Dad, putting a small stick on the fire.

"He's dead," said Carpenter. "Pore Little Pete had a hard time of it crossin', too. He got into it with the Blackfeet. They stampeded his pack hosses first. Then Pete made a ride for it. But they killed his pony under him. Somehow the old man managed to hide in the sage 'till they left him. It was late in January, an' that night a bad blizzard hit the plains—the worst we'd hed. Pete tried to make the Post, but his foot was nigh shot away. Of course the Injins didn't know that, or they'd got him. They told a half-breed about the fight, an' 'lowed Little Pete had made the Post. But Teed and Snow found what was left of him among the ribs of a buffalo bull ten days after. The wolves hed et pretty much of both him an' the bull. The pore little devil must hev shot the bull an' gutted him an' crawled inside to keep from freezin'. Most likely the meat froze an' held him there till he froze, himse'f. Anyhow, they found him that a-way ten days after the fight. It must hev been a hard crossin' fer Little Pete."

"Shoo! shore was. How fer was he from the Post?" asked Dad, filling his pipe.

"Not more'n ten mile; an' if Teed hedn't seen a white wolf near the carcass, nobody'd ever knowed what went with him, most likely."

"Well, I reckon I'll slip out an' relieve Joe," says Dad, getting up.

I wanted to go with him, but he said, "No, turn in. Ye'll git yer share soon enough."

When Joe come in he went right to his blankets. I reckoned Dad had told him to. Old Bill took the hint, too, and put his flat keg in the pack. It wa'n't long after that till the little fire was plumb out and Mike Fink snoring like all get out.

But I couldn't go to sleep. The story of Little Pete wouldn't let me. All night long the awfulness of the thing kept me turning and tossing, till I could fairly see the man inside the dead buffalo and hear the wolves gnawing the frozen meat in the bitter storm.

Besides, I heered Mike Fink stirring in the night. I reckoned they'd got out the flat keg again, and that pestered me, along with the other.



CHAPTER VIII

I must have gone to sleep just before day, for I woke up when Dad started the fire. I didn't reckon I'd been asleep more'n ten minutes, though. I crawled out and went down to the river and had a swim. That freshened me up. On the way back I met Dad coming down with a couple of kettles, and I turned back with him. Down by the river I says, "Dad, is it true that a man ever gutted a buffalo and crawled inside to save himse'f from a blizzard?"

"I'm too durned long, myse'f," he laughed, "but I'm shore men hes done it. I've heered of it bein' done more'n once. Pete was a little feller, and there ain't no doubt he did it. Ye see, son, all of us hes heered of it bein' done, an' in desperation a little man would be apt to try it when it was an only chance fer life. Yes, I reckon it's true Little Pete done it."

"Are we goin' to start to-morrow, Dad?" I asked, while he filled the kettles.

"Figgered on it," he says, "but it don't look like it now. Bill's full, an' Fink's drunk. Must hev dranked in the night, I reckon. Never knowed Bill to drink in the Injin country before. I don't like to travel that a-way. The keg's nigh half full yit, an' if they've got to finish it, this is as good a place as any—better'n the trail. Guess we'll go out an' move the stock a bit. They been camped here so long the grass is nigh too short close in."

"I'll go along with you," I says, taking a kettle of water.

I was mighty sorry we'd met up with Mike Fink,

but I didn't say so. I knowed Dad was sorry, too. But I reckoned he figured we needed he'p to get to the Post, so mebby it would turn out for the best in the end. Anyway, I figured from what Dad had said the keg held all the liquor there was in the packs.

We left the kettles in camp and Dad called the men. Right away Bill got out the keg again.

Joe was on guard. He wa'n't drinking like Bill; but mebby it was easier for him not to, and that makes a heap of difference. He was in the top of a big cottonwood near the edge of the grove, where a seat had been fixed and a way to get up.

"I see a big cloud of dust to the west," he says, when we come under the tree.

"Buffalo," asked Dad, looking away across the plains.

"Yes, I make out it's buffalo, an' an awful herd of 'em, too."

"Runnin'?"

"Can't make out."

"Hope not. Look scatterin,' Joe. Me an' Lige will move the stock, but if the buffalo's runnin' we'd best drive the stock into the timber."

"I'll look sharp. But I don't think they're runnin'," says Joe.

We went on out to the stock and moved our staked hosses, and then climbed a knoll and saw the dust rolling up in the still morning air. The dust cloud was miles long, and the sun, just coming up, lit on it like a long, wide trail of gold hanging between the ground and the blue sky. It was a curious sight, and mighty pretty.

"They ain't runnin'," says Dad, after a spell. "But jest the same I cal'late we'd best move the

stock into the timber. That's a whopping' big herd, an' it's headin' too close in. The mules might stampe. Git on yer hoss, an' we'll drive everything to camp—theirs an' ours. No call to take chances. Shake yerse'f!"

When we got to the tree where Joe was, driving the stock ahead of us, Dad called to him, "Come down, Joe! Lige'll take yer place."

That tickled me, and I climbed up to the seat with my rifle. It was higher'n it looked from the ground. I could see a long way up and down the river and out over the plains. The men in the camp was stringing rawhide ropes from tree to tree, in no time makin' a rope corral three ropes high around the hosses and mules.

Then Dad come back to the tree, "Look scatterin', son!" he called. "An' if ye should see Injins behind that herd, let us know it quick's ye kin. But I reckon the herd's driftin'. Anyway, ye'll see they's buffalo left, an' before night ye'll say so."

Then he went back to the camp and begun shaping up and piling different, the others helping some, especially Joe.

The cloud of dust kept coming nearer and nearer. I couldn't see no end to it, an' I reckoned it was more'n half a mile wide. Directly I could hear a low rumbling and then pretty soon I could see a black line down under the dust. I knowed it was buffalo, but it was just a black line without any breaks in it. And right over it and back of it, the dust rolled up in a cloud that kept getting bigger and bigger and nearer and nearer.

The rumbling come on louder and louder, till I could feel the ground tremble like an earthquake was shaking it. Directly, here they was! right at

the edge of the grove. I could see the leaders plain. Their black tongues was lolling out and they looked to be nigh winded, but kept on going straight and steady. Then the dust hit me and hid the herd. I reckoned they was going to skip the camp, but I couldn't see.

In less'n a minute I couldn't have heered a cannon go off, nor I couldn't even think. The ground was shaking so the tree jiggled, and I took hold of a limb to hold on to. The noise was awful! Horns pounding against horns, hoofs clicking, and the ornery snorting grunts—worse'n a nightmare. The smell of thousands of heated animal bodies crowded close and going fast, come up to me with the dust. My throat and nose was dry. I'd have given anything for a drink of water. But to go down now was out of the question.

Hours went by. They seemed like nights to me. Dark come on, and still the thunder of the herd was bad as ever. My eyes was smarting, and my tongue was parched. I couldn't see a foot from my nose. I wondered if there ever would come an end to that herd. It didn't seem as though it had any. There wa'n't any lessening of the noise. I couldn't have told how long I'd been in the tree, if I died for it.

It must have been past midnight when I thought the roar was falling off some. But I wa'n't sure. My ears wa'n't dependable. They wouldn't rest, even when I knowed the drags was going by and the end had come, sure enough.

Cracky! My teeth gritted with sand, and my ears thumped with the clicking and grunting and booming of hoofs, long after I knowed they was gone. I couldn't seem to gather myse'f to climb down—jest set there a spell, kind of numb.

All of a sudden I thought, "Mebby the herd come through the grove!" That stirred me, and I started down. My legs was asleep and numb, and I was afraid I'd fall. But at last I got to the ground. The dust was settling and I heered Dad's voice. "Drive 'em to the water," he says, and I run into camp.

"I'll take 'em!" I says. "Cracky! I can drink that old river plumb dry, myse'f."

Dad come along with me. "See any buffalo, son?" he says, brushing the dust off his sleeves.

"No," I says, "but I heered and smelled a million, I reckon, and I don't care if I never *see* any."

"Shoo! don't say that, son," he says, serious, like. "It's the buffalo that makes livin' possible, an' I'm glad ye know the supply ain't noways threatened yit. Anyway, the buffalo sobered our pardners, an' Bill's put away his keg. Besides we can't stay here now. So I reckon mebbly we'll move sooner'n I figured."

Cracky! I was glad.

The moonlight was just beginning to pierce the dust, and everything looked queer and different. Every mule had changed his color—or lost it, I mean. They was the same color as the men's clothes. Even the leaves on the trees and bushes was coated over with a whitish yellow. And nothing on earth could have et the grass for a mile or more, I reckon.

I took off my clothes and shook them and waded out and sat down in the river to watch the hosses and mules drink. Some of them waded far out, and some drank till I thought they'd kill theirse'fs. I washed my head and wallowed around till the stock got tired and left. Then Dad drove them back to the corral, and I come out and put on my clothes.

Everybody was grouchy. The herd had got on everybody's nerves.

"Boy, rustle up some wood an' we'll cook an' eat. I'm wolfish," says Mike Fink, and I went at it and got some wood. His eyes was red, and I knowed he felt as touchy's a setting hen.

"We'll hev to pull out of here," he says to Dad. "The stock won't eat the grass no more, an' we'll have to move."

"It's mighty nigh day," says Dad. "My idee is to cross the river soon's we kin. I figger there'll be Injins close to that herd."

"We kin make a short cut," says Fink. "There's a good crossing above here a mile, an' soon's we cross we kin strike straight for the Post an' camp on a creek that runs into the river. We kin git to it by four o'clock."

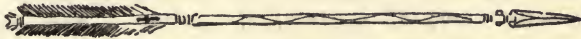
"I reckon the stock kin stand it," says Dad. "They'll hev to. Joe, you start shapin' up the packs. Lige'll he'p ye. Me an' Bill will saddle up while ye're gettin' somethin' ready to eat, Mike."

The moon was hanging low when we got started up the river. The hosses was glad to get away and was saying so, snuffling and blowing the dust out of their noses. Fink was ahead, knowing the crossing, and I rode with Dad. Just as the moon was dropping out of sight, I saw Fink ride into the river, followed by Bill and the mare. Then the mules splashed in; and the pack-train, crossing the river in the fag end of the moonlight, was mighty pretty to see. Fink's hoss, when he got to the center where the deep shadows of the trees on the other side fell on the water, was nigh swimming. I lost sight of him for a minute, but directly heered his hoofs on the stones on the other side.

We made a good crossing and was mighty soon out and heading across the country in the dark, for the moon was plumb gone and the stars was fading out for day to come. It's darker just then than any other time—just between night and coming day. The pack train looked like lumps on the plain, and was longer'n ever because of our new pardners' stock strung along with ours, some packed and some with just pack-saddles on their backs. The wolves was howling on the other side, plenty of them. They was following the big herd, picking up the wounded and the weak, I reckoned.

Then morning come and there was more antelope than ever. It was blistering hot when the sun got up good, and the stock was tired and mighty hungry, too. But we kept on till nigh sundown, when we stopped on a little sluggish stream to make camp.

A double guard went out with the stock that night, and after supper Fink climbed a knoll to watch, too. All night long the wolves howled up along the little stream, and it was so hot I couldn't sleep. I didn't hear the guard come in, or the other men go out, though, so I slept more'n I reckoned.



CHAPTER IX

We was up and stirring before daylight, but made no fire—just ate a cold bite and started soon's we could. It was going to be another blistering hot day, and I was glad we'd started early. Mike Fink, leading his war-hoss, was more'n a quarter ahead of the train, and Dad and I leading our hosses, walked nigh as far ahead of the mules as he, only to one side, like. It was light, but not yet sunup when Dad says, "Son, I feel shore they's Injins close. Twice last night when I was on guard the mules smelled 'em an' was restless. Better keep yer eyes peeled good an' keep a-lookin' scatterin'. Watch Fink, too, always or whoever's ahead. Best drop back behind me a bit, an' out a little so's we'll cover more territory."

We went on ahead a piece, and I cut out farther, feel he knowed more'n he'd told, mebbly. I looked mighty careful but couldn't see a thing—not even an antelope. Directly Dad stopped and beckoned and I hurried up to him. He was standing beside a partly butchered buffalo in a little coulee.

"I was shore of it, son," he says. "The mules was right last night. It's a wonder the Injins didn't come at us at daybreak. Wait here till the train comes up, an' tell the boys to look scatterin' an' keep the stock bunched. I'm goin' ahead. But if anything starts I'll come back, too."

A hot wind had sprung up with the sun. Sage hens scurried into the sage, holding their wings away from their bodies and their beaks wide apart. They was so close and tame I could see their eyes

and their panting throats. My mouth got dry just looking at them, and my knees felt weak like, and tired out. I knowed Dad expected trouble, and I was more afraid of being afraid and showing it than I was of Injins. I knowed that. But the more I thought of it, the worse I felt. When I mighty nigh stepped on a rattlesnake, I jumped a foot high, but right away got hold of myse'f. I wished I had a drink of water as cold as ice.

Directly the pack-train come up. As soon's the men saw the butchered buffalo, they tightened up, like, and was touchy as porcupines. When we started again Carpenter and I was on one side of the train and Bill and Talbot on the other, Joe being ahead with the mare, so the stock was guarded on both sides. It was hotter'n all time. We hadn't gone a quarter when here Dad come, lickety-split on the white gelding.

"Jumped! as sure as the devil's a pig!" cries Bill, getting onto his roan. "Git on, boys!" he says. "We're in for brush. Lige, tighten yer cinch!"

Dad pulled up short when he got close. "Gros-ventres!" he calls. "I saw four of 'em, an' they saw me. It's a war party, I reckon, an' their camp's down along the river, I figure. No call to stop. Best keep jiggin' till they jump us."

He and Bill rode out ahead and got down off their hosses and walked. Fink, who had rode up behind Dad, turned back as soon's he saw Dad and Bill coming and went on with them—all walking and about one hundred yards apart and two hundred yards ahead of us.

My mouth was dry as a powder horn and my tongue felt like a wood-rasp in my mouth. Carpenter begun to hum a tune.

"I wish I had a drink of water," I says.

He laughed a little. "Keep cool, boy," he says. "If ye're a rifle shot worth a scabby robe, this outfit kin lick the whole Grosventre tribe. Yer pardners an' mine are as good's they grow 'em. When it starts, hold yer fire till yer ball kind draw blood. That's what chills 'em—to see every shot count." Then he begun to hum again.

A flock of sage hens went up right from under my feet. Cracky! I fetched my rifle down and cocked it before I even knowed it. My legs was prickling like a million ants was crawling up and down my skin, and I looked at Carpenter, fool-like.

"Don't git excited," he says. "Keep right cool. We kin whop a whole passel of Injins. When they come at us we've plumb got to keep the stock bunched, ye know. That looks like a mighty fine rifle ye're packin', boy."

"'Tis," I says. Then I thought of something. Suppose I got killed. They'd never know I didn't kill Caley Byers, especially if murder *didn't* out.

"Mr. Carpenter," I says, "do you reckon it would be all right for me to run ahead and tell Dad something I forgot to tell him before?"

"Yep. I'll lead yer hoss. Run on," he says.

I run ahead, making my throat dryer'n ever; but I says: "Dad, if anything should happen to me, will you be sure to write to Eldin Muzzey, Coon Creek Crossing, and tell him I didn't have no hand in killing Caley Byers—that I didn't even *know* he was dead till that officer took me up in St. Louis?"

"I shore will, son," he says. "I shore will. But keep yer nerve. We'll git through this little brush directly an' when it starts ye'll feel a heap better."

"I wish—" I started to say something, and quit.

"Ye wish what, son?"

"I sure wish they'd come if they're comin'," I says.

"Best git back now an' he'p hold the stock. It won't be long— Here they be! Hurry back to Carpenter!"

Dad got on the white gelding and I started to run back. I'd seen the Injins—a whole passel of them, off on the plains. "They're comin'!" I cried out to Carpenter. "They're most here. And I'm blamed glad of it!"

"Git on yer hoss," says Carpenter. "Bout forty, I judge. Let 'em come!"

Everybody was on his hoss, but we didn't stop. Dad and Bill and Fink, all mounted, was waiting for us to come up. As soon's we got close they went on again and we after them, keeping the stock bunched up close. They was heading for a coulee. By the time we got there the Injins was close—not more'n three hundred yards.

When they saw us stop they turned and begun to circle 'round us, yelling like all get out. They was plumb naked, except for a breech clout and moccasins. Their hair was flying loose, and there wa'n't a saddle nor a pad on their hosses—just a rawhide rope fast to their necks and hitched around the lower jaw. They was riding fast and yelling and waving buffalo robes and red blankets in a cloud of dust to stampede our stock. It looked like they'd sure do it. The mules was scared and mighty nigh run off. One of them, dragging Bill, stepped on my foot and upset me, but Joe hung onto the bell-mare till he got her tied. Dad was behind the buckskin mule from me. I heered him shut his pan, so knowing he'd fresh-primed his rifle, I

primed mine. Psst! come a ball. I felt the wind of it and honkered down. Then another splattered dirt on Mike Fink and went whining off like they do when they glance.

Fink commenced to laugh and carry on to badger the Injins. I wished he'd quit it. We was in a bad enough fix. They was riding closer and closer. Bill was nigh as bad, trying to tell a yarn to Carpenter like anybody wanted to hear it now. Then a pack-horse went down near to Joe, and I saw Dad take a chew and kneel down, ready, like.

Mike Fink kept saying, "Don't nobody kill that young buck on the pinto! Leave him to me! I'm goin' ter gut-shoot him!" And Bill made out like he wanted the young buck himse'f. They kept it up till the Injins charged.

I saw them start straight at us; heered the gunlocks click; and cut loose. Fink's rifle roared in my ear. I jumped up to reload. The Injins had turned, and over the smoke I saw the young brave pitching and tossing on the ground; so I knowed Fink's ball was in his bowels. Four was down and two more running away from their dead hosses, zig-zag, like snipes fly. The young buck got up, staggered, and fell down again, doubling up and kicking out in all directions. And Mike Fink laughed. "Tickles ye, don't it, young feller!" he yelled, and it didn't even r'ile me to hear him.

While I was ramming down a ball I begun to wonder if I'd taken aim like Carpenter had told me, before I fired. I couldn't remember. But I knowed one thing—my scare was plumb gone, and I felt as ornery as Mike. I half wished they'd come back.

None of us was hit, but Carpenter's best pack-hoss was dead, and that r'iled Mike Fink more'n

ever. He run to the young buck and stabbed him and took his scalp, tore it off, mostly. Then yelling to dare the rest, he waved it over his head. And Talbot yelled to he'p him.

It was like a goad-stick to the Injins. They charged. And Fink streaked back for the coulee. I knelt down to make a shot that would count. But they wa'n't so brash this time. They turned off. I didn't know if I was glad or sorry. But when I thought they wa'n't comin', here they came again. I cocked my rifle. Dad heered it. "Let 'em come in close, son," he says. "Don't waste no lead." I told him I'd wait for them. But they circled off again and stopped out of range.

"Baah!" yelled Fink, and I yelled myse'f, and stood up.

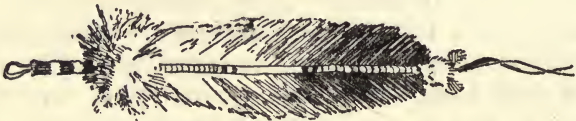
Two was ridin' off from the others. Right away Dad got up off his knee. "They've gone to git he'p," he says, "an' I reckon we'd best charge; then make a run fer a place where we kin stand 'em off."

The men talked back and forth. Mike was for charging, and so was Bill. Carpenter said he reckoned it was as good a way as any, and that set Mike off. He cussed and swore, and at last Carpenter said, "I've *agreed*, ain't I?" and Dad said, "Shoo! One quarrel at a time. You boys know the river down yonder. Pick out a place an' let Carpenter an' Lige run fer it with the stock when the rest of us git the Injins movin'."

He began to take off his shirt. I tried to hold him back, but he only laughed. "Son," he says, "this fight's won. They're afraid of our medicine. But when they come back, them two with another passel, no tellin' how strong they'll be, ner how hard they'll fight."

He tightened the cinch on the white gelding's pad and swung onto him, naked to the waist. Carpenter says, "Little Pete's old camp—that's a good place." And before I knowed it they ripped away, yelling like mad—Dad and Bill and Joe, and all of them but Carpenter and me. I held my breath. It was five against nigh forty.

But quick's the Injins saw them coming they run. I couldn't believe it. I didn't know Injins then. Something had made them afraid of us; something that nobody could name; and to this day I don't know what it was. But it was medicine of some sort. Dad had knowed it right away, and so had Mike Fink. I saw Bill fire a shot, saw four or five spurts of smoke from Injin guns, and then they was over a ridge and out of sight.



CHAPTER X

"Now, boy, untie 'em." Carpenter's voice fetched me back, like. What looked to be foolhardy on Dad's part was on me, and I couldn't believe what I'd seen.

"Hurry, boy."

I put down my rifle and commenced to untie the stock, not more'n half hearing Carpenter's voice talking as he worked. "'Taint more'n five miles," and "That was the best pack-hoss we had," come to me without me caring much *how* far it was, nor *what* hoss was killed.

We unpacked the dead animal, divided his pack on two others, and lit out, Carpenter leading the bell-mare, and me driving the rest as fast as I could make them go.

We come to a coulee and Carpenter turned down into it. It was stony but led to the river, getting deeper as we traveled. Directly Carpenter turned into another coulee and took that one on a lope; so in no time we was in the prettiest little meadow I ever saw. It was in a sharp bend of the river, and not more'n ten feet above the water. The bluejoint was high and down below out of rifle-shot there was a grove of big cottonwoods. Up above for more'n a mile there wa'n't anything; so that nothing could come at us without being seen.

It all popped into sight, the stock snuffling like they was glad, and Carpenter stopped at the edge of the bank. We both got down and unpacked, stringing the packs in a half-circle with the open part towards the river. We worked fast, Carpenter

talking most of the time, like we was safe and all right; but I couldn't care much what he was saying. I was thinking of Dad and the others out on the plains.

There was a little pole corral under the bank that Carpenter figured would hold the stock, so we put them into it and tied the mare. Then we saw that the buckskin mule had an arrow sticking in him. I'd never noticed it all the way from the little coulee, and felt ashamed. We pulled it out and the wound was bleeding bad when we climbed up the bank to pile the packs two-high for a barricade.

I looked out over the plains. There was nothing in sight—not even a bird. I wondered what I'd do if Dad didn't come back. Carpenter begun to hum a tune. "What's troublin' ye?" he asked me.

"I reckon I'll go an' get a drink of water," I says. "I plumb forgot I wanted it."

The water was mighty nigh clear and rippled over a bar below the corral, where I reckoned there was a ford, mebbly. The shade of the big trees down below me reached out to the middle of the stream, so I knowed it was nigh four o'clock. It was awful hot and still. When I knelt down to drink a black shadow fell on the water. I looked up and there was a big old buzzard sailing slow against the blue sky, his wings spread out, and never moving, like he could go where he wanted to without trying. I watched him, still and sure up yonder where he could see for miles. Just when I was going to drink a band of antelope come down to the water on the other side. They looked mighty pretty if only we wa'n't in trouble. I watched them a spell, but when I moved to get up they lit out in a hurry.

Carpenter was stretched on the ground with his telescope to his eye. "They're comin'!" he called.

"All of them?" I says, running to him, afraid of his answer.

"Every damned one!"

I begun to laugh. It was too good to be true. Then I thought of that other time when I figured things was too fine to last, and it scared me. Mebby some of them was hurt. Dad mebby. I wanted to saddle my hoss and ride out to meet up with them, but Carpenter wouldn't hear to it. We stood there watching and waiting till I couldn't stand it any longer. I run out to meet them, in spite of Carpenter.

There was blood on Dad's legging. "You're shot!" I says, grabbing Eagle's bridle to lead him in.

"Leggo, son, leggo. Git my duds an' I'll put 'em on. It's only a scratch."

I let go. He didn't want no carrying on, though his legging was soaked with blood. I ran for his shirt, feeling like I'd acted silly.

He made light of his wound when I he'ped him bind it up, but I knowed it was mighty sore and hurt him. It was in the thigh—a regular deep cut made by a ball that plowed a groove clean 'cross but didn't lodge.

He was plumb happy because Eagle wa'n't hurt and said so more'n once. "Fink," he says while we was eating, "that's a good animal, that roan of yours. I'm sorry he stopped an arrow."

"Nothin' to hurt," says Mike, "an' I'll trade him fer yer Eagle an' give good boot."

Dad laughed. "Ain't interested," he says. - "I

might want to get out of the country pretty fast some day."

"Not as fast as me," says Fink. "Well, we're in good shape here. I reckon I'll hev to adorn Betsy. Five more notches," he laughs, cutting nicks in his rifle stock. Dad had said he was a born rattlesnake, and I knowed he was. But he wa'n't afraid of anything. I was sure of that.

"How fer did ye run 'em?" Carpenter asked.

"Nigh an hour," says Bill with his mouth full of dried meat.

"Put up any fight?"

"Only them that hed to."

"This rucus ain't over yit," says Dad. "I'm goin' ter cut some grass fer Eagle, an' tie him handy under the bank."

He got out his knife, and being through eating, we all went at it and cut some grass for the war-hosses while Bill and Joe turned the stock out of the corral to let them fill up before dark.

There wa'n't any use to try to hide out, so we built a good fire and cooked supper. At sundown we watered the stock and then corralled them, all but the war-hosses, which we tied under the bank, saddled and ready for use. We piled the cut grass where they could eat, and then we was ready and begun to wait. We didn't even put out a guard, but one of the men stayed close to the edge of the bank where he could watch the corral.

Nobody wanted to sleep, although Dad said there was time for a good nap if anybody wanted one. The men sat around and talked and I listened. They told of Injin medicine, mostly, and I was glad of it. Dad said that he'd seen an Injin who was bent on goin' to war or on a hoss-stealing raid, kill a

badger and bleed him on a rock. Then when the rock was covered with the blood the Injin would look in it quick. If he saw his own face reflected clear, he'd go, but if his features was blurred, he wouldn't budge.

Then Bill told of seeing one man beat off a whole war-party by acting crazy. That set Mike Fink off, and I didn't know whether to believe what he said or not, but it was a good yarn anyway.

He said that once a war-party run onto tracks in the snow, but not being able to tell which way the man that made the tracks was going, and to be sure to run him down, the party divided and one half went one way and the rest the other. At last one outfit run onto the man asleep by his fire. His feet was sticking out from under his robe and he was awful clubfooted—so much so that one of his feet was turned backwards. As soon's the Injins saw the man's feet they lit out.

Then Dad said, "But jest the same they will fight, an' fight hard, if their medicine is good. Their superstition saves us lots of times, an' nothin' else."

I've seen Injins bleed badgers like Dad said since then, and I know that they won't bother a crazy man. And likely the club-foot puzzled them and made them turn back. But when any man says Injins won't fight he's slandering folks he don't know.

The men talked less and less as it got darker and darker, till finally they was still. After they was quiet for a spell it 'peared like everybody was plumb afraid to break in on the stillness. I got to thinking of Injin medicine, and of Little Pete. His camp had been here—mebby he'd slept where I was sit-

ting. Then I thought how he'd died; and then Caley Byers come into my mind, and Aunt Lib. I felt mighty uncomfortable and as skittish as I did when I nigh stepped on the rattlesnake. No fire, no noise, only the river rippling over the bar. Now and again a hoss would snuffle under the bank, and every time I heered it I thought it was something else for a second. Directly I saw a star, then another. Then the wolves begun to howl back yonder. I reckoned mebbly they was on the trail to the coulee where Talbot's hoss was dead. Boah! a night-hawk swooped down over the river, letting out a noise that sounded like anything but a bird. Then I saw the Big Dipper and the North Star come out clear and felt a breeze on my face, cool and fine. Joe moved a pack a little, and Talbot next to him, changed his position. I was glad they stirred. It eased me up. But the hours dragged and dragged, till at last the stars begun to fade out and I knowed day wa'n't far off.

Suddenly Dad, who was close to me, raised his rifle, and its flash nigh blinded me. "They're here," he says, reloading his gun.

Talbot fired—and Fink—and Bill. And seeing a shadow moving, I let go one myse'f.

"Down low everybody!" says Dad.

Cracky! there was a passel of 'em. Next come arrows, thud! into the packs, and over us—a cloud of them. I could hear their feathers sing past like bullets. Cracky! After them come a passel of shots. I could see the flashes and heered a ball land right under me in a pack. Then more arrows—a passel of 'em.

"Anybody hit?" asked Dad, sliding down to load up.

"Nope," says Fink. "I got two, shore's hell's afire."

I saw something crawling towards the corral and I let go.

"That was a good one, son," says Dad, cocking his rifle. "You got that feller."

I couldn't see another thing. There wa'n't a sound, except the water on the bar.

"They're restin', I reckon," says Dad after a spell. "Joe, was the brown mule bleedin' much when we corralled 'em? I forgot to look. Oh! Joe. What's wrong with Joe, Talbot?"

"By God, he's dead! Hit plumb in the forehead with a ball." Talbot's voice was husky, like his throat was dry.

I couldn't speak for a minute. It was too awful. Everybody was still, thinking, I reckon, same's I was.

"Too bad, son," Dad whispered. "We'll make 'em pay for Joe. That's all we kin do, now."

Seemed as though our voices had started them again. There come a couple of shots and a passel of arrows.

"I'm hit," says Talbot, but not stopping his shooting.

"Bad?" asked Dad.

"Nope—shoulder—arrow—Look out, Dad!"

Dad's rifle flashed and a yell went up.

"My God, Dad, they's a whole passel of 'em," says Bill. "Yonder, yonder, Mike!" he says, loading as fast as he could. "If we kin only stand 'em off till day, we'll make 'em move."

"Here, son," said Dad, "move on the other side of me. Look scatterin' down nigh the corral while I load."

I crawled around Dad. Sure enough there was four or five Injins stealing towards the corral. I fired and loaded and fired again. Dad kept popping away, steady, as fast as he could load. Directly we couldn't see a thing on the little flat down by the corral. It was getting light fast and I could make out the trees by the stream. Day was most there. I could see the packs stuck full of arrows all around us—and poor Joe laying dead by Talbot. I was stiff from staying still so long and stretched my legs.

“Shoo! I reckoned they'd charge at daybreak, but I don't see ary one,” says Dad at last. “Mebby the fight's ours. But we'll wait a spell before we move around.”

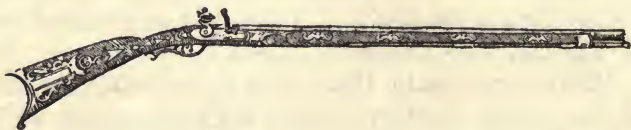
“They don't know they hit any of us,” says Fink. “We got a mess of 'em last night. I know I got several myse'f, so they've got a lot more respect for us an' our medicine than they had before. I'll bet a robe they've pulled out—had enough.”

“I reckon ye're right,” says Dad, “but we'll best sit tight till it gits good and light.”

Fink stood up. “Come on,” he says, “let's bury Joe an' pack up.”

“We'll bury Joe, that we will, an' do it right,” says Dad. “Then we'll scout a bit. If it's safe we'll move.”

I could feel he didn't like the way Fink spoke. And I didn't.



CHAPTER XI

It ain't no use to try to tell how we felt when we buried Joe. Dad felt mighty bad. And Bill too. I knowed it was plumb wicked, but I couldn't he'p think what if it was Dad instead of Joe—kinder comparing how I'd feel if it had been him—and I felt mean and ornery for doing it. But you can't fight off such thoughts once they get going, even if you're ashamed of them and turn against them. They keep hanging on like a shadow you're trying to leave behind. I reckon I felt as bad's anybody though, except mebby Dad. I could see how he felt by his face. The lines hardened up and he looked older. But I was a heap sorrier than I was when my father was killed, and *that* kept pestering like it was against decency. I couldn't even drive it away by remembering how young I was then. That and the thought that I'd be a heap sorrier if it was Dad kept shaming me and making me feel worse all the time we was digging the grave.

The men was mighty careful about the dirt they dug. They put it on buffalo robes, and when the grave was filled and levelled off and tramped solid, they packed every bit of it to the river and dumped it in. Then they built a fire on the grave so neither wolves nor Injins would know it held a body.

"Good-bye to ye, Joe," says Dad. "Ye was a man, all man. Amen."

For more'n a minute nobody moved. A lump come into my throat and nigh choked me. It wa'n't much to say, but the way he said it made it seem longer and better'n a whole funeral sermon

preached by Joshua Moulds. It made me feel that it would be all I'd ask if a good man could say as much for me when I quit. Seemed as though it held a passel of praise, and a promise, too, some way, without fussing, either.

"Come," he says, turning away. "It's a trail we'll all take some day, some way. One place is as good's another, too, I reckon. Nature kin use us, and she will. I'd ruther go to he'p the wild roses than garden flowers—an' so would Joe. But when the time comes we've got to lay 'em down, no matter where it may be, ner how."

Then right away he shook it off—turned his talk to ourse'fs. "We'll look 'round a bit, an' if the Injins hes left, an' I reckon they hev, we'll pack up an' move," he says, walking fast towards the camp.

The Injins had gone. Fink and Dad rode out while we cooked a breakfast, and Bill and me pulled the arrows out of the packs and shaped up. Then Talbot and Carpenter brought up the stock and we packed and lit out. Dad and Bill gave me Joe's war-hoss, and I walked with the other men and led him with a pad on his back. He made me think of poor Joe; but owning him someway put me up, like, in spite of thinking it was low-down to profit by such a thing as a pardner's death. I kept arguing with myse'f that I'd willingly give a hundred hosses if I had them to save Joe, but the ornery side kept horning in all day long and kept me miserable.

Dad and Fink was ahead and I tried to take Joe's place as good as I could and kept behind the pack train. Carpenter and Talbot guarded the sides and we traveled mighty fast, for we'd divided some of the packs and used some of Fink's pack hosses, so the loads was lighter.

We passed dog-town after dog-town; and always there was coyotes sitting around to try and nail a prairie dog. They'd sneak up and then make a rush when a dog had strayed out from his hole a piece, and sometimes they'd catch them but not often. The dogs was curious little fellows, sitting up as straight as ramrods and looking like a passel of posts drove in the ground. They'd bark a funny little chirping bark; and when we got too close they'd pop down in their holes with a flip of their tails. The towns was plumb clean of all grass, and around every hole there was a pile of whitish dirt the dogs had dug in making their burrows. I figured they was mighty wise in handling the dirt. Piled the way they was the mounds made a good place to sit and look for trouble, and besides they kept the water of bad rains and storms from flooding their holes. On nigh half the mounds, too, there was little long-legged owls sitting and looking like they knowed more'n anybody. They didn't pay any attention to the prairie dogs nor the dogs didn't mind them, but each tended to his own business, whatever it was.

There was plenty of antelope again. And twice we saw herds of buffalo feeding off to the north. I was glad to see them, for I knowed it was a good sign and meant there wa'n't any Injins close. But we kept on careful till night and then camped on a water-hole. There wa'n't a thing but buffalo-chips to build a fire with if we'd wanted one, and the water was warm and tasted bad. The rim of the water-hole was tracked up with a thousand million of antelope tracks, and buffalo, too. Just before dark Bill killed a fat young buck.

We moved early in the morning—and every

morning for three days, traveling straight across country that was mighty high level. The sun had plumb baked the adobe flats along the streams we crossed, though they was mighty few and far between.

It was the afternoon of the fourth day after the fight when I saw a strip of cottonwood away ahead. I thought mebby it was a mirage, at first. But directly Dad and Fink stopped and caught up their regular saddle hosses and got on them. So we all mounted, and I was glad to ride a spell.

"It's jest beyond that strip of timber yonder, son," says Dad. "We'll make it by sundown."

He begun to slick up, combing out his hair with his fingers and talking happy, like. I was sure glad and perked up. It seemed like letting out a tight cinch. We was all talking and laughing and riding close and sociable. Everybody acted like he'd stepped across a bad place lucky; and even the stock showed they knowed it. Fink begun to sing.

When we trotted over a little swell on the plain I saw horsemen coming lickety split. At first I thought it was Injins. But Dad says, "Here they come to say 'howdy'; they've seen us a'ready," and Fink and Bill rode ahead to meet them. Dad stopped and got on Eagle, who begun to prance and dance like he wanted to run. But Dad held him in, talking to him quiet, till the men come up.

I never saw anything like it. Everybody was talking at once and was especially glad to see Dad. They called him everything—cussed him and slapped him on the back, laughing like boys. They'd yell like Injins and shoot and ride circles around us and sing. Everybody nagged and jabbered to git a word in—all talking and saying mighty little. But they was sure glad to see us—though no glad-



I yelled with the rest and rode inside

der, I'll bet, than I was to see them. Some kept at it till Fink and Bill climbed up behind them on their hosses; and the bucking and bawling and laughing beat all time. One hoss threw himse'f backward so Bill skinned his nose in the dirt. "Ride in, you fellers!" somebody called above the jangle. "Ride in! Me and Tom'll fetch in the train."

It was like a pistol-shot to start a race. Away we went over the plains, through a dog-town, among a million holes in the ground, like mad men. I couldn't have held my bay if I'd tried. I figured the Yellowstone would stop 'em, but it didn't. They splashed in, ford or no ford. It was a race for the other side. I knowed who'd win it, and he did. Dad and Eagle was across long before anybody else. And I wish you could have seen the hosses. Every one of them crazy wild for the race and stopping at nothing, full of mettle and trembling like leaves. I never did see the beat.

Dripping wet and singing any song we knowed, we rode to the Post. The gate was wide open, and someone let off a cannon as we turned in. The wind of it hit my face like a slap and my hoss shied and nigh upset me; but I yelled with the rest and rode inside. Dogs was barking, Injin drums beating, and if ever a man heered bedlam broke plumb loose, it was me. One feller with rings in his ears run out with a flat keg and a cup, singing in French and offering liquor. They was sure glad to see us and knowed how to show it, I reckoned.

By the time the pack train got in, Dad had got a set of lodge poles from an Injin and had 'em up and waiting for his lodge-skin. "Here we be, son, as our officer friend said in St. Louis. An' now we kin sleep an' sleep an' sleep," he says, filling his pipe.

CHAPTER XII

The Ashley-Henry Post was inside a stockade of cottonwood logs set in the ground on end so that they was more'n ten feet high in a solid wall all around a space two hundred feet by one hundred and fifty feet. The logs was pinned together on the inside with pegged girders, and resting on the girders was a runway where men could stand and defend the Post. The runway was high enough so a man could see outside and shoot without showing too much of himse'f to Injins. The gate was big and heavy, built of split logs and hung on wooden hinges that made an awful fuss when it was opened or shut. When it was open it allowed a passage-way about seven or eight feet wide. In each of the corners opposite from the gate there was two little cannon, set so they could be turned loose on unwelcome visitors; and between them seven little, dirt-roofed cabins for the engagees was built against the wall, the runway stopping against their ends so that men could use their roofs to stand on in a fight. On one end of the stockade—the end on the right of the gate, going in, and nigh the middle of the wall, was the store—a long, low, log building with loop-holes cut in the logs and along the side, and in the end towards the gate, windows that had hinged shutters made so they could be closed on the inside. Down along the right hand wall a little way from the store itse'f was the storehouse, and further down, with quite a space between them, the blacksmith shop, without any door. The roofs of all the

buildings joined onto the regular runway against the walls, so men could walk on them the same as on the runway. The corral was across from the blacksmith shop and storehouse—a good big one that would hold considerable stock. Along that side of the stockade, next to the river, there wa'n't any buildings, but there was several Injin lodges, besides some trappers' camps between the corral and the ends of the enclosure.

Altogether, there was fifteen men in the Post, regular hired men. Engagees, they called them, and they was all white except two interpreters, who was half-breeds that got drunk whenever they could and had a passel of little, sharp-eyed boys and girls that was everywhere and full of mischief.

Bill went off with Fink and his pardners as soon as we got unpacked; so Dad and I was alone. We got everything inside the lodge, making it so full there wa'n't a heap of room left even after we'd piled everything as high as we could to save space. "Gone to git drunk," says Dad, not grumbling, but thinking, like. "Good pardner," he says, "none better, but he hankers for liquor. His flat keg's nigh half-full yit, an' he'll pack it month in an' month out an' never tetch it. Never knowed him to tetch it by himse'f; but I reckoned him an' Fink's crowd would finish it down the river there. The buffalo herd sobered 'em, and the movin' broke up the spree.

"Seems good to be able to set around an' know we kin sleep an' be keerless," he says, sipping a cup of tea. "Reckon we'll stay where we be, son." A gun cracked and he sat up straight with the cup nigh to his lips. But a loud laugh followed from over at the store, and he begun to sip again.

"Drunk," he says, "drunk an' singin.' They'll likely be fightin' before mornin'."

It was hot in the lodge and I raised the lodge-skin higher on the breezy side so the cool would come in. "Tomorrow," I says, "I'm going to write that letter."

"Yes, tomorrow ye kin do it, son." He pulled off his head-silk and smoothed his hair; and then as though he half wanted to blame Bill and excuse him at the same time, he begun: "Son, I don't aim fer to hev ye think I was always a teetotaler, 'cause I wa'n't. I've dranked enough liquor to float a keel-boat an' shot away more lead showin' off than would sink one of 'em, in my time. Experience finally weaned me from liquor, but I figure she was goin' an extra gait when she done it. Anyway it took, good an' plenty, an' I ain't dranked a drop in goin' on twelve years." He stopped to light his pipe.

"Eleven years ago last May," he went on, "me an' my pardner, Dug Tiley, cut into St. Louis with our ketch. It was a good one—one of the best I ever hed a share in. The town was full of trappers an' river men, like it always is. Everybody was havin' a frolic. We sold out good, an' jest as soon as we hed bought our outfit an' paid fer it, we got drunk, as usual. It was Tuesday mornin' when we took in the taverns, an' it was Tuesday night when we called on the dance houses. Before midnight I lost all reckonin', an' aside from spots where there was fights er fires, I don't remember much. Even them's dim.

"Dug had a bad row with a river-pirate in a hurdy-gurdy house an' the feller cut him mighty bad—cut his right ear clean off an' sliced his cheek

like a beefsteak. I kin see him now with his wounds undressed an' bleedin' into his liquor. I may hev been there when the fuss started, but if I was, it's shore my senses wa'n't. Seems like I must hev been outside a spell. Anyhow, when I saw Dug to remember it, he was cut like I tell ye, holdin' a glass of whiskey in his hand an' walkin' in a circle, nigh blind with blood; an' follerin' was the man with the knife. I took it up for Dug an' recollect nigh killin' the devil that cut him. Mebby I did. I know he cut me up some before they pulled me off him."

He stopped, and I could see he was hating to tell the yarn; but he went on, talking slower'n ever. "After that I remember of goin' outside. It was a-pourin' rain an' the night was black dark. I started fer a hitch-rack in the middle of the street. The light from the dance-house streaked out to it an' fell upon a big puddle that surrounded it. I made fer the rack like I tell ye, most likely with a drunken idee of ridin'. Anyway, I went up to a hoss tied there, but he snorted an' thrashed about till he knocked me down in the mud puddle. All the ponies pulled back, an' while they was still snortin' at me I went to sleep there in the water an' mud.

"That's the last I remember—the snortin' of the hosses—till I waked up stiff an' sore an' ugly as a crippled buffalo-bull. There was a buffalo robe over my face; an' a man was layin' on my arm on one side, while on the other, another feller was jammed up tight agin my side like a bed-hawg. 'Lay over, damn ye,' I growled, an' dug my elbow agin his belly. But he didn't move. I give him a couple more good ones, but still he didn't stir. So I set up to move him. He was dead, son, stone dead, with

his glassy eyes wide open an' his ugly mouth agap. Next to me was another corpse—the feller that was layin' on my arm when I waked up. His jaw an' chin was all shot away an' his teeth hung like fringe from shreds of flesh an' bone.

“There was three of 'em besides me under that robe, an' the others was dead men. I didn't camp there long, son. I moved out. Jest as I did a wagon with four men in it backed up to the robe. They hed some shovels; an' ye'd oughter seen 'em stare at me gittin' away from that herd of dead ones. Son, if I'd a-slept jest a leetle longer they'd hev buried me sure's hell's afire. That's when I swore off.”

“Cracky!” I says. “How was the men killed, Dad?”

“Well, ye see, sometime after I went outside a big fight started, an' there was a heap of shootin' done. After it was over they jest gathered up the dead, an' findin' me near the hitch-rack in the puddle with blood all over me, they jest natcherly counted me in, too. Yes, son, if I'd a-slept jest a leetle longer, I'd a-been buried alive. I know I would.”

“Cracky!” I says. “What became of Dug Tiley?”

“Never got over it. Took cold in his wounds an' died a month after. I camped with him till he crossed. Hated awful to see him go, for he was a good man, Dug was. Wished Bill wa'n't so keen fer liquor, but I orten't complain, I reckon; fer if it hedn't a-been fer what I told ye, I'd a-been worse'n him. If I was you I'd never start it, son. It's a trail that don't lead nowhere.”

I was right glad he told me that story. Sometimes I'd wondered why, unlike the rest, he never

touched liquor, but watched his friends drink without much objection. I'd felt that if he had been hard set against drinking like some folks is, he wouldn't have acted the way he did; but his story made me see why he let liquor alone, himse'f.

It was right dusky in the lodge now and a heap cooler since the sun had set. I was unrolling my bed when a man come to the door.

"Hello, Jim! Come in an' rest yourse'f," says Dad, moving so that the visitor could sit down beside him. I never knowed his last name. They called him Big Jim, and he was one of the men who brought in our pack train that afternoon. Also he'd been Little Pete's pardner.

"Do ye reckon 'twas Blackfeet that jumped Little Pete, Jim?" says Dad when the big fellow had set down in the lodge.

"Ain't noway sure," he says. "I was wantin' to talk to ye about it."

He commenced to fill his pipe, slow, and awkward with his hands. His shirt was black with grease and one sleeve was untied so his big sinewy arm was bare to the elbow. He bent over to dig out a coal of fire from the ashes, and I could see his middle finger was gone from his left hand. When he straightened up and spoke it was slow and with a half stutter to his words.

"Ye see," he begun, "Little Pete was plumb alone when he went under. Last winter me an' him trapped the Missouri below the Post an' worked some on the Yellerstone. I ain't noways superstitious, but Thanksgivin' day, near as I know, we set fourteen traps on the Yellerstone. In the mornin' when we visits 'em, every trap was sprung an' in the last one down the stream was an arrow—a Crow

arrow with a cross down nigh the feathers. It was painted on the shaft with blue paint. The next day one of my pack-hosses come into camp with an arrow stickin' in his flank. I pulled it out, an' it was a mate to the one in the trap—cross an' all. We moved down towards the Post a day's drive; an' when I went to build a fire, damned if an arrow wa'n't stickin' straight up on the spot where I'd intended buildin' it. That arrow belonged to the same quiver with the other two. It was Crow, except the cross.

"I didn't say nothin' to Pete just then. In the mornin' when I woke up it was early. Pete was with the stock. We intended trappin' from where we was down to the Post below; but we didn't set a trap. Not one. Another arrow was in camp, an' it had been sent by a bow. We come on into the Post an' started to trap the Missouri, all the time lookin' fer more arrows; but nary one did we see!"

"Curious, Jim. Mighty curious," says Dad. "Tryin' to scare ye off the Yellerstone, mebbly. But why all the trouble? 'Pears to me that if the Crows—wait—"

"Ye've struck it," interrupted Jim. "'Twa'n't Injins. But I didn't guess it until a month later—after Christmas, anyhow. I was in the Post to get some lead an' trade in some beaver. A Crow vilage was camped just across the river an' a big bunch of 'em was tradin' when I got in. A whalin' big brute who seemed to be a chief among 'em was talkin' English to the trader. If there was any Injin in his breedin' it was hid by nigger blood, though he was part white."

"Rose," says Dad, reaching for his pipe.

"Edwin Rose," says Jim. "An' if ever I laid eyes on a bad one that was the man. I'd like to hev pulled an arrow from his quiver, but I knowed I'd start somethin' if I did. I was shore he was better acquainted with me than I was with him, too."

"I hev seen him," said Dad. "He was a river-pirate between New Orleans an' St. Louis till the law got him fer murder. He got free some way an' now he's a chief among the Crows. He's a mulatto an' as full of fight as a badger. I've heered good things of Rose as well as bad, but he's an outlaw from the States. He wants to keep us off the Yellerstone, likely; an' with his backin' I'll remember it. He stands high with the 'Rees, too. He's with them as much as he is with the Crows. He's a bad man. But he shore was square with Colonel Leavenworth last spring in the battle with the 'Rees, even if Hunt was afraid of him twelve years ago. 'Nez Coupe.' Yes, I know him; an' I've wondered that he don't burn this Post."

I sat there waitin' for them to go on. But I reckon to them it seemed like they'd said all there was to say.

Dad thought a minute, listening to the racket over at the store. "Son, mebby me an' you'd better try to git Bill to camp," he says.

We all went over, Dad, Big Jim, and me. The door was wide open and the place dim-lit by cups of grease with burning rags in them, smelling fearful. And such carrying on! A fiddle was going to beat all time and men dancing to the music with their arms around each other like one of them was a girl. It was hotter'n blazes in there, made hotter

by the burning grease and the dancers; but nobody seemed to notice the heat and sang or danced to the fiddle as hard as they could go. Everybody was dripping sweat, except two Injins who was squatted against the wall looking on. I couldn't figure whether they thought the men was plain fools or just crazy. Their faces didn't tell.

We went over against the wall and looked around for Bill. Directly we saw him back in the shadows in a corner. Dad went towards him and I slipped down nigh the fiddler who was setting on the counter. His face, shiny with sweat, was nigh black and had deep pock marks. There was rings in his ears and an ugly whitish scar reaching up from the corner of his mouth to his left eye, which was sunk in, like, and never moved nor winked no matter which way he looked. His other eye'd laugh but that one, never. It just stared like it wa'n't no relation to its mate and wouldn't get glad no matter what happened to tickle its pardner. His head was tied round with a dirty red cloth and his hair was fresh bobbed and blacker'n a crow. Cracky! I used to see that face in my dreams, and do yet when I'm upset by something or other. I just couldn't take my eyes off him. He worked like a nailer, too, fiddling fast and steady and keeping time with his heel against the counter, while the sweat poured off him; and that one eye that never winked just fastened on my own, though it didn't seem to see me or anything else.

I slipped down along the wall a bit to get closer. A drunk Frenchman stopped me, singing,

“Dans mon chemin j'ai rencontré
Trois cavalières bien montées”

and slopped a cup of liquor on my arm. He never noticed it but waved the cup:

“L'on, ton, laridon danée
L'on, ton,”

I've heered it a thousand times since then.

“What's the matter with that man's eye?” I says to make talk and mebbly get away without a quarrel.

He teetered back and forth, spilling about all that was left in the cup. “Dat's glass heye,” he hiccuped. “She's buy heem New Orlean.” He took hold of my shirt to steady himse'f and leaning forward till his chin was mighty nigh against me, whispered “Ma frien', de hol' man, she's see hout dat heye. Yas siree! She do. Wan day me an' de hol' man is look por de 'orse.” He begun to look towards the fiddler as though he was afraid he'd hear what he was saying; but finding he was busy with his music, he went on, “Jes' bimeby me HI'm seeum some 'orse—mebbly ten, twelve. HI'm say, 'Hol man, me, HI'm seeum some 'orse' an' HI'm point ma finger. By gar! de hol man, she's tak hout dat damn heye, she's wipe heem wid piece buckskeen, she's put de heye back hon de 'ole, she's look queek. ‘Yes sar, Pete,’ she's says, ‘dat's dem 'orse, by gar!’ She's see hout dat heye same lak de nodder wan.”

“Trois cavalières bien montées
L'une à cheval, l'autre à pied.
L'on, ton,”

away he went, whirling and staggering about the room, seeing mighty little and hearing less. I'd never before heered of a glass eye, nor seen one,

and I couldn't more'n half believe there was any such thing.

Suddenly I perked up. Someone was shouting above the racket: "My full an' complete name is M-I-C-K-E P-H-I-N-C-K, Mike Fink!" And there he was on the other side of the fiddler, pounding the counter with his fist, though the fiddler kept right on playing like he wa'n't there. "Hi! Good-eye," yelled Fink. "Stop that damned fiddlin'. I'm talkin'!"

The fiddle stopped and the singing, too. Even the dancers stood where they was while Mike spelled out his name again. "As fer East as Pittsburgh they give me the fifth quarter of beef not to shoot agin 'em," he says, pounding the counter harder'n ever and talking louder.

Carpenter slipped nigh to him; and I reckon he knowed Mike was wanting to go to war, for he commenced to talk low to him and put his hand on his shoulder, friendly, like, and anxious.

"Git away from me!" Mike shook off Carpenter's hand, "Git clean away!" he snarls. "Ye stole my squaw, ye low-down skunk!"

Talbot run up to them, sobered. "Don't quarrel, boys," he begs, pulling Carpenter away.

Mike spit after them, ornery and mean as a bobcat. "I kin lick any white man, Frenchman, er Injin in this here Post—any of 'em," he says, gritting his teeth till I could hear it plain. "My name is M-I-C-K-E P-H-I-N-C-K—Mike Fink!"

It got still again in the store; but the little drunk Frenchman, full of good nature and not realizing Mike was mad, staggered across the room with his cup. "Have a drink, Meester Fink," he says, teetering like he might fall over on top of Fink.

Mike was made madder by the fellow's good nature. He grabbed the cup out of his hand and threw the liquor plumb in his face. "Hell, if I want a drink I kin git it myse'f, can't I?" he yells. "Keep away from me—clean away!"

Then he walked right out of the door as straight's a string. I was glad, and so was everybody else, I reckon; for right away the fiddle started up again and the little drunk Frenchman begun to sing his song, like he didn't know he mighty nigh had a peck of trouble.

"Well, son," says Dad, coming up to me with Bill, "let's go to camp and hev a good sleep. Bill's comin' with us."

The fresh air smelled mighty good. A little night breeze was stirring, and back of the Post, a piece, a wolf was howling like all get out. On the runway two men was walking back and forth; but besides them we didn't see a soul. The lodges was all dark. Two Injin dogs was answering the wolf now and again; but that and the wolf howling was about the only noise we heered, except the racket back in the store.

Dad kindled a little fire and made a cup of tea for Bill, and we all took a cup with him.

"That quarrel of Fink's an' Carpenter's ain't done yit," says Dad over his tea. "They's a woman in it, an' that kind o' trouble's like a carbuncle. Old friendships may salve it an' keep it down fer a spell, but it's bound to come to a head."

"They'll make it up agin before mornin'," laughed Bill. "Mebby 'twon't stay made up; but they'll all three be back in the store inside an hour."

"Mebby," says Dad. "When I was over there the trader told me that Alex Beasley an' Jake Aber-

nathy left word with him to tell me an' you they figured on throwin' in with us this fall an' winter. The trader said they'd ought to be here now an' if we liked the arrangement we'd better wait a spell till they got here. How does it strike you, Bill?"

"Jake an' Alex's good men," says Bill. "I figure 'twould be a good plan to have 'em with us."

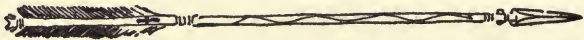
"Good. Son, how do ye feel about hevin' two more men in the party—two more besides their skinner and flesher?" Dad says.

"I'm agreeable to whatever you an' Bill says is for the best," I answered, feeling mighty good to be asked.

"Then we'll wait a spell," says Dad. "If they ain't too long gittin' here, we'll make one party out of theirs an' ours."

"What are we goin' to do fer a skinner and flesher in Joe's place?" asked Bill.

"I can't answer," says Dad. "We'll think about it tonight an' talk about it tomorrow. Let's turn in."



CHAPTER XIII

I layed awake a long time after Dad and Bill was asleep. The noise from the store, now high, then low, kept up as long as I remembered anything. And I thought a good deal about our new pardners. I half wished they wouldn't turn up. I was afraid I might not like them. I tried to picture Alex, but I couldn't make him fit our party, somehow, and Jake was off color, too. I reckoned it was his name, mebby, for the only Jake I knowed was a worthless lot. Then I thought of Joe fer a spell, wondering what sort of a man might take his place. I heered shots twice, but they didn't disturb Dad or Bill; and at last I went to sleep.

Dad had a fire kindled outside the lodge when I waked up. The store was plumb still and I could see men stretched out under the runway asleep. Two was setting up against the store with their heads lopped over and their mouths wide open, sleeping sound but not very still. They looked silly. Bill laughed. "I'm glad I ain't one of 'em," he said starting for water.

When he come back, Dad, thinking it was a good time, I reckon, said, "Bill, ye'd please me if ye'd call the spree over. Jake an' Alex oughter be here any day now, an' as soon as we kin we ought to be jiggin' fer winter quarters. What say?"

"I'm plumb through, Dad," he says, and I saw he meant it.

We wa'n't in no hurry with breakfast. There wa'n't a thing that needed doing except my letter,

and as soon as I could do it without letting on it was pestering me, I reminded Dad of it again.

"I've got a quill an' some paper in the packs," he says, "but I callate we'd best write it over to the store. We got to give the letter to the trader anyway, an' it'll save me hevin' to dig 'em out. We'll wait a spell 'fore we go over, son, an' let folks git the kinks out of theirse'fs. Ain't no call to hurry, nohow. The mail don't leave this p'int every day," he says, laughin' and pourin' his tea.

But other folks didn't wait to visit the store, I noticed. For directly the gate opened and some Injins rode inside, men, women and children, going straight to the store, where they got down and went in—some of them. One old woman was riding a pudgy mare with a spotted colt following close behind. She didn't more than slow up when the little feller went after his breakfast. It didn't bother her a bit. She got off on the other side and let him fill up while she went in to trade.

By the time most of the Injins had got down and before the man had the gate closed, in come some more—half-breeds, mostly, I reckoned, and not nigh so trim-looking nor tidy as the Injins, theirse'fs. Colors! Cracky! It was nigh as bright as St. Louis in front of the store. And the hosses was of every color, too. In less'n no time there was nigh forty of them, lots of them spotted, some of them with mighty showy rigging, and others without any rig at all, only a rawhide rope hitched on the underjaw.

I could see it was going to be a hot day—still and the sky clear of clouds, though the beginning of a hot wind was flapping the ears of the lodge a little, and over there, the trappings of the Injins' hosses. The women begun to unload some of them that was

packed with robes, and as fast as they could they carried the stuff into the store. I was itching to go over and watch the trading; but I let it go for more'n an hour.

They was still at it when Dad and I did go, though most of them had made their trade and was packing up to get out again. Every one of them seemed to know just what he wanted and got it as quick as he could.

But one, a tall, thin, man, was standing still close to the door and just inside. He had a mighty fine face, though it was seamed up right smart and looked stern and proud. Someway, he reminded me of Dad, only he wa'n't so tall. Now and again while the others was trading he'd say a few words to a girl by his side.

It ain't right easy when you've seen a body a heap o' times, to remember how they looked the first time you ever saw them, 'thout adding things you've kinder discovered a little at a time. But I remember plain how she looked that day.

She was pretty as any young woman I ever saw, her black eyes eager, though she stuck timidly to the man's side like she'd give a lot to be through and away from there. Her black hair hung long in two thick braids over half-naked shoulders that was round and brown and smooth-looking. Her arms was bare to the elbows, and she had little hands and little feet. Her dress was made of brand new elk-skin, not smoked much, so that it was mighty nigh white, all quill-worked and pretty's could be. So was her moccasins which fit her like her feet was made for 'em. There was a little streak of bright red paint in the part of her hair; and whenever she moved the long, thin fringe of her dress trembled.

I'd never seen a nicer dress nor a prettier girl. But she wouldn't look at anybody, only the Injin I knowed was her father.

When the last load of goods was packed out the man walked over to the counter and made some signs to the trader.

"Wants credit," says Dad. "They're Crees."

The trader signed back without hesitating, and Dad says, "He gits it, too. Now watch 'em."

And I did watch them. I made up my mind to learn how to make signs, too.

Up and down along the counter the Injin walked, the girl behind him like a shadow—just as still and just as easy. The man bought one thing after another, the girl taking whatever he got and piling it careful on the floor; till finally he quit. Then he turned around and put his hand on her arm, saying something to her and pushing her gently to the counter.

"It's her turn now," says Dad. "I bet I know what she'll buy."

So did I. I'd noticed a while back that whenever some of the other women got a red blanket she would say something to her father. I could tell by the way she looked she wanted one, too, and I shore hoped she'd get one. I watched her sign the trader. I tell you, she had pretty hands and arms. As soon as she'd made her wants known, sure enough the trader and she come back to the pile of blankets beside Dad and me. He showed her white ones and green ones and striped ones; but she knowed just what she wanted.

It was a red one. Her eyes wa'n't lying when the other women got theirs. She didn't put that blanket in the pile with the other things. She put

it on Injin fashion, over her dress. But it didn't look half so nice as the dress, and I wanted to tell her so.

Next she bought some beads—about a tin cup full, I reckon, of all colors, every color separate on a string. When she took the pile in her hands, so plumb tickled she was afraid she'd drop or break them, she looked up at her father and said something. He laughed, low and glad, and made signs to the trader, who smiled and nodded like he was interested. He was a good trader an' knowed how.

"She says she will make her father some fine leggins with the beads," Dad told me.

The trader tried to sell her more. But, no, she had everything she wanted. She was plumb satisfied, and you could see it in her face. Dad and her father begun to talk in signs then, and she to make packs out of the stuff they'd bought, laying her new blanket on the counter near me.

I watched her work. Her hands was quick as lightning; and the closer I got the prettier I thought her, which ain't always the way it turns out.

I reckon I'd been looking at her right steady, when suddenly she straightened up and her eyes lit right on mine. Cracky! Hers dropped quicker'n scat. She said something to her father in a voice so low I didn't reckon he'd hear it. But he turned and come to her side, picked up the biggest part of the packs, and started for the door. "Ho!" he says, and laughed out loud. It made him look mighty different, that laugh, when his face lit up, and I liked him.

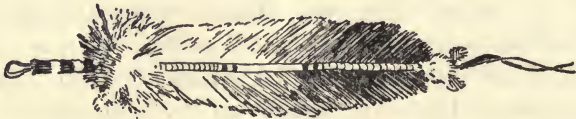
The girl shouldered the rest of the goods and followed him. It looked like a big load, for she was little. I'd have carried it out, but I didn't reckon

she'd let me. Anyhow, I followed them to the door and watched them pack a couple of hosses with the stuff. She was handy as a man, and as quick. She worked on the off side and knowed her job as well as Dad or Bill, and heaps better'n I did, though I'd been making a hand ever since Joe was killed.

"Here, son." It was Dad, and he was grinning. "Better take this here quill an' paper an' git that letter wrote before ye fergit it," he says. "The trader told me a mackinaw is leavin' fer St. Louis tomorrow, an' that's lucky.

I could feel my face getting red, but I took the quill and paper. "Do you reckon that officer was bad hurt, Dad?" I says.

"Shoo! no. He's plumb forgot all about that little tap before now. Ain't no call to mention any sech argument in yer letter, nohow, son," he laughed. "I'd jest write an' tell 'em ye didn't know nothin' 'bout that killin', an' say I was well an' gittin' along. I've fixed it so's the boat will take yer letter, an' when it's wrote jest give it to the trader. I'll step over to the lodge, I reckon, an' when ye're through ye kin foller me."



CHAPTER XIV

It was harder to write that letter than I had thought. I knowed it looked mighty bad of me, running away like I did; and when I got the words down on the paper telling I didn't kill Caley Byers, I couldn't excuse myse'f for running off. I didn't try to. If I had, I would have had to say something about Dad hitting the officer. I couldn't say that, so I just said I didn't kill Caley Byers and didn't even know about it till I was in St. Louis. Somehow, I reckoned Aunt Lib would believe me, and that I was well. Then I quit. It seemed as though if I couldn't tell it all, I couldn't tell any part that would excuse me in running off.

I gave my letter to the trader and was just starting for the door when Mike Fink and Carpenter come in. I tried to slip out, pretending to be fixing my belt; but Mike called, "Come, boy, let's licker up!"

"I don't drink," I says, and got to the door.

But he started for me. "Wait," he says, and I saw he was more'n half drunk.

Carpenter caught hold of his arm. "No, no, Mike," he says, pulling him back. "Let the boy alone. Let's me an' you take our lick'er by ourse'fs. It's my treat."

Fink begun to laugh. It sounded nasty and mean; but he let Carpenter lead him towards the back end where the liquor was; and I went on over to the lodge.

Dad was inside mending my saddle that was Joe's

and Bill was half asleep on a robe, with the sweat prickling out on his forehead.

"It's hotter'n fire in here," Dad says when I sat down near Bill. "Let's git outside an' set in the shade of the lodge." And he picked up the saddle and his tools and we moved out, him and me. Bill raised up, too, but he only picked up a stick of firewood and propped up the lodgeskin higher from the ground and then stretched himse'f again.

"What are we goin' to do fer a camp-keeper, Dad?" he says, wiping his forehead with his sleeve.

"We must look around," Dad answered, poking his awl into the leather of the saddle. "It'll be hard to find another man like Joe. He was a mighty good skinner and flesher, Joe was."

"Couldn't double up with Jake and Alex's men, I reckon?" suggested Bill, like he knowed Dad would object, which he did.

"No," he says. "'Tain't good style to be beholden to others. We'll look around keerful, keepin' our eyes open an' our mouths shet. We don't want them that's lookin' too hard fer a job. Them kind is generally small potatoes." Then after he'd set with the saddle in his lap for nigh an hour, he says, "Son, we'll hev to move agin, I reckon. The sun's a-workin' 'round here."

And so we moved, Dad and I, while Bill dozed on the buffalo robe, until the store was out of sight behind the lodge. We didn't see Fink and Carpenter coming nor even hear them, until they stood before us, Mike with a tin cup in one hand and his other arm around Carpenter's neck. Stopping, he bowed low to Dad and me.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he says. "Me an'

Carpenter's made it all up, an' we've come over to tell ye. Ain't we, pardner?"

"Yes," Carpenter says, glancing queer at Dad.

"Take a drink then," says Fink, swinging round the cup and slopping the liquor.

Carpenter took the cup and drank. Then he give it back to Fink, who also took a drink. His eyes was red and he swayed a little on his feet and begun to hiccup between his words. "We drink from the same cup, me an' my ol' pardner," he says, slapping Carpenter on the back. "Yes, sir, an' the same robe covers us both, like it orter do." He staggered and spilled nigh all the rest of the liquor, but straightening himse'f and looking at Carpenter like he didn't see him, he says: "Say! let's show 'em how our confidence is after our little squabble, hey? Let's—let's s-shoot this here damned cup off'n each other's heads at seven—seventy yards, jes—jest to show 'em, hey?" His bleary eyes was leering at Carpenter now, daring him, like. Carpenter smiled, looking at Dad kinder helpless. He wa'n't drunk; an' somehow I knowed Mike wa'n't so far gone as he acted.

"Men," says Dad, sticking the awl in the ground beside him. "Ye're in liquor, an' hands ain't none too stiddy then, ner eyes. Better go slow."

Fink scowled ornery. "Liquor never stopped me an' my pardner from drawin' a bead," he says. "Let's show 'em, Carpenter," he urged.

Then Carpenter put his foot into it. "Who'll shoot first?" he says, like he didn't want Mike to think he was afraid.

"We'll sky a copper, an' the winner'll shoot first," says Mike, digging into his pocket. He brought out a penny an' tossed it high.

"Heads!" calls Carpenter, as the coin was going up.

"An' tails she lies!" laughed Mike, bending over the penny that fell near my feet. "See fer yerse'f," he says.

And sure enough, it was tails.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Fink begun to laugh. "Come on, all of ye. Everybody outside the gate, an' we'll show ye what confidence between pardners is like. Come on, Dad. Down the saddle! Come an' see if liquor's dimmed my eyes!"

He was in high spirits, and I noticed he wa'n't hiccuping no more, nor staggering neither, as we went along. For we was all following him towards the gate like it was the only thing to do. "I'll go an' git the cup filled agin, boys," he says, and run into the store as we passed. And everybody in the Post joined the party, eager like folks is to see a rucus.

Talbot come out and fell in beside Carpenter. They begun to talk low, but so's I heered part of what they was saying. Directly Mike rushed past us to head the procession; and when he got by, holding the cup of liquor in front of him, Carpenter said: "Talbot, I want ye to hev my rifle, powder horn, pouch, an' pistol. I believe Mike will kill me."

Talbot stopped still and I had to walk on; but I heered him pleading, "Don't be a fool an' let him shoot ye down!"

But Carpenter took hold of Talbot's arm and started with him to follow us outside the gate. I tried to get to tell Dad what I'd heered; but Fink was with him, and I couldn't.

No sooner had we strung out of the gate than

Fink shut it on its creaking hinges and saying, "All ready!" he handed Carpenter the cup, about half full, shook hands with him, paced off seventy yards, and turned and faced him.

My knees felt like they did when I run onto the rattlesnake before the fight. Carpenter stepped away from Talbot, stooped and picked up a charred stick from an old lodge-fire, and blackened a little spot on the cup. Then he set the cup square on his head.

He wa'n't ten feet from me; nor any of us, for we was all in a bunch. "All right Mike, let her go!" he calls. And Fink raised his rifle.

My muscles tightened awful. The muzzle didn't wobble, and I watched to see it flash. But Fink lowered it, and I loosened up some. "Stand still, Carpenter," he calls. "Don't spill that liquor. I'll be wantin' a drink in a holy minute!"

And his rifle went up again and flashed.

Carpenter pitched forward on his face. Talbot run to him and rolled him over. There was a bullet-hole plumb in the middle of his forehead.

"You've spilled that liquor, an' I need it," called Mike, dropping the butt of his gun to the ground.

"You've *killed* him!" cried Talbot hoarsely. His hands was clenched till his knuckles was white.

"The hell I have! I drawed as fine a bead on that cup as I ever did in my life. Damn that gun!" Mike bent his head, blowing his breath into the barrel of his rifle to rid it of smoke, and begun to reload.

"Come, son, let's be jiggin'," whispered Dad.

And we turned away. "I was afeered to stay there," he said. "Afeered I might mess things up more if I did, mebby."

That's all he said till we got back to the lodge where he picked up Joe's saddle again and begun to work at it. I set down beside him, but there wa'n't no use telling him what I'd heered now. I was numbed all over anyway—couldn't think of anything but Carpenter with the tin cup on his head, ten feet from me. I'd even heered the bullet hit him plain.

"Best not to think about it, son," says Dad, after we'd been setting there a spell. He cut a raw-hide thong with his knife, slow, like. "Jest drive it out of yer camp. It's like a skunk an' ain't fit to associate with nohow," he says, threading the thong through a hole he'd made with his awl. He begun to hum a tune; but I knowed his mind wa'n't on it, nor his work, neither; and directly he says: "Crime itse'f punishes crime, an' all debts are paid by all men. A day don't count, nor a year. The score will come even; it's plumb bound to. Reach' me that awl again, son."

I gave him the awl. And then I saw the men trooping in through the gate, "They're coming back," I says.

"Yes; more liquor, I reckon. An' Bill's with 'em," he says, getting up and carrying the saddle into the lodge.

In a little while they was singing over at the store. And when more than an hour had gone by and Bill didn't come, Dad says, "Son, jest you slip over yonder an' hang around a little spell. Don't say nothin' to nobody; not even Bill. But jest ha'nt him, like. 'Twill be a reminder, mebbly, an' better'n fer me to go, I reckon."

I found Bill right away, leaning against the wall across the room from the counter where Fink and

the rest was drinking. I slipped over to him and squatted down with my back against the logs, doing as Dad told me. Then I saw Talbot, alone over in the corner. He was watching Fink like a cat; and I took to watching *him*.

Mike was spelling his name and pounding the counter with his fist. Suddenly he saw Talbot, and his eyes narrowed and looked cunning and mean as a coyote's. "I say my name is M-I-C-K-E P-H-I-N-C-K, Mike Fink!" he says, leering at Talbot. "An' there's more dirty, white-livered cowards in this Post than would patch hell a mile. I kin lick 'em—any of 'em! I say I kin lick any white man, Injin, er Frenchman in the house, er anywhere! I want to fight! I'm Mike Fink, an' I kin out-shoot any——"

Talbot was close to his side in a second. "That was a wild shot ye made this afternoon!" he hissed through his teeth.

Fink jumped back, bumping over a Frenchman. "I killed that skunk a-purpose—*a-purpose*, you damned fool!" he yelled, his face white with rage.

A pistol flashed in Talbot's hand, not a foot from Mike's heart and he went down.

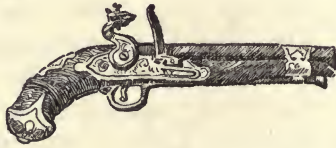
I stood up. Talbot bent over Mike in the powder smoke. "You snake," he hissed, looking down at him with the pistol in his hand. "You low-down snake! I killed ye with *his* pistol—Carpenter's own pistol! Do ye hear me, damn ye?"

I can smell that powder-smoke yet and see him bending over Mike Fink with the pistol in his hand. When the men had fallen back he was gone.

Bill and I went to the lodge. I felt glad all over, and I ain't ashamed to say it.

But we never saw Talbot again, any of us. He

must have been afraid of trouble over killing Fink, although he need not. Anyhow, he slipped out of the stockade and away; and that fall was drowned while trying to cross a river. And so all three partners died with their boots on. And I had liked Carpenter—maybe by comparing him with the other two.



CHAPTER XV

The next morning we did some trading on our own account. Dad paid ten dollars fer a spade that a person could buy at Coon Creek fer sixty cents, easy. We bought a sawed-off scatter-gun from a trapper who was going down the river, in the mackinaw, besides. Dad said it would be good medicine in a night attack at close quarters, and I reckoned it would.

In the afternoon there was some hoss-racing up the river a piece between some of the men at the Post and Injins. I wanted to see it and mighty nigh decided to go with Bill who started early with some more men; but Dad said he'd stay and tinker the rigging and I didn't want to leave him behind, so I didn't go.

It was nigh sundown when Bill come back. Dad was cooking supper just outside the lodge, broiling some fat buffalo steaks on willow coals. I watched him lay green willows on the coals, some one way and some another, crosswise of the first. Then he spread the steaks on the sticks and salted them plenty. The meat sizzled and wrinkled and smelled mighty good; and in no time he took hold of the two outer sticks and flopped it over. It was browned in squares, like, and fairly bubbling with its own fat. The green willow sticks didn't even start to burn, and Dad said the bark would flavor the meat. He took pains with it, I tell you, and was right busy, squatting before the hot coals with one knee on the ground and both hands tending to three big steaks.

Bill's mouth fairly watered when he smelled the meat. "Ho! pardner," he laughed. "I'm wolfish an' kin spot fat cow a mile off."

"He'p yerse'f," says Dad, handing him over a dripping steak on the willows, right off the coals.

"I saw Kenneth McLeod today; an' if ye're agreeable I reckon I could git him fer our camp-tender," said Bill, taking the steak. "I didn't say nothin' to him—thought I'd wait. He's a breed, but I knowed his father down below, an' he was a good man. His mother's a Cree woman," he says.

"I'm agreeable if ye know him," Dad told him. "His Injin blood ain't no bar with me. Git him if ye reckon he's fit."

Cracky! the meat was good. Dad got up and cut two more steaks and spread them on the coals; but the fire wa'n't so good as it had been.

"McLeod told me he was with the Crees above here," says Bill, taking a drink of water in great gulps. "I'll see him tomorrow. 'Tain't far to the village, most likely," he says.

"No," says Dad, turning the meat again, "Red Robe told me the Crees was camped about an hour's ride up the Yellowstone. Must be a right smart village of 'em to be where they are. Ye'd better ride out an' see McLeod in the mornin', Bill. Jake an' Alex oughter be here now, mighty quick."

Red Robe. That was the name of the girl's father—the girl I'd seen in the store. I wanted to see her again. And long after Dad and Bill was asleep that night I thought about her and wondered if Dad would plague me if I went with Bill. The longer I thought about going the more I wanted to see her, and before I went to sleep I'd decided I'd go anyway, even if Dad did poke fun at me. I'd

never seen a big Injin village, and now I had a chance.

I waked up just at day and built a fire. Then I went down to the river and took a swim. By the time I got back with a kettle of water Dad and Bill was up, and Dad said, "Conscience troublin' ye, son?"

"Nope," I says. "I thought I'd go 'long with Bill and see the Injin village, so being awake I turned out."

"Shoo!" he laughs, "I wouldn't let it keep me awake, less it was a hostile village. But mebby it's only a red blanket that's pesterin', son." He said it low so I knowed Bill didn't hear it.

But I was glad I'd out with it anyway. It was settled, and I felt better. So while Dad was down at the river I told Bill I was going with him. "All right," he says. "I'll send an Injin out fer a couple of hosses."

Before the sun was up we rode out of the gate and up the river. It was a still morning, and going to fetch in a hot day. We passed the herders with our hosses and mules. Eagle, Dad's white gelding, was fat and as sleek as an ivy leaf, and my hoss that was Joe's war-pony looked good, too; and so did all the stock, for that matter.

Directly I saw an Injin on top of a knoll beyond us. He was waving a robe over his head. Afterwards he dropped it, picked it up, and dropped it again. "He's tellin' the village we're comin'," says Bill. "It's early yit an' most likely the hunters are still in camp."

We passed close to the foot of the knoll, not seeing the Injin any more; and riding around a point of timber, we come in sight of the village—more

than a hundred lodges in a grove of big trees by the river. The sun was coming up, and there was just enough breeze to stir the leaves on the tall cottonwoods. The lodges was pitched in a big circle with their doors faced to the rising sun—skin-lodges all shaped alike, though not all of a size. Some of them, half hidden by the bushes, looked far away and kind of make-believes in the circle that reached from the river's bank to the outer edge of the grove. Some was painted queer-like, with funny looking animals on them. You could tell what every animal was intended to represent, and some of them was mighty well done. I never saw so many dogs—cur-dogs that looked like wolves; and fine hosses was staked here and there in the village, fat and sleek as butter. I knowed right away they was picked buffalo-runners, and war-ponies kept handy in case of trouble.

We rode into the village between two fine lodges. When we stopped and got down, just inside, I saw a dozen groups of men sitting in the shade under the trees, off to our right. Directly a tall, oldish man got up in the group nearest to us and said something to another man. Then *he* got up. He was a half-breed. They both come over to where we was standing and the old man said, "How," right agreeable. He said something to the half-breed, and directly the breed says, "De Chief, she's want you por tell heem wat you want."

Bill says, "Tell the Chief I'm wantin' to talk to Kenneth McLeod."

The fellow didn't know who he meant at first, but directly after Bill described McLeod, he understood.

"Hees nam' Kap-sah-sik Mo-ca-mon; Leetle

Knife," he says, and he repeated to the Chief what we wanted.

The Chief—his name was Big Bear—said something to the breed, and the fellow untied a pony near us and, straddling him quicker'n lightning, rode about the village, calling out something in Cree. It was all in one tone of voice and sounded wild as all get out to me then.

I couldn't see a woman anywhere, though I looked. I could catch glimpses of their faces peeping from under the lodge-skins that was raised from the ground so that the breeze could pass under; but none of them come out. There was plenty of children hid behind the lodges and trees. They stole shy glances at us now and again; but they was quiet, and whenever they caught us looking at them, drew back like shadows, plumb out of sight. I was hoping some to see the girl that had been trading at the store; but you'd hardly know there was a woman in the village, and I gave it up.

Directly here come seven men, the breed leading them. They was headmen and members of the Council. The girl's father was one of them. They spread two robes and we all knelt down on them. Then Red Robe filled a big stone pipe and after he'd got it going good, handed it to the Chief. The old Chief was mighty solemn with it, and you could see he was in earnest, the way he handled it before he passed it to us. We all smoked it—the Injins and Bill and me.

I was wondering which was McLeod and looked them all over while Bill talked. He told the story of our trip up the river—our fight, and how Joe got killed—in English, talking to nobody in particular; but everybody listened whether they understood or

not. That was the first time I knowed that an Injin will always let you have your say till you're plumb through. Bill wound up by saying he wanted McLeod to go with us and that we would pay him thirty dollars a month.

You would have thought McLeod would answer then, but he didn't. As soon as Bill had finished, Red Robe filled the pipe again out of a mighty pretty pouch and we smoked. It was queer to me then; but I've found there are fewer mistakes made by smoking between an important question and an answer.

When the pipe had been plumb around, a smallish man across from the Chief begun to speak in Cree. I reckoned he was re-telling everything Bill had said, for the Chief and the other men listened, and now and again one would say "Ho!" or "Ahh!" but never interrupted till the smallish man was done talking. Then we smoked again, slow as ever, and when we'd done that the Chief talked and after him everybody had a say. When the last had spoken, the little man got up and shook hands with Bill. He was Kap-sah-sik Mo-ca-mon, Little Knife, Kenneth McLeod.

"HI'll go, me," he said.

And right away I liked him. He was as quick and sure in his movements as a cat, and would look you right in the eye.

"You'll want two hosses," says Bill, "an' we'd like fer ye to come in as soon's ye kin, fer we want to make winter quarters."

McLeod squatted on the robe. "Tomorrow, me, HI'm come wid two 'orse," he said. And Red Robe filled and lit the pipe.

I begun to figure which was Red Robe's lodge and

made up my mind to watch which one he went into when we got through; but directly the smoking was finished Bill says, "Well, Lige, I reckon we're done here." And I couldn't think of any excuse to hinder us going.

It was nigh noon when we got back to the Post, and Dad was tickled plenty. Alex and Jake had come in, and we'd hired Mac in Joe's place. Dad was alone in the lodge, though, for Alex and Jake and their skinners was over at the store. "The boys'll want to spree a little, an' mind yer promise, Bill," says Dad, hoisting up the lodgeskin to let the breeze come in.

"I'm done, Dad," Bill says, like he didn't want to be reminded.

"They want to trap as far up as the Marias," Dad went on like he didn't notice he'd made Bill peevish. "I think it's a good idee; but that's the Blackfoot country. They'll be eight of us with their skinners, though, an' we orter be able to make out if we're keerful."

"I'm agreeable," says Bill, all smoothed again. And Dad and him talked about the Blackfoot country. Dad had been there once and almost got caught.

It was nigh sundown and the breeze felt good, coming down the river from towards the mountains, when Jake and Alex and their skinners come back to the lodge. I listened to them talk, figuring some on liking our new pardners; though they wa'n't exactly pardners but a separate outfit by themse'fs, which had joined us for strength. At last Alex says, "All right, Dad. It's the upper country then, and nigh the Marias. We'll be ready, me an' Jake, day after tomorrow at daybreak. Let's us all go over an' take a little liquor?"

"No," says Dad, "we're through, but you boys go on."

Bill watched them head fer the store like he wanted mightily to go, but begun to unroll his bed. And in a little while we had all done the same.

Somehow, I knowed I'd like Alex Beasley. I could see good nature in his blue eyes. He was tall, and fair as Dad, and his hair was right curly and hung around his shoulders in fluffs. He wa'n't over thirty I reckoned, but account of a bullet in his leg, he walked with a limp which made him appear some older than he was.

His pardner, Jake Abernathy, was stockier and darker and not so tall. He was mighty round-shouldered—said he got that way dodgin' truck his step-mother threwed at him when he was a boy—and his arms was longer than usual. Alex and Jake had been pardners for eight years, and they got along better'n most men do.

Their skimmers, Tom Ferguson and Sandy Anderson was cousins, alike in many ways, but different most in talking. Tom was always at it and Sandy had little to say.

I saw right away that Dad and Bill liked them all; and so did I, especially Alex.

The next morning after breakfast Bill went out to look at our stock while Dad and I worked at odd chores that needed doing—pack-rigging, mostly. I run onto Bill's flat keg, and found it was nigh half full yet. "I don't believe Bill's touched a drop of his liquor since we camped with Fink and his party," I says.

"It's queer, son," laughed Dad. "Bill loves liquor, but somehow he kin torment himse'f by packin' that keg an' never tetch it. Let him get where

liquor's fer sale, an' he'll trade his ammunition fer it. It uster bother me, havin' him pack that keg, but I never think of it no more, even in the Injin country. Bill jest packs that keg to spite himse'f. I hear ye're hankerin' to learn Cree, son."

I'd told Bill I wanted to learn Cree. "I would like to," I says. I saw he was smiling, so I says, "What's the joke? I don't see none."

"Nor me," he says, serious, like, "nor me."

Then he says, "I never did see Bill right riled but once." I thought he'd changed the subject; but he went on: "That was the day I met up with him first. I was camped down on the Cheyenne, when one mornin' a man rode up to my fire an' got down. His hoss was blowin' a-plenty, an' I sez to him, 'Must be lookin' fer somebody er leavin' the country, stranger.'

"I be,' he sez, madder'n a gut-shot bear. 'A little black Frenchman's run off with my woman,' he sez. 'I been tryin' to overhaul 'em, but they've lit out fer her people, an' I can't lick the whole tribe; an' besides she ain't worth it, noway.' He squatted by my fire warmin' his fingers. 'I wouldn't minded him takin' the woman,' he growled, after a bit, 'but the skunk's a low-down thief. He went an' packed off my cookin' outfit with her. I'm plumb afoot fer a fryin' pan, by the Lord!'

"Then he saw how funny it sounded an' we laughed, me an' him. That was nigh ten years ago. She was a Cree woman."

He turned a pack-saddle over and looked at the cinches. "Hev ye seen that roan war-hoss of Alex's?" he says. "He's a wonderful fine animal."

"No," I says, "I haven't, but I will, likely."

His story was told for my benefit, I knowed. He

wanted to keep me away from the girl. I didn't know why then; but afterwards when we was in bad trouble I understood, and saw he was only being fair. I he'ped him sew a ripped breeching without neither of us saying a word, and by and by Bill brought McLeod in.

Nobody could he'p liking Mac. He was small and wiry and quick as a steel trap. I liked the way he shook hands with Dad, looking up into his eyes like he wanted him to believe he was to be counted on. His skin was nigh as dark as any full-blood's, and he wore rings in his ears and his hair braided like an Injin's and only a breech-clout and leggings for clothes. His eyes was black and sharp and he had a mouth like Dad's—straight-cut, with thin lips. He was kind as a woman, and had mighty little to say, himse'f, though he always looked you right in the eyes if you talked to him. His English was funny. At first I wanted to laugh whenever he talked, but I got used to it, and in no time I could talk like him, and did sometimes. I was right friendly with him from the start because I figured on learning Cree from him. But my liking was genuine and grew stronger every day.

I thought I'd learn the girl's name the very first thing; so when he and I was shaping up the packs the next morning, getting all ready to start on the following day, I says, "Do you know Red Robe, Mac?"

"She's my honkle, Red Robe," he says, without looking up from his work.

That give me a queer thrill. Mac was related to her. "How does that come?" I says.

"My modder's sister's his 'oomans."

I couldn't figure that out for a minute; but di-

rectly it was plain. Mac's mother was Mrs. Red Robe's sister. Mac was a cousin of the girl. "What's her name, Mac?" I says.

"Oo's dat you'll mean?"

"Why, Red Robe's girl," I says, remembering he didn't know anything about me seeing her.

"She's got two, t'ree, four, mebbly five gal, Red Robe," he says, stopping to fill his pipe. "Wan, hees nam' Yellow Flower; nodder, hees nam' Sits-an'-Seengs; nodder wan, hees nam' Bluebird; nodder wan, hees nam'——"

He was stuck. His forehead puckered and he squatted by the fire for a coal to light his pipe with. "HI don' know hees nam—dat bird is walk hon de long lag," he says.

"Oh," I says, "snipe."

"No, no—*beeg* wan! Hell of a long lag, dat wan! He's walk hon de plain an' fly. Mak' de cry, too."

"Crane—sand-hill crane," I says.

"Yas, by gar! Dat's de wan. Sand-hill crane. Wah-chee-cha, hees nam', Cree. He's mean hon de Englis', Speerit de Mountain—mebbly Mountain Ghos'—som-e-ting lak dat. HI don' spick de Englis' lak de Cree or de French, me."

I saw my chance. "I wish you'd learn me to talk Cree," I says. "Will you?"

"You bat! Me, HI'll be glad por talk de Cree, me an' you," he says, going back to the packs.

After that he spoke to me in Cree and then said the same thing in English. It seemed like I could learn Cree and remember it easy. I stuck to him close and talked to him about Red Robe and his daughters.

CHAPTER XVI

We was off before the sun was up—eight of us now, with a long string of pack-animals. When I looked ahead the pack-train looked nigh a quarter of a mile long. It was a sight I can't never forget—several hosses and mules, then a man, then more hosses and mules, then another man, till at last come Mac and me. Dad was ahead with Bill and Alex; but I was learning Cree and making a hand with Mac.

The day was hot—so hot we all felt glad when night come. We'd cut straight across to strike the Missouri at the mouth of the Musselshell, and the country was without a tree—just rolling plains, and hotter'n all get out. The first night we made a dry camp—no water at all, but we got along without it and pulled out mighty early in the morning. About noon we come to water and let the stock drink, but didn't unpack. That night we camped on good water, and after that we wa'n't obliged to make any dry camps.

I reckon 'twas late in the afternoon of the ninth day when we struck the Missouri at the mouth of the Musselshell. It had been a hot, dry trip—days without seeing a tree. The rivers looked mighty good, I can tell you, and we camped there and rested and let the stock fill up good. We was mighty careful, though, for we was well into the Blackfeet country and they wa'n't friendly to Americans but traded with the British. Dad told me that the Hudson's Bay company was behind it, too. But we didn't intend to trade any until spring, and

then, as soon as we got rid of what goods we had, light out quick. Most every night the men talked of the ornery ways of the Hudson's Bay traders, Mac setting beside me listening but never taking part in the conversation unless he was asked a question.

We stayed in the camp a week. It was September and there was signs of the summer's end when we started off up the Missouri, following the course of the great stream as close as we could. Badlands, queer country and rough, kept us far away sometimes. Then again we was close and camped in still cottonwood groves by the river itse'f. We built small fires and mighty few of them, using only dry willow or alder wood for fuel. Every day we saw big herds of buffalo, but no Injins, although we was always on the lookout for them night and day. One day I saw a grizzly bear—the silver-tip that Captain Lewis called the white bear. And he *did* look nigh white in the sunshine. Cracky! he was a big fellow, and didn't want to give the trail either. After that we saw more and more of them as we traveled towards the Rockies. We camped early one day because we saw buffalo running, but although we scouted around and Dad found fresh sign of them we saw no Injins.

It was on the seventh day after leaving the Musselshell that we come to the mouth of the Marias. It's waters, swifter than the Missouri, made a fuss in the big river when it entered, but in less than a hundred yards was swallowed up and belonged to it.

We made camp and put out a guard before sun-down. It was a beautiful spot, and the night come on cool and clear as a bell. There wa'n't a sound in the air except the rippling of the Marias waters

cutting into the Missouri in a clear streak. And when the moon come up and its light fell on the ripples it looked like a million silver fish was jumping and playing in the middle of the stream. It was mighty hard to believe there was trouble in such a place; but the low voices of the men and little fire, even to cook, kept me reminded of it till I got fidgety and restless as all get out.

We was up before daylight and Dad and Bill and Alex and Jake set out to explore the country and look for a site for our winter camp. Mac and I was with the stock, and Tom and Sandy stayed in camp. I could talk a good bit of Cree with Mac now, and every day I learned more, besides the sign talk. It was easy for me, and I liked it. Mac wa'n't never tired nor ornery, but took pains with me and was tickled when I learned and remembered my lessons.

It was after noon when the men got in. They had decided to cross the river and make the camp on the Marias near its mouth. So before sundown we was across and had piled the packs for a stand-off in case of attack. It was a better place for the camp than on the other side. I could see that. And that night they decided to build a stockade.

"I reckon ye've been here before, Mac?" says Dad.

"Oui, HI'm been 'ere planty tam, me. De Cree she's lak por stop 'ere. Som-e-tam Blackfeet, she's mak de fight jist 'ere. Planty buffalo, planty beevair. Good place, dis wan, por mak' de beeg, strong camp."

"We'll shore try to make it strong," says Dad. "An' I only hope we kin git it done before they jump us. In the mornin' Lige an' Mac kin guard

the stock an' mebbly find time to cut some grass. The rest better jump right in an' go to cuttin' logs."

"That's the idee," agrees Alex, cheery like he always was. And they laid out the stockade, fifty by sixty-five feet, besides a strong pole corral to join onto it. It looked like a mighty big job; but there was eight of us; and in the morning we begun.

At first the sound of the axes bothered me a heap. I was sure it could be heered a mighty long way; but the logs had to be cut, and a lot of them. They was ten feet long and set in the ground over two feet on end like the stockade at the mouth of the Yellowstone, only smaller, of course. There wa'n't no runway, but plenty of loop-holes, and the logs was tied by a girder pegged half way up and braced every little bit, from it to the ground on the inside so the logs couldn't be pushed over. Every day for more than two weeks Mac and I guarded the stock and cut grass while the other men worked on the stockade. We hadn't seen an Injin; but we wa'n't careless, and kept expecting them. Each night Mac and I would tie up our grass and pack it in; and each night the stockade was farther along, till at last it was done, gate and all. It had been hard work, especially when the men had to stand night-guard after working all day. I felt relieved when we was all safe inside and could build a decent fire; for the nights was getting right sharp.

Dad had pitched his lodge and we had made it snug for a long stay. Everybody's bed was in it, and all the goods was piled in two tents belonging to Alex and Jake, so there was sleeping room to spare in the lodge.

"Now," says Dad, filling his pipe the first night inside the stockade. "I feel we're fixed, an' before

the storms set in." He looked so satisfied and cheerful, setting there, that I thought the job of making the stockade was worth while. "There's fur a-plenty, here," he says, "but I reckon we'd best make a little killin' o' meat right away now, so we kin dry it agin the time when it's scarce or poor or the Blackfeet jumps us—an' they shore will."

"We'll hev to make some travois, too. We'll need 'em," says Alex. "They'll be a sharp frost tonight," he goes on. "We kin go to trappin' mighty soon now. But speakin' of dryin' meat; I never see a rack of it but what I think of Tom Meek's squaw. Remember her, Dad?"

"Reckon I do," laughs Dad, putting a stick on the fire. "Reckon I do. She was nigh as wide as she was long, an' full twice as heavy as she looked."

"She's dead," says Alex, interrupting.

"Yes, there ain't no doubt of it. Leastways not in my mind, nor Bill's," says Dad, refilling his pipe, slow. "She died a year ago last winter. Me an' Bill was camped nigh Tom; an' the woman took sick along in January. It had been right warm. No storms to speak of. She was took sudden an' bad an' kept gittin' worse an' worse, till one night Tom rode over to our fire. He asked us if we'd kinder ride herd on the woman whilst he made a trip to the Post fer some medicine; an' of course we said we would do all we could fer her, an' we did. It was better'n a hundred miles to the Post; an' the next mornin' after Tom set out, a blizzard set in—a bad one—the worst I'd seen in a long time.

"Me an' Bill went over to Tom's camp an' built a fire an' cut some wood an' cooked. We hustled around an' made the woman some tea; but while we was there she died. We camped right there the

next day an' the next. Then the weather moderated. It got warm agin—too warm. Tom hedn't come in, an' me an' Bill reckoned he'd got lost or froze in the blizzard, mebbly. But we stayed there in his camp, like we felt we ought to, till two more days went an' still there wa'n't no Tom. Then me an' Bill held a council. Something *hed* to be done with the woman. So we packed her out of the cabin an' laid her down on the plains so she'd freeze. Night come again, but Tom didn't; so we packed the woman back into the cabin to keep the wolves from gittin' her in the night. That went on for three more days an' nights—packin' her out at daylight to freeze her, an' packin' her in agin at night to fool the wolves. Yes sir, that woman is dead. I kin prove it by Bill."

He wa'n't laughing; but there was something mighty funny in the way he told it, though he was serious enough.

"Sioux woman, wa'n't she?" Alex says, knocking the ashes out of his pipe.

"Nope," says Dad, "she was a Cree."

I looked at him quick, but he didn't see me, and I couldn't make out whether he was meaning anything or not. "Why didn't Tom come back?" I says.

"Got lost in the blizzard," he says. "Badly froze, too; but we hed a funeral before we 'tended to *him*, poor devil."

"Well, anyhow," says Alex, "every time I see a rack of drying meat, I always think of that woman. She was the busiest meat-dryer I ever see. What become of Tom, Dad?"

"The Rees killed him last fall—him an' a man name o' Adams. Better turn in, son," he says to

me. "It's your turn to go on guard at midnight. You an' Mac relieve Bill an' Jake, ye know."

It didn't seem to me I'd been asleep five minutes when Bill shook me. I got up quiet as I could and went out of the lodge with Mac. The air was frosty and the sky full of stars. As we come up to the stock, Mac says, "Jake, pretty soon now, beeg storm is come."

"How soon, Mac?" says Jake, stopping a minute to talk, with his shoulders humped over in the chill air.

"Mebby she's start tomorrow. Dam beeg wan, dat storm is comin' now."

"What makes you think that, Mac?" I asked.

"I don' know, me," he said, looking at the starry sky.

Then Jake left us an' we was still. We rode around the stock once before picking stands, and after that each man was a guard by himse'f. I could see far out over the plains in the clear night and across the Missouri, from where I stopped. Such nights fetched me what I wanted of the plains. And always my love for them got stronger. I couldn't never see how any man could be small or ornery and live on the plains. It seemed to me that men ought to measure up to their country, someway, and be big like it was.

Towards morning the sky begun to cloud up and the wind hauled around to the north. A change of weather was coming. But how could Mac have knowed it with the sky so full of stars?

It wa'n't growing much colder, but the wind was raw, and I was glad when daylight come. Alex and Sandy relieved Mac and me, and we went into the stockade where Dad and the rest was making tra-vois.

By ten o'clock it begun to rain, and early in the afternoon sleet come, driven by a gale from the north. It kept getting worse and before dark was snowing hard—so hard you couldn't see ten feet ahead of you. The stock drifted into the cottonwoods and the guard was glad to follow. The cold strengthened all night, and when morning come on, the plains was white and drifted bad. The wind was still howling and driving sheets of snow with a force that was hard to face. Nothing could stand against it. Cottonwood limbs, suddenly froze, snapped off, and even fair-sized trees was broke down. It looked as though winter had come to stay.

That night was a hard one on the guard, and I felt lucky because it wa'n't my turn. Dad built up the fire in the lodge, and we was mighty snug and comfortable, though it was bitter cold on the plains. "Hear that wind," says Dad, tightening the guy-rope by his side. "It's the equinoctial storm and a good one; but when it's spent itse'f we'll hev fine weather fer a long spell, I cal'late. Jest as soon as it lets up we must kill some meat. The buffalo might drift an' leave the country. Shoo! hear that wind," he says again, as a gust nigh tipped over the lodge.

Mac said, "It is a strong wind," in Cree. And I said, "Yes; you said it would come."

Dad perked up and says, "How's the Cree language comin' along, son?" with his gray eyes twinkling, but kind, like.

"She's do good," says Mac. "She's spick de word jist de sam' lak de Hinjin."

We sat up till after the guard was changed. (The men was nigh froze when they come in.) Then we went to bed; and the wind howled till nigh daylight.

But in the morning all was different. The storm had passed, though the snow was drifted in the coulees and along the Marias. By noon the sky was clear and blue as it ever is on a summer's day, and the sun shining so bright it was hard on my eyes. The snow begun to melt away. Gullies fed by the coulees filled up with muddy water that rushed to the Marias or the Missouri, so that by sundown the plains was white only in spots where the heavier drifts had been piled by the wind. The sky had never seemed so clean and clear and blue, and when night fell the stars come out as though there hadn't been a storm. Mac and I stood guard from midnight till morning. And there never was another such a morning.

Mebby it was comparison that made it seem so beautiful. Anyway, under the warm sky the little spots of snow in the coulees looked plumb out of place. On most of the trees the leaves was yet green; but some, on the small quaking aspens, was yellow, and, setting their color against the blue of the sky, made a mighty pretty picture. The yellow seemed brighter and the blue bluer, one color working to set off the other, like. Out in the breaks and bad lands of the Missouri where the heat of the summer had dried and withered every bit of color to match the plains theirse'fs, the storm had fetched back the reds and greens and yellows of the cliffs and clay banks, till they looked pretty again, and unreal, like. There wa'n't a breath of breeze stirring; not a cloud in the sky. It was all so still you'd think the elements was plumb ashamed of the way they'd cut up the day before and was doing their best to make you forget it. An old crow, a moving black speck against the blue sky, called Caw! Caw! from over the river. And when we got

into the stockade Dad was humming a tune and peeling willows for a meat-rack, happy as all get out.

"Now for the meat," he says, after Mac and I had he'ped him fer a spell. "By the time we git it to dryin' it'll be high time to set some traps, I cal'late," he says.

And that was just the way it come out. We rode out of the stockade when it was just coming day, Dad and Mac and Bill and I, and by eight o'clock had seen a small herd of buffalo grazing not far from the breaks. We rode around to get wind of them and Mac wanted to run them, but Dad objected. Mac had his bow and arrows as well as his rifle, hoping, I reckon, that we'd run them. We made a wide circle and got well to the leeward of the herd. Then by leading our horses and crawling up a coulee, we got within easy range.

"Now, son," says Dad, "wait till I tell ye to cut loose."

We settled ourse'fs, and pretty soon a cow walked out from the herd a piece and Dad let go. She fell to her knees, but got up and walked back into the herd and kneeled down. Directly, out come another cow, and Mac shot her, just as Dad had, through the lights, and she poked back into the herd and knelt like the other. Dad and Bill and Mac kept waiting till a cow walked out, when one of them would shoot her through the lights. And by cracky! directly half the herd was kneeling down around the wounded buffalo.

"Now, son," says Dad, "get in an' pick cows. Here we go!"

We commenced to shoot; and after a while the herd stampeded, but not till we'd killed twelve fat

cows. I had killed three, myse'f, and saw that the trick was a good one. If we'd commenced to kill right off, we wouldn't have got more than two or three; but by shooting those cows the way they did, the herd got the idee that they wanted to bed down, and so we got what we wanted.

"We'll hev back-fat that'll make an Injin home-sick," laughed Dad. "That's nice clean work, an' not a bull among 'em," he says. "Bill, if you'll go in fer the travois the rest of us will butcher while ye're gone; an' ye'd better fetch an extra pack-hoss or two. We'll need 'em."

We worked hard, I tell you, and it was after midnight when we got the meat to the stockade.

And then we feasted. Fat buffalo steaks, roasted before the fire on peeled willow sticks. We spread them with skewers and hung them on roasting-sticks before the coals. Cracky! how fine they was. They'd drip and sizzle and cook, finest in the world. I ate till I couldn't hold no more, and so did the others—choicest cuts and plenty of them. When the guard was relieved, instead of turning in, they took up the feast where we'd left off. It was daylight before the camp was quiet.

The stockade was a busy place in the morning. We cut the meat into thin strips, strung it on the peeled willows, and hung them on the racks to dry. We even had to make some more racks and they stretched the whole length of the stockade. The sun begun to do its work right away. There wa'n't a fly to bother, and by night I could see a big difference in the color of the meat.

"Looks like an Injin village hed moved in," says Dad, washing his hands. "Them was fat ones," he smiled. "We'll trot out the traps now, son. An' tomorrow me an' you will set some of 'em."

CHAPTER XVII

There was a white frost on the grass the next morning and no green left on the big cottonwoods, Their leaves had turned since the storm. Every breeze that shook them loosed a yellow shower that left the branches like a passel of birds to flutter about, crazy like, and then fall—sometimes on the river, where the wind and the current sent them hither and yon. They huddled and piled in the willows like they wanted to stay together, but the keen wind hunted them out mighty nigh as soon as they'd got settled. Some of the trees was 'most naked, and the breezes was stripping the rest as they passed, till the groves looked ragged and cold.

All night and all day the wild geese and brant, swan and ducks kept flying over us, making a racket that you would have to hear to believe; and while we was eating supper the night before, a weasel, white as snow, had run across the stockade. "Yonder he goes," says Dad. "He's white, and the fur's prime."

The traps had been marked with a file—one notch for Dad's, two for Bill's and three for mine. Alex and Jake was to trap below the stockade on the Missouri and we was to take the river above it.

When we started out, Bill went on ahead of Dad and me, and I watched Dad set his ten traps. He talked all the time, showing me how and telling me about beaver and their ways. "'Tain't a good plan to mix territory in trappin'," he says, while he set his tenth trap, "but whatever's in yer traps belongs

to you accordin' to our agreement; an' to raise a trap that ain't yer own is the lowest down job known to free trappers." That just slipped out, but I knowed he wanted me to remember it, though he kept on talking without even looking up from his work.

"Now," he says, wiping his hands on his shirt, "beginnin' here ye pick yer own sets, an' if they ain't good ones, I'll tell ye, son."

I'd watched him close, and I believed I could do it. I didn't walk ten feet before I stopped and waded into the water to set a trap. Dad didn't say a word while I made me a slide and a bait-stick. He watched me every mintue but didn't find no fault, and I set my trap. After that I set another and another, Dad on the bank far enough away so he would leave no sign, and me in the water. Only once, when I stopped to set a trap did he object, and I moved to another place.

When my traps was all set we went back to the stockade. "We'll hev a heap of work for ye, Mac," said Dad, as we entered the lodge. "There's beaver here a-plenty an' we'll make a good ketch."

I couldn't hardly wait for morning. The beaver sign was everywhere along the river—quaking aspens and cottonwoods cut down in big patches there. You would think, to see them, that somebody was slashing for a clearing in the bottoms along the stream. And all the afternoon and evening I guessed at the number I would catch in my ten traps. Alex and Jake said the sign was plenty down the river, too, and everybody was happy over our good luck. I can't never forget that night. It was as though I had made my first bet in some big game of chance. I felt that I was at last doing my

part; that if only my traps took a decent number of beaver, I would be satisfied with life.

I was first to get up and build a fire. It wa'n't quite day; but I had been awake for more than an hour before I'd turned out.

As soon as we had breakfast Dad and I set out to visit our traps. We found he'd caught nine beaver. He was bothered because one of his traps was sprung and empty. I waited for him to take out his beaver and reset his traps, though it was hard to do. I wanted to get to my own. But at last I did. I had six big beaver, mighty fine ones, out of ten traps. Dad said I'd done good, and I felt mighty proud when we begun to skin them out.

Skinning out a beaver is quick work, but fleshing a beaver hide ain't quick nor easy. That's why fleshing is done in camp. We all turned in and he'ped the fleshers and by dark we had the hides sewed into willow hoops to dry. There was forty of them in all. Bill had caught ten and joked Dad plenty because he'd lost one.

As fast as the hides was dry enough the fleshers took them out of the hoops, folding them fur against fur to make room for more. They made bales of the dry skins and hung them up in the tents away from the damp ground. In ten days we had two hundred and thirty beavers, just our own outfit. And Jake and Alex had taken nearly two hundred between them. I begun to figure my earnings and was plumb astonished at the figures.

The weather kept fine, though the nights was mighty sharp and clear. When we'd cleaned out the beaver within easy travel from the stockade, we made a little camp, Dad and Bill and I, up above the Marias about ten miles, I reckon. We hadn't much

property in the camp so in case we was jumped there wouldn't be anything to leave behind. Mac come there everyday to take the beaver skins to the stockade, so I kept practising Cree almost as good as though we was together all the time.

Jake and Alex had moved down the Missouri, leaving their camp-tenders at the stockade with Mac; and among them they managed to guard the stock and take care of the fur. But it kept them busy; and if it was going to be a steady grind, they couldn't have stood it.

Near the middle of December we was all in the stockade—just happened to go in at the same time for supplies. The river hadn't yet froze over. In the bends where there was eddies the ice would nigh hold up a man, but where the stream was swift there wa'n't no ice at all. Nobody had seen an Injin, and the buffalo grazed within sight of the stockade most every day. We was having a feast and a big talk, and it seemed good to all of us to be together again.

Dad was mending a pair of moccasins by the lodge-fire. "Whenever I putter with a pair of these," he said, cutting a piece of elkskin with his knife, "I always think of pore ol' Harvey Tucker. One night 'way down on the Platte he was mendin' his. 'Twas mighty cold, an' he hed a big buffalo-chip fire burnin'. A Pawnee buck crawled up close to the camp an' shot through the lodge-skin at Harvey's shadder. The arrow went clean through him, an' we found him settin' up straight with his awl in one hand an' a moccasin in the other. He was froze stiff that-a-way. "Hello, Mac! What's goin' on?"

The lodge door had been jerked up and the half-breed's head stuck inside.

"Jest my seeum smoke, me."

"Shoo! Signal-smoke?"

"Nope. She's jest de smoke de camp fire, dis wan. 'Bout two, t'ree mile hup de Marias. Mebby w'iteman, hees smoke."

Dad stood up. "Whitemen! Can't be whitemen, Mac!"

"Wall, mebby Hinjin," said Mac, like he knowed it wa'n't. "But dat wan hees look lak de w'iteman."

All of us that was in the lodge went outside to look. On the Marias a thin coil of blue smoke was going mighty nigh straight up under the sky.

"Lige, go out and tell the guard to be ready to run in the stock," says Dad, looking to the priming of his rifle. "Come on, Mac."

I run out to the guard, which was Sandy and Alex. The smoke wa'n't so plain to be seen now, but it was there and couldn't mean nothing but a camp of some sort. I could see Dad and Mac making their way up the stream towards the troublesome smoke. I hoped they *would* find whitemen—friends—there. We was doing so good, and I could see a small fortune ahead if only we could hold out until spring.

Alex and Sandy had already seen the smoke before I got to them. "Too bad, Lige," Alex says, with almost a cloud settlin' down on his good-natured face. "It's a toss-up now whether we git out with any fur."

I felt gloomy, I can tell you. It seems worse when a fellow that always looks cheerful gets down-hearted, like. Dad and Mac had disappeared. I

waited, watching for them to show themselves; but they was hid. It must have been two hours before Alex saw them and pointed them out.

But they didn't make no signal; seemed to be in no hurry; and my worry begun to get less, with them coming boldly down the Marias without no attempt at concealment. "I'll go in," I says, "and find out what's goin' on up yonder."

My curiosity was up and my fear gone. I run back to the stockade reaching the lodge long before Dad and Mac come in.

"Whitemen." That was Dad's first word. "Whitemen; an' what's more, they're Britishers—Hudson's Bay men," he says. "They cain't he'p but see signs of us here, an' come in. If they don't we're jest plain lucky, boys. Better git all the fur as nigh out o' sight as we kin. The sight of it will only lend 'em meanness."

"How many's in the camp?" asked Bill, beginning to he'p Mac and Tom pack away the beaver skins.

"Only three," says Dad; "but that proves a heap."

The lodge-fire wa'n't nigh so bright that night. The men talked till late, but they wa'n't feeling pert. The smoke of the other fire, up the Marias, had plumb deadened ours. Instead of packing up for our camps above and below the stockade we fixed ourse'fs for a visit from the Britishers, which Dad felt sure would come. Nobody slept—not even Bill—and when it got daylight Mac got up and left the lodge.

Dad built the fire, and Sandy and Tom went out to relieve Jake and Alex. When the guard got in they said the fire had been kindled up the Marias and the camp was still there. I was pouring the

tea when Mac come in, quick and quiet and sharp-eyed. "She's comin' now, dem w'itemans," he said. And Dad tidied himse'f up to meet the company. We swallowed our breakfast in a hurry and then went to the gate and opened it wide, firing a few shots of welcome as they rode in. They was three whitemen; and I couldn't see any difference between them and ourse'fs.

We went back to the lodge, the men talking together as they walked along; and Dad sent me out to the herd with their hosses. They had only four—three saddle-hosses and a pack-animal. I hurried, for I wanted to hear what the strangers had to say. Tom wanted to talk. But I says the men looked all right I guessed and run back.

When I raised the lodge door, they was talking and laughing like women at a quilting bee; so I reckoned we was going to get along.

They had some liquor and treated. I liked their looks and ways; and all the morning they talked open, making no secret of their plans. They wa'n't trappers but clerks in the hire of the Hudson's Bay Company, and their post was 'way east and north of us over the line. They had come a long way to pay the Blackfeet a visit and at a big risk of bad storms. They said they tried to keep in touch with the Blackfeet and secure their trade when possible. I couldn't see but what that was fair. And I reckon Bill couldn't either, for he got out his flat keg and treated. And when we had dinner Dad opened a little keg of maple syrup he'd bought in St. Louis.

What a night we had! And what a feast, with every little thing that Dad had laid in for an extra splurge. They stayed two days and nights and we

had a great time listening to their stories and telling yarns in our turn.

When they left us we rode more'n twenty miles with them to see them off, and was mighty sorry to have them go. Dad who had been suspicious of them, had been won over, and give one of them a powder-horn, all carved and thin as paper.

It wa'n't more'n noon though, when back in the stockade, he and I was packing up a few things to take to our camp up the Missouri, and I run onto a leather packet.

"Shoo!" says Dad, "our friends must hev left that. Fell out of their pockets, I reckon. Letters, looks like, most of it. Reckon I'll saddle Eagle an' overhaul 'em."

Bill, curious, took the packet. "Mebby 'twouldn't be a bad idee to see if there's a fur-list in it," he says, looking at Dad. "I don't much like to prowl in a mess o' private papers, but I figger them fellers is enemies, or their bosses is," he says, handing the packet over to Dad, like he'd leave it to him.

Dad rubbed his chin. "'Pears like the doin's of ornery folks," he says, "but mebbly it's the right thing to do. What say, boys?"

"Let's hev a look," says Alex. "'Twon't hurt 'em. An' if it's honest truck in the packet, we'll be sorry we didn't let it alone; an' if it's something we ought to know, we'll be glad we looked."

So, slowly, like he was handling humming-bird's eggs, Dad undid the packet. There was letters and, as Bill guessed, a price-list of furs. But Dad's curiosity had been roused, and directly a look of disgust crossed his face. He opened and spread a letter before us, though only three of us besides himse'f could read. The letter was dated October 1, 1822, and read:

Mr. Josiah Berkshire, Esq.

Sir:

This letter will be delivered to you by an Iriquois Indian who will faithfully return with whatever list of goods you require for the spring trade.

With this letter is a list of prices now prevailing, together with other information we deem important.

We are happy to learn that you succeeded in selecting a site for trading and trust that your House will become an important one in North America.

It is most advisable that you pay a visit to the Blackfeet before spring. Efforts are being made by our competitors to open friendly relations with these Indians who have, as you know, never traded with Americans. Do not delay the visit. Make suitable gifts to their chiefs and headmen and assure them of our friendship. Endeavor to persuade them to keep American trappers and traders out of their country in order that we may hold their trade as usual.

I trust that the winter will pass pleasantly and that the spring will bring trade to your new House.

"The skunks!" said Dad, with anger in his gray eyes. "The ornery skunks! We're in fer it now. They'll start them Blackfeet our way as soon's they reach their village. I've always heered they did sech things, an' now I know. They kin come an' git their packet, but I'll shore hold out this letter."

Bill lit his pipe. "I wish they *would* come after it," he said between puffs. "I'd kinder like to cook 'em another meal."

We took down the meat-racks to make room for the stock, and when morning come we took up every trap, so that by night we was ready for trouble. The stock was herded close in where the grass had been saved for an emergency.

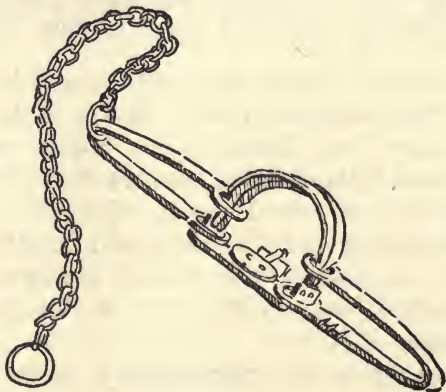
"We kin sleep tonight, an' tomorrow night, too, says Dad, "but after that, fer a time, I reckon we'll sleep standin' up like a pony."

"Mac," says Bill from his bed, "did ye ever know of the Hudson's Bay outfit tryin' to keep the Injins set agin us Americans?"

"Oui. HI'm know dat long tam. She's tell it Kootenai, she's tell it Cree, jest de sam'. De Cree she's stop hon Canada mos' hall tam. She's comin' 'ere, de Cree, some tam por 'unt de buffalo, fight de Blackfeet leetle, too, mebby, mos' every year."

"Wisht they was here now," growled Bill, turning over. "A Cree village is jest what I'd like to see."

Mac muttered something under his breath. "Mebby she's come, Meester Bill," he says, aloud. And reaching fer a brand from the fire he lit his pipe and passed it to me.



CHAPTER XVIII

One by one those in the lodge fell asleep, while Mac and I speaking Cree between us, fed the fire and waited for our turn to relieve the guard. Mac seemed to be in a queer mood, gazing fixed at the fire and filling his pipe oftener than usual. His spoken words was little above a whisper, and more and more he seemed unwilling to talk; only answering my questions with a few whispered words. At last, feeling the mood myse'f, I fell silent, and only the breathing of our pardners and the crackling of the fire made sounds. I lost myse'f complete. Aunt Lib come into my mind, and Caley Byers; and finally Red Robe's daughter replaced them both. I got to dreaming of her. I tried to see her face in the fire and thought I could. I could hear her soft voice and tried to remember what she'd said to her father that day in the store. I begun to hope to see her—talk to her and know her. She was young like me, and pretty, and stranger than any girl I'd ever seen.

"Come." Mac touched my shoulder. It was as tight as a fiddle string and I jumped. "It is time for us to go," he said, picking up his rifle.

We went out into the sharp, starlit night. I had never felt so keen before. I couldn't have slept if I'd tried. I felt like I wanted to run, to fight, anything to give me a chance to exert myse'f up to the limit of my strength. Cracky! how queer I felt. And when out on a knoll-top under the stars Mac begun to sing Cree, low, like, and earnest, I fell in with him and beat time like a war-drum with my

knife-handle on my rifle-stock. On our knees there in the night we sung; but I didn't know why then; nor that Mac was making medicine to bring the Crees. He'd put some sort of a spell on me and my thoughts was away in their village, as, beating the time we sung together like full-blooded Injins.

At last he got up and looking me full in the eyes, his face close to my own, he says, "Mee-wah-sin! It is good. Ho!"

From then until day he spoke no more; and when the sunlight come and Sandy and Tom relieved us, I had a feeling that the Crees wa'n't no longer on the Yellowstone, that they wa'n't far away, and was even moving towards us. But whether it was Mac's singing and muttering that done it, I couldn't tell. At last I said, "Where are the Crees now, Mac?" as though I expected him to tell me.

"I do not know just where," he answered in Cree, "but they are coming this way. Their village must be on the Missouri below us."

Did you ever feel that a thing was true when there wa'n't even the least proof of it? Well, I felt that Mac's words was the truth just as much as I would have believed them if he'd been with the Crees a day before. And even now, after I've been so long among them, I don't understand it. But I felt relieved then; and have known such things more than once since that December day.

They was gathering more wood and cutting more grass when we got to the stockade. There wa'n't any snow, but the ground was froze hard and they dragged cottonwood logs into the enclosure with rawhide ropes from a saddle.

"Sleepy, Lige?" asked Bill when I'd eaten my breakfast.



Out on a knoll-top under the stars Mac began to sing Cree

"No," I told him. "I never felt more wide awake in my life."

"Let's me an' you go out an' kill a buffalo or two fer fresh meat," he says.

And so we went, Bill and I. We killed two good cows and had started back for the travois, when from a knoll, I saw something that held my eyes. It was moving—a long string like a snake, and far off down the Missouri out of the breaks. I pulled up. "What's that yonder, Bill?" I says, pointing.

"Injins, by God!" he says. "Come on!" and he ripped away, down and up, over the rolling country.

There was somebody on the gate when we come in sight of the stockade. "It's Mac," I says, and Bill pulled up and begun to ride in a circle.

Directly Mac burst out, making straight for us and lashing his pony with his rope. When he was nigh enough to hear, Bill called, "Injins comin', Mac! Want ye to hev a look at 'em! Mebby they're Crees!"

Then he wheeled his hoss and we raced back to the knoll and stopped to wait till Mac come up. I pointed and Mac give one sharp look. "Cree, by gar, she's come!" he said, his black eyes shining.

"Whoopee!" yelled Bill, waving his blue head-silk, nigh wild with relief. "Let's git the boys an' go to meet 'em in style!"

I shan't never feel happier in my life. Everybody was talking at once in the stockade. The hosses was caught up, and Dad painted himse'f and Eagle. Everybody painted up and fixed his hoss for the welcome. Then, leaving Tom and Sandy in the stockade, we pranced out to meet the Crees, with everybody talking and laughing like a passel of blackbirds in the fall time.

The Injins was on our side of the river and directly we come in sight of them. But their scouts had seen us long before and was ready for fight. It was mighty pretty to see them get theirse'fs in order—the camp with the women and children guarded, and skirmishers ahead. It was all done so quick and fine that in a minute the warriors was stripped for battle.

Dad left Eagle break into a run, yelling, "Here we go, boys!" Alex fired his rifle; and we all did, waving them over our heads after they was empty and yelling like all get out.

Then a gun went off among the Injins. I saw the puff of smoke before I heered the report. Several braves rode out to meet us. The rest stopped and waited. Directly the braves rode close enough to recognize Mac. Cracky! but they was glad to see him. In less than two minutes we was in the middle of a passel of more'n two hundred warriors, all jolly and wanting to be friendly.

The Chief singled out Dad right away and they begun to talk in the sign language. Dad's hair, sprinkled with gray like it was, marked him as a big man with the Injins. They respect gray hair more than we do. They hold that Manitou allows only good men to grow gray and that gray hair is a mark of His special favor. Dad could talk as fast as the Chief. They was too many for me; but I watched them right close, I tell you. I wished Mac had stayed by me, but he'd found his family and was lost in the crowd. I didn't get all the Chief and Dad said, but I did understand the most of it. Dad told the Chief that we were at war with the Blackfeet; that they was bad people; that their hearts was bad. He said that if we stole any of

their hosses the Crees could have them as well as all the scalps we took. He invited the Chief to a big feast the next night and told him to bring his warriors with him. "There are many buffalo near our stockade," said Dad. "It would be well if you camped near us until spring comes. I have finished."

"We do not want war," begun the Chief, "but if the Blackfeet come we will fight them." He said they were always his enemies and that Dad was right—their hearts was bad. He said he would camp near us as long as there was meat handy and that he would come to the feast with his headmen and warriors.

Cracky! but I was tickled. I begun to look for Mac and Red Robe's daughter, but I didn't see either of them. I even rode out of the crowd and moved about by myse'f; but there was so many travois and hosses and people all mixed up that I didn't have time to find them before we started back for the stockade, with twenty young Crees. They was a mighty clean-looking lot, tall and thin mostly, and lively as kittens, but careful not to seem careless or unlike the older warriors. Some wore weasel-skins braided in their hair and one or two was painted, but mostly they wore good-looking shirts and leggings like our own. Dad didn't come along but stayed with the Chief. And Mac hadn't turned up; so I had to go without even seeing the girl, though I'd seen Red Robe while Dad and the Chief was talking.

Before sundown the smoke from more than a hundred lodges was perfuming the air down by the river. All the hosses, the Crees' and ours was out under double guard; and everybody felt good again. I can't never forget that night. I was leaning

against the open gate of the stockade looking at the Injin camp. Dad took a place beside me. The moon was full and her light silvered the lodges so that the shadows of the naked cottonwood limbs that fell on them shimmered and sparkled, like. At first there was fires in every lodge—fires that showed through like reddish-yellow lanthorns. But one by one they went out till mighty nigh all was dark inside. The rippling of the Marias waters came loud, then soft, as the breeze strengthened or lessened, carrying the sound to us and away again. I fell to wondering which was Red Robe's lodge, and couldn't he'p picking the biggest, whitest one in the camp for the home of the girl I'd seen in the store. Now I could get to see her again and know her—even talk to her some in her own language. Mac would take me to visit her in the lodge. Not even a dog was stirring in the big camp. There wa'n't a sound by the river.

“They shore do look good, don't they son?”

I reckon I jumped. I had forgot Dad, altogether. “Yes,” I said, “they look awful good. I'm glad I can talk Cree some.”

“I reckon you be,” he chuckled. “We'll give them Blackfeet all they want now, son—if they come. I 'most wish they would come,” he sighed; “that is, if they fetch their friends along with 'em. We'll hev to make that feast tomorrow, an' it will mighty nigh clean us out; but if our friends didn't do it, the Blackfeet would, I reckon.” He moved away. “I'm goin' to turn in, son,” he said.

The moon climbed higher, and queer shadows crept out from the lodges to hide in the brush along the river as the silver light brightened above the camp. The breeze had died down to nothing and the air was so sharp it stung my ears. The shad-

ows of the cottonwoods fell in black streaks across the water, and upon thin ice that was forming nigh the shore. A big horned owl turned loose over the river. His deep voice roused the echoes and in the thin frosty air was fearful loud. Whoo-oo, who, who! Cracky! if that camp wa'n't a spooky place, I'm a nigger.

I was chilled through and closing the gate, I went to the camp to get warm. Dad was fixing to mould some bullets. He hadn't gone to bed. Nobody had. "We'll cache a little of our stock of jimcracks an' spread the rest," he was saying when I entered. "At daylight we kin git in that meat an' we'll make as big a showin' as we kin. If we git into it—an' I reckon we will—we won't git no trade with the Blackfeet noway; so all we kin look fer is trade with our friends the Crees, after they've hunted an' trapped a spell." He put his ladle into the fire and cut a bar of lead into pieces with his hatchet. "What a tea-party we'll give them Blackfeet," he laughed. "They'll wait fer a storm likely, an' it'll be a daylight affair, I cal'late. But they'll buy in on a mess, them fellers will, for the Crees is good fighters."

He dropped the lead into the hot ladle. It sunk, melted, almost at once. Then he begun to mould round balls with a quickness I'd never seen before. "This here old world must smell awful to a good dog," he says, as the bright shiny bullets rolled about him.

"Why, Dad?" I says.

"Oh, I was jest thinkin' of the hidden ways of men," he sighed. "Mostly I was thinkin' of them three with white skins who come to us here in the wilderness, et our meat, laughed with us, even shook us by the hand at partin'. They wished us luck with their lips, but while their tongues was formin'

the words they was intendin' to deal us a card from the bottom of a filthy deck. Yes, son, I bet a good dog smells a heap an' wonders a lot—Shoo!" he'd burned his hand with the mould.

At last, setting the hot ladle away, he rolled the bright bullets into a robe, and turning, asked, "Alex, what did ye ever do with that strawberry roan hoss ye hed last year?"

"Sold him to Andy Gray," says Alex.

"Git the money?" Dad's eyes twinkled merry, and I was glad, someway, he'd changed the subject.

"No. Got his note though." I could see Alex didn't want to talk about it. But Dad pretended he didn't notice it.

"Once," he said, "Smith Terry sold Andy Gray a yoke of cattle fer fifty beaver skins. Andy paid five hides down; an' a year later Smith heered where he was livin' an' rode over to see him. He was aimin' to git the rest of them skins, fer beaver was high that spring. Andy had got himse'f a squaw an' hed settled down nigh to a spring of water, 'bout forty miles from a beaver slide. He knowed what Smith hed come fer, though, an' admitted the debt like a man. He says, 'Smith,' he says, 'I ain't ketched a beaver in a hell of a while. Don't see no sign neither, lately. But I'll pay ye them other forty-five hides if it takes me the rest of my life to trap 'em.' An' it will take him full that long, most likely. I'd as lief hev a mortgage on a band of antelope as Andy Gray's note. That was a good hoss, that roan."

The fire was making a strange noise. Singing, Dad called it. "It's fixin' fer a storm, son," he said. "An' that will jest suit them Blackfeet. I'm goin' to turn in."

CHAPTER XIX

Dad's snoring pestered me that night. I couldn't go to sleep. Near midnight, clouds covered the stars I'd been watching through the smoke-hole and a wind come up and shook the lodge. It was growing colder, too, and I tucked my blanket closer about me; but I couldn't go to sleep. I thought of the Injin camp and the moonlit lodges and Red Robe's daughter for hours. And twice above the wind I heered the voice of the horned owl over the river.

The morning broke with a sky full of running clouds and a cold wind that cut like all get out. While I was building a fire in the lodge Mac come in from the Injin camp; and after breakfast Bill went out with Jake and Alex to fetch in the meat. But the wolves had got it, and they had to kill more; so it was late in the afternoon when they come in with it.

Mac and I he'ped Dad get things ready for the feast, and spent nigh all the morning cutting up meat and spreading what we had, including more than half a keg of molasses and some sugar. I hated to see it go. But we didn't have much besides meat to spread, noway.

It was nigh noon when Dad says, "Son, you an' Mac best go down to the village an' rustle up some kittles. It'll take a-plenty I cal'late."

I was glad to go. Mac would call at the lodges and ask fer kettles, I thought. I'd see Red Robe's girl.

But Mac didn't do that. He straddled a hoss and

rode about the village calling for kettles to use at the feast, and the women brought them and put them in a pile and went away. I never saw so many kettles before. There was big ones and little ones, and all of them made of brass. Mac begun to pick out the biggest ones; and I was looking for the girl and wondering if her mother had fetched a kettle already.

My eyes lit on a little hoss staked in front of a lodge nearby. Both his ears was cut off, or froze off, making him look wild and curious. He was only half-broke and ornery as all get out and snorty. All of a sudden while I was looking at him, the wind blew a wolf-skin from a willow bush smack against his heels. He whistled like a white-tail buck deer and tore away with the wolf-skin right after him, lickety-split. Suddenly he turned sharp around a big painted lodge and the stake he was dragging ketched under the lodge-skin. It ripped and come down, like a passel of poles in a big bag. A child screamed, muffled, like, and smoke and a whirling blur of white ashes hid the pile. Mac and I started to run towards the wreck. An Injin, coiling his lariat, dashed past us on the trail of the runaway hoss, his heels drumming a tattoo on his pony's sides. Lodge-doors raised and heads was thrust out, sometimes more than one to a door; and there was a heap of laughing and banter back and forth. Some women hurried down towards the overturned lodge to he'p. But we got there ahead of them.

Two women was standing by it with flecks of feathery-white ashes in their black hair. There was four small children clinging to the older woman's dress, but she wa'n't noticing them. She was telling all the world what she thought of hoss-

creation, in a shrill voice. The other was laughing fit to kill herse'f, clutching a shiny brass kettle under her arm; but when she turned her face towards us, I felt like I'd been ketched at some ornery trick. It was *her*—Red Robe's daughter.

The laugh went out of her eyes quicker'n scat. She handed the kettle to Mac, and bending over, begun to pull the ground pegs that held the lodge-skin down, as though there wa'n't a second to lose. I'd never seen a face change so quick. When she handed Mac the kettle there was a startled, half-frightened, look in her eyes, distrustful, like, that made me feel the stockade was the place for me. But I stooped and ketched hold of a peg and pulled it. "I will he'p you," I said in Cree.

She flashed a glance out of the corner of her eye, and one big braid of her hair slipping over her shoulder to the ground, she ketched it up and tossed it back. We both reached for the same peg and our hands touched. She pulled hers away like she was bit. Mac laughed, and she run to the nearest lodge and disappeared.

There was plenty of other he'p now, and Mac and I went back to the pile of kettles.

"That's her, Mac," I says. "What's her name? Red Robe's girl, I mean."

"His nam' Bluebird, dat wan. Ca-skee-tah-coo-pe-asis. You lak dat gal? Hee's dam good gal, Bluebird, you bat!"

"Yes, I like her, Mac," I says. "But she's afraid of me. Let's us visit Red Robe's lodge sometime—tonight, mebby?"

"Mebby," he says, stringing a lot of kettlebails on his arms. "Mebby Blackfeet, she's comin' to-night—mebby no."

"How old is she, Mac?" I asked, loading myse'f up with kettles.

"HI don't know, me. Mebby eighteen snow is gone now; bout dat. Hee's dam good gal, Bluebird."

I was sorry the feast was to be that night. I wanted to see Bluebird by her own fire. I was glad her father's lodge was painted, proving that Red Robe was a medicine-man, or a man of importance, in the Cree tribe. I would pay him a visit as soon as I could. I made up my mind to that.

The feast was ready before dark, and Dad spread mighty nigh all the extras we had. But we didn't have much besides meat. Everybody and everything on the plains lived on meat, except the brutes we lived on, ourse'fs. They and the beaver ate no meat; but all the rest was killers like ourse'fs. I hated to see the molasses go. There was nigh half a keg of it; but there wa'n't a smidgen left after that night, nor any sugar.

"Well," said Dad, at sundown, "the trap is set. Fetch 'em on, Mac."

Mac got on a hoss and rode down through the village singing out our invitation to come to the feast. He didn't forget to tell how good and great we was, and I thought he went pretty far in his praises, but that is their way.

Directly they commenced to come in and the stockade to fill up. They sat on both sides of the long fire where about seventy-five steaming kettles was hanging or setting on coals on its edge, sending up the smell of fat buffalo meat. They was all dressed up, and some of the clothes and ornaments they wore was beautiful to look at. You wouldn't believe what they can do with porcupine quills and

the quills of bird-feathers. Their bullet pouches looked too fine for use and their head-dresses, made mostly of eagle feathers—young birds, at that, which show a lot of white on them—was a sight in the firelight. There was a heap of finery there and I knowed it took a lot of work to make it. Not many things was alike. Nobody copied his neighbor, but had, or tried to have, a rig of his own; and some of the designs in the quill work was too wonderful for me to describe. I just set down and looked at them. And when it got darker they looked prettier.

Dad made a little talk, and then we set out the kettles and they went at it. Dad was jolly and moving a kettle here and there, went on talking in English. "A herd of b'iled buffalo would last this outfit about as long as a fried hummin'-bird would feed a pack o' hounds," he says, and sat down by the Chief.

How they slicked up the kettles! In no time at all they was empty and every drop of syrup gone. After which the smoking commenced, and the speech-making.

Dad presented the Chief with a whole keg of powder, some flints, and a quart of bullets. Cracky! but that pleased the Injins. The Chief called twenty braves by name and when they rose and stood before him, he counted out a handful of bullets for each, besides filling a lot of empty powder-horns from the keg of powder Dad had given him. I never saw more happiness over a present than over that powder and lead.

And the Chief didn't forget his men who was with the pony-herd, but made a speech asking us to remember their service while we was feasting, to

save meat for them. Dad said it would be done, and Bill put ten kettles of meat on the fire to boil against their coming.

We was sparing with our tobacco, but at the end Dad give the Chief a present of nigh two pounds. The Chief divided it among his headmen, and they in turn whacked up with others. Nobody held out or was stingy or mean. Everybody got part of the presents; except the blankets, and a share in them wa'n't expected.

It was fixing to storm by the time they left, taking with them the empty kettles. I was glad when we'd shut the stockade gate. From there I could see the fires shining through the lodges among the trees; and in less than ten minutes after our company had left us, a drum was beating in the village and a strange chanted song come to us on the wind. We barred the gate and went back to the lodge. Dad lit his pipe. The firelight flickered on the wall in zig-zag patterns and nobody spoke for a spell. The sound of the drum and the chant down in the village had layed hold of us. Dad was restless and showed it. The wind was growing stronger and sleet was beginning to patter on the lodge-skin. A white weasel stuck his head inside near me, his wicked, beady little eyes blinking at the firelight a moment, before he vanished like a shadow.

Suddenly Mac stood up and bent forward, his hand behind his ear. "By gar," he said, "jist me, HI'm 'ear de shot, mebbly!"

We sat still, like we was cut out of stone; but no sound come to us above the howl of the wind. Mac swung his bow and quiver of arrows over his shoulder and sat down again with his rifle across his knees.

"Hark!" Dad half rose, as the lodge door was jerked up and a painted face looked in, followed by a naked arm that clutched the hair of a bloody scalp.

"By gar!" whispered Mac, springing up. "Me, HI'm 'ear de shot, sure. Dey're 'ere, de Black-feet!"

The lodge door dropped and the painted face and the scalp vanished. We heered the boom of hoofs on the frozen ground. It was the pony-band of the Crees, together with our own hosses and mules, racing past with the Injin herders behind them. We rushed out and down to the open gate. The village was astir. I could hear men calling to each other, making ready to corral the coming hosses. I couldn't see ten feet before me; and the wind was fearful strong and chill.

"I cal'late this here is more our rucus than it is the Cree's," says Dad. "They won't come to the stockade to fight, noway. We'd best go down an' make our fight along with 'em."

So we untied our war-hosses that had been kept inside the stockade since the night we read the Britishers' letter, and went down to the village.

Every fire was out, but the sleet had froze to the lodges so that they looked like white, sharp-pointed patches standing upright in the dark. Injins was going this way and that and women talking fast and herding their children back into the dark lodges. In two big rope-corrals the hosses was milling and tramping. I could hear the smack of kicks and the click of teeth as stallion met stallion inside the raw-hide ropes, and I reckoned there would be some broken legs among them. It seemed that everybody was doing something—roping hosses or

hurrying in or out of lodges, though with all the stir there wa'n't any confusion or foolishness. The village looked spooky and unreal, with the big, snow-streaked lodges marking the rim of a circle that was plumb broke and blotted out here and there when the wind whirled the snow in the air. Over in the center I made out a big corral—or I thought it was a corral—full of stock. Just then a man passed us, hurrying along with his hoss. He was headed that way and we followed him.

What I'd thought was a corral was more than a hundred braves, with the Chief, standing by their hosses, ready to ride in a jiffy. The storm fretted the animals and they pawed and stirred about, nervous and wanting to move; but nobody complained or made a fuss. Dad and the Chief begun to talk in signs, and Mac, who was by me, told me what they said, though I knowed most of it myse'f. The Chief said that a strong party of Crees was out on the plains and that scouts was everywhere waiting for the Blackfeet, who he didn't think would fight till daybreak. Now and then a scout come in and went out again. And the hours dragged slower'n all get out. 'The wind shook the branches of the big trees over the river till they rattled like a passel of dry bones, and my fingers fairly stuck to my rifle-barrel, it was so bitter cold. When the owl's voice come over the river above the storm, Mac edged closer to my side and says in a voice that shook with superstition, "Dat's bad, dat howl. HI don' lak por heem mak' talk jist now, me." He glanced cautious over his shoulder, and still speaking in English, whispered, "Hinjin no lakum howl talk lak dat. She's stop dere long tam now, dat howl. Damn!"

He turned his back to me, squatting in the snow,

as a drum in Black Bear's lodge commenced beating. *To-tum, to-tum, to-tum*, wilder'n a wolf, but solemn and deep as a mountain lake, the drumming beats rose and fell with the wind. "Bear, where are you? Hi-yah! Bear, listen. Ho-yah! Bear, great Medicine-man of the Crees; Bear, mighty, great Medicine-man of the Crees! Hi-yah! Ho-yah! Hi-yah!" It was Black Bear's voice, chanting in a high-pitched key, the song of the Bear. Mac bowed his head; and a stiffening silence fell on us. Cracky! It was worse'n the owl. I was prickling all over in spite of the cold.

Suddenly the drum stopped. I could hear the limbs on the trees across the river rattle. Then the old medicine-man begun to pray to the Bear:

"Lend us your strength, O Wah-ki-oose! Give our warriors power to slay those who made war upon our fathers! Hear me! Hear me! Hear me and be with us!" His voice shook with earnestness. The men, crowded together and waiting for the fight, seemed to be held closer by the grip of the prayer. My muscles tightened more. I wanted the row to commence. But the wind shrieked, and like it was jeering at Black Bear's earnestness, the owl's voice come again from over the icy water.

Mac stood up and with his hand tense on my arm, whispered, "By gar! dat's bad wan, dat howl! Somebody is die now. Somebody dat is 'ere wid us, beeg warrior!" But directly his hand slipped from my arm and his body straightened. "Well, can' be help'," he said. "Do de bes' we kin, by gar!"

I heered a shot, faint and far off. It sounded like a whip-lash. Dad swung onto Eagle and pulled up beside me. "The ball is open, son," he said. "Stay close to me. I might want to say something to you in confidence."

CHAPTER XX

We was off, crossing the Marias, when the queer-ness of his words come to me. "Ain't you feeling good, Dad?" I asked him.

"Fit as a fiddle, son; fit as a fiddle. But stay close," he says.

And I tried to do it. Our party divided and spread out like a fan, all the trappers staying with the Chief's men. We turned slightly towards the north and up the stream, while Left Hand with nigh fifty braves headed in the direction of the Teton. It was breaking day, and the north wind was whipping its way over the plains, sharp as a knife. The snow had nigh quit falling, but the sky was black with running clouds. I heered shots, a passel of them, and saw three riderless hosses go by on the run. We met several wounded warriors—two afoot and more on hossback—coming back towards the village, but only one or two of our party stopped to he'p them. We rode fast towards what was going on ahead.

All of a sudden in the dim light, we saw nigh forty Crees, dismounted and fighting like fury, with more'n a hundred Blackfeet riding 'round them and closing in on them at every turn. The Crees was answering every war-whoop of their enemies, and whenever a Blackfoot saddle was emptied, they jeered and danced about like crazy men. But they was in a mighty bad fix. We lashed our hosses, but they didn't seem to go fast. I felt like it would all be over with before we got there.

But the Blackfeet was so keen to wipe them out

that they didn't see us, or if they did, they didn't quit. When we wa'n't two hundred yards away, they charged straight at the Crees and rode them down. But directly we met up with them; and I lost Dad in the rucus. When the Blackfeet turned to run for it, I saw him again. He was riding lickety-split after an Injin on a bay hoss. Left Hand was coming up with his party, and the tables was turned for good.

Away we went in the face of the wind. I thrilled with the wildness of it. Now and then a Cree would pull up and get down to scalp a Blackfoot or turn out to catch a hoss; but we crowded them hard, till the Chief called a halt. I'll never forget the light that was in his eyes. It would have made an old dog-wolf look behind him, I tell you!

I begun to look for Dad. Where could he be? Bill wa'n't in sight neither. A fear layed hold of me. I'd plumb forget to stay by Dad in the fight—never thought of it after the Blackfeet turned to run. I asked this one and that one. But nobody had seen him. They was excited and all talking at once. Left Hand said Dad wa'n't hit or he would have knowed it; but my heart was like lead as we turned back.

The women met us and took their dead. Nine in all. They gashed theirse'fs with knives and tore their hair from their heads in handfuls and their wailing was dreadful to hear. But the warriors hung many fresh scalps in their lodges and rode about the village singing war-songs; while the women wailed and the dogs howled. The confusion—and it was confusion now that the fight was over—was enough to unsettle a person. I started for the stockade to find Dad.

On the way I met him. He was afoot. His face was white and his lips was blue and drawn. I got down off my hoss. A lump come into my throat. "Are you hit, Dad?" I asked, my voice shaking like a scared girl's.

"Yes, son, they got me. I knowed they would, someway. Let's be jiggin'. Where's Bill?" he says.

We turned back to the stockade. I hadn't seen any one of our own party, not one, and I went wab-bly all over. "Bill will be along directly, Dad," I says, hoping he'd forget.

In the lodge he sat down and asked for water. He drank hungrily and then stretched himse'f on a robe. "Better build a little fire, son. An' ye'll find some paper an' a quill an' ink in that black mule's pack by the door," he says. "I'll want ye to put down in writin' some things I want to say."

If a giant had clutched me by the throat I couldn't have choked up worse. But I kindled a fire and got out the things he wanted.

"Here we go, son," he says when the fire crackled up good. "Mouth of the Marias River. Put that down, son; and date it December twentieth, or twenty-fifth, eighteen twenty-two."

I wrote it down at the top of a sheet of paper, looking up when I'd finished.

"I, Washington Lamkin," he says, "bein' in my right mind an' knowin' I'm about to die——"

"No, Dad!" I says. "Ye *can't* die! Where are ye hit, Dad?"

"Son," he says, "I'm bleedin' inside, bad. An arrow got me in the charge. I pulled it out, but I'm goin' under. Now hush an' put down what I say. —bein' about to die—got that?"

"Yes," I says; but my eyes was hot and blurred. I wished Bill and Mac would come in.

"——want to tell all concerned that I shot an' killed Caley Byers at Dan's Clearin'——"

"How could that be true! You think you're he'p-ing me," I says. "Oh, Dad, I didn't shoot Caley——"

"Son, I'm he'pin' the truth by tellin' it. Put it down like I say. ——nigh Coon Creek Crossin' on July sixth of this year, eighteen twenty-two. An' thet I done it fer causes well known in Kentucky where both me an' him was born. Knowin' myse'f to be dyin', I'm glad I done it. Amen.

"This confession will also serve as an order on Shipman and Company of St. Louis to pay over to my pardner, Elijah Mounts, nine-hundred dollars that they are keeping for me, to have as his own. An' know all men that Elijah Mounts, my pardner is to have an' own——"

Mac burst into the lodge. "Bill, she's die hon de Hinjin fight!" he cried. Then, seeing Dad, his voice sunk to a whisper. "Oh, by gar! Me, HI'm bad sorry now, me."

Dad smiled and raised up on his elbow. For a minute he didn't speak, and his eyes was far-away and rested, like. "We hev been pardners fer more'n ten years," he said softly, "an' we've both gone under together. Amen."

Then he layed down. "Mac," he said, even, and sure as ever, "git Alex an' Jake as quick's ye kin."

Mac hurried back to the village, and Dad, as though he hadn't been interrupted, went on: "—— the outfit of hosses an' mules an' all goods an' arms belongin' to me an' my ol' pardner, Bill Hanks, him bein' dead without kin. Amen. I'll sign it, son." And he wrote "Washington Lamkin" under what I'd put down.

"Gi' me another drink of water, son. Best quit

this life, if ye kin. I never could; but we're all hell-bent to advise others to do what we cain't do ourse'fs. Son, I saw ye when ye pulled off yer boot to git out the kernel o' co'n that day in Dan's Clearin'. An' agin I saw ye when ye come back with the grist. I was waitin' behind a down-tree to collect a debt from Caley Byers. Caley Byers was a snake that needed killin'; but he left our parts an' 'twas years afore I located him. Every word that ol' nigger told about him an' the Sessionses was true, an' Lucy Ann Sessions was blood-kin to me. That fool squirrel that barked at me made ye cur'ous, an' I was some feered ye'd come over to me. But ye didn't."

He turned over on his side and was quiet a spell. My mind had took in what he'd said. But it didn't seem to feel it. It seemed like I'd knowed he killed Caley Byers for a hundred years.

When he spoke again his voice shook a little and wa'n't so strong. "Son," he says, "ye're a boy yit; an' if ye do the thing thet's in yer mind, ye kin never go back to the States. I don't say it's wrong to do it, but society hes made trails thet everybody must foller, or the mob will hoot. Custom, in its frills an' furbelows, is a heap like a bell-mare to the mob; an' bogs of cussedness don't keep it from follerin' wherever she leads. The blood of the human race'll mix, but the deer an' the antelope won't cross. When the blood of the whiteman is mixed with thet of the red people, the get is an Injin in most ways; an' they might as well look fer chiny plates at an Injin feast as charity among the kind of their fathers. We're a bad lot—a mighty bad lot, in some ways, son."

Mac raised the lodge door and come in, with Alex and Jake. "Howdy," said Dad, lifting his

hand a little. "Sign this paper, or make yer marks on it, as witnesses, both of ye, Alex an' Jake. An' Mac see that the boy don't git into bad company. He'll pay ye what I owe ye.

"Hear me, son?"

"Yes, Dad," I says; but I couldn't look at him to save me.

"I want ye to bury me here, but not inside the stockade, boys," he says, after I'd give him another drink, my hands shaking—nigh as weak as him. "I don't want no fence around me. I want to lay out where all the wild kind kin walk over me an' around me without suspectin' that an ornery ol' killer is there. Fix me so's the wolves won't scatter my bones, an' ye better put Bill in with me. He was a good pardner; none better."

He quit talking sudden and turned over. I took hold of his hand and he pressed mine. "I'm goin' across now, son; goin' under at last. It's gettin' dark, like, an' chill."

He didn't speak again but let my hand go and folded his arms across his breast and closed his eyes. I couldn't keep the tears back no longer. I knowed he was dead and that his spirit had gone out on the wind to the great wild plains he'd loved so long and well. I covered my head with a buffalo robe and tried to keep back any sounds of sobs, that I knowed was womanlike and weak. Alex and Jake went silent out of the lodge, but Mac spread a blanket over Dad and put a stick on the fire.

My mind was numb, like when you're half awake, and I didn't care what happened to me. I wouldn't have dodged an arrow to save myse'f. Mac knowed how I felt, I reckon, and didn't talk, but only put sticks on the fire while the daylight got grayer, till it finally faded out.

The wind wa'n't nigh so strong as it had been. It had gone down some with the sun, so that the lodge-poles didn't strain and creak any more; but the women was still wailing awful and the firelight flickered lonesome on the lodge wall, like it always does when the fire is low. I dreaded the morning more'n anything else. It seemed awful to bury Dad and go away from there. My face was turned towards the lodge wall and the fire had burned down pretty low. A prowling Injin dog looking for scraps, poked his cold nose under the lodge-skin and touched my face. Any other time I'd have jumped mighty pert; but it didn't faze me. I set up and turned towards the fire.

Mac put on another stick. "I will go now, but I will soon come back," he said in Cree.

The lodge-door lifted and fell behind him and I turned my back to the fire and the form under the blanket and layed down again to think.

What ought I to do? Dad was dead, and Bill. I was alone again and in a worse fix than ever. Dad had been more like a father to me than Uncle Eldin, even, and I'd have died for him; but he was gone. I hated the plains—the storms and the heat of summer on the treeless waste. I'd leave it and go back. It was no place for a whiteman—the great plains, hard and merciless and ugly. I had thought I loved them; but now I knowed it was only Dad I had loved. He was the plains to me—all that was worth while and good about them. And now he was gone, it seemed like more than half of me was dead and like I hadn't any more place on the plains. I wa'n't like Eagle who had lost his place but directly would become the servant of another man. There wouldn't be another man for me to foller and to

make me the man I'd thought I was. I hated the plains and blamed them.

I begun to think of the only other place I'd knowed, the clearing on Coon Creek. I thought of the peace and quiet there, forgetting how poor we was and remembering the neighbors, one after another. Then I thought of Caley Byers and how it was Dad that killed him. I reckoned murder *did* out; but like he'd said, all killin's wa'n't murders.

I tried to forget the plains and promised myse'f to leave them. But the wailing cries of the women down by the river wouldn't let me forget. They belonged to the plains—was like them, savage and ungodly.

I wouldn't have anything more to do with Red Robe's daughter. I'd go back. I'd start right away, too. I made up my mind to that. I would buy me a place—the old Lacey place on Coon Creek—and settle down there where there was peace and people of my own kind and kin.

That's what I thought; but all the time I was more'n half afraid I wouldn't do it. I'd reason it out over and over again, but every time I come to a decision—the same one—I felt like something was left plumb out of my calculation. I knowed that love of the plains is a disease, and that Dad had it bad. Mebby I had it, too, and couldn't get away.

It was snowing hard. The fine flakes fell through the smoke-hole on my cheek and powdered the buffalo robes. Outside it was growing stiller and colder and the women had nigh quit their crying down by the river. I heered the door raise and fall back and saw a shadow on the lodge wall; but I didn't move till long afterward, when the fire was mighty nigh out and, being chilled, I sat up and put some wood on the coals.

The dry sticks crackled and blazed up; and there beside the fire, still steaming in the chill air of the lodge, I saw a brass kettle. I could smell the meat and dried berries that was in it. But I didn't want to eat. I stood up to shake the snow from a robe to spread over me; and on a rawhide right by the door, I saw the outline of a moccasin—just the dim lines left by the fine snow that had fallen from a foot when it was set inside. It wa'n't all there—I mean some of the line was melted; but it was too little to be Mac's.

I wrapped the buffalo robe around me and sat down. Could it be that Bluebird had come into the lodge and that the shadow I had seen on the lodge wall was hers? It must be. There wa'n't no doubt that the foot-print was hers. I leaned over. It was dimming. The heat of the fire was melting the snow till only a wet outline showed where the toe had been, though the heel was nigh perfect yet. I watched it melt slowly away until it was gone and only a wet spot marked the rawhide where the almost perfect track had been. I put more wood on the fire and layed down.

It was good of her to fetch the kettle; mighty good and kind. She must have thought me ornery and impolite not to have said a "howdy" to her. She was a good little woman. Mac had said so, but I could tell it without that. Anybody could have seen it in her face. And she was sweet and pretty and gentle. I fell to planning on talking to her; till I thought of Dad again. And then I felt mean and ornery for thinking of *her* when *he* was dead just across the fire. I felt ashamed. I told myself I was a trifling nigger and once my mind got on that trail it pestered me worse'n it had when Joe

died. It got so set on showing me up to myse'f that I wa'n't right with Bluebird in my thoughts. And then I got ashamed of it and *that* throwed in with the other and he'ped torment me.

I was right glad when Mac come back, and I said "How" to him.

"Whose kettle is this?" he said, raising the lid. "Ho! it is Red Robe's kettle. Bluebird has brought you food, and you have not eaten." He set the kettle on the fire. "She will believe that you cared not for her food," he said. "You must eat of the meat and berries."

"I am not hungry, Little Knife," I answered in Cree. He had spoken in that tongue and seemed to want me to talk it, too.

"It is well to mourn for the dead, but not as women do. They have named you Paok Mah-hee-can; Lone Wolf; and I, your friend who taught you Cree words, would have you throw off your robe of sorrow, or wear it in the lodge or on the plains when you are alone. It is well to remember forever, but let not your sorrow come between you and a living friend at your own fire. And this is now your fire, Paok Mah-hee-can." He took the kettle from the coals and set it before me. "Eat," he urged, "that when she comes for her father's kettle it will be empty."

I did eat a little. And when I had finished he emptied the brass kettle into one of our own.

"That is good," he said, filling and lighting his stone pipe. He offered the stem first to the dark sky, from which the thick snow was falling, and then to the earth, now white with the storm. Then he passed it to me; and I smoked with him there in the lodge with Dad.

CHAPTER XXI

When morning come we hadn't slept. Mac had kept the fire all night and talked when I would answer. My eyes was dry as a powder-horn, and burned from looking into the fire. The longer I went without talking to Mac the harder it seemed to find a word to say. The wind had gone altogether, and nigh the dawn even the snow had stopped falling.

Just as the sunlight touched the tops of the lodge-poles a soft voice called near the door, "Shall the woman come in now?"

I stood up. "Yes, Bluebird, come," I answered. And Mac put wood on the fire.

She raised the lodge door, stopping a moment, at the shrill cry of a child, to look backward at the village. Her breath was white in the cold air and her cheeks, when she turned towards us, rosy with health. "If you will go away for a little while," she said, stepping in like a shadow, "I will try to make your lodge a better place." She looked down at the fire and stooped to warm her shapely hands.

"Come." Mac took me by the hand, and together we went outside.

The plains was an endless stretch of blinding white. Sparkling frost-crystals fell like showers of diamonds, and mighty nigh straight down out of the blue sky. The keen air cut and stung, and there wa'n't a track in the snow any place, except Bluebird's, leading up from the village below the stockade. The snow was a foot deep and drifted some.

Mac started up the Marias and I followed, not caring where we went, until he stopped on top of a high knoll. "Look, Lone Wolf," he said, pointing down to the stockade and the Injin village.

I could see the smoke from our lodge and the lodges of the big camp below it, white in the cold air.

"This is good," he said. "A brave warrior will rest well here. From this spot he can see the buffalo and the antelope. And the rivers are nearby so that in the heat of summer he can always see the green leaves rustle in the breeze that comes at sundown and with dawn. Is it not a good place for our friends?" he asked.

"Yes," I told him. But the snow was cold and I couldn't like the place.

"Then when the sun turns his face toward the South we will bury our friends here."

I shivered. He begun to scrape away the light snow with his feet, and I he'ped him. "We had better move your lodge to-night," he said, as we worked at the snow. "It is not well to be alone in the stockade. We will move your camp to the village. Jake and Alex and Tom and Sandy are already there."

Then he told me some news that made me feel lonlier'n ever. "They will not wait for spring," he says, "but in spite of the danger of bad storms and Blackfeet, they are going to try to make their way back to the Post at the mouth of the Yellowstone."

I stopped scraping snow. Mac knowed what had come to my mind. "It is foolish to go now," he said. "We should think much before we go with them. It is not long to wait till spring will be here."

Then there will be no bad storms. Do not decide until tomorrow."

I didn't answer him. We had cleared away enough ground. "We shall have to build a fire here," he said. "The ground is frozen, but not deeply. I will have the women build the fire. We can now go back to the lodge."

Bluebird had straightened things inside and had a fire burning bright. The ashes and mess about the fire was gone, and the bed-rolls tidied up nice and tight.

"Now you must eat," she said to me gently. "You did not eat much of the food last night, but I have prepared more. See, I have made tea from your store." And she set out the cups before Mac and me, just two of them.

"You will eat with us?" I asked her, hoping she would.

"Would you have me eat?" she smiled shyly; and her voice was like I'd heered it in the store, soft and kind.

"Yes," I told her, folding a robe between Mac and me.

"Then I shall," she said, and poured out three cups of tea.

But that ended our talk, or mighty nigh it. As soon as the tea was poured and she'd sat down silent between us, I couldn't find a word to say to her or to Mac. She must have thought I was cross, I reckon; and it was getting worse, when Mac said, "Bluebirds are good in lodges or near villages. Ask her to tell you what her people say of bluebirds."

"I *will* ask her some time," I said, looking across the fire at the blanket that covered Dad.

"And some time I may tell you," she smiled.

She'd finished her tea and stood up in that swift, still way that is like a shadow. "I am going to my father's lodge now," she said.

The Crees was kind and he'ped us that day; so when night come the grave on the knoll held the old pardners side by side. I feel sure Dad would have picked the place himse'f, if he could; for if the dead can see, him and Bill can watch the buffalo herds and the passing of war-parties, till the Injins shall quit their fighting forever.

When we come back from the knoll the lodge had been moved to the village, and Mac and Jake and Alex and Tom and Sandy all walked with me to light a fire in it there. It was pitched between Mac's lodge and Red Robe's and all the goods had been piled inside so that there wa'n't much room left to sit or move about.

As soon as the fire was going good Alex says: "Me an' Jake is through here. We're pullin' out for the Post at the mouth of the Yellerstone. Ye're welcome to come along with us; but if ye stay here we'll trade what goods we've got fer yer beaver skins. Then ye kin trade the goods for more towards spring."

"That is good," said Mac to me in Cree. "I will help you trade."

I wanted to go. I had made up my mind to go. But now, when the chance come, I didn't grab it. "I reckon I'll stay till spring," I said; but I didn't half mean it.

"Good," says Alex. "I'd like to trade fer Eagle."

"No, sir!" I says. "Eagle ain't for sale nor Dad's rifle, at no price. And I'll leave the other trading to Mac." I couldn't care much what bargain was

made; and I didn't know what made me decide to stay. But Mac was tickled a-plenty.

By dark they had made a bargain and I gave Alex and Jake an order on Shipman and Company for two hundred dollars of the money Dad had left me, wondering if they'd pay it. But Alex wa'n't worried, nor Jake, so I made the order and it was settled.

I mighty nigh weakened when at daylight Alex and Jake pulled out with Tom and Sandy. It wa'n't so cold as it had been, and I reckoned it would warm up more by noon. They didn't have any packs but beaver-skins, so the hosses wa'n't loaded heavy and could travel fast. I stood and watched them start away down the Missouri; and when I thought that there wa'n't another whiteman between the Post and the mouth of the Marias, I mighty nigh saddled up and went with them. But I held onto myse'f now I'd decided to stay and when they had got out of sight, went back into the lodge.

My thoughts was busy but not good. I'd wanted so bad to come to the plains. Now I was far into the Injin country, the last of my outfit. Dad and Bill and Joe was all dead, every one of them killed. I could see I had a chance to trade and make money, and if I did, I'd go back and he'p Aunt Lib. I'd never come to the plains again, once I got to civilization. Aunt Lib was right about the plains, I reckoned. But mostly things have to be *proved* to you before you'll believe them.

By and by the sun come up and shone through the smoke-hole. I wondered how far Alex and Jake had got by now, and if the snow was deeper towards the Yellowstone. Mac had ridden out with Jake and Alex to see them off, and I thought I

heered him come back. Some women was putting up a lodge back of mine, and after a spell I heered Mac's voice talking to them. They was mighty busy at something for quite a stretch; after which Mac called, "Lone Wolf, come to your trading post!"

I got up and went outside. There was a fine new lodge pitched right back of mine. Mac was holding up its door. "Go in," he said, proudly. "It's your trading lodge. I bought it with some goods that belonged to you."

So I went inside with him. It was piled with trade-goods—all of Alex's and Jake's packs, and some that had been Dad's. "You'll be rich now," said Mac, kindling a fire in the new lodge.

I thought how kind he had been, and how honest. "It is half yours," I said. "You are my partner, Little Knife. Let us trade the goods and go away from here as quick as we can. I do not like this country."

He spread his hands before the new-made fire. They was thin hands, and clever. "Do not say that, Lone Wolf," he said, as though what I'd spoke about the plains had hurt him. "Bad luck is everywhere, my friend," he added in a lower voice, "and only waits to make war on men. It is in St. Louis, and on the plains, the same. But whatever you will do *was to be done*. You cannot change much of life, though it is not well for us to believe that so strongly as to let our canoes drift and forget the paddles." He put more wood on the fire, making it crackle cheerful. "You have made me happy," he smiled, "for soon I shall be able to buy fine presents for my woman and my children. Let us not trade now, nor move. It is not wise to think of either. Let us wait until the Crees have many fine robes and beaver

skins. Then we will trade, and when the winter has passed, go down to St. Louis with our fur."

He stood up and walked around looking at the packs of trade-goods. He moved a bale here and there and begun singing a Cree song as he moved about; until I caught some of his interest. He was quick to see it, and commenced talking of trade and how many robes this and that would fetch, until I found myse'f figuring on what my share would be. I felt ashamed of it. It was profiting by an awful thing; and it pestered me like it had when I let thoughts of Bluebird come between me and Dad.

Mac kept talking and speculating till late in the day. I thought how nobody had laid a hand on the goods, unless they had been asked to he'p, and no thief had pilfered. I was mighty afraid folks at the Crossing wouldn't have been so careful of other folks' truck; but I was thinking mostly of Jeff Hawkins, I reckon.

It was getting dusk when Mac broiled a buffalo steak on the coals; and we ate and smoked together till all the fires was out in the other lodges. The hunters had been out all day, and all through the early evening there had been feasting in the village; but Mac stayed with me, and when at last I unrolled my bed, he went to sleep across the fire.

It was a still night and cold. I could see Mac's breath, white in the chill air, over the dying fire. I didn't sleep for hours. I thought of Dad and Bill, and Alex and Jake. I wondered if the snow got deeper towards the Yellowstone. Then when I thought of the cold and the snow they fetched Dad back to my mind to stay, and I couldn't lay still. I built up the fire, and when Mac turned his back to the blaze, I lit my pipe though I knowed I didn't

want to smoke. The stillness was heavy, like, and layed hold of me till I was skittish. Mac's breathing, so regular it seemed to belong to the loneliness that was pestering, was the only sound—that and the pop of cottonwood trees when the frost stabbed them deep. I run back to where I'd first met up with Dad, and then trailed along with him to the minute he'd told me of killing Caley Byers—and after; clean to the grave on the knoll. It 'peared like running off, and leaving him—to go away; but I knowed I'd never like the plains any more, though I'd wait a spell.

At last I layed down, and when I turned over, I heered the guard go out to relieve the men with the stock; and that made me think of Bluebird for a spell. But I didn't hear the men come in, nor I didn't hear anything more until Mac kindled the fire in the morning.

The water in the camp-kettle was froze hard as a rock, and the meat, too. The sun come up in a frost-mist, and it took the new fire quite a spell to melt away the white, feathery crystals sticking to the lodge-poles. I turned over, and Mac begun to sing. "It's a fine morning, Lone Wolf," he said, and went out of the lodge for fresh water.

I followed him out, and down to the river where he was chopping a hole in the ice.

Several women was along the bank with kettles, everybody cheerful and glad of the sun. Thin tails of blue smoke was coming from the tops of more than a hundred lodges, going nigh straight up in the winter air till they was plumb lost in the shower of frost crystals that fell to meet and hide them. The ice on the river clugged and plunked, queer-like, and the noises of its cracking went up and

down the stream like echoes do in the bad-lands. There was a passel of trails in the snow, mostly leading to water-holes chopped in the ice; and I looked to see *her*, but I wa'n't lucky. Red Robe's lodge was close to mine, but there wa'n't a soul in sight around it. Smoke was coming out of it, though, like all the rest, so I knowed they was up and stirring inside; and I reckoned they'd been after water, likely.

Everybody said "how" nice and friendly on the way back and some young men who was going out to run buffalo asked us to take a hand with them; but Mac said we was going after antelope a little later on.

After breakfast we got hosses and set out along the edge of the river breaks. The light was mighty bright and made me blink; but it wa'n't long before we had what antelope we needed and started back. A breeze had come up and was brushing the light snow off the quaking asps and cottonwoods sending it away in little white swirls whenever it freshened, though there wa'n't much of it, noway. The wind had blowed hard during the storm and there had been more or less until the night before, when it had died down and some fresh snow had fallen; so that it wa'n't long till the limbs was plumb bare again.

We found the snow was all tracked up in and around the village when we got back. Women was coming in with packs of wood, and off on the plains I could see some more with travois loaded with meat. We struck the river a little above the village, and just as we turned in between two lodges I saw Bluebird. She was coming from the river with water. I got down and led my hoss to meet her.

She saw me and turned into another trail; but right away I noticed it would lead her wrong; and she saw it, too, for directly she turned back, and we met where the trail forked.

"I have hoped to see you," I said, holding out my hand.

She looked down at the snow, and the kettle of water she was packing begun to swing back and forth, its bottom brushing a dead weed that stuck up by the trail. She didn't offer to take my hand, and I couldn't think of anything to say. We just stood there, till I felt ashamed of pestering her. "Will you not tell your father that I would be glad if he would bring you to call at my lodge?" I finally said, and stepped aside so that she could pass. "I would give him and you presents to show my gratitude for your kindness."

She slipped by me, and without raising her eyes from the trail, said, "I will tell your words to my father." Then she was gone.

I stood there a minute, thinking. Her head had been bent towards the snow, but turned a little to one side like she didn't want me to see the cheek that was next to me. The thin, bright red line marking the straight part in her black hair was fresh-made and looked right pretty. And she was such a little woman and spoke so soft—though I'd heered every word and know them yet. I wondered again how she had made me hear them. She hadn't spoken louder'n a whisper, and yet there wa'n't anything like whispering about her voice—nothing that whispered words make you think of—conniving, or the like. Every word was clear-sounding and sweet; yet after hearing them, you'd wonder how you did it, even after you knowed you had. I

thought that I'd give a heap to hear her talk for a whole hour without stopping.

My hoss whinned loud and pulled sudden on the rope. He was anxious to be with the herd. So I led him to my lodge and unloaded him. Mac's antelope was by the door, and a fire was already burning inside. I turned the pony loose and lifted the door.



CHAPTER XXII

The afternoon was short. At dusk Mac went to his own lodge to spend the night with his family. I sat up till late thinking, and I got to fussing in my mind over things that had happened, till I didn't want to go to bed. The fire burned low more than half the time, and I didn't have gumption enough to feed it. It was snowing again. Flakes come down through the smoke-hole whenever the fire was low enough to let them in. The camp noises settled down to nothing and folks was asleep, all but the guards and the herders with the stock. "A fine life!" I thought. "Any minute the Blackfeet might come, or a blizzard that would drive the buffalo away and leave the Crees without fresh meat." It was no place for a whiteman. I made up my mind to that.

A dog was gnawing a bone just outside my lodge, and it pestered me. I picked up a stick of wood and got on my knees to creep to the door and drive him off. But I got ashamed and let him stay. He was happy. I wouldn't change it. Directly a wolf howled up the Marias a little piece and the dog stopped gnawing and answered. "That's it," I thought. "You are blood-kin."

Then I thought of Bluebird. Was she any relation to me or my kind? I wished I hadn't asked her to tell her father to call at my lodge. I would persuade Mac to trade for whatever we could get, and try to make the Post at the mouth of the Yellowstone. Why was I thinking of Bluebird? I didn't want her. If Red Robe came to my lodge I

hoped she wouldn't be with him. She had been good to me, but I had an idea Mac had been responsible for her coming to the lodge in the stockade. I *knowed* it was Mac's doings. *She* wouldn't have thought of it. But I wanted to even the score with her, nevertheless, so I'd send her a present by her father, if he come. I'd let her see that a whiteman paid his debts, anyhow. I'd go back to Coon Creek and stay there. I'd even go and listen to Joshua Moulds of Sundays, and be glad of the chance. By turns I was angry at Mac, and grateful to him for sending Bluebird with the kettle of meat and berries, that night. For I was sure it was him that did it. I didn't ask him about it then, and I wouldn't do it now. I'd rather have it the way it is in my mind: mostly a guess that could be settled easy. The dog kept gnawing the bone outside, his teeth gritting and grinding and crushing, till it mighty nigh made me drive him off. Once another dog come nigh him and he growled ugly and the other dog went away. His happiness was threatened but he defended and kept it. I did wish he'd finish the bone, or else pack it away somewhere and enjoy it alone.

That was a night such as comes once in a while to most folks. I'd been willing to bet that I hadn't slept an hour; but I know that I must have, for it was plumb daylight when I built up my fire in the lodge. I was glum yet, and the fresh snow, instead of brightening me up, seemed to deaden what good nature I had.

I went down to the river, stepping in tracks already made by others. When I was coming back I saw Bluebird slip out of her father's lodge with a kettle in her hand. She was going for water, but

when she saw me she ducked back into the lodge, letting the door fall shut behind her. "Go it!" I muttered, and felt ornery as all time.

I washed up, and broiled some meat; and when Mac come in I was in better spirits. But somehow I couldn't open the question of trading and getting away. He was so happy over our prospects that I thought I'd wait a day or two.

The sun didn't come out and the clouds hung low and looked threatening, though it wa'n't very cold. We slicked up the lodge and was talking, when the door was lifted and Red Robe looked in.

"How!" he said, and smiled.

"How, how! hi-ee!" greeted Mac. And I got up and spread a robe.

Red Robe stepped into the lodge, and behind him was Bluebird. They sat down, and right away Mac lit a pipe and passed it to me. "Dis is your lodge," he said in English. "You'll mak' de smoke wid de Sun and de Earth. Den you'll pass de pipe to heem. When she's troo smoke, you'll spick first an' tell heem you're glad por veesit."

I did like he told me. When Red Robe had smoked with us I said: "You are welcome in this, my lodge. I am made happy by your coming. Your daughter, Bluebird, was kind to me, and I would show my gratitude by making you presents."

I went to the packs and got Bill's rifle and a good blanket and give them to him, besides some powder and balls. I never did see such pleasure in a man's face. He was so tickled I was glad even to watch him, and when he thanked me I felt good all over. I reckoned that she was as happy as he was; but when I give her a cup full of beads and two mighty pretty blankets, one red and the other green, for

herse'f, I wish you could have seen her eyes. Cracky! But she didn't speak a word—just sat still with the blankets beside her and the cup of beads in her hand.

Red Robe thought that was bad manners, I reckon, for he said to her, "Have you no words? Can you not speak? Are you like the stones that drink the rain and thank not the rain-maker?" He spoke like a man speaks to a child, not ornery or cross.

She rose to her knees and shot a glance at me. "It is too much to give me," she said. I saw her eyes shine in the firelight, but they wouldn't look at me; they just dusted me with a pleasant look that, like her words, was only enough to do, and nothing left over.

Right away I remembered my thoughts of the night before and felt ashamed. These was good folks, even though I didn't know their ways. We're apt to get on the wrong trail that way, comparing strangers with ourse'fs, and mebbly after we know them well we find out that we hadn't so much to brag about after all.

Mac lit the pipe again and I watched Red Robe as he offered the stem to the Sun before he smoked, himse'f. You could see that he was a good man. I was sorry when he got up to go; and when Bluebird bent to pass outside, I says, "Some day will you tell me about the bluebirds? You said you would, didn't you?"

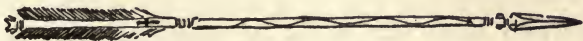
"I said some day, maybe," she answered.

"What do you say now, to-day?" I said, low as I could.

"Maybe, some day," she answered, and I thought there was laughter in her words; quiet laughter

that wa'n't intended for anybody but herse'f. I thought of her ducking back into her father's lodge that morning and felt like saying, "Go it," again, but I didn't.

I was sorry I had said anything about bluebirds—didn't care to learn about them, and wouldn't mention them again. I'd talk to Mac about trading and getting out.



CHAPTER XXIII

But I didn't do that either. Mac begun to talk about a big buffalo hunt the Crees was planning, and even while he was speaking I heered voices singing.

"What's that?" I asked.

"The Buffalo song," he answered. "Day after tomorrow they will make a corral and kill much meat."

We listened. There wa'n't many words to the song; only a tune that was queer, like all their music, and wild as theirse'fs. It swelled up loud a minute and then died down like the winds do, till we couldn't hardly hear it. Suddenly there come a voice speaking in one tone, and the singing stopped altogether. "Black Bear," says Mac. But I could have told it.

The old man was asking power of the Bear, cunning from the Wolf, and speed from the Antelope for the buffalo hunters.

"He owns a great buffalo-stone," whispered Mac, while the medicine man was talking.

"What is a buffalo-stone?" I says.

But he didn't tell me. "She will tell you," he says. "Listen."

Black Bear was talking fast. He was speaking to the winds now.

"Oh, North Wind," he said, his voice shaking with earnestness, "wind that we fear, wind that brings the winter and holds it long; hear us, for we are in need. Rest while our people go forth to the herds, that the buffalo may not be warned and run away.

Your breath is cold, O North wind, but we do not complain, do not grumble against you. Oh, hear us, hear us, hear us!"

He stopped short, and the singing commenced again, this time with a drum. Then Black Bear's voice rose again, speaking to the East wind. "O great wind that knows the Sun, that so often comes with him to the world in summer, hear us now, for we are hungry. Stay in your lodge. Do not visit the plains when our people seek the buffalo, for thy breath goes fast and far."

When he stopped the song commenced again, the drum sounding hollow and deep. I felt creepy all over. I wanted to see the singers.

"Can we not go into the lodge with them, Little Knife?" I asked.

"Yes, come," he said, and we went out into the snow. The sun hadn't shone all day and snow was falling slow, like it had a notion to quit and clear up.

Nobody paid any attention to us when we went into the lodge and sat down near the door. The music stopped and Black Bear stood up facing the South. Sweat stood out on his forehead and his eyes burned like a man's with fever on him. He begun to chant: "Oh, soft wind, Oh, gentle wind, Oh, wind that all the people love, that brings the grass and the flowers, your breath is sweet with the perfume of things whose lives are short and beautiful. The flowers make you presents as you pass, until you can carry no more. Do not blow! Do not visit the plains now, where the North wind has set his lodge, lest his breath drive you off and for long. Help us by your silence!" His voice was low; but it lost none of its earnestness when he added, "Help us by staying away, O South wind!"

They sung longer than before, and when they quit the old man turned to the west. "Oh, West wind," he prayed, "Oh, strong wind, Oh, wind that sleeps with the Sun; wait until the North wind has piled the snow in the coulees. Do not send your strong breath to the plains now, lest the buffalo be told that we are coming to kill them. Our people need meat. Do not tell the buffalo. Do not betray us, O West wind!"

He sat down, plumb tired out, and they sung a song to the West wind, the music loud and soft by turns—a heap like the wind, I thought.

"We will go now," said Mac.

Back in the lodge he told me that there would be a buffalo-dance on the next day and that if their medicine was good they would have many robes to trade soon. He didn't go to his own lodge, nor we didn't sit up late. I had made up my mind that I wouldn't urge trading until after the big hunt, anyway, and fell to thinking of Bluebird. But it didn't keep me awake; for before the fire was out I was asleep.

When we went down to the river in the morning men was parading about the village wearing head-dresses made of buffalo hair, buffalo heads with horns and all left on, or bonnets made of tails. They danced about and chanted songs. One man wore the head of a large buffalo bull that looked almost fresh-killed, it was so real and life-like. They didn't talk to us nor pay any attention when we met them; and all through the day till sundown they kept moving about, wearing something on their heads made of buffalo hair or hides. Then at night they danced till late, and it was a sight.

The weather had warmed up considerable and the

snow had settled down so that there wa'n't more than a foot of it on the level, though in the coulees it was drifted bad. I was as anxious to see the hunt as I could be, and hoped that the morning would suit the hunters.

We was up before daylight, and no wonder. Everybody was up. The camp-crier went about telling of the hunt and saying the day would be fine. Mac took his lance and his bow and arrows and we set out with mighty nigh every able man in the village, before it was light enough to see good. And the women—a passel of them—come along, too, and some half-grown children, all packing old robes and axes. You'd think they was moving to see the stuff they had; but I soon learned that every bit was needed.

After an hour's travel up the river we come to a big grove of cottonwoods growing on the edge of the plains, from where, as the sun come out of a cloud on the eastern horizon we saw a herd of buffalo not more'n half a mile away.

Everybody knowed what to do. They begun to slash brush and pull down-timber out of the snow. In no time they had built a flimsy corral, using anything for its sides, even old buffalo robes and willows. It wouldn't have held a hoss a minute; but though I didn't scarcely believe in it, I he'ped them them make it.

The cottonwood grove was a little lower than the plains. I mean there was a bank that dropped down about three or four feet where the plains met the trees in the cottonwood bottom—quite a jump-off it was. They built a wall against the bank, making the side of the corral of logs, too, so they could place more logs from the wall to the corral's side,

like the bottom of a bridge. This approach wa'n't more than six feet long. Anything crossing the approach, or bridge bottom, would either have to jump down about four feet or turn and go back; but of all the miserable-constructed things I ever saw it was sure the worst. If they ever managed to get a buffalo into the corral I figured he'd go right through it. I told Mac it wouldn't hold a rabbit. But he says, "Wait and see. The buffalo," he says, "will not touch the sides when once they are in the corral. They always go around and around in one direction until the last one is dead. They go as the sun goes. It is always so."

Everybody had been careful to stay in the grove, and while they wa'n't over-careful about noise they didn't do much talking and didn't pound any more than they had to. But now some men, each packing willows, walked out onto the plain, the party spreading out V-shaped from the corral-bridge. When the outer ends of the V had gone the right distance, the men layed down behind the willows they had been packing so the willows formed wings to the corral. It seemed like they was flimsy make-believes which wouldn't likely fool a buffalo.

As soon as the men with the willows had layed down we all hid behind trees and bushes. The wind was still. Black Bear's medicine was good. Not a breath was stirring.

"Look," whispered Mac by my side.

A man had popped up like a jumping-jack directly in front of the herd. He was wearing a buffalo head-dress, and though he was more than half a mile away, I guessed it was the big bull's-head bonnet I'd seen the day before. "Bad Weasel," whis-

pered Mac. "He owns a great buffalo-stone. He is the buffalo-man. Watch him."

"What is a buffalo-stone?" I asked, parting the bushes to see better.

"She will tell you," he says. "Look!"

The buffalo had noticed the man. A cow, curious, had walked a step or two towards him and stopped, sniffing. The man begun to dance. The cow moved nearer. And then others of the herd noticed and stopped grazing. The cow advanced a little more, and there was a general movement in the herd. More than five hundred buffalo was looking at Bad Weasel! I thought I'd rather be where I was than out on the plains with him. But he turned his back to the herd and danced towards us, hopping about and even getting down on his knees sometimes. A dozen cows and a big bull was walking towards him now, and I could hear the people muttering. They was growing excited. I turned to whisper to Mac; and when I looked again Bad Weasel was gone.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Hid in a little coulee. Watch!"

Mac got to his knees and was breathing hard. The buffalo had stopped. The whole herd was bunched and looking for the strange object that had been near them. They was restless and ready to stampede. It was a ticklish moment, and the people was fretting. Directly I saw Bad Weasel rise out of the snow, still in front of the herd, but closer to the corral. He danced and the herd started towards him. He begun to trot, awkwardly towards us, half-dancing. The buffalo come faster, and Bad Weasel ran.

The stampede was on. They was coming. I prickled all over. Mac had hold of my arm and

squeezed hard. Bad Weasel was running for his life. It seemed like the herd would trample him to shreds. He couldn't hope to out-run the buffalo. I seemed to be in his place. I could feel the hot breath of the big bull on my back. I struggled to my feet, but Mac pulled me down. "Be still!" he whispered.

Bad Weasel was near to the willow wings. I hoped the men behind them was going to save him. But even as I looked he was gone. Only the herd was coming, running straight over the unmarked snow.

Nobody moved nor spoke. The herd had entered the V and was between the willow wings, running blind and fast. As it passed them the willow men raised up with their willows, yelling, and sending the stampeded buffalo even faster towards the corral, till they tumbled into it, one against the other. The ones behind crowded the leaders into the trap, and right away the corral was a milling mass of brown bodies, so thick that there wa'n't room for another one. The willow-men had split the herd, someway, and turned part away. There wa'n't no need of care now. Everybody was talking and everybody was killing buffalo. Strong bows sent arrows into the big bodies so that the shafts sometimes stuck through them. I saw men reach in and even jump in the corral and push arrows deeper with their hands.

Round and round, over the dead bodies of others, the buffalo ran, never once touching the corral—unless they was crowded against it—and traveling as the sun does, like Mac said. They never changed their course nor stopped, till the last was dead, or down to die. They stumbled blind and without

sound over the dead bodies of their fellows till the last, an old bull, crazed and gored with lances and even knives lashed to poles, fell panting upon the carcass of another bull as big as himse'f.

It was all over with. Blood was everywhere and all over everybody. The snow was awful to look at, all tracked and trampled and full of red puddles for more than twenty feet from the corral. I wanted to get away from it; so as soon as the butchering commenced Mac and I with four nice tongues, left the place to the butchers.

No part of the meat was wasted. Even the entrails was taken for use and heads and legs was prized. Travois-loads of meat come to the village for three days, and there was feasting for four nights. And all through the winter the camp dogs kept a trail open to the buffalo-corral, where they had many a meal, and scores of battles among theirse'fs.



CHAPTER XXIV

We broiled fat buffalo steaks like Dad had done till we couldn't eat no more; and there was a lot of good robes in the kill that would come to us in trade. Even the village dogs grew fat and sleek; and every day hunters fetched in more meat for the camp needed much, and the women dried it as fast as it come to them.

The weather wa'n't cold, and the snow didn't bother us much, though it hung on till one night when a Chinook hit the country and next morning it was all gone except in the coulees. I couldn't believe it when, leaving the lodge at daylight, I saw the plains as bare of snow as on a summer day, excepting spots in the deeper coulees. All night the wind had howled and shrieked, though it was warm, almost, as summer winds. Water was in puddles everywhere and I felt spring had come. But in two days the weather was cold again, although there wa'n't no snow. The buffalo didn't leave, so that there wa'n't much chance of the Crees moving their village, and I was glad of that. I begun to go about evenings with Mac, visiting his friends, feasting and listening to stories. The Crees was proud of their tribe, and I never got tired of the stories they told. The fairness showed up by their telling was a thing to remember. If the joke was on the teller himse'f, he told it straight out and seemed to enjoy it as much as anybody.

One night we was in Left Hand's lodge. He was more'n sixty years old, I reckon, and he told a story that I can't forget.

"When I was a young man," he said, cleaning his black stone pipe, "there were not so many horses as there are today. To steal a good horse was a greater task then than to take many now. I was a leader among the young men, and they looked to me for brave deeds. But there was another of my own age who had a large following of his own—larger than mine most of the time. Fine Bow, that was his name. We did not like each other, and he tried hard to set examples which I could not follow or beat. The old men and warriors would watch, and the young women took sides. But he could never beat me. I could not beat him. If he won an honor, I won as much but no more. And so it went on till one night he came to me and said that we would go together horse-stealing.

"We traveled fourteen days and many nights before we came upon the Blackfeet village. There were more than five hundred lodges. We saw them before the sun went down. They were not far from here, half a day's ride up the river from this place. There was no moon and when the night came it was very dark and still. We were not far from the nearest lodges, and while yet there was sunlight I picked the horses that I would try to steal. The Chief's lodge was not far off, and near it was a rope corral that held four beautiful horses. I had seen them plainly. One of them was white.

"The Blackfeet are careful of their horses. The rope corral was so near to the big lodge that it almost touched it. But I would have the white horse and another besides. I was thinking how fine it would be to have such animals for my own. It was growing dark. Fine Bow whispered to me. 'Go your own way,' he said. 'I shall not help you.'

"His words angered me. 'I scorn your help,' I whispered. 'I would not have it. I have already picked the horses I shall steal.'

"He laughed scornfully. 'Ha!' he said. 'If you steal more horses than I do I will join your band with those who follow me.'

"'Good,' I whispered. 'If you reach our village with more horses or scalps than I take, I will call you my chief. Ho!'

"He crawled away in the darkness. As soon as he was gone I left our hiding place and felt my way toward the big lodge. No dogs howled and the wind moved not. No men were stirring. Fires were few in the village and most of the lodges were dark. At last I reached the corral. I listened. I waited there so that the horses would smell me and grow used to me before I moved again. I feared that if I startled them they might snort. That would waken the people in the big lodge. But they were quiet and I moved a little so that the horses would know that I was there. Finally I crept under the rope. They stirred a little then, and that made me wait longer. But at last I stood up and listened. There was no strange sound. No person was stirring. I had forgotten Fine Bow. But now I wondered if he, too, had succeeded in getting into the village. I stole to the side of the beautiful white buffalo-runner of the chief. Ho! what a beauty he was and how sleek. I reached about his smooth neck to tie my rope. Ho! my hand bumped against something strange. I nearly cried out. Then a head—a man's head—rose over the white horse's neck. I was terrified. My heart jumped like a green frog, and I stepped backward. 'This is *my*

horse,' a voice whispered. And two eyes looked into my own.

"Then anger came to me. It was Fine Bow who looked at me, who whispered across the neck of the white horse. He had crawled to the same corral. He was after the horses that I wanted.

"'No,' I whispered, when I could. 'I saw this horse first. He is mine because I touched him before you did.'

"'I want this horse, this white one!' His voice was growing louder. It was too loud. He was foolish.

"'Shh!' I warned him. 'You will wake the people in the lodge. Take any other horse but this white one and let us go,' I begged.

"'Ho!' He struck the Chief's lodge with his rope's end. It cracked like a shot. 'Ho, Blackfeet!' he cried. 'A Cree is stealing your white horse!'

"I ran away. So did he. It was a dark night, but we both ran fast. I was ahead.

"'Here he goes, Blackfeet! I am chasing the Cree!' Fine Bow's voice was loud. 'He runs well and his scalp is a fine one!'

"He was crazy I thought. Fine Bow had lost his reason. I tried to run faster but my strength was leaving me. I was almost without breath.

"Then I heard him laughing. We were far from the lodges now, and I turned and seized him. 'You fool!' I panted. Anger was stronger than my fear.

"'You are the fool,' he laughed. His voice was choked with glee.

"'Why did you do that?' I demanded, pushing him from me.

"'To see how brave you are,' he said and fell upon the ground, laughing loud.

“‘But we have stolen no horses,’ I cried angrily.

“‘No,’ he said, ‘but I made you run by speaking Cree to Blackfeet!’ He got up to laugh again.

“It was so. The village laughed a long time after the story was told. And while it laughed I became the friend of Fine Bow.”

Left Hand stirred the lodge-fire and re-filled the black pipe. “There are men yet living who remember the story,” he said, his deep-lined face set hard at his thoughts of the past. He drew a brand from the fire and lit the pipe. “Fine Bow was a great warrior,” he said. “But his years were few. I saw him die, and I hope to die as he did, fighting the Blackfeet. I have finished.”

Everybody laughed over the story, but I didn’t laugh. Left Hand’s face held my eyes and kept me from laughing. I wished he would tell another yarn. But before there was time we had another caller. Black Bear, the old medicine-man, come into the lodge.

Left Hand greeted him warm, placing a back-rest made of little willows held together with sinew and thongs for the old man at the head of the lodge; and everybody said “how” when he sat down and leaned against it. He had the sternest face I ever saw. His mouth was bigger than Dad’s, but straight cut like his was, and square-looking. His hair was getting gray, and that is a mark of distinction among Injins, always, a proof that the Great Mystery has favored the owner. Black Bear wore a necklace made of the teeth of grizzly bears, and in his ears two shells as big as dollars. Right over his high, broad forehead was a little knot of hair, braided and wound up tight, with a bone whistle sticking through it. Mac said the whistle

was made from the bone of an eagle's wing and was a medicine-whistle. He must have been eighty, but his eyes was bright as a boy's and when he looked at me I was sure he knowed what I was thinking about.

Left Hand filled the pipe but didn't light it. He passed it to Black Bear, and I watched careful to see how it was handled, for whenever the old man smoked it was a sight to watch how deliberate and careful he was of his pipe's movements.

He lit the pipe and rose to his knees. His face was solemn and his eyes saw nobody about the lodge fire. His lips moved but made no sound, as he turned the pipe's stem slow towards the sky and held it there with bowed head. Then he pointed it at the earth near the fire, his lips still moving silent, while he offered it to the "mother" of all things. I could have counted twenty before he moved it and offered it to the four winds, the four seasons, or the north, east, south, and west. I never saw a thing done so solemn, nor with such grace; though I'd have bet the pipe was out.

But it wa'n't. Black Bear smoked before passing it back to Left Hand. After that it went around the fire and I noticed that the stem was always pointed towards the lodge wall and that it was passed in the same direction the Sun travels. I thought of the buffalo in the bloody corral. No wonder they noticed and followed such customs. Mebby superstition is behind a heap of them, but it's hard for me to draw a line between it and a sensible creed. I reckon they're related, one to the other, anyhow. I've never forgot what Dad said about the ring on the finger and the ring in the nose. I try to go slow in branding things I don't

understand, as frauds. But I've seen queer doings and heered strange things in Injin camps—things I don't try to explain. They lay hold of me, too, sometimes; though I reckon it's only the mystery that is wrapped around them that does it, mebby. Anyway, most always I've found that if you believe a thing strong enough it's likely to be true, or seem true.

But whatever an Injin believes in he never insists on you accepting it as your own belief, and he thinks no less of you if you *don't* believe like he does. He holds that you have a right to your opinion and claims that same right for himse'f. He never scorns another's creed, no matter how much it may differ from his own

That night Black Bear told this story; and when he had finished I wished that Dad might have lived to hear it and tell me what he thought of it. It left me wondering and I've wondered often since. They believe things that we don't believe, and do things that we can't do. I'll let it go at that.

"When I was a boy," begun Black Bear, "our people had camped in the Cypress Hills. There were no buffalo, and the Crees were hungry. The heat had burned the buffalo range and the Black-foot had whipped us hard. There was much mourning among the women and many faces were painted. The old men said that the buffalo had left the world, had hidden away in a great hole in the ground to the eastward. There were no antelope. Maybe they had gone into hiding with the buffalo. I do not know. The plains were bare, all bare, and brown. The people knew why all this had come upon them. Wah-pi-oose, the buffalo-man had lost the great buffalo-stone of the Crees; it could not be found;

and they must starve. Their hearts were on the ground!

"Natuse; ah, I remember that great medicine-man! Natuse went away alone. For four days and four nights he stayed away. Then some young men saw him returning. They went to meet him. He was crawling over the hot plains—crawling on his belly as a snake travels. He would not speak to the young men, nor would he allow them to help him, but kept crawling painfully on. He did not reach the village until it was dark. His finger nails were torn away and his hands were cut and bleeding. Blood had dried upon his face where the bushes had scratched it, for he had come straight for the village, as his medicine had told him he must. Natuse stopped near to my father's lodge. 'Bring me a knife,' he called. My father gave his knife to him. Then Natuse cut off his little finger and buried it in the ground under him. 'Ho! my people,' he said, rising to his feet. 'I bring good news.'

"The Crees gathered near him to listen. 'In the early morning,' said Natuse, 'the buffalo will come. The plains will be blackened with them. Let the hunters prepare. Let the women get ready, for there will be much to do. Let no one leave the village, but keep some young men upon that knoll where they can watch the little lake. They must not take their eyes off its water. With the buffalo will come one that wears a white robe. A warrior will kill that buffalo, but he must not take his robe. Let him who kills the white buffalo remember this, and come here for me when it is slain. I have finished.'

"The people were glad. Natuse was powerful.

My father has told me that Natuse foretold the coming of the whitemen, and that he even described their weapons before any people on the world had even seen them. Yes, I remember Natuse when he was very old, and now I am as old as he was when he did what I am telling.

“The village that night was as still as the places where the dead are buried. All the night the young men were upon the knoll watching the lake. A bright star looked at me through the smoke-hole of my father’s lodge. I saw it move a little. Then a star that was near it fell and a streak of light made a glow upon the dark lodge wall. A grasshopper crawled upon my arm and sang in the night. I was frightened. I crept out of the lodge without making a noise. The day was not far off, I thought, for a wind was beginning to stir as it does when the day is coming. I crept to a hilltop not far from the knoll where the young men were watching the lake. I heard a wolf howl down where the shadows were thick near the water, and a stone I had loosened in walking went tumbling down the slope towards the village. Then a dog howled and my body felt as though a cactus were being pressed against it, for I feared that all the dogs would answer. But they did not, and I sat down to watch the lake. After a time I heard a strange noise (Black Bear made a humming sound deep down in his throat). I could see nothing that was making it; but the air felt queer about me. I was very young and the noise scared me. It came again, louder than before, and then I saw that the lake was disturbed. White smoke was coming from the water. Then it bubbled and boiled, just as a kettle does over a fire. The ground trembled and the noise came again. Mn-

mn-mn-mn ugh-ugh! Mn-mn-mn-mn ugh-ugh! The air became heated and the ground shook and stirred under me. I could scarcely get my breath. It was terrible.

"The people in the village were awake, too, but they did not hear the strange noise as I did. I kept my eyes upon the lake. Suddenly the water rose in the middle and the lump was like a ball of water. The ball began rolling towards the shore, rolling, rolling, rolling, until it struck the beach and burst with much white smoke. Ho! Out of the mist of white smoke there walked a buffalo. He was white as the snow. Ho! He stood on the land looking towards the east. He was the Medicine Buffalo that Natuse had told us would come.

"Then lumps rose up all about the lake and began rolling towards the shore. Each lump burst with a puff of white smoke and a buffalo came out of it. When the shore was black with buffalo the white bull began to move eastward, and the rest followed as fast as they reached the land. The white smoke hung over the lake until it almost hid the mighty herd that was coming out of the water. They could not be counted. The ground trembled with their weight; and as far eastward as I could see there were buffalo without end. The hunters went after them and the travois followed to bring in the meat. My father killed the white bull. Natuse skinned him and gave the white robe to the Sun. I have finished."

Left Hand filled the pipe again.

"My grandfather was Natuse's brother," said Sitting Horse, a man as old as Black Bear.

"Ahh!" both Left Hand and the old medicine-man said, like they both had knowed him.

Black Bear smoked and passed the pipe as before, but nobody spoke till it was back with Left Hand. It was plain that Sitting Horse was expected to go on. And he did.

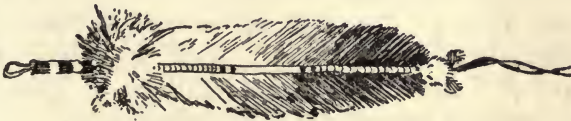
"My grandfather was with a war-party once that was led by Natuse," he said. "Grandfather was young then. He told me this:

"One night they camped in a dark forest where great pine trees grew. It was far to the eastward. The war-party numbered thirty men. It was in the month of roses and rain fell every day and night. They had found no enemy. In the night a great stillness came in the darkness. The heavy rain had stopped but a fine mist was falling. The great trees leaked water through their tops and no dry places could be found. There was something that made them afraid. Even Natuse felt it. None could tell what it was that frightened them. That made it worse. The men tried to sleep but the stillness among the pine trees made it hard for them to get breath.

"Suddenly Natuse sat up straight near my grandfather and there came a terrible crashing sound that hurt the ears. With it came a flood of light that went away as soon as it came. The air smelled of something that did not belong in the world. Ten of the war-party were dead and two that lived were blind forever. A great hole was torn in the ground near Natuse and grandfather and flying dirt had covered them. It was long before they could speak or move. Then Natuse and grandfather walked down into the hole the great noise had made. In the bottom they found a feather. It was green as the new grass in the early spring and was as long as a war-bow. It came from

the wing of the thunder-bird, Natuse told my grandfather. It was the thunder-bird that made the hole in the ground and brought the great light. It was the thunder-bird that killed the warriors. The rest came back to the village. I have finished."

Right away I knowed it was lightning that dug the hole and killed the men. (White folks are mighty sure of theirse'fs and know a heap.) But I couldn't understand the green feather. Natuse didn't lie, and Sitting Horse believed every word of what he told. So did all the rest—all but me; and I wondered why. I knowed that dreams figured in the lives of Injins and thought mebbly a dream had mixed itse'f up with a thunder storm 'way back yonder when Sitting Horse's grandfather was a boy. But dream or no dream, the thing that grabs you—the thing you think you can explain and can't, was in the story. I don't know how to say it, but it *dared* you, somehow; and I liked it the way I'd liked the Robinson Crusoe book of Abner Hastings'. And the green feather made me feel like I knowed he felt when he run onto the man's track in the sand.



CHAPTER XXV

When I sat by my own fire after Mac had gone to his lodge for the night I thought about the stories some more. White folks that lived long ago and was wild like the Injins held to queer beliefs and their medicine-men told of chariots of fire and folks that turned to salt. Nobody disputed them, and even now it won't do to make light of it. And I wouldn't do it, noway. I reckon that mixed with the truth in every belief there is a passel of impossibilities which folks could separate if they dared, and that whether they admit it or not, both white and red folks'll bear shackles of mystery rather than to pick and choose.

Once when I was little old Nate Busey that lives down on Coon Creek below the mill told me to watch out for devil's darning needles, those big dragon flies that stays around water. He said they'd sew up the lips of boys that used bad words. I told it to Jeff Hawkins and after that we was both afraid of them and was mighty careful what we said when we was fishing. I've even set out to kill them with a stick, holding one hand over my lips. And blamed if I ain't half afraid of them to this day, even though I sure know they're harmless.

I figured that we had owned beliefs as rickety as anybody's and that the difference, if there was any, was less than between the bow-and-arrow and my rifle. And I let it go at that.

It was a long time before I went to sleep. In spite of all I could do to keep it off, lonesomeness layed hold of me. I built up my fire, but it didn't

he'p, and I let it go plumb out and layed on my back looking up through the smoke-hole at the stars. But I couldn't fit myse'f to the plains, noway. I mean, to live there always. While Dad was living I'd never thought about living there always; just thought about one day at a time, like, leaving things to him to settle, I reckon. But now I'd got to think for myse'f.

I could see clear that I ought to get back where I come from; and I wanted to. Then when I'd settled it and tried to go to sleep, I got to thinking of Bluebird. I tried to shut her out, but whenever I turned my thoughts away from her I couldn't hold to it, and back she'd come.

It's queer, but when you try to keep from thinking of anything the trying itse'f won't let go of what you want to turn loose, and it hangs around till finally you give up. I wished that she hadn't fetched the kettle that night, and felt plumb ashamed of it as soon as I'd wished it. I got to asking questions and answering myse'f honest.

Wa'n't it a kind act, fetching the kettle?

It sure was.

Wa'n't she as fine a little woman as I ever saw?

Yes, she was.

Had she made eyes at me or tried to get acquainted?

No, not by a long shot.

And then I got mad at her ducking back into her father's lodge that morning when she saw me. She didn't want to have anything to do with me. And she needn't. I was a whiteman and she was only an Injin woman. As soon as that come out I felt as sneaking as a coyote and took it back. And that's the way I spent more than two hours.

Mac come early to the lodge, but I was up and stirring when he lifted the door and entered.

"Did you rest well?" he asked, kneeling beside the fire.

"No," I answered, and looked into his eyes. There was something in his voice that told me I needn't have answered—that he knowed I'd spent a restless night.

He stirred the fire with a stick; then dropped it on the blaze. "The ways of your people are different from the ways of the Crees, Lone Wolf," he said. "Do you think that Bluebird is a fool, or that Red Robe has no eyes?" He begun to fill his pipe, absent, with his thin fingers, while his glance was on me without seeing that I was there.

I could feel my face getting hot. "What do you mean?" I asked. But I was sure he knowed I didn't mean for him to answer me.

"I know but little of the ways of my father's people and your own," he went on directly, leaning forward to take a brand from the fire to light the pipe. "Be wise, Lone Wolf. Do not seem to steal about among the Crees. Their customs are their own and you are here with them. Speak out, that they may know what you mean and what is in your heart, lest they think you treacherous, all because they do not know the whiteman's ways. If you want Bluebird go to her father."

He passed me the pipe and I took it. Before I could speak his hands flashed the signs "smoke first." It is a good rule and I have followed it since then. My feeling wa'n't all clean resentment. It was a mixed feeling, with some anger. But it weakened before the quiet little man across the lodge-fire, and when I spoke I'd killed it off.

"I have not even told *myself* that I want her, Little Knife," I said. "But I would like to know her, like to learn if I *do* want her. That is the way of my people. And if she does not want me I would not have her, even though I could."

I was speaking the truth. I had not thought of having Bluebird for my wife. If it had been in my mind I hadn't knowed it. I'd took to her from the first, the same as I had to Dad. She seemed to draw me, and I wanted to talk to her and be friendly. But I couldn't stay on the plains always. And I remembered what Dad had said just before he went and how all along he'd tried to keep me away from her.

"I do not think that I want her, Little Knife," I said, handing back the pipe.

He paid no attention to that. "Your ways are different from ours," he says, putting away his pipe. "Bluebird is a Cree woman and will do as her father decides. I have spoken."

"She seems to be afraid of me," I said. But he didn't answer.

"The weather will change soon. There will be snow again," he said finally. "We must kill some meat."

"They are curious folks," I thought. "I am ready to hunt for meat," I told him. "But let us begin trading soon." Our talk had made me want to get away more than ever. I wanted to get the thing settled. "When can we start our trading?" I asked.

"There is no good in haste," he smiled. "The robes and fur will come to us and to no others. It is quite a time until spring and while we may begin to trade even now, it is well to be slow, for we shall

be able to choose the best by taking time. Let us go out on the plains today."

So we set out up the Marias after buffalo. The morning was chill. A strong wind was blowing, but the plains was nigh bare of snow. I rode Bill's hoss to save Eagle, though they was all fat enough and fit; but I reckoned to save Dad's war-hoss for special occasions.

I hadn't ever yet run buffalo; and no sooner had we started than my hoss, going as fast as he could, fell with me and mighty nigh laid me up. My head hit the frozen ground and I went plumb asleep for a spell. When I come to Mac was with me. I felt light-headed and sick at my stomach.

The herd was only a small one and it was more'n three miles away when I got straightened out. But Mac had killed a fat cow, so we called it good and quit.

A lump was swelling above my ear and I felt worse than I let on when we started back for the village. Before we got there I had to get down, or I'd have fallen off, I reckon. Mac got down, too, and we both waited a spell till I felt better; but my head wa'n't right by a long shot when we got in.

As we passed Red Robe's lodge, Bluebird come out. She had a kettle in her hand.

"What is wrong?" she asked, dropping the kettle and coming to meet us. I thought she looked scared.

"His horse fell with him. His head is hurt," Mac said, starting on.

"Come into the lodge." She turned and walked to it in that silent way of hers and raised the door. "Lone Wolf is hurt," she said, and I heard them murmur "Ahh," inside.

I was glad to sit down, but the warmth of the lodge made me light-headed again and I layed down on a robe. I wa'n't out of my mind. I could hear them talking and knowed what was going on, but it was dim, and I didn't care. Somebody undid my head-silk. And I knowed it was her. I tried to sit up, but she pressed her hand against my breast and I give up. It was good to be still. She put something cold on my head and I could hear them pounding up some roots to make medicine that would he'p me. But I dozed off.

I must have slept a long spell, for when I woke it was plumb dark. The fire was crackling and I could see them all in its dim light. I stirred a little, and Bluebird come and changed a cloth on my head.

"You are better," she said, pressing down the cloth gentle and careful. "You must have had a bad fall. Lie still yet a while."

I had moved to get up. I wished she would talk some more, but she sat down where I couldn't even see her and was still. The rest went on talking in low voices; and Mac was there.

Directly I sat up and the cloth that smelled strong of herbs, fell off.

"How," smiled Red Robe, rising to his knees across the fire. And Mac come over and sat down by my side.

"I am better," I said. "I have had a good nap." My head pained me some but I wa'n't dizzy no more nor sick. I was hungry. "Come," I says to Mac, "let us go to our own lodge."

But his hand was on my arm and I did not get up.

"I would speak," he said to Red Robe. And the warrior straightened his body.

"Your lodge is a good place." Mac spoke slow and in a low voice. "Manitou gives comfort to those who are cunning with weapons, and you are a great hunter.

"I would speak for my friend, Lone Wolf. I would tell what is in his heart. He did not know that I would speak, did not guess that I would tell you. He did not ask me to speak for him, but Little Knife is the friend of Lone Wolf. The ways of the whiteman are not our ways, and that my friend may not be misunderstood, that you may respect him as he goes about the village, I will speak for him before you while his own ears listen.

"Lone Wolf thinks much of Bluebird. He would talk to her often and learn to know her well. He would not seek to take her to his lodge unless she wished to go there as his woman. That is the way of his people. He has told me this, and I am his friend, that he would first be sure that Bluebird was the woman he wanted and that he was the man she desired before he spoke to you, her father. Lone Wolf will have but one woman. That, too, is the way of his people. Red Robe knows that Lone Wolf is a good hunter, that his heart is kind, and that he has many goods and horses. I have finished."

Red Robe drew his pipe from his fire-bag slowly and laid it before him. A puppy whined at the lodge-door and Bluebird raised it and lifted in the shivering, fuzzy mite, born plumb out of season.

I can't tell you how I felt. I was angry at Mac and sorry for *her* all in one. But it was done. I wanted to get out of there; but I couldn't see any way to do it right.

"You'll spick now," said Mac in English. "You'll

tell heem I ha'n't lie, me. Dat's bes' way, ma frien'." His voice seemed to beg me to do like he said.

"What Little Knife has spoken is true," I says. "I did not know that he would do as he has done. I did not ask him to do it. But he has not lied. There," I thought, "I've done it."

Bluebird's mother put a stick on the fire but nobody spoke. The other children was staring at me, their black eyes searching my face. I felt my head throb, and looked at Bluebird. She was snuggling the puppy in her arms with her head bent over him.

Red Robe filled the pipe with tobacco and willow bark and when he reached for a fire-brand the light fell on his face. It was seamed deep, like Dad's, and honest-looking and kind. He lit the pipe and offered it to the Sun, the father, and then to the Earth, the mother, of all things, before he passed it to me. I took it and smoked as he had and as careful. Then, after Mac had smoked, the old warrior spoke and I haven't forgot his words. They was fair.

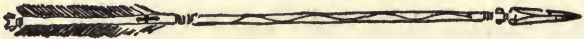
"All people have their ways," he said, looking straight at me. "The Blackfeet and the Crows and the Sioux, each have customs that are not like those of the Crees. But that does not mean that the ways of those people are wrong. Let each nation follow its own ways as its fathers did, and let any who become members of a tribe of people conform to its customs. That is well, for it is easier for one man to change his ways than it is for many to adopt those that are his. I have known many whitemen. Some were honest. Lone Wolf is a brave man and I would call him my friend. Let it be as he wishes. But let him come to my lodge to

talk to my daughter and know her, where all may hear what he says, if they care to listen. I have finished."

I was more'n half set against Mac, and fidgety. I wanted Red Robe to know that I appreciated him being fair, but I didn't want Bluebird to believe that I sure wanted her, only to find out later on that I didn't. I couldn't think of a worth-while thing to say; but I knowed I plumb had to say *something*.

Red Robe was putting away his pipe with the air of a man who has set aside a respected custom to oblige a friend, and Mac was looking at the lodge wall over my head, listening, like. I reachd across the fire and shook hands with Red Robe. "I will go now," I told him. "But I will visit your lodge, and I would that you come often to mine."

Mac got up to go with me. I mighty nigh stopped to say something to Bluebird. I wanted to; but I wa'n't sure it would be right. I saw her eyes in the firelight, though, and I thought they looked glad.



CHAPTER XXVI

My head was sore the next morning, and I did not go out on the plains with Mac. The cut in my scalp had bled some, so that my hair was tangled—it was longer than Dad's now—and I washed it and my head-silk to get rid of the medicine-smell.

Red Robe come to the lodge door soon after Mac had gone, but he didn't come in. He asked how I felt; but he didn't mention Bluebird nor I didn't.

I slicked up the lodge and run up a few bullets and cleaned my rifle to pass the time. It was after noon before I was through and sat down. I hadn't spoke to Mac about him taking my business into his own hands and figured that I wouldn't. He thought he was doing me a kindness. I knowed that; and when he told Red Robe what I had said to him he believed what he had spoken. But he forgot part of what I'd told him—that I didn't want Bluebird. But there wa'n't any use arguing with Mac, nor jangling over a woman, noway. I would overlook it and we'd go on as before. I made up my mind to that and felt better and easier. It would only be a little while till I could get away and I needn't come back. I smiled to myse'f. Come back? I wouldn't come back to the plains once I got safe away to St. Louis. Nobody could pester me about Caley Byers now. I took a look at the paper Dad had signed, though I didn't undo it. I just wanted to make sure it was there and safe.

It was sundown before Mac come in. He had made a good killing but he was tired and went to his

own lodge to sleep. I broiled a fat steak and smoked alone. It wa'n't late when I turned in, but I slept till daylight. And it was snowing hard when I got up. The fire ring was covered white and it was dark, though I knowed it wa'n't early. I was hungry as a buffalo wolf and it didn't take me long to get a fire started.

The air was thick with snow-flakes when I went for water and the plains was hid from sight. I reckoned that the storm would last a spell and I went back to my lodge feeling comfortable, like, and satisfied. I have mostly always since then felt that way when I had meat and a fire and the weather was bad, especially late in the fall when Nahpee has made his sign that the summer is dead.

Mac come in and Yellow Bear. We smoked and talked till after noon. Then we went to visit Medicine Elk for a spell. He had company already and was gambling. But we sat down and watched. Medicine Elk and Big Rock was playing the bone game, and they had been at it since early morning, I reckoned by the pile of robes and furs and fixings that was behind Big Rock, the visitor. Medicine Elk was pretty much interested in the game. He said 'how' when we come in and then forgot us. It was Big Rock's turn with the bones—two sections of a deer's shank about two and a half inches long, one with a thong fastened about it, the other bare. He reached behind him and drew five dressed robes to a place between himse'f and Medicine Elk. "I'll wager these against their worth," he said.

Medicine Elk spoke to his woman. She got up and fetched a parfleche, painted bright with colors, which she opened by the fire. It was a dress that she took out, a beautiful-worked elk-skin dress all

fancy with colored quills and fringe. I saw her face as she handed it to her man, and I was plumb sorry for her. It had taken months of work to make that dress, and likely she hadn't even had a chance to wear it.

"Ten tanned robes against this dress," said Medicine Elk. "See, Big Rock, it is beautiful."

"No, six," objected Big Rock, "only six," and he reached for another robe that had belonged to his host and put it with the first five.

"Bet ten robes against it," urged Medicine Elk, holding the pretty thing up in the firelight.

But Big Rock didn't look. "I will bet eight dressed robes—that is all," he said, and lit his pipe. He was older than Medicine Elk and one eye was gone. He was naked to the waist and had a scar on his right side as wide as my hand.

Medicine Elk's face didn't change. "Good," he said, laying the dress on top of the eight robes. "I can beat you this time. Ho!"

He took the bones and begun to rock and sway and sing like a woman quieting a fretting child. His hands was so quick I couldn't see what he did. But directly he opened one of them before Big Rock. The marked bone, the one with the thong around it, was there in his palm. He held it still only a second. Then he closed his hand, passing his other, while he sung and swayed his body in time with the tune.

Big Rock's eye was fastened on him, and it was lit up with excitement that no word or movement of his hands would show. I was so tightened up I ached. I hoped the woman wouldn't lose her dress.

Suddenly Medicine Elk sat still, both arms extended towards Big Rock, hands shut with their

backs up. I could feel myse'f prickle all over. The woman bent over her man's shoulder and her eyes ha'nted me for days afterward. Even Mac raised to his knees to look.

"Ho!" Big Rock struck his own right arm. Medicine Elk opened his right hand. The marked bone was there. The dress was lost.

"All of my horses against everything in that pile behind you. I will end the game that way," said Medicine Elk, offering Big Rock the bones.

"Good," he said, and took the bones. "I will bet as you have said, the pile against all your horses."

Medicine Elk spoke again to the woman and she put a stick on the fire. A hundred hosses! And the pile of goods represented months of work. The stick blazed up and Big Rock begun to sing and juggle the bones about. Then, after he'd showed the marked bone to Medicine Elk he begun to sway in earnest to his song. I didn't like him. "Um-um aaye-aaye aaye-aaye. Ho!" He sat straight up with his hands held towards Medicine Elk and his one eye boring him like an auger.

"Ho!" Medicine Elk slapped his own left arm and right off Big Rock opened his left hand. But the marked bone wa'n't there; only the smooth one.

I could feel my heart pounding and my mouth was plumb dry. But Medicine Elk smiled. "Now," he said, even, "I will bet this lodge against five good horses."

I saw the woman's hand cover her mouth. She wa'n't going to cry out. It was only the sign of astonishment, made, most likely, without her knowing she did it. Then for the first time I saw the face of a boy between the woman and Mac. His lips was open and there was a guarded look of

anxiety in his black eyes. But he too was a Cree and held onto himse'f.

Big Rock, anxious, I reckoned, to follow up his luck, lit his own pipe and drew the smoke deep into his lungs. When it come through his thin lips one word come with it. "No," he said, and passed his pipe to Medicine Elk.

I liked him better for his answer, and I could feel the woman and the boy let down, like. I took a better hold of myse'f. The excitement of the game had layed hold of me; and I let down, too.

Medicine Elk smoked, and when the pipe went back to Big Rock you wouldn't know there had been gambling between them. Medicine Elk joked and laughed and seemed anxious to show Big Rock and ourse'fs special attention. He filled his own pipe with tobacco he borrowed from Mac and passed it without even a look at the pile of goods behind Big Rock that held every trinket, every bit of finery and fur, and every robe he had owned. Besides, he had no hosses—not even one.

We left before Big Rock did. I hated to see him pack up his winnings, especially the woman's dress; and we left him there to do it after we was gone.

I got to thinking of old Hi Penney at the Crossing while Mac made a fire in my lodge. Hi gambled, or folks said he did. He went to the river and took trips on steamboats just to play cards, they said. Nobody had any use for Hi, and I was half afraid of him and never let him talk to me. He was the only gambler in our parts. Folks bet on hoss races and held up their heads; but to bet on anything else, except mebby rifle-shooting, was bad business. I begun to wonder at the way they figured it out, but there wa'n't anybody to talk to

about it. Mac gambled. I'd seen him win a hoss. Some Injins wouldn't drink liquor. I knowed that. And mebbly some wouldn't gamble. I reckoned we was about even on that.

The storm quit when the sun went down, leaving nigh a foot of snow on the plains. And then that night the wind blew hard, so that when morning come there was drifts and long stretches without any snow to speak of. But it was cold as all get out, and bright again. We traded some that day and the next. We was beginning to get some beaver too, though not many. We baled up the robes as fast as we got them, and I begun to figure what we'd make by spring. For more than a week we traded a little every day. Big Rock offered the dress of Medicine Elk's woman for two blankets, but I wouldn't listen. I was counting the days till spring, and getting more and more anxious to make our goods count in trading.

One morning Mac come to the lodge before daylight. "Come with us," he said, blowing coals and kindling into a flame. "Some young men will run buffalo today—make a surround and then run the buffalo. Eagle needs to be used and I have told them to bring him in with the others."

I sat up. "Mac," I says, "I'm tired of being an Injin. Let's talk English. You be a whiteman for a spell."

He smiled. "Mak' de w'iteman hout de Hinjin?" He slapped his knee and laughed aloud. Then he raised up and put his hand on my shoulder. "No, ma frien'," he said. "HI'm never see dat, me, *nevair*. Mak' de Hinjin hout de w'iteman? Oui, HI'm see dat planty tam, me."

"Well, you won't see it *this* time," I said. I bris-

tled like a porcupine. "You'll have to admit that the whiteman is the best, the greatest of all men. You *know* it, don't you?"

He rubbed his nose, while his eyes twinkled with fun. "Well, mebby," he says, looking straight at me. "She's mak' de gun, de w'iteman. But she's pay nodder man por mak' de prayer por heem. Ha, ha, ha! She's fonny man, de w'iteman, ma fadder's peop'. No tam to smell de rose. She's mak' de money, money, money; but smell de flower? No tam por dat dam' foolishness, by gar—no tam. Yes, she's greatest man, mebby."

Then he says in Cree: "Come, Lone Wolf, let us run the buffalo. I want to be a Cree again."



CHAPTER XXVII

Mac had his way, as usual.

The hosses was fat as butter, and when they was fetched in some of them was right frisky. Eagle was so pretty that everybody liked him and talked about him. He knowed they admired him and cut up and acted wild; but he was gentle as a kitten, and just putting on dog.

It was a fine, bright morning, and more than twenty young women was watching us as we set out. There was thirty of us, each riding a hoss and leading another—the one we was saving for the run. Most everybody rode a pad or buffalo saddle, though some rode bare-backed with only a rope on their hosses' jaws. I saw Bluebird and waved my rifle at her. She had an eagle feather in her hand and she held it up and waved it, and looked tickled.

"We will follow you with the travois," a young woman said. And then they all laughed, for they knowed that if we made a killing their mothers would be with them if they followed the hunt.

We rode around the village, the young men and Mac singing and carrying on to show off, while the young women laughed and joked us. A young man named Big Sky turned around on his hoss to ride backward, but the hoss didn't like it and before he could get straightened out he was on the ground. How the young women laughed! Big Sky got up and danced while somebody caught up his hosses again. And that's the way it went—round and round the village, everybody full of fun and frolic. We passed close to Bluebird and she stepped out

and caught hold of Eagle's foretop. I held up, and she braided the feather in Eagle's mane, him pretending he was afraid of her. I thanked her and give her a smile. Then I went on to catch up with Mac. And first I knowed I was singing, myse'f.

Directly, like it was planned to surprise the young women, we dashed away up the Marias, looking for a herd of buffalo. I could hear the young women singing for more'n a mile, till the sound finally died away. I felt right good; and the plains looked so far-spread and free that I took back some of the things I'd thought of them. But not all.

We talked and cut up and rode pretty fast till we saw a herd of buffalo away off on the plains towards the east. It was mighty pretty to see. The plains, lit up by the morning sun, yellowish-brown, with the dry grass striped with long narrow snow-drifts crusted hard as ice, seemed to be without end. And as far as I could see the Missouri's course was clean-marked by leafless cottonwoods. I thought of the morning I first saw it, from the hilltop nigh St. Louis, and tried to imagine leaves on the trees, and flowers. But I couldn't. That's the way of the plains. They hold you to theirse'fs. There's no time but the present on the plains, and the hour itse'f is so plumb full of wonder or fun or beauty or misery, or something that no other place offers the same way, that you can't mope in the past or dream about the future.

We stopped and divided into two parties and then set out again towards the buffalo, one party turning to the right a little and the other to the left, in order to surround the herd. When we was nigh we got down and changed hosses. Eagle was so keen to run that he mighty nigh broke up the hunt.

He bolted twice and I had all I could do to hold him in.

But it wa'n't long till the parties was in position, and we charged straight at the herd, closing in around it on all sides. I killed one, a young bull; and twenty others must have been killed before the herd broke away and stampeded. Buffalo is foolish animals. Once they get started they won't turn but run straight ahead. That's why the Injins can run them the way they do.

I had trouble reloading. Just as I'd managed it, Mac called to me. He'd wheeled his hoss to run the buffalo, and I followed.

Eagle raced away, past Mac, and alongside of a fat cow. I poked the rifle-barrel close to her and pulled the trigger. At the crack of the gun Eagle sprung to one side, mighty nigh upsetting me. I thought he'd shied at the shot; but he hadn't. He was only looking out for himse'f. I begun to try to reload, the wind blowing my powder away faster'n I could pour it out. And after a dozen tries I got loaded. We was tight alongside of another cow, going lickety-split. I cut loose and she went down. Eagle dodged, and none too quick, for he'd have run into her if he hadn't. I was ahead of all the runners. Eagle, never stopping, laid himse'f close to another buffalo. But it wa'n't worth while killing him. I couldn't load fast enough, and I was losing too much powder. I pulled him up. Mac sailed past with two arrows in his mouth and one on his bow-string. Eagle pawed and whinnied and wanted to go on, but I got down and petted his head. He shook his mane, mad as all get out; and the eagle-feather come off. I picked it up and fixed it back

again, while I watched the chase for more than two miles. Then I started back.

A rifle wa'n't any account running buffalo, not compared to a bow and arrows. I could see that. They was too heavy and awkward to load on a running hoss. Even a pistol was better, I figured.

I passed a lot of buffalo, some not quite dead, and some down and quiet, and others walking around sick as all get out with three or four arrows deep in their paunches. I shot one crippled bull that was war-like, but most of them that was wounded I knowed would die. I wondered how long Mac would follow the herd, how long his hoss would last, and if I'd ought to wait a spell.

I sat down on a dead cow. Her body was warm and made a comfortable seat. I couldn't see the runners any longer. They had gone over a ridge on the plains. I begun to watch the wolves come up to feed on the kill. There was hundreds of them. No wonder the travois had to come quick. One old dog-wolf, whose ears was gnawed off close to his head, snuffing and smelling at the cow I was sitting on, come up so close that I could see the center spot in his yellow eyes. Likely he thought I ought to get up and go away from there. I reckoned I'd kill him. But before I touched the trigger I thought mebby he had a right to take whatever he could get like the rest of us; and that saved a charge of powder and a ball.

Eagle cropped the grass while I sat there and held the rope. But I couldn't see anything of Mac. I was getting chilly sitting still, and finally went on towards the place where we had rode at the herd. Dead buffalo was plenty all the way, and when I got to where we had made the surround I counted

twenty-two on less than an acre. I found the young bull I'd shot and skinned and dressed him. He was fat and all I needed for myse'f. By the time I had the job done Mac and some others was in sight. And the travois was coming too.

Bluebird was with the first to come up. "How many are yours, Lone Wolf?" she asked, like she hoped nigh all of them was mine.

I hated to tell her.

"Only thre'e," I says. "My rifle is too hard to load on a running horse."

She noticed the change in the eagle feather and touched it with her fingers. "It come off and I put it back," I told her.

She unbraided Eagle's mane and did the job over again, so that the feather stuck up and looked pretty.

"You will find two cows along the line of the run—cows that are shot," I says. "They are yours. This bull will be all that I shall need. I have meat enough. Shall I help you find them?"

"No, no," she objected. "But you are kind to me."

Was there ever another voice like hers? I thought.

"See," she said, "the young men are waiting. They have caught your other horse for you to ride to the village." Her eyes looked so happy when she said, "Men are warriors and hunters. Travois belong to the women. I would not have you help. And see, my mother is coming. She will think me lazy for talking so long."

She led the travois-hoss a little way towards the center of the kill; and I led Eagle to where Mac and the others was waiting, and got on my other hoss.

The young men was happy as we rode off to the

village, leaving the women and some old men to take care of the meat they had let lie where it fell. I got to thinking about it. They had all the fun and the women did the work, it seemed to me.

But directly I remembered that the men had something to do, theirse'fs. I figured that to take care of a family, feed it and fight for it like a wolf, was a considerable chore. And when I thought how most Injins used bows and arrows, even to fight, I reckoned it took a good man to do it. To rustle a living in all seasons and in all kinds of weather with an arrow or a lance was more than I wanted to tackle, let alone being jumped by enemies a dozen times in a year.

The women worked hard. I knowed that. Dressing robes, making clothes, drying meat, and raising children; but all that was offset by the dangers and hardships of the hunt and war, I figured. Even to ride as the men rode after buffalo was to take desperate chances, and they had to keep fit for fight every minute, which they did. I'd seen them in the icy water of mornings and their sweat-lodges was too much for me. They could stand more than any men I'd ever knowed; and only work can keep men fit. The reason the women seemed to be doing the biggest share was that when the men got to camp they was through, but the women didn't ever get through. That was it—the women always had a chore ahead. Even Bluebird's finger nails was always broke, half spoiling the prettiest-shaped hand I ever saw, and she was always busy at something.

Then I evened it up in my mind by counting up the blind eyes and scars and broken bones among the men. It seemed to me that there wa'n't much loafing on either side; but nobody was complaining.

Before I let Eagle go out with the herd I took the eagle feather from his mane and hung it on the side of my head-silk. Then I give him a little salt and let him go. He wa'n't tired, but was frisky as ever; and he had more friends in the village than I did.



CHAPTER XXVIII

Mac and I sat by the lodge-fire that night and talked of the hunt. "You should learn to use the bow," he says. "It is the best weapon in running the buffalo. You have a good wrist and a strong arm. Dad could use the bow. I have heard them tell that his arrows sank deep. I will teach you. The rifle is not for running buffalo. The bow is best. It is a silent weapon, Lone Wolf. When its arrows go upon their missions they startle none but their victims. The rifle cries aloud that a ball is coming. And even though one may not hear it in time it startles the rest that are near. It even wakes the echoes that drive the game away too soon. It is great in war and to kill far off. But the bow is best for running the buffalo."

I thought he was right and told him so. But I knowed it took practice to use a bow.

"See," he said, showing his wrist that was cut and bleeding a little. "I lost my wrist-guard and my bow-string wounded me today. Old Crooked Horns," he laughed, "is wonderful. He beat me, killing fifteen buffalo. And he is old. But his arm and wrist are like the iron of the whiteman and feel not the strain of bending his powerful bow. Crooked Horns will not use an iron point on his arrow. He still makes his arrow points of bone as did his father before the whiteman came. He is old—more than seventy-five snows he has seen. Yet he will use nothing made by the whiteman. His dreams have told him that whitemen are his enemies. He is a great hunter and a brave warrior,

is Crooked Horns. He ran the buffalo alone today, and to westward of the Marias."

That is their way, always, to own up to a beating. We do not always do it.

"How shall we go down the river with our fur and robes?" I asked, thinking of the spring.

"We could make bull-boats, but they are not good for such a trip. Let us travel by land to the Post at the mouth of the Yellowstone with horses and mules, and trade them for a mackinaw if we can."

"Two of us will not be enough for such a trip," I says, thinking how Dad waited for Alex and Jake before coming on to the Marias.

"That is true," he answered, "but there are Woodpecker and Spotted Elk and Standing Bear. They are brothers-in-law of mine and I know that they are good, brave men. I can get them to go with us when the time comes."

I thought he was right. "When do you think we can finish trading and go?" I asked.

"When the ice goes from the river and the water begins to rise," he said. "We must start soon after that and travel fast. The country is not good for travellers. Often there are many Indians between this place and the mouth of the Yellowstone. They are at war with strangers. And farther down along the river the whitemen are not all honest. Some there are who would plunder us if they could."

I knowed he was right; and I thought of such as Mike Fink; but he'd been a pardner of mine, and I didn't speak his name, even to Mac.

"Shall you come back to the plains, Lone Wolf?" Mac's voice was always low-toned, but now I hardly heered him.

I didn't want to hurt him. "I do not know. Lit-

tle Knife," I says. "Sometimes I think I shall not come back." And that was the truth.

He moved the sticks in the fire. The days had been getting longer and I had noticed too that the nights wa'n't so long. Spring wa'n't so far away. We sat silent, each with his own thoughts, when suddenly there was a great stir in the village. Dogs was howling.

"Hark!" Mac raised to his knees with his hand behind his ear. I thought of the night in the stockade and stood up.

Men was calling to each other. Mac bolted into the dark with me at his heels. We couldn't see anything at first. The light of our lodge-fire was still in our eyes. Men was mounting their hosses. "What is the matter?" Mac asked a man who I saw was Fish Hawk.

"The Blackfeet have stolen many horses and wounded Three Leggings," he says. "We are going after our horses."

"Let us go with them, Little Knife," I says. "Maybe they have stolen some of ours."

They'd killed Dad. Hate layed hold of me, and I felt like I did that morning at the gate with Caley Byers, only worse.

"They have taken two of your mules and several of your horses, the herders say."

It was Red Robe who answered. Bluebird was by his side, but I hardly saw her. I was thinking of Eagle. What if they'd got *him*! I run into the lodge for my rifle, feeling mighty anxious, and from there to the rope corral, half afraid I wouldn't find him.

But I spotted him, quicker'n you could wink, and felt glad all over, while I caught him up and got my

pad on him. "We'll get even, little hoss!" I says, swinging onto him, and I rode up to where Mac and nigh fifty more under Yellow Bear was ready to go.

The night wa'n't cold; and excepting patches of crusted snow and a few drifts that the coulees sheltered, the plains was bare. The Northern Lights was playing on the sky northward towards Hudson's Bay, spreading up and out like a fan. There wa'n't any moon, so that Oo-check-a-tuck, the Big Dipper, was 'specially plain. Every star was out and the sky plumb peppered with them, some looking bigger than usual and some so little and dim you couldn't hardly make them out.

The wind was out of the west, but not very strong, when we crossed the Marias and whipped up. Some scouts was ahead of us. I could see them dim under the stars. After crossing the stream we rode faster. The Blackfeet wa'n't half an hour ahead of us and we figured on overhauling them, they having to drive the stolen hosses.

But for more than an hour we didn't see hide nor hair of them. I was beginning to reckon they'd got away, when from the top of a knoll two scouts sighted the flying pony band and waited till we come up. Yellow Bear sent ten men straight after them, and the rest of us turned off to try to ride around the stolen pony band and head it back.

I leaned low over Eagle's neck. "Now!" I says, and let plumb loose of the rope. He knowed what was wanted; and I begun to draw away from the rest. I passed the ten Crees and come abreast of the Blackfeet. An arrow zipped in front of my face. I felt the wind of its feathers and bent lower. The Blackfeet was yelling. Shots flashed behind the pony band. They cracked loud above the steady

roar of pounding hoofs. But if they was shooting at me I didn't know it, nor care.

The Crees was behind me and coming, but Eagle was gaining on the band at every jump. I'd passed the Blackfeet and was abreast of the trailers in the pony band, when an arrow pinned my shirt sleeve to my pad, thud! I reached over and broke the shaft to free my arm. I'd get me one of them yet, if only I could turn the pony band. I thought of Mike Fink—even excusing him for notching his rifle-stock. Then I touched Eagle's sides with my heels. The wind whistled in my hair. I was creeping up, up, up, as steady as a clock ticks and as sure. "Oh, stand it, little man! stand it for old Dad's sake!" I whispered, and felt myse'f tighten up to he'p him. The leaders of the band wa'n't far ahead. I gathered my rope to be ready to swing him, and untied my shirt. Only three more to pass—only two—only one—but they was so close-bunched I daren't cut in between them, lest I make a fizzle of it. I got one arm out of my shirt, then pulled it off. It was like I'd spurred him. He sprung forward and a fleck of hot foam struck my cheek. His nose went ahead of the leader's like he was standing still. I swung my shirt over my head and yelled. The leader swerved off and turned back towards the Marias with the whole band at his heels. He'd done it. The little hoss had beat them all!

"Lone Wolf! Lone Wolf!" they cried behind me. And the Crees come thundering up, sweeping the pony band with them.

But with the runaway band turned, the Blackfeet was trapped. There was shots and shouts and war clubs swinging and arrows zipping like all get out,

and the Blackfeet broke and ran in every direction, followed by Crees.

I pulled up. I wa'n't going to kill Eagle, even to get me a Blackfoot. And in less time than I can say it in I was plumb alone. It seemed like I'd been lifted in a second out of a whirling, yelling bedlam and dropped down in a still place that no living man had ever seen. I heered two or three shots, but they was faint and far off. Eagle's sides was heaving, so I got down to walk and rest him. The wind come in little gusts and when I stepped on spots of snow the crust broke and made a noise. The Northern Lights had quit playing, but there was still a greenish glow on the sky to northward when I set out for the Marias, wondering if Mac was all right and wishing he was with me. But if he had followed the Blackfeet I couldn't have hoped to overtake him.

I figured that I'd turn and cut south a little, keeping a sharp look-out around me. Directly I saw four little knots on the rim of a knolltop between me and the sky. I stopped and watched them. One of them moved a little and then I knowed they was only wolves and went on.

I crossed the knoll, stopping to look and listen on its top. But there wa'n't a sound, only the wind, so I started on. Suddenly, though, Eagle stopped in his tracks. His ears was pricked forward and his nostrils working like a dog's. I heered a hoss coming over the frozen ground and cocked my rifle. Directly I could see him. He was headed straight for me. But he turned off at the foot of the knoll and I made out that he was a loose hoss trailing a rope. He was out of sight almost as soon as I saw him, but I heered him for quite a spell. When I

started on I was mighty careful. Somebody was down and afoot. I knowed that; and I reckoned I might meet up with him.

Directly I come to a little knoll with a flat place on its top. Right at the edge of the flat both Eagle and I stopped sudden, like we was grabbed and held. Something moved just ahead. It was against the background of a higher knoll. I couldn't make it out. Directly it moved again. And then I saw another black form stir and bend over. It was a man. They was both men. I cocked my rifle and squatted, quiet, just as they rushed together and clinched, bending and twisting. They was coming my way. I rested my elbows on my knee, ready. They stopped, straining like pulling hosses. I could hear their panting breath and smell blood. An arm raised up and went down, thud!

"Ahh! dog of a Blackfoot!"

The words was gasped out, and they was Cree.

The two was stone-still a minute. Then they staggered apart for wind like two fighting dogs that won't quit. Both was naked and so blind with hate that a buffalo herd could have passed unnoticed. One laughed, the one nighest to me, and cold shivers went up my backbone. It was like a whip-lash to the other. He rushed and they clinched again. I couldn't tell which was the Cree.

For a moment they struggled, trying to stab, but not moving either way. Then they come on, one, the laugher, being forced backward and backward, his breath hissing in his awful effort to hold his ground, till his heels was plumb against a sage-bush. I held my breath. Was it the Cree?

There was a sudden lunge and they went over, the laugher underneath, not ten feet away, and heads

towards me. I could hear my own heart beat. My finger was on the trigger. Which was the Cree? I *had* to know.

The man on top begun to raise his knife, slow. I saw it plain when he wiped the blood from his eyes with his bare arm, and the stain on his wrist. Words muttered with burning hate come from between his teeth. They wa'n't Cree words! And I pulled the trigger. Eagle jumped at the flash of the gun, and the man with the knife rolled over. I'd got my Blackfoot 'thout trying.

I stood up and commenced to reload, watching the two forms on the ground. One moved, the one that had laughed, the Cree. "How!" I says, priming my rifle pan.

"How, how! Paok Mah-he-can!"

The voice was weak. I went over to his side and lifted his head. It was Yellow Bear.

"Rest," I says. "I will wait while you rest."

But he sat up and looked at his enemy. "That was a great warrior," he said, his voice full of admiration. "He was brave and strong. I shall take his scalp when I have rested."

He was bleeding bad, and I counted his hurts, six of them—two arrows and four knife-wounds, enough to kill two ordinary men.

I cut up my shirt and bound up his cuts the best I could so as to stop some of the blood.

"My life belongs to you, Lone Wolf," he says. And directly he got to his feet.

"Get on my horse," I urged him.

But he took the scalp of the dead Blackfoot, and turning towards the Marias, says, "No, I am strong. I will walk. It was the white horse that turned the stolen band. Let him rest."

So we walked slow, looking out for hosses as we went. "Fish Hawk is dead," said Yellow Bear, after a long silence. "There will be mourning in the village. But you are now a warrior, Lone Wolf, and my life belongs to you."

"It was chance," I told him, "just chance that led me towards you while you fought. I was not guided by sounds."

"No, it was not chance, Lone Wolf," he said. And he meant it. "It *was* to be so. It was not my time to die, although I thought that it was. Let us rest. I am dizzy."

We sat down in a coulee out of the wind that was freshening some, and Yellow Bear filled and lit his war-pipe. "Smoke, brother, warrior," he said.

And I took it from his hand. Somehow I suddenly felt like I was part of the plains—like I had always been a plainsman, and wanted to stay one!

The stars was fading out of the sky. Day wa'n't far off. I wished it would come on. I knowed Yellow Bear was bad off and suffering, though he didn't whimper. I covered him with a robe that was under Eagle's pad and went up on the top of a ridge to look for Crees. I knowed they would soon be hunting for us. The sky was showing day and the wind was coming stronger and from the east. I was cold without my shirt, but I thought how Yellow Bear had called me warrior, and stood the wind on my bare hide like it was summer.

I could see the Marias, and while I looked hard I saw riders coming. I didn't wait but run back to Yellow Bear. "They are coming!" I cried; and he got up, but wouldn't get on Eagle no matter how much I begged him.

The Crees had reckoned I'd been killed and Mac

was nigh tickled to death when he saw me. They led Eagle like he was tribal property and a prize. I felt mighty proud and I don't deny it. There never was a better little hoss.

We rode into the village just as daylight was coming on. Everybody was out. Two was badly wounded besides Yellow Bear, and Fish Hawk was dead. But they sang of victory—even Yellow Bear. When he come to the Chief's lodge he stopped and, still lashed to his hoss, begun to talk and sing.

"It was Lone Wolf who turned the flying horses! It was Lone Wolf who saved my life! His bullet went straight in the darkness and a Blackfoot warrior died! Lone Wolf is brave and a warrior; my life belongs to him. Let all my relations remember him as my brother! I have finished."

Then he rode off to his lodge.

Cracky! I'll never again feel like I did then. I was proud a-plenty and grateful too, though I hadn't done much myse'f. Eagle did the most. But I didn't say so; I let it go.

A bright fire was burning in the Chief's lodge and the old man stepped out. "How! Lone Wolf, warrior!" he says, and he handed me a painted robe while a lot of young men and women looked and smiled, as happy as I was. They crowded around me, all talking at once. But I got down and made my way to my lodge with Eagle. I would cover him with robes and keep him near me.

When I come out with the robes Bluebird was by his side, emptying a robe'ful of grass on the ground at his feet.

"I heard of your wonderful ride before you reached the village," she said. "See, I have cut grass for your Eagle, that so great a horse may

feast." She put her little hand on his neck and he went after the grass greedily.

"Thank you," I said, tying a robe over Eagle's back. I couldn't think of anything worth while to say.

She begun to braid Eagle's mane, looking over his neck at me. "I heard what Yellow Bear said and saw Big Bear give you the painted robe," she told me. And there was pride in her eyes when she looked down at the grass she had cut. She begun another braid, her fingers working swift and without the guide of her glance. "Yellow Bear is my father's youngest brother, Lone Wolf, warrior; and I am proud that you are my friend." Her voice barely reached me across Eagle's white neck.

I leaned forwards sudden and reached for her hand, but she drew it away. "Come into my lodge, Bluebird," I begged. "Come, and pick what you will for a present."

"No, no," she said, stepping backward. "I cannot," looking straight into my eyes. "I must go now. But my father would be glad to see you in his lodge to talk and smoke with you and hear you tell of your ride and the fight. You are hungry." She moved towards me again and her voice fell to that tone I liked so well. "There is no fire in your lodge, no meat," she said. "Will you come to my father's lodge now?" She was backing away again, still looking into my eyes. How pretty she was, and how little! "Shall I tell my father that you are coming?" she asked, and turned away from me.

"Yes," I told her. "I will come."

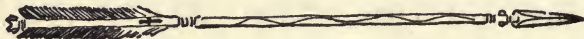
My arm was around Eagle's neck and I watched her go to her father's lodge and disappear inside.

When she was gone Mac raised his lodge door

and stepped out. "How! Lone Wolf, warrior!" He came to me. "I would have been first to greet you," he said, "but an arrow wounded my arm and my woman was binding it up." He held out his arm, but I knowed why he hadn't come to me sooner and wondered if he'd heered what Bluebird had said.

"I am going to Red Robe's lodge to feast," I told him, half daring him to smile or plague me. But he tightened the thongs that held Eagle's robe and when he spoke it was of the hoss himse'f.

"Nothing can beat him," he says, patting his neck. "I feel as proud as yourself over his great run. I shall spend the night with you; but you will be long at Red Robe's lodge. The day is yet young. Do not hurry. I shall have a fire waiting for you when you have feasted."



CHAPTER XXIX

There never was a more comfortable lodge than Red Robe's. It was large and roomy and taller than most of the others. Its painted lining was of dressed elk skins smoked to a rich yellow and decorated with pictures of the old warrior's deeds in war, done in red and blue. And it was in order; not topsy-turvy like some I'd seen.

There was parfleches filled with pemmican—lean meat cut thin and dried and pounded to a pulp, with melted back-fat and dried berries poured on it and mixed. It's good grub to do a hard ride on, for a little of it goes a long way towards keeping a man's stomach from gnawing. There was three bales of prime beaver skins done up fine, to pay the trader at the Ashley-Henry Post at the mouth of the Yellowstone. They was the first things he showed me, being plumb tickled because he could pay for the goods he had bought in the fall. He looked mighty comfortable leaning against his willow back-rest, his weapons ready at hand and his family about his bright fire. Anybody could see that he was a good provider and that his was a contented household.

The women—his woman and Bluebird and Sits-and-Sings—was busy making moccasins. The other children was younger and was hot at the ring-and-arrow game when I come in. It made me feel right good to see them; and when I leaned against a back-rest beside Red Robe at the head of the lodge I sure thought I'd never before been in so cozy a place.

We feasted. I was hungry as a wolf and Bluebird made some black tea that was better than any

I'd ever tasted. Red Robe had traded for the tea at a Hudson's Bay Post up north. It was strong and had a fine flavor.

When he lit the pipe and passed it he asked me to tell the story of the race to turn the stolen hosses and about the fight. I told it, but I didn't make a long yarn of it, and he said so. He told me that Yellow Bear was bad hurt and might not get well. I proposed we go and see him and he said he would go with me after we'd finished talking.

He spoke to Bluebird and she fetched a parfleche to him. He unlaced it and spread it out so I could see what was in it. His war-bonnet, shirt, leggings, fancy bullet-pouch, and pretty moccasins, and a lot of other finery. He took out an eagle's wing, all worked with colored porcupine quills up and down the quill of each feather, and give it to me. He said that none but a warrior could carry such a thing, and that whenever I sat with warriors about a fire I had a right to hold the wing. Next he give me an eagle feather to put in my hair and showed me how to wear it—crosswise, or sticking out from one side of my head. That meant I'd killed an enemy in battle. If the feather was worn straight up behind the head it meant you'd killed three enemies in fight. In between the straight-up position and the crosswise showed that you'd got two enemies in close conflict. He taught me the paint-marks on hosses too, and I was surprised to learn that each had a meaning of its own.

We smoked two pipes and then he showed me his leggings. "Bluebird made these," he says, laying them across my knees.

They was beautiful things. The design and colors beat any I'd ever seen, and I said so. I looked

at her, but her head was bent over her work and her needle never missed a lick, nor she didn't look up.

"Where did you learn this design, Bluebird?" I asked her.

She stuck her needle into the elk-skin and looked at me. Her eyes was shining like her mind was full of words. Her father smiled good-natured and nodded like he would listen to what she said.

"Look, Lone Wolf," she says, "and you will find it and others as beautiful. They are everywhere—in the forests, on the plains, on the ice when the frost has worked its magic under the moon, and even in the white snow-flakes that fall and drifting deep, make life a battle."

"But the colors?" I says. "How did you learn to use them so skillfully?"

I saw her bosom rise and fall quick. She wanted to talk. If only we was alone!

"Paok Mah-he-can, if you do not look for *much* you will see but little. The colors are upon the plains and in the forests. It is there that we learn to use them. Napa has painted the bird-people and the animal-people. Carefully has he made the colors to blend. And we have but to copy his work to do well. Some of the least things are the most beautiful. Upon the backs and wings of moths and butterflies are wonderful designs where colors blend. And so cunningly has he made them that we cannot follow the wearer always. They beautify and yet hide him from sight. Only the sharp eye can see. Only the trained ear hears the sounds that attend the beautiful of the forests and plains. Manitou would have the beauty wrought by His servant Napa admired. It was intended to com-

mand our admiration. There is beauty for every sense: the eye, the ear, the tongue, and the body itself. Is it not wrong to close the eye to beauty and the nose to the perfumes which the flowers give to the winds?"

She stopped and her head again bent over her work. I could see the red part in her hair.

"I am afraid that I have not noticed the bugs and worms," I says, feeling I'd missed a good deal, "but after this I *will* notice them. You will show me the designs, won't you, Bluebird?"

She laughed softly and raised her head. There was merriment in her eyes now, and mischief. "I cannot make you see beauty with honest eyes," she said, so low I scarcely heered her. "If you do not find beauty for yourself how could you know that I did not lie when I declared it to be before your eyes? Most things grow in beauty for those who pause to look upon them. But to the hawk no bird is beautiful, save those of his own tribe. Yet the little birds he preys upon bathe and plume themselves. They do not do this to be beautiful in the eyes of the hawk-people, but to those who know beauty and love it." She turned the moccasin she was making inside out and inspected her work, then layed it away.

She knowed I belonged to another race—a people who don't take the time to learn the little things in the great out-of-doors and her words, gentle as they was, pricked and shamed me. I felt like I'd been petted and scolded, all in one just like I did when Aunt Lib jawed me for wearing my boots in the front room. But I didn't like it when she compared white folks to hawks; and I was willing to bet that was what she meant to do. "Let us go to

the lodge of Yellow Bear," I says, turning to Red Robe.

"Ho!" he laughed, like he'd noticed that I wa'n't altogether tickled at what Bluebird had said; and we went out of the lodge.

The sun was bright and warm and the ice on the big river soggy-looking and nigh the color of lead, so that I knowed the spring wa'n't far off.

Yellow Bear was in bad shape, but he was glad to see us, especially me, and told his woman to give me his best leggings. He said no word about his suffering and his eyes brightened when we spoke of the fight. "See," he said, pointing to a fresh scalp sewed in a little hoop of willow that hung on his coup-stick, "that is the scalp of a brave man."

He asked how I'd fared and if I wanted anything. I told him that I'd feasted and that I was happy to see him alive.

"I shall get well," he said, "and be as good as ever. Do not worry about me."

His family treated me with a heap of respect and waited on me every chance that offered. There was three boys and two girls, the oldest a girl about Bluebird's age, I reckoned.

While we was talking Black Bear come into the lodge with his rattle and medicine sack. He told us to go away, and the family followed us out, leaving the old medicine-man alone with his patient.

Directly I could hear Black Bear singing and shaking his rattle to drive away the pain. But Aunt Lib believed that a soiled stocking tied around a sore throat would work a cure, so I didn't see that our kind had much to brag about. Besides, the Injins do as they please in such matters and

allow others equal privilege without cutting their acquaintance or branding them as fools.

Yellow Bear's family went visiting friends while the medicine-man worked his charms, and Red Robe and I went to my lodge where Mac had a fire burning. The old warrior stayed more than an hour, smoking with us and visiting. Then he went out, and Mac with him.

Eagle had finished the cut grass and was pawing for company. I knowed how he felt and went outside and turned him loose to go out with the pony band. He didn't wait, I can tell you, but whinnying at nigh every jump, he tore out to find his own kind.

I reckoned that was what I would do as soon as the ice went out of the river.



CHAPTER XXX

Mac didn't come back that night, and I turned in pretty early, but I didn't go to sleep till nigh midnight. I got to running over what Bluebird had said. And I reckoned that every word was true. Mebby she did intend to liken me and my kind to the hawks, but I reckoned that after all, we *was* hawks. We prey upon everything and mighty nigh everybody that will stand it. And I *didn't* know anything about the beauty on the plains and in the forest. I hadn't ever noticed—never cared, when a buck antelope was dead, to notice his markings. It was meat that I wanted.

Mebby I was missing a heap. I would pay attention to everything I saw from now on. I made up my mind to that. I could think of more than a dozen birds and animals with fine colorings, some even as bright as all get out, that *did* seem to hide the wearer, though once you got your eyes on them you couldn't lose them if you tried. Things did grow in beauty if you only knowed beauty when you saw it. I reckoned that Bluebird was right, and that I would like to talk to her again. "Lone Wolf, if you do not look for *much* you will see but little," was the last thing I remembered before I went to sleep.

Mac waked me early by kindling a fire in the lodge. "Yellow Bear is better this morning," he said when I sat up. "He is glad of your visit of yesterday. You are a warrior now, and he has sent you the scalp of the Blackfoot you killed."

I didn't want the thing, and said so, but Mac hung

it on my back-rest with the eagle's wing, and I let it stay there.

That day we traded a lot, and every man that come into the lodge said something about the scalp, and I saw that it he'ped make friends with the Crees, though I reckoned it might be different with the Blackfeet.

Towards sundown Black Bear sent me a painted shield made from the skin of an old buffalo bull's neck, that would glance an arrow if it wa'n't coming straight on, and even then, sometimes.

Everybody wanted to smoke with me and talk about Eagle. I never did see such a change in people. They had always been pleasant, but now they was plumb friendly, and there wa'n't anything in reason that they wouldn't do for me if I asked them.

By night we had traded off a right smart of our goods. It seemed like everybody wanted to trade at once, so that when Mac and I turned in there wa'n't more than a quarter of our goods left in the lodge. We went at it and baled up our fur and robes, but we tired before it was finished. I begun to feel perter; and Mac was so plumb tickled that I was glad I was there and responsible for his happiness. I slept sound all night and beat Mac making the fire when morning come. It was only breaking day when I lit it, and we hustled up our breakfast and went to baling fur and robes again.

The spare guns was all gone, except the scatter-gun. We had never used it yet, and I wanted to trade it off, but Mac said it was big medicine and we kept it, though I figured it was only in the way. I kept Dad's rifle cleaned up and oiled, like he did, and figured on keeping it always.

I needed some moccasins and reckoned I would

get a dozen pairs so that I would have enough to last me clean to St. Louis. And I would buy them of Bluebird. I didn't tell Mac, but when he'd gone to his lodge I slipped over to Red Robe's and put in my order.

Neither Red Robe nor his woman was in the lodge, though the other children was there with Bluebird. She measured my feet and promised to set to work making me twelve pairs of moccasins. "Are you going to war that you need so many at one time?" she laughed.

"No," I says, "only to St. Louis with our robes and fur when the time comes."

She looked straight into my eyes. "And shall you come back to the plains, Lone Wolf?" she asked.

"I do not know," I told her. "Sometimes I think that I shall stay among my own people. Then sometimes I believe that I shall want to come back here. I do not know, Bluebird."

She laid a stick on the lodge-fire. "Tell me, if you will, of the whiteman's God," she said in that soft voice that I liked to hear.

It was only fair. And I told her the best I could, and all that I could. She didn't miss a word. She was all attention, her eyes hardly winking till I was through. I knowed that it wa'n't a good job I'd done, but it was the first time I had even thought what it means to be asked to tell about our God or our beliefs; so I hardly knowed where to begin or to end.

The fire popped and snapped, but there wa'n't another sound in the lodge while I was talking. Bluebird's arm slipped softly around the waist of Sits-and-Sings. They leaned their heads together so that their hair touched; and even the small chil-

dren was so still that I forgot they was there. Even after I'd finished they didn't move for a spell, and their faces was solemn and puzzled. A stick rolled off the fire and Bluebird put it back.

"I have thought, oh, many times, that the white-man's God must be powerful, for His people do wonderful things," she said. And then, like she wanted to believe in Him but daren't, she asked, "But how can a Man-god be greater than Manitou, when He, your God, is part of All—*is* Manitou?"

I knowed there wa'n't any use in trying to answer that. I knowed, too, that they was honest in their beliefs, and that they respected the beliefs of others. "Tell me of Manitou," I said.

She drew away from Sits-and-Sings, as though if in speaking she herse'f did wrong, no blame could come to her sister.

"We do not speak His name often," she began softly. "The sun, the earth, and everything that lives is Manitou, even the ants and the tiny things that live under the leaves that lie on the ground beneath the forest trees." Her eyes shone bright and her lips trembled with earnestness. "Greater and more wonderful than the moon and stars is the sun, but *All* is Manitou. The Sun, the father, makes the grass and the flowers to grow upon Earth, the mother, of all things. And through the great Sun we thank Manitou with the Sun-dance each year. Always when medicine-men or warriors smoke they pray. To smoke is to pray, for the thoughts of the smoker are softened and are kind. And kind thoughts are prayers, for they are good."

"Why then dare the people kill the buffalo if the buffalo, being a part of All, are Manitou?" I asked, wondering how a man could dare to hurt his God.

"The buffalo strive to live as we do. Striving to keep alive is payment for life's breath. Manitou knows when it is time for His creatures to die. He has made nearly everything to prey upon other, weaker things. But they all live again, so that nothing of Manitou is lost. How *could* it be?"

"Why then, if everything lives again do warriors fight to live this life?" I asked her.

"Because they are afraid not to love this life given them by Manitou. It is He who sets the number of their days, and they do all in their power to keep their breath in their bodies until he calls. Then, no matter when or how it comes, death takes them to the Shadow-hills where the summer stays forever."

She stopped speaking. The lodge door had lifted. Red Robe come in.

"How, how, Lone Wolf," he greeted me, sitting down by my side. "Let us smoke," he says, and got out his pipe.

I didn't stay long; and when I got back to the lodge Mac had been there and had gone again. I reckoned that he wouldn't come back that night, so I cooked and ate my supper. Along about eight o'clock, I reckon, the wind begun to blow like all get out, and when I went to bed the village dogs begun to howl. They pestered me; and the lodge shook now and again, till I got up and smoked a pipe. When I turned in again I went to sleep. But I had a bad dream.

I thought that I was at home. It was Sunday morning and we was all going to church at the Crossing. The road was dusty and the wild flowers that stuck through between the rails of the worm-fence along the way was all grimy. Then

the bell in the little log church begun to ring. It was tolling. And Bugle under the wagon behind old Tom and Becky, begun to howl. Aunt Lib said it was a scandal and blamed me, but somehow I couldn't stop Bugle's voice till I saw Joshua Moulds. Then I managed it, but I didn't know how. We went into the church and I couldn't breathe, the air was so hot and filled with the perfume of flowers.

It wa'n't a regular service. It was a funeral. I wished they would open the windows. I couldn't stand it a minute longer. I would tip-toe out and wait under the trees.

Just as I moved to go Bluebird stood up before the congregation. I sunk back in my seat. How did she get there? Somebody was crying soft down nigh the front. Bluebird raised her right hand, palm outward, and the crying stopped. Everybody was still as death, and the heated air nigh smothered me. "How can a Man-god be greater than Manitou, when He, your God, is a part of All—is Manitou?" Her voice was soft and sweet. There wa'n't anything ornery in it, and her eyes was mild and looked inquiring about the room, as though they begged an answer. The people stirred, and the crying commenced again. I heered the scrape of heavy boots on the puncheon floor, like the men was angry. My face burned and I sunk lower behind the back of my seat. She shouldn't have followed me. I would crawl down the aisle and leave her there. I tried to move, but something held me down. Then a man stood up in the church, a man with the face of a fiend. A great livid scar stretched from his thick lips to a staring eye that didn't wink. The fiddler! The fiddler at the Post! I would save her from him. Who was holding me?

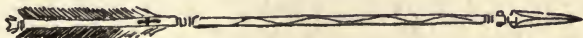
God! The fiddler grabbed at Bluebird, caught one of her black braids of hair in his dirty hand. She cried out. I wrenched loose.

My head struck against a lodge-pole. For more than a minute I didn't know where I was. Sweat was dripping from my forehead and I was wet as though I'd been in a sweat-lodge. Cracky! I was as weak as a cat and scared as a little boy. But I soon found what had brought on the dream. A bale of buffalo-ropes had turned over and fell on my face while I slept, nigh smothering me.

I kindled the fire and smoked. I knowed that fiddler would ha'nt my dreams some night before I died. Cracky! what a face he had.

When the fire burned bright I got to running over my dream, and Bluebird's question kept coming back. Wolves was howling above the wind and the village dogs had quit. A feeling of sure enough homesickness settled down on me, and I wanted to go back. I *would* go back, and I'd stay there. I made up my mind to that.

Then at last I turned in once more and slept till plumb daylight.



CHAPTER XXXI

March come and it snowed again. A darker, meaner morning couldn't have been. When I went down to the river for water all signs of spring was buried, and it looked as though winter had just begun. The wind howled and the snow was piled about the lodges, like it would plumb hide them out of sight by night. The smoke that come out of their tops was snatched by the gale before it got fairly outside, and whipped in every direction. Here and there about the village a hoss, tied up, stood with his back humped and his four feet in a pile, like misery on dress parade.

I wa'n't in a good humor, noway. The storm that wiped out the signs of spring, and the sight of the snowed-in lodges made me hate the plains. Yesterday I'd thought that the winter was dead. Now I could have swore that the plains had never knowed a summer's day.

I turned back with a kettle of water. It bumped and slopped against a rose bush and out jumped a red fox. He sank nigh out of sight in the snow and wallowed. There was feathers sticking to his whiskers, and I looked into the rose bush and found he'd been eating a willow grouse while the blowing snow covered him up. I thought of the chance he'd taken with the village dogs, in looking for his breakfast. But all life was a chance on the plains. The grouse driven into the rose bush for shelter couldn't save himse'f from the fox, though he had tried. I wondered if he would live again. I couldn't see why he shouldn't if *we* did. God made both of us,

and I reckoned it wa'n't becoming of us to promise only ourse'fs a hereafter, mebbly. It sure was fair, anyway, to believe that way, and it didn't seem so much like setting ourse'fs ahead of all other creations of the Almighty. Mebbly He saved birds as well as men. And then I thought of Mike Fink.

I scraped away the snow nigh my lodge door so folks would know I was up and stirring; then I broiled a steak and had my breakfast with some tea for trimming.

Directly I heered a woman laughing—two of them. And I went out to see what was going on.

Bluebird and Sits-and-Sings was rolling in the snow, each trying to bury the other and both nigh choked with laughing. Red Robe with the snow above his knees was watching them, his face full of fun, and nothing at all on him except his leggings and breech-clout.

I went closer and Red Robe greeted me. Then both of the girls, as though they'd planned it there in the snow, bounced up and tackled *me*. It was mighty sudden, so I had my hands plumb full to keep my feet. Mac and his woman and children come out to look on, and of all the laughing I ever heered it was then. At last I got them down and held them, and they was worse than bob-cats to hold; but as soon as they layed still, I let them up. We was all panting like running buffalo; and the bad humor that had got out of bed with me was plumb gone.

There was snow in Bluebird's hair and her face was wet, but her eyes sparkled and danced with fun. I had never seen eyes that laughed like hers.

I pulled my head-silk off and begun to brush the snow from her back. Her laugh quit when I

touched her, but I could hear her breathing fast. Directly she turned and faced me, and I went on brushing, even after the snow was all off.

"That was great fun," she smiled, and catching hold of my arm, "You have finished, Lone Wolf," she says. "Come into the lodge and smoke with my father."

I shook my head-silk and put it on. My own hair was full of snow and wet. Not a soul was in sight except Bluebird. They had gone into their lodges and left us. She moved towards the lodge like she expected me to follow.

"Will you tell me about the bluebirds if I come?" I asked her.

She turned her head and tipped it to one side, like. Cracky! I though I'd like to kiss her. I reckoned she'd never heered of kissing.

"Maybe," she said, in that voice that was so low I wondered how I heered it above the storm.

They made room for us at the lodge fire. Just as we sat down a strong gust jerked at the thongs that held the poles to the ground, as though the storm was warning us to be thankful for shelter. I was afraid mebbly the lodge would turn over. "This is a bad storm," I says, taking off my head-silk again to dry it by the fire.

"Yes." Red Robe glanced at the thongs. "The buffalo may drift far in this weather."

"I hate strong wind and deep snow," I says, turning my head-silk.

"Let me braid your hair." Bluebird moved to my side and with a comb made from the tail of a porcupine, begun to straighten out the tangles. Then when her slender fingers begun to work, she said, "Lone Wolf, it is not good to cry out against the

seasons. It is well to be silent when we are troubled or in pain. If the grass is poor the buffalo seek another and better range. If they cannot find it, they die. If one buffalo is badly wounded he follows the rest as best he can without troubling the others. When he can keep up no longer he falls behind and dies. Shall the buffalo be more patient in the sight of Manitou than we are, Paok Mah-he-can?"

She fastened the end of the braid with sinew and begun to make the other. She was petting and scolding again, but I knowed she was right this time. A man hadn't ought to complain against what he can't he'p, noway.

Then, as though she knowed my thoughts, she said, "It is useless to cry out against things we cannot prevent. To do so is but to waste the very breath that might give us strength to stifle a groan that would torment our friends or please our enemies. The storm that has passed and gone leaves us always more love for the sunshine. If the sun never hid away we would grow careless of his worth. The storms come to help us and strengthen our appreciation for the sun."

She finished the other braid and I put on my head-silk. "I have heered Black Bear pray that the wind be still," I said, and was tickled I'd thought of it.

"Yes," she agreed, "but our people would have found no fault if the winds had not been still," she said, picking up her comb. "They would not dare. They know that there is no created thing that is always free from trouble. The flowers of spring and the young leaves upon the trees often creep out of their winter lodges to meet the summer and are

chilled by the north wind. Many die. Some are crippled, but last the season through and lend their scant breath to the summer's breeze. Often the flowers are hungry and thirst is never far away; but they do not often let us know. When the berry is ripe it dies. So men die."

She moved away to the other side of the fire, and Red Robe, excusing himself, left the lodge to visit Mac. I was mighty nigh ready to follow him. I was bristling inside, but held onto myself because I knowed I needed to be talked to that a-way. "You promised to tell me about the bluebirds," I said, filling my pipe.

"No, I have never promised that," she said, glancing at her mother, who turned square around and begun unlacing a parfleche, like she hadn't heered me. "I said 'maybe'." Then she come back on my side of the fire, picked up one of my moccasins that she had been making, and sat down near me.

"My people are fond of the bluebirds," she says, almost under her breath. "They love to see them always. Whenever a bluebird comes to a lodge—" she bent over the moccasin till her face nigh touched it, "they say that the owner of the lodge-skin will be lucky because the bluebird came. If a bluebird lights upon a lodge-pole it means health and joy. But if the bird should come inside, as they sometimes do, then great good fortune is sure to follow through the door. That is all."

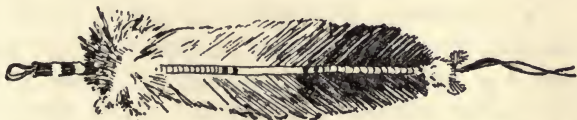
But before I could speak she said, "If a butterfly should come into a lodge and light on a sleeping child there and fan it with its sleep-wings, then the child will surely die. And the owl is bad, too," she went on, like she didn't want to talk about the bluebirds. "They are the spirits of the dead, ghosts

that come out of the Shadow-hills because they cannot rest there. If an owl comes close to a lodge and cries out, it is a bad thing for someone within that lodge. On the night before the battle with the Blackfeet you heard the owl. You heard Black Bear and you knew that the Crees were troubled and were sure that a great warrior would die. One did die. It was your friend. Owls are wise and bad, and we never bother them."

It had suddenly quit snowing and the wind was coming from a different direction, so she got up and went outside to change the smoke-ears on the lodge. I followed her outside.

"See," she said, "It is Sow-un-you-tin that blows. Tomorrow the snow will be gone again, and the ice will soon leave the river."

Then she untied a necklace of little shells from her neck and gave it to me. "Your moccasins will be finished in two days, and you will follow the ice down the stream," she said.



CHAPTER XXXII

The storm had suddenly turned and a Chinook was blowing. All night the wind howled and the snow fell from the walls of the lodges where the storm had blowed it. The air was so warm that a fire was uncomfortable, so that I left my door open. The village dogs, glad of the change, prowled about to find and gnaw bones that had been hid under the snow that was going away fast as it had come. One of the miracles of the plains was being worked, and I knowed that by morning everything would be soaking wet and that the plains would be bare again.

A drowsiness that comes to man and beast when, after a bad storm, a Chinook blows, layed hold of me and I fell asleep. It was late in the night when I woke. The wind wa'n't so strong, but I could hear the dripping of water from the trees and bushes and the ashes in the fire-ring was wet when I kindled a fire. It was raining. The ice would go out of the river. I closed the lodge door and layed down again, and before the fire had burned out I was sound asleep.

The morning was dark. The heavy clouds was so low that they didn't look to be far from the ground, and a fine drizzling rain was falling mighty nigh straight down, for the wind had plumb quit.

I went to the river for water and found the ice flooded from shore to shore and cracking. I heered a wild goose gonk up somewhere in the dark sky, and my heart jumped I was so glad he'd come. The

snow was mighty nigh all gone, and by noon the plains would be bare as they had been in the fall. Spring was coming! I begun to whistle a tune. The way was open to the mouth of the Yellowstone and soon the river would carry us down to good old St. Louis from the Ashley-Henry Post.

Mac was setting by the fire in the lodge when I got back. "Ho!" he says, "Sow-un-you-tin blew hard last night. The winter is dead, Lone Wolf."

I can't make you know how his words set me afire to get away.

"Let us finish our trading and start when it quits raining." I could jest *see* St. Louis—see the white-men and hear the fiddles through the open doors of the town. But they seemed to me to be at the other end of nowhere and I itched to begin traveling towards them.

"We must not go until the water begins to rise, Lone Wolf." His voice seemed to be warning me that would be months from then, and it made me bristle. "There will be storms yet and the ice must go first," he said, laying down on a robe.

He wa'n't ever in a hurry! I got up and moved a bale of robes. It didn't need moving, but I plumb had to move something. "I don't want to stay here forever," I said, and sat down again.

He got up and filled his pipe. "We are lucky," he smiled. "If the Crees had moved we should have been obliged to pack all our furs and robes and move with them, Lone Wolf; or stay here and fall an easy prey to the Blackfeet." He lit his pipe and passed it to me. "Even now the Crees might have to move to follow the buffalo before we are ready to start on our way."

It was true. I hadn't thought of it. I slowed

down right away. "Well, let us get rid of the rest of our goods, anyway," I says.

He agreed to that; and the next morning we drummed up some traders, so that by night we was cleaned out.

I took to watching the river; but as Aunt Lib says, "a watched pot never *will* boil," and it was slow and tiresome. The ice did go out at last, but there was one bad storm after another to keep us back. Did you ever hold a hound-dog by a tether while he snuffled and rared to go on a hot trail? Well, I was like that every minute, and worse. Days I'd watch the river, and nights I'd dream of St. Louis till I'd mighty nigh get up and walk towards it in my sleep.

The first wild flowers blossomed in sunny spots, hiding, like, near the bushes and under the river's banks. I run onto Bluebird and Sits-and-Sings one day picking flowers by the river. Bluebird asked me to tell her about St. Louis, and I did; all I knowed.

"And do the people stay always in that one place?" she asked, as though she reckoned they'd starve to death if they did. I wished that she could see St. Louis, but I didn't say so.

I went to Red Robe's lodge that night, but I didn't stay a long spell. They seemed to think I'd come back, and I didn't figure on making it any harder for me to leave by telling them that I had made up my mind I wouldn't. They was good folks and I liked them a heap.

Nights when I'd get to thinking about Bluebird I'd tell myse'f that it wa'n't fair to like her too much, noway. If I had been going to stay on the plains it would have been different, but she was of

the plains and I wa'n't a plainsman. She couldn't live in my country and be happy noway, and I sure couldn't stand the plains, myse'f. I'd run it all over and over in my mind that way; and I couldn't see my way out only to go away and let her plumb alone. Even if I wanted to stay on the plains just then, how could I be sure I wouldn't flop around and want to quit. I'd let her alone. It was what I'd ought to do—what any honest man would do. I called myse'f honest, and I'd let it go at that.

The leaves was showing on the trees and meadow larks piped up the sun of mornings, but the river paid no attention and just wouldn't come up an inch. Ducks and geese—millions of them—was everywhere and great flocks of curlews with their long, crooked bills that turn downwards, and sand-hill cranes, with their echoing voices flew over the village in long strings, their thin legs sticking way out behind like they didn't belong there. And blamed if the plains wa'n't turning greenish with the new grass that was crowding up under the old, before the water showed any sign of raising. I never *will* forget how glad I was when at last Mac had to admit that it was coming up.

Drift logs begun to come down—logs that the freshet of the year before had left on sandbars up above us. I watched them go sailing down the stream till they got plumb out of sight, and mighty nigh wished I was a log, myse'f.

One afternoon a big one come on by, a rough-barked cottonwood with scraggly roots, and broke off nigh the middle. It caught on a bar just above me and I reckoned it would have to wait for higher water, too. But directly it swung around and got loose, and I saw two fat muskrats sitting close to-

gether on the log. They was faced down-stream like two cronies going to market and not hardly able to wait to get to St. Louis. I started to run along the bank, keeping abreast of the log, and if I didn't talk to them like they was men I'm a nigger. "I'll be along directly!" I says, and felt foolish when I heered my voice. I watched them round the bend below the village and turned back. I'd made up my mind to move. I wouldn't wait another day.

But I didn't have to argue with Mac. He was working on the packs when I got to the lodge.

"Let us start in the morning!" I said, pitching in to he'p him. Then I knowed we couldn't possibly make it, so I says, "Or the morning after."

"Good!" he says; and I was mighty tickled.

I had kept out some beads, two axes, two knives, a keg of powder, and ten bars of lead, for presents. I reckoned I'd give them all to Red Robe's folks.

Then all of a sudden misery come to me. We was going to trade off the hosses and mules for a mackinaw-boat at the Ashley-Henry Post. I couldn't take Eagle on down the river. And I wouldn't trade him off. I sat down to think how I'd manage; but there wa'n't any way unless we went clean on to St. Louis by land, and I knowed we never could make it. Woodpecker, Spotted Elk, and Standing Bear would only go with us as far as the mouth of the Yellowstone, and I couldn't blame them. The Grosventres would take us in if the Crows didn't. I layed awake nigh half the night thinking about it; but I couldn't figure out any way, only to leave him with Bluebird. I wouldn't *give* him to her. I'd just *leave* him with her, like. Once I made up my mind to it, I went to sleep.

We got all ready for an early start and spent the

day changing and fixing packs. We had twenty pack animals loaded light enough to travel fast and had to get six extra hosses from the Crees to make out. Besides our own robes and furs we was taking along the packs of beaver skins belonging to Red Robe, promising to pay the trader at the Ashley-Henry Post for him.

I couldn't wait for daylight. I got up and built a fire an hour before dawn. Mac turned out and went out for the stock, while I got breakfast, as nervous as a girl, dropping everything and burning my hands twice.

Woodpecker and Standing Bear come in before Mac got back, and when he run in the stock Spotted Elk was with him. The Crees begun to saddle up while Mac and I ate.

"You give this lodge to somebody and I will give Dad's to Yellow Bear," I said.

"Good," he said, and that was settled. But somehow I wa'n't so glad to do it as I thought I'd be. Eagle was pestering me, too.

The Crees begun to pack and a crowd gathered to look on. Bluebird was there, and Red Robe and his woman and the other children, but I went at it and took a hand at the packing. The mules was ornery not having done any work for so long a spell, and some of them cut up, making everybody laugh. But one by one they was packed, all of us working hard and fast to get the outfit strung out so the mules wouldn't lay down and roll. I was sweating like a nigger when Mac swung onto his hoss and leading the bell-mare, headed out onto the plains to clear the bad-land breaks before turning down the Missouri.

Eagle, like he knowed what was going on, made

out to follow, but I caught him up and led him to Bluebird. He whinnied and pawed and rared up, and I mighty nigh weakened and took him along.

The crowd of folks fell back and begun to go away to their lodges, when holding onto Eagle with one hand, I held out my other to Bluebird. She took it, her eyes falling when I squeezed her hand. It was little and slender, but hardened with work, and I saw again how the nails on the tapering fingers was broke from dressing heavy robes. Directly she drew it away from me gently and brushed her forehead. How pretty she looked, and good! Her black hair, parted exactly in the middle, hung in heavy braids that reached below her waist, one in front over her breast, the other behind a half-naked shoulder as pretty as any woman could own. Her head being bent showed the part in her hair which was fresh-painted, and there was pearl shells in her ears—not big pieces, but pretty ones, round and polished.

“Bluebird,” I begun, “will you keep Eagle for me?”

She looked up and her eyes held onto mine like they was afraid I’d lie. “Shall you come back?” she asked in that nigh-whispered voice, “back here to stay?”

It was the first time I knowed how much she liked me; and right then my job got harder to do. I knowed I couldn’t lie to her; and I wouldn’t, no-way.

“I am going down the river to my home, and I may come back. I think now that I like the ways of my own people better, and that I shall stay there,” I says. “But if I come back I will stay.”

She turned to look out on the plains where the

pack-train was still going nigh straight away. Her eyes didn't change, nor her face. Then she took hold of Eagle's rope. "I will keep him, Lone Wolf," she said, "keep him till he dies."

I couldn't hardly hear that word. I pricked at it.

Her father and mother was standing just behind her, but far enough away so that I knowed they didn't hear. I wouldn't run off and leave her without fixing it so she would know if I wa'n't coming back. I took off my ring. The shield on it was nigh worn away now, but I handed it to her.

"Look at it carefully," I said. "If after I have visited my people I make up my mind that I shall not come back to the plains I will send it to you so that you will know."

She took the ring, and when she give it back I was sure she'd know it any place. "Do not lose it, Lone Wolf," she whispered, "or I might never know."

How her eyes looked into mine!

"If I should lose it, I will let you know some other way, Bluebird, and before the month of roses shall have passed a second time from this day. I have spoken and I have not lied."

I took her hand again. It trembled in mine, but her fingers closed about my own and she led me towards her father. "Tell him what you have said to me, Lone Wolf," she begged. "Tell him all, that he may not listen to other men who may want me."

I told him every word. His sharp eyes never left my own while I was speaking. But afterwards he says without hesitating: "I will not listen to other young men until the month of roses shall have passed a second time from this day, or until the ring

has come back to her. You are young, Lone Wolf, your heart is strong, and there is yet time. Ho!"

He walked away and his woman followed.

I turned back to Bluebird. "There are some presents for you in the lodge," I said. "Get them before they move it."

She didn't hear me. Eagle was restless and I took the rope from her hand and tied him to a tree.

"Good-bye, Bluebird," I said, and got onto my hoss.

"Good-bye," she whispered. "Do not forget us." Her arms went around Eagle's white neck and she buried her face in his mane.

I rode away. Twice I heered Eagle whinny, but I didn't dare to look back. I felt as ornery and low-down as Mike Fink, and my conscience got to pestering me like it did when I'd caught myse'f being glad it was Joe instead of Dad that was killed. And it kept at it till I caught up to the pack-train. Then it let up a little and I showed myse'f again that I was only doing the right thing, the honest thing. I couldn't stay on the plains and to take Bluebird and then leave her would be lower-down than a skunk. Besides I reckoned that I was as bad-hurt as she was mebbly. I hoped I was, anyway; for I reckoned I deserved to be hurt more than she did, a heap more. I'd ought to have stayed plumb away from her, and I hadn't. But I couldn't he'p it now. I'd keep my promise and send the ring.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Mac had turned down the stream; and the pack-train, beginning to settle to work, looked mighty fine, the loaded animals following him over the rolling plains. First was Mac, then some stock, then Spotted Elk, then more packs, then Woodpecker and more mules, then Standing Bear, and finally me—all headed for the mouth of the Yellowstone.

The morning was fine, and there was a rich smell of spring in the air. The buffalo was shedding their hair, and it was sticking to every bush. Little rolls of it, fine as silk, blowed by the wind, bounded about like queer, shapeless animals looking for a place to hide. Directly we passed a herd, and the animals was all ragged and looked trowsley as all get out, with their long hair coming off in wads and still sticking about their bodies like it hated to let go. They was in good fix, but didn't look much like the buffalo we'd killed during the fall and winter. And the young calves, all legs and heads, that trotted by their mothers' sides, looked for all the world like bad-made toy animals that had come to life in a dream.

Wolves, packs of them, skulked close every minute, hoping to pick up a new-born calf or to find a crippled buffalo to kill. They was shedding, too, and looked tattered and tired, their tongues lolling out, and panting even when they sat down to watch us go by. Now and again I'd see one scratch him-se'f like he wanted to get rid of his winter coat and was half mad because it wouldn't come off.

I could see the tree tops down along the Missouri,

showing right green with young leaves. The plains was a picture; and you'd have sworn that they never could know bad weather and that misery never come that way.

Every day things went smooth and easy. It would be cloudy and rain, then the sun would come out again before night. We didn't see an Injin; not one; nor any sign, till we got opposite the mouth of the Yellowstone and had kindled a fire. Then a dug-out come over to us from the Post, fetching a white man and an Injin. I was tickled to see one of my own kind again, I can tell you. They stayed with us all night and we visited till late.

At daylight Mac and I went to the Post with them, taking Red Robe's beaver skins along. We struck a bargain easy for a mackinaw, but part of the agreement didn't suit me. We had to take as many bales of freight belonging to the traders at the Post as the mackinaw would carry, besides our own. There wa'n't no way out of it. But they was to send a man along to he'p us and take care of the goods belonging to them. Mac was plumb tickled at that. He knowed I wa'n't any hand with a boat and so was mighty glad when a little black Frenchman was sent across to our camp with the mackinaw.

We loaded up, taking some dainties like meal and sugar got at the Post. We'd paid off the Crees before we left the Marias, so we said good-bye to them and shoved off at about ten o'clock.

There was two oars up nigh the bow of the boat, which Mac and I manned while St. Pierre handled the steering oar at the stern. The river was coming up fast and the current was mighty strong, so that we was out of sight of the Post in no time. Cracky! We was bound for St. Louis at last. I couldn't be-

lieve it. If I lived to get there with what belonged to me I'd be rich.

St. Pierre begun to sing, but Mac said something in French and he quit. It had sounded funny and I laughed.

"HI'm say no good por seeng now," Mac says, turning to me. "T'ree man is stan' dam' poor show wit' planty Hinjin. Me, HI'm lakum song jist de sam' nodder man, but not now, by gar! Not jist now!"

I knowed he was right and said so. Each bend in the big river held a mystery and we never turned one of them without wondering if our luck would hold or break. Any turn might show up an Injin village or a war-party looking for trouble. Many a boat had been captured and its crew killed, even away below where the country was better known to whitemen. There had been a heap of fights along the river. I reckoned that one of them had figured in fetching me to the plains, mebby. But we didn't stop. We went on and on, 'round bend after bend till plumb dark, before we ate a bite. Then we changed things some. I took a nap while Mac pulled on one oar and St. Pierre steered in the stern. But we didn't stop, not a minute, all night long. We changed once, nigh midnight, when I took a hand at the oar and Mac took St. Pierre's place in the stern.

There was a quite a difference in the looks of things when morning come. The leaves on the trees was nigh full-grown; for we had traveled more than a hundred miles, and I could notice that it was some warmer.

I quit pulling the oar and got some breakfast ready. Then we called St. Pierre and ate. After

that Mac took a nap till nigh noon, while I pulled the oar and St. Pierre steered.

Directly we passed Little Pete's corral. It was still standing. I could see just where Dad and I was laying when Joe was shot. It didn't take long to pass the place; but while we was drifting by, I saw most everything and thought of everything. A band of antelope was drinking where they'd drunk that day. I wondered if they was the same ones. I didn't say anything to St. Pierre; it wa'n't worth while; but I got to thinking hard.

Dad was dead, and Bill, and Joe. Even Fink and Carpenter and Talbot had gone under. I was the only one left alive. If I could only get to St. Louis I'd go home and stay there.

Then I thought of Bluebird and Eagle. I reckoned I'd been square and honest with both, and that I loved both more than anything else in the world. But there wa'n't any way I could have them.

We didn't stop but twice in eight days and nights. Then we only tied up at islands and cooked, being mighty careful about making our fires. We baked up a lot of corn bread and took wood so that we could make a little tea on the boat while we was traveling. But on the morning of the ninth day I killed a fat whitetail buck and we landed. It was the first shot we'd fired and the first fresh meat we'd had in nigh a week. We could have had tons of meat any day, but we daren't shoot. Mac held to it that we must keep quiet and make time, and we did. I was cramped and tired with the stillness, and the bad-lands, pretty and queer as they was, got on my nerves more and more; though now they was changing—fading out, like, and I was mighty glad.

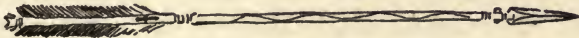
It was on the morning of the tenth day when it begun to rain like sixty. We was all up and awake. Mac, pulling at the oar, says, "Now, St. Pierre, you'll seeng plenty."

Cracky! The Frenchman didn't wait, but struck up a lively tune, and Mac joined him. It was like letting out a tight cinch, and I felt tickled.

They sang song after song—all in French, but sounding good to me. The dangerous country had been safely passed and we hadn't anything to fear. Rank vines and weeds with bright-colored flowers lined the banks now, and the timber was thicker and bigger and reached farther back from the river. Directly we passed a log cabin and cheered till we was hoarse. A man come to the door and waved his hand; but he wa'n't white, he was a mixed-blood on the outskirts of civilization, though I knowed his next neighbor was likely to be white.

Near sundown we went by a clearing—just a little one without a fence. Then, before dark we saw a dozen good-sized cabins, and a mile or two below them went ashore to stretch our legs. We slept on land and built a fire and cooked, all we wanted.

But at daylight we went on. It rained hard that day and the next. The cabins and clearings was nearer together now; and when the sun come out again, there she was—old St. Louis, not a mile ahead! We'd come into the Mississippi and never knowed it.



CHAPTER XXXIV

We tied up at a low-lying wharf. Almost before we got out of the boat we had visitors. But they was loafers, all of them, and mean-looking. Directly, a fiddle commencing to play, St. Pierre begun to jig on the dock like a crazy man. I saw right away that I'd have to be careful and fast if I got shed of the trader's freight before St. Pierre run off with the wild bunch, so I says, "You stay right here with the boat till I come back, both of you."

I saw a fat man coming towards us packing a jug. I waited till he come up to St. Pierre and spoke in French to him. He poured out a tin cup full of liquor from the jug and St. Pierre downed it, hungry. The man passed to Mac and give him a drink too. Then he come on to me. "None for me," I says. "There's plenty time for that."

They both promised to let it alone while I was gone, so I set out to look up the Ashley-Henry place in St. Louis. I knowed that Mac's word was plumb good, but I couldn't trust St. Pierre noway, and I walked fast.

Mud was deep in the streets and there was holes and puddles of water everywhere. Great teams of yoked cattle was coming and going between the levee and the warehouses, the wheels on the heavy wagons cutting down deep into the rain-soaked road. In mighty nigh half of the open doors, women, dressed up fine, stood or leaned against the casing like they was waiting for somebody. Some of them spoke to me and wanted me to stop and talk

a spell, but I wanted to get shed of my responsibility as well as our fur and robes and I kept on till I'd found the Ashley-Henry place.

They sent some men down to the boat with a wagon right away, so that I felt there wa'n't so much need to hurry now. But I went right off to Shipman and Company's store and showed Mr. Shipman the paper Dad had give me.

He read the paper and called a man named Bracket to read it, too. "Mounts," he says, looking interested, "this will clear you of the charge of murder. I knew, of course, that Wash Lamkin was dead and I paid the order you gave to Beasley and Abernathy; but I knew nothing of Lamkin's confession till now—not a word."

Mr. Bracket handed back the paper, looking curious at me.

"Remember what you've read, Bracket," said Mr. Shipman. "And Mounts, as soon as you can spare the time I'll go with you to see Judge Perkins," he says. "You aren't likely to get into trouble for a little while; but as soon as you can we'd best make the call."

He put the paper in an iron box, and I was satisfied to leave it there.

Before dark the mackinaw was empty and we'd sold her for thirty dollars. Sixty-nine hundred and fifty dollars was what Shipman and Company paid us for our robes and fur, and half of it was mine, besides the money left from what Dad had given me. I felt rich, I can tell you, and happy. I asked Mr. Shipman to take care of the money for us till we wanted it, and we took a receipt for nigh all—only keeping out some for spending money. Mac held out more than I did, though I tried to talk him

out of it. But I couldn't and I had to leave him to go see the Judge.

His home was up on the bluffs among a grove of big trees, and there was a mighty good-looking hound-dog in the yard. Mr. Shipman knocked and a nigger let us in.

Right away after introducing me he handed Dad's paper to the Judge, a little fat man with a bald head, and smooth-shaved. The Judge put on his glasses. "Sit down, gentlemen, sit down," he says, beginning to read.

Directly he finished, "Wash Lamkin? Why, I grew up with Wash," he says, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his coat-tails. "And I reckon I know why he shot Caley Byers. Everybody expected it in our parts long ago." He looked like he felt important, and shaking hands with me, says, "Mounts, I'll give you a copy of this paper to have with you, but I reckon I'd best keep the original document, myse'f," he says. "Oh, Eph! Eph!"

The nigger that let us in come to the door. "You go and fetch Tuck Taylor here. Tell him I want him mighty quick," the Judge says. "Tell him I got some news that's worth his time. Understand?"

"Tuck runs the Gazette," he told me, after the nigger had gone (and he went mighty quick. I reckoned he was afraid of the Judge, likely).

The Judge filled a long-stemmed pipe and lit it. "A little publicity will he'p Mounts, Tom," he said to Mr. Shipman. "Besides, Tuck is mighty keen for news from up river, so it will be water on his wheel, too." He sat down nigh me. "Had a right smart brush with the Injins, I reckon?" he says, hitching his chair nigher mine.

"Yes, sir," I told him.

"Good fighters, ain't they?"

"Yes, sir," I says.

"Mighty good, I reckon, from what honest folks have told me," he said, puffing hard at his pipe. "But when I was a boy I knew a man who used to tell me that one good whiteman could lick a whole tribe of Indians. He lived in our town and said he'd been a trapper once before he came there. His name was Alvin Levigood, and he was a cooper by trade. Old Al'd sit straddle of a log that used to lie down by the cooper-shop and tell us boys about his Indian fights, till we could see blood all over everything. Al always won the fight, no matter how it started or how many were engaged against him. He had a bad scar on his side, a mighty nasty-lookin' scar, that he said was made by an Indian's lance; and he'd pull up his shirt and show us the scar every time he yarned about his battles. He'd say, 'I jest wrenched the durn spear out of his hands an' druv it clean thoo his belly. Then I tuck his scalp; yes, sir, an' I kep' it fer a long time, too.'

"Old Al was a hero; I mean *our* hero; till one day his wife chased him clean to Hawkins' Ferry with a mop, right through town lickety-split. That settled it with me. I never believed a word of Al's stories after that. Hark," the Judge says, getting up and going to the door. "Here's Tuck now."

He introduced me to a thin little man with eyes like a mink's. "Here, Tuck," he says, looking more important than ever, "read this paper first; then Mounts will tell you his story. You remember the Byers killing, of course? Well, Tuck, I know the whole story. Grew up with the Lamkins and Byerses. And you can say in your paper that I

know what Wash Lamkin says in that paper is true!"

Mr. Taylor didn't answer nor look up till he'd finished reading. He wa'n't a man to talk much, it looked like. "Thank you, Judge," he says, sitting down at the table. He pulled some paper out of his pocket and spread it out, reached for a quill on the table, and turning to me, says, "Now Mounts, let's have it."

I told it short as I could. But whenever I skipped the Judge or Mr. Taylor knowed it and questioned me, till first I knowed I'd told it all, or mighty nigh all.

"Thank you, Judge, and Mounts." Mr. Taylor got up to go, nodding to both of us. "The Gazette will be out some time between now and morning, gentlemen, and I've got to bid you good evening if this story is to be in."

"There, Tom," said the Judge, after Taylor had gone, "we have been of service to Tuck, and set Mounts right before the world at the same time."

Men was going and coming up and down the muddy streets and in and out of lighted places when Mr. Shipman and I went back to the store. On the way, after a long spell of silence, each picking his trail through the mud, Mr. Shipman said, "We do business in a queer way, Mounts. I was thinking of the order you gave to Beasley and Abernathy. I paid it because I knew them, though I didn't know you. I knew Lamkin well enough, of course. But we do business with queer people—people who do almost anything but cheat. Did Beasley or Abernathy know about Wash Lamkin's confession?"

"No, sir," I says, "I don't reckon they did. They just signed the paper for Dad."

Mac and St. Pierre was gone. I expected it, but it pestered me. "You'll find them in the first dance hall, Mounts," laughed Mr. Shipman. "And I'd go slow while I was in town if I was you."

Mac had a lot of money on him. I ought to find him. I turned to go out. "Good-night," I said, shaking hands. "And thank you, sir, for what you've done for me."

"You're entirely welcome," he smiled. "Going back up the river soon?" he asked me.

"I reckon I'm plumb through, sir," I says. "The way I got it figured now, I'm going home to Coon Creek to stay."

He reached for a quill on his desk. "No," he said. "You aren't through. They never get through, somehow. You are a born plainsman, Mounts, and you'll go back. It's in your blood."

"Good-night," I says, and walked out. I was lonesome as all get out; and in St. Louis.

I looked into two dance halls and a tavern but Mac and St. Pierre wa'n't there. Then I crossed the street to a bright-lit place where there was a heap of music and noise. And there they was. St. Pierre with one arm around Mac's neck, was flourishing a glass of liquor, singing and keeping time with the slopping glass, over Mac's head.

I elbowed my way inside. I couldn't hear myse'f think. I reached over and touched Mac. "Come out," I said in Cree. "I must speak with you."

He was drunk. I could see that. But his face sobered quick. He thought I was in trouble. He shook himse'f loose from St. Pierre's arm and followed me outside.

"Let us go to bed," I said, taking his arm.

He pulled back. "No, Lone Wolf," he said. "I am in St. Louis. I am playing now, and I shall play until I have finished four days that way. Then," he reached for my shoulder to steady himself. "Then I shall go back with presents for my woman and children. Are you going with me, Lone Wolf?"

"I am going to my home tomorrow," I told him.

"When will you come back, back here from your home?" he asked anxiously.

I felt of my ring. If I gave it to him now he would lose it.

"In ten days," I said. "Then I will know if I am going back up the river."

"I will wait ten days, then, Lone Wolf," he said. "Come, let us go to St. Pierre and sing."

"No," I said. "I am going to my bed, and I wish you were going, too."

But I knowed him. When he said "no" he was set as a mule, and there wa'n't any use to coax.

I didn't sleep a wink. I thought of Mac all night. Then, too, I got to itching to see Aunt Lib till I wanted to get up and go afoot. I was glad when day come, and I got up and ate breakfast as quick as I could.

After that I went to the store and got two thousand and five hundred dollars and a suit of clothes that had been made for Mr. Shipman himself. They fitted me fine and looked good on me. I had never owned a regular suit of clothes before, and I felt proud, though mighty uncomfortable in them, after the clothes I'd been wearing. I rolled up my duds and Mr. Shipman promised to keep them, and Dad's rifle, till I called for them. Then I went out to find Mac.

I hunted the town over. But some places was shut up and in others that was open only niggers was in them, cleaning up after the night's carouse. I had to give it up.

At a sales corral I bought me a good hoss and saddle, after which I went back to the store to say good-bye to Mr. Shipman and ask him to keep an eye on Mac. He said he'd do the best he could, and laughed when I told him I'd be back in ten days, and handed me a copy of the Gazette. "Your story is in it," he said, "and Tuck has told it well."

"Good-bye, sir," I says. "And I'll sure be back in ten days."



CHAPTER XXXV

When I got down at the gate and opened it, it squeaked loud like it always did. And here come old Bugle, tickled plumb to death, and Bing with him. They set up a howl that you could hear a mile and I was mighty nigh as tickled as they was. Then Aunt Lib come running down the walk. "If it ain't *Lige!*" she says, hugging me tight and beginning to cry. It was a regular bedlam for a spell, with the children all talking at once and asking questions.

When I'd got loose from Aunt Lib, Uncle Eldin shook hands. "Glad to see ye again, boy," he says; "and supper's ready, too."

"An' we got chicken," says Jinny.

"Fried chicken, *Lige,*" piped Jane Ellen, taking hold of my hand.

"Yes, an I'd better be 'tendin' to it," says Aunt Lib, wiping her eyes on her apron.

We walked in a bunch, with the hounds wriggling about us. "Where's Eben?" I asked, not seeing him.

"Pap bound him out," says Jinny, and that set off Aunt Lib.

"The crops wa'n't much last fall, *Lige,*" she told me, "an' Eldin had to mortgage, so we bound Eben out, though goodness knows we needed him bad enough. Now git washed, *Lige.* Eldin'll take keer of yer hoss."

She fussed around the stove and table, talking fast and fretting, like she always did. "I never *was* so glad of a thing as I was to git yer letter, *Lige,*" she says, pouring the tea. "I jest cried an' cried till it got here."

And I was mighty glad it had got there, even if it did take a time, because I knowed she *had* fretted awful.

After supper I told them about my trip, some of it. Then I gave Uncle Eldin the Gazette and he read what it said aloud. It was pretty nigh the truth, only Taylor had made the fights seem worse than they was. I'd read it the night before and knowed that, but I let it go.

"Massey sakes! Lige, I don't see how you ever did git here alive!" Aunt Lib hugged me like she had at the gate. "It's awful to think of that pore man tellin' of killin' Caley Byers with his last breath," she says. "I 'low ye got enough of that life to last ye, ain't ye, Lige?"

Her voice sounded like she'd bet I had.

"I don't know, Aunt Lib," I says. "That's what's pestering me. I wanted to get back here bad enough; but just as soon's I did, everything looked small to me, and fenced-in, like. I never knowed Coon Creek was so small and lazy-looking. But it sure is; an' muddy." Then I thought I was mebbly fretting her, so I says, "Eben must have growed a lot in a year. I wish he was here."

I knowed they'd sleep better, so I told them they could buy Eben off and that I had fetched them two thousand dollars for their own. Aunt Lib was sure then we'd all be killed for the money in the night, and I reckoned mebbly I'd made a mistake to tell them, though it would be a change of torments, anyhow, I figured. But she said she wouldn't take the money noway, and cried.

"There's more where it come from," I told her. And that set her off again.

"Ye won't never go back up the river, will ye,

Lige?" she whimpered. "The Injins'll kill ye or ye'll git yerse'f drowned. Stay here where folks has got religion and fears God."

I couldn't sleep that night. It was smothering and close, and the bed was too soft. I thought of what Aunt Lib had said about folks fearing God, and then I thought of St. Louis and Bluebird and Mac, until everything was mixed and upside down. I had told myse'f there was peace here, and there was. At least, there wa'n't any fighting between men. But somehow it wa'n't the kind of peace that let a man go to sleep.

Nigh two o'clock I heered a fuss in the barn. Then directly Uncle Eldin got up and went out. When he come back I heered him ask, "Where's the hoss-medicine, Lib?" and her tell him it was in the cupboard on the top she'f. I got up and dressed.

Poor old Becky was dead in the barn. It upset me, and I knowed Aunt Lib would fret. The mare was old and wore out, but she'd been faithful and he'ped a heap to make the place for us there.

I walked out under the stars. The night air smelled so good after the loft that I didn't want to go back. An owl hooted over in the timber, and I thought right away of the Crees—of Bluebird. "A warrior is dead, sure 'nough," I thought. "And even old Black Bear couldn't have saved her."

I knowed I had to go in with Uncle Eldin, but the minute I set my foot inside I wished I was out again.

"How is she, Eldin?" Aunt Lib's voice was full of fret.

"She's dead," Uncle Eldin says, setting the lantern on the table and sighing.

"Never mind, Aunt Lib," I says, hurrying to keep

her from crying if I could. "We'll buy a team of good hosses tomorrow. By cracky! we can afford it, too."

But she had something else on her mind. "Pore ol' Becky," she says, and then, "I believe Alexander Hamilton's got the fever. He's jest a-burnin' up, an' so cross a body cain't live with him. You'd best see Doc Seaberry tomorrow, Eldin, an' git him some medicine. Take Lige's hat. Good land!" she says. "An' blow out that lanthorn. It's nigh the last candle in the house, till I git time to make some more. If 'tain't one thing, it's another."

I reckoned it was—with nothing between them, and climbed the ladder to the loft.

But I couldn't sleep. It was all I could do to breathe. I looked out at the stars till they faded. Then I got up and went to the barn and hitched old Tom to the stoneboat. I reckoned I'd get old Becky out of sight before Aunt Lib got to see her. So I hauled her over into the timber and left her there for the varmints. They was the sneaky kind that didn't howl over a feast, nor kill their meat; and some way I got to thinking of the strength of men and brutes that lived on the plains.

Smoke was coming out of the chimney when I got back from the timber. And after all my trying to get home, I didn't want to go in the house. But I knowed I had to.

Aunt Lib met me at the door, askin', "Where on airth have ye been?"

Not waiting for me to answer, she went on, "Alexander Hamilton's right sick this morning, and Eldin'll have to go to the Crossin', Lige."

"I'm goin' too," I told her. "And we'll fetch home a good team and some medicine. Then tomorrow we'll fetch Eben home."

I thought that ought to quiet her; but Aunt Lib couldn't be quiet noway, I reckon.

As soon as breakfast was over we set out afoot for the Crossing, Uncle Eldin, Charles, and me, though Charles ought to have stayed home to he'p, I thought. The trail hadn't changed, nor Dan's Clearing. The big down-tree was there with its scraggly roots; but there wa'n't any squirrel on them, and Dad was up on the Marias. I thought of that morning when I took the corn to the mill and how mighty nigh I'd come to looking behind the down-tree when the squirrel barked so hard. If I had, mebby everything would have been different now. Mebby Dan would be alive, and Caley Byers. Mebby the owl when he flew out of the bushes and made me believe it was him the squirrel was barking at, took two lives and changed another. Charles was ahead, and Uncle Eldin. They didn't notice the down-tree, and I kept my thoughts to myse'f. It seemed like both of them was plumb strangers to me, and of another tribe.

I got to figuring. It took two days of hard riding to come from St. Louis, and it would take two to go back, without mishap; I'd best call it three. That was five days out of the ten. If I kept my word I'd have to hustle to get back to St. Louis to catch Mac and give him the ring. And I'd have to do that. Two or three days was all I dared to wait before I started back. I made up my mind to that. I knowed Mac would wait the ten days but no longer, and I must see him and send Bluebird the ring.

There was a lot of men in Hawkins' store, and Mr. Hawkins was reading the Gazette aloud, when we went in. They all wanted to shake hands at once and was all mighty curious about Dad. "An'

that was the first time ye knowed he'd killed Caley Byers, eh? Gosh A'mighty! What if he'd a-died 'thout tellin' ye?" says the blacksmith, spitting at a box of sawdust clean across the store.

"Well, didn't I always say Lige never shot Caley Byers? Didn't I, say?" Mr. Hawkins looked from one to the other, till finally the blacksmith he'ped him out.

"Yep," he says, "ye kep' a-sayin' it, shore 'nuff." And Mr. Hawkins took a chew of tobacco and give him one.

There was teams a-plenty for sale, and directly Uncle Eldin and I went to look at them that was nearby. Charles went off with Lem Cutts' girl, Mandy, and I could see it was a mash, sure enough. But she wa'n't much. Her hair was always mussed like she'd just got up, and her aprons wa'n't ever clean. Besides she was hog-fat, and lazy as Charles every bit.

We bought a good team of bay mares and paid off the mortgage on the place. Ezra Dyke held to it till I had to pay a whole year's interest that wa'n't due, before he'd let go. Then Uncle Eldin went over to see Doc Seaberry; so by the time we got started back it was past two o'clock, and cloudy.

I was up early next morning, and figuring on how to tell Aunt Lib I had to go back to St. Louis, I walked down the Coon Creek trail a piece with Bugle. The meadow larks was singing just like they did on the plains, the notes a little different, though, and not so sweet. I could see in my mind the great, endless stretches of green, the rolling land, the treeless land of the buffalo, and I felt shut-in, like, and tied.

After breakfast we went after Eben, and bargained with old man Yenney till I mighty nigh

shook him. At last he let the boy go for sixty dollars, and he come home behind the new team.

I reckoned I'd done nigh all I could and that I might's well have it over with, so after supper I says, "I've got to go back to St. Louis right away and find Mac. I haven't made up my mind yet, but I reckon I'll come back here. But if I don't, you'll know——"

"That ye've gone back up that river to git yerse'f killed!" Aunt Lib begun to fret again.

"Mebby I'll come back," I told her. "Anyway, here's four hundred dollars for your own, Aunt Lib. I want you to spend it for anything you want. It's only for you."

Then she *did* cry. And I couldn't stop her.

I called Uncle Eldin out and give him all but ten dollars of what I had left. "Uncle Eldin," I says, "you're a man, an' know I've plumb got to keep my word. I told Mac I'd be back in ten days; and he's my pardner."

"When must ye go, boy, to make it?" he asked, going back in the house with me.

"Soon," I says.

And right away I climbed up the ladder to the loft.

I waited till I reckoned they was all asleep; then, carrying my boots and rifle, I crept out on the shed-roof and let myse'f down to the ground. I felt like it was low-down and ornery to sneak away from my own kin; but I jest couldn't stand it to see Aunt Lib take on and cry.

Bugle come dancing around me, and into the barn where my hoss and saddle was. When I led out my hoss, though I knowed he'd howl like all get out, I shut the door on him and rode off.

CHAPTER XXXVI

When the gate creaked Bugle begun to let folks know where he was. I got on and struck the Injin trot and never quit till plumb noon, when I stopped at a clearing to 'tend to my hoss good, and get my dinner. I waited an hour afterwards to rest my hoss, and then went on. I had to catch Mac, and I didn't have but three days to do it, though I reckoned that was plenty. I'd send the ring to Bluebird and let it go at that. But I knowed I'd never stand it to live with Aunt Lib again. I reckoned I'd get me a place in St. Louis and stay there. Then if the folks needed me I could he'p them.

It had been more or less cloudy all day, and along about six o'clock I heered thunder. I couldn't only see a little of the sky through the tree-tops, and it was bad and black, so I reckoned I'd camp at the next clearing and call it a day.

Directly some big rain drops splattered on me, and the wind, like it had been hid and waiting for a signal, charged the bushes and tree-tops, and they bent and twisted and tossed, their leaves trembling and showing their under sides as though they was scared. Right then, like the wind had shook him down off a limb, a tall man with a long black beard stood in the road ahead, waving his arms.

I pulled up beside him. He was bare-headed and ragged. "Howdy," I says. And he begun to whimper and take on mighty bad.

I got down. "What's ailing you?" I says, taking hold of his arm.

Then he broke plumb down and cried. His big body shook with sobs and he couldn't talk.

"I'll he'p you, stranger," I says. "Tell me what's wrong." And I put my hand on his shoulder.

"I'm afeered she's dyin'," he says, his voice shaking like he had the chills.

It layed hold of me. "What's happened?" I says. "And where is she?"

"She fell—over yonder," he says, pointing out into the heavy timber.

Mebby we could get her on my hoss, I thought. "Well, let's not stand here," I says.

He wiped his eyes with his big, dirty hand, and struck out, me at his heels leading my hoss

It was sprinkling again and thunder was growling. The clouds overhead being black, it was nigh dark under the trees. I could just make out the man's broad back ahead of me as he picked his way among the wet bushes. Directly there come a blinding flash of lightning right with a clap of thunder. I thought of that night under the bed in my father's cabin, and Lafe Daws' big cowhide boots leaking water. I was wet plumb to my skin.

The man stopped by the big root of an overturned tree. "Look yonder under there," he says, just so I could hear him above the pelting rain. "Ain't it a sight, stranger?" and he begun to whimper and cry again.

I bent over and looked into a deep hole the root had tore in the ground. There was a cracking sound that sizzled, like, and a light streaked in my eyes and went out. That's the last I knowed for a long spell.

When I opened my eyes it was daylight and I was laying on my back in a pool of water. I tried to sit up, but didn't make it. Gobs of mud fell off the root when I moved and rain was falling down

through the shining leaves overhead. I was stiff and my head hurt me. I couldn't figure it out. I tried again to sit up, and made it. Then I climbed out of the hole; and the minute I got on my feet I remembered.

My rifle was gone, and my hoss. My pockets was turned inside out. I was mad clean through, and I reckon that was good for me, warming me up, like. But where was the road? I was all turned around and fuddled. There wa'n't any feeling in my legs, and my arms ached, and my head. I didn't know which way to go, but struck out, stumbling in the bushes that showered me, and falling over logs that barked my shins, till common sense come to he'p me and I sat down to let it. I'd find the sun first; then I'd know where the road was. I reached for my knife, but the pocket being inside-out, I peeled a little twig with my fingers and wet my thumb nail. I set the twig on it, and found the sun, not more than two hours high. Cracky! I might miss Mac. Mebby I'd been a week in the hole. I didn't know. My heart nigh smothered me when I thought mebby the ten days was up. I started on, walking faster than was good for me, till I run onto the road. Then I set out towards St. Louis, weak and sick as a cat. I don't know how long I traveled, nor what time it was, for it was dark when I saw a light in the window of a cabin.

I remember of somebody opening the door, and that I tried to tell them what had happened to me. Losing my rifle was on my mind, and Mac; but while I was speaking the room teetered and commenced to whirl. I reached out to take hold of a chair. Then the light went out.

Directly I heered a man say, "He's coming

'round. He'p me lift him on the bed. His head's bad-cut an' his hair's full of blood."

Then I knowed somebody was carrying my head and feet. My body didn't seem to be there; but I didn't care what became of me, noway.

Directly the light come on and everything was still for a spell, till I heered a woman say, "Massey! he's only a boy. Ye'd best saddle Rusty an' fetch Doc Tate to see him, Lafe. He's got a fever."

I waked up and went to sleep over and over again, all the time pestering about Mac and my rifle, but only half caring about either. Sometimes I knowed I was talking, though it seemed like somebody furnished the words, and they didn't make sense, which I knowed. I'd try to straighten them out, like I was changing Cree to English, but in spite of me they was gibberish. I dreamed a lot of Bluebird; and once I saw the man with the black beard wearing the necklace of little shells she had given me. He had taken it out of my coat pocket, and I followed him till I was plumb tired out trying to get it back.

By and by my mind got clear and I saw that I was in a bed. A woman come to the bed and bent over me, a woman with a kind, sweet face.

"How long have I been here?" I asked her, afraid of her answer.

"This is the tenth day," she says, "but don't fret none, boy. We got plenty of room and lots to eat. Massey! We're right glad to he'p ye."

Tenth day! Mac had gone. I couldn't send the ring to Bluebird. Mac had said he'd wait ten days. I knowed him. He was gone. I just weakened down, like, and if I'd been a woman I'd sure have cried.

"Gee, Buck! Blue!" I could hear a man plowing over in the clearing and see him through the open

door which was bordered with morning-glory vines in bloom. A bluejay in a stick cage on a bench outside, jabbered at others of his kind in the trees, like he envied them; and I sure knowed he did. There was a clock that ticked slow, with brass hands, and a picture of George Washington on a hoss. The glass was cracked on it, and I reckoned the roof had leaked sometimes, for the picture was mighty nigh spoiled by a yellow streak cutting the hoss plumb in two.

"Cracky!" I says, fretting, and the woman sat down on my bed and put a cold cloth on my forehead. I shut my eyes to think. I'd have to find somebody to take the ring up the river. I'd *have* to. I couldn't lay there like a knot on a log, noway. I opened my eyes again and they lit on a good-looking rifle over the fireplace. I hoped mine would bust and kill the man that stole it; only I hated to have the old gun spoiled, or bear the disgrace of busting.

"I plumb got to get to St. Louis," I says, trying to sit up.

"There," she says, pushing me back, kind and gentle. "I know it's been pesterin' ye right smart," she says, like I'd told it before, "but ye cain't travel yit. Mebby in four or five days if ye're good an' stay quiet. Lafe'll take ye to town as soon's ye kin go."

And there wa'n't anything to do, only lay there and wait; and I knowed it.

Their name was Bartlett—Lafe and Susan Bartlett—good folks as ever lived, and kind. I sure made it up to them both, with an extra present for her, besides, when at last Lafe drove me to St. Louis. I'll never forget them as long as I live, and keep my mind.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Mr. Shipman was right glad to see me and wondered what had kept me. I told him what happened, and quick as I could, says, "Have you seen Mac?"

I held my breath.

"Not for several days," he told me; and I let go and give it up.

"He kept coming to me for money and I reckon he's had a big spree. The last time I saw him—four or five days ago—he bought a bill of goods which he told me he was sending up the river with a boat. His money's all been drawn, and he may have gone himse'f; but I reckon you'll find him about town."

I knowed I *wouldn't*, though I'd look. He had waited more than ten days, I figured. There wa'n't any time to fool. I got three hundred dollars and started out.

"Are you going up the river, Mounts?" Mr. Shipman asked, walking with me towards the door.

"I haven't made up my mind, yet, sir," I says. "But anyway I need a hoss and some things." I wouldn't have to buy a rifle, noway. Dad's was mine, and there wa'n't any better gun.

I went every place; and asked nigh everybody I reckoned might know of Mac, if they'd seen him; but they hadn't, not for days. Some men said he was gone, they reckoned, and others said he was here, or there, they reckoned; but I could see they was only making talk. I was leaving the Albemarle tavern and dance-hall when somebody called me by

name, making me nigh jump out of my boots. It was Alex Beasley, sober as a judge, and as tickled to see me as I was to see him.

"You seen Mac?" I says first thing.

"He's pulled out," he told me. "He had a big spree, him an' a Frenchman, St. Pierre. I was with them six nights ago, and they said they was going up the river in the morning. I ain't seen 'em since."

That settled it. Even though I'd knowed he was gone, when Alex told me I felt plumb left out and miserable.

We went back into the tavern and Alex, moving a chair to a table, says, "Sit down, Lige," and we both sat down to visit. It was good to see Alex again, and I needed to talk.

"Tell me how you made out with the Crees," he says, going on, before I could start, to tell me that Jake and himse'f was pulling out in a day or two for old Fort Lisa with the last supplies they'd use there. "'Tain't far from the mouth of the Platte," he says, pouring liquor into two glasses the man fetched to the table.

"Better go along with us," he says, lifting a glass. "Come," he says, "here's to old Dad, the best man that was ever on the plains!"

I picked up my glass and downed the liquor. I'd drink to that. Alex was Dad's pardner and mine.

I told him about my luck and finally about the fight with the Blackfeet hoss thieves. That tickled him and he poured out more liquor, and I drank with him. Directly they lit candles, but having so much to say, we never budged. I drank when Alex did, though not so much, at first.

Directly some women come in, and the fiddles started. Alex got up and danced, but not knowing

how to dance, I sat there till he'd finished. Then he and two women sat down at the table and he got one of them called Belle to sing "Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot." Alex cried over the song, till Belle says, "Come on. Good God! let's not be mournful. Let's dance."

They wanted me to try it, and at last I did, though I knowed I couldn't dance a lick. There was a lot of singing and two fights. But the fights was stopped quick as they started. A big yaller nigger took care of that. He was a bully and needed killing. I saw him hit a Frenchman and break his jaw, because he put his arm around a couple that was dancing. It made me want to go to war, myse'f. That was early in the evening. But what went on afterwards I don't remember.

It was afternoon when I waked up, in a stuffy little room without a window in it. My head was thumping awful, and the room was a sight—everything on the floor, including myse'f—old clothes, men's and women's, and jugs, and filth, too. My mouth was parched, so that when I tried to call Alex, I couldn't.

I got up and went to the door that let in what light there was. I felt sick and dizzy. I went out into a hall, nigh as dark as the room, and stumbled along to a door at its end. Cracky! when I opened it the light cut through my eyes into my brain, and I nigh fell down. Every heart-beat felt like something was pounding on a boil in my head.

"Mornin'." A big fat-faced man was slapping at flies on the bar with a towel.

"Howdy," I says, wondering where I was.

"Hev a little something?" he says, reaching for a jug.

"Not by a damn sight!" I says, and I went on out through the front door.

I cut straight as I could for the river bank and kneeling down in the shade of a big warehouse, drank till I thought I'd bust. Then I crawled up and layed down in the shade, too sick to care what was going on.

It was nigh sundown when I sat up and went down to the water to drink again. I slipped out of my clothes and into the river. How good and clean it felt! I washed me with sand from the bank. When I come to scrub my hands I caught my breath like somebody had hit me in the stomach. My ring was gone!

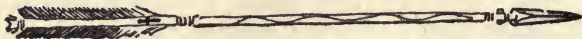
I waded out and took up my clothes. Every pocket was empty. "Twice in two weeks," I says aloud. "Twice in two weeks; and in the land where there's law and religion." And I knowed they'd done it oftener, mebbly if I hadn't been in bed most of the time.

I dressed and sat down and thought it out. I hadn't wanted to go back, but everything connived to make me go. I'd tried to keep away from it, hard as any man ever tried; but it wa'n't any use. I'd go back. And once I made up my mind I felt better—as though I could have cured myse'f of a sickness any time I had minded to. I got up and lit out for Shipman and Company's store. "Give me my clothes and my rifle," I says, breathless, "an' five hundred dollars."

Mr. Shipman handed them out, and the money. "Going back up the river?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes, sir," I says, "I reckon I am." And I went out and down to the warehouse again to change my clothes.

It didn't take long, I can tell you. And when I threw the coat and pants and vest and boots into the river, "Keep out of the shadows," I told them, feeling better'n I had in a month. "Keep close together, an' mebbly you'll find more law. I'm goin' back where there ain't any!"



CHAPTER XXXVIII

I bought the best hoss I could find, and next morning dickered for two good pack-hosses, besides. Then I went back to the store and bought all they could carry of goods and presents and powder and lead. I drew out what money was left, and by sundown I was ready to go.

I found Alex and Jake and camped with them that night, so that we started early for Fort Lisa; where after more than twenty days' traveling, I left them, to go it alone. I lightened packs a little there, and at a profit, and rested a week before I set out to try to get to the Marias and find the Crees.

I traveled early and late. The nearer I got to the mouth of the Yellowstone, the faster I wanted to go, till both myse'f and the hosses was plumb wore out. I knowed I was in bad Injin country, but I couldn't go any farther. I had to sleep and rest my stock.

It was on the Little Missouri that I hid away in a snug grove of young quaking aspens, with here and there a cottonwood. I had only rested three times for a day and a night, and my hosses was skin and bone. Here the grass was good, and I staked them out where they could be close in, and made me a bed. When I waked the hosses had cleaned up the grass around them, so I got up and moved to a new place. I couldn't keep awake, now I'd let go, though I knowed I was taking a big chance when I layed down again.

I moved the hosses and packs three times, and for three days slept most of the time, feeling somehow surer and surer that I was safe. One afternoon

when it was hot as all time, the plains blistering, not a breath of air stirring, and not a speck in the sky, my saddle-hoss suddenly snorted and pricked his ears. I was up and had my rifle cocked quicker'n a wink. I couldn't see nor hear a thing, but I knowed I was in for it, and my knees went weak a little when I thought what a fool I'd been. The sweat prickled out on my face, and I turned around.

"Don't be foolish, man."

English! A man's voice. And in a clump of bushes I saw a black face with a great nose mashed and scarred. God! what a face.

"Ha, ha, ha! I ain't much shakes for beauty, be I?" His laugh made shivers run up and down my back. I was glued to the spot.

"Don't ye make any bad motions," he says, getting up on his knees. "The Crows is all around ye. They've got yer hosses already, an' they'll take yer hair, too, if ye ain't mighty keerful." He stood up, a giant of a man, coming towards me, his sullen eyes fixed on mine like a snake's. "Put down yer rifle. I'm Rose," he said, "an' I'm Chief of the Crow-people; Edwin Rose."

I lowered my gun. I knowed they had me, though mebbly there'd be some way out. I could have killed him easy; but I knowed the brush was alive with Crows and that I'd die with him.

"I reckon you got me, Rose," I says, as calm as I could. "What do you want?"

He laughed again, and I'd rather have heered him cuss.

"Yes," he says, "easy, easy! But where's the rest of yer outfit. Who's with ye?"

"I'm plumb alone," I told him.

He sat down, and I did. I couldn't do anything

else, and I knowed it. "I'm trying to get to the Crees," I says. "They are my friends, and I want to get back to them. I'm plumb wore out.

"Crees, hey?"

I thought I saw scheming quicken his dull eyes. He spoke loud in Crow to some Injins that had closed in on my camp and they sat down where they was. One of them had my saddle-horse. Rose filled his pipe and struck a light with his flint and steel. Then, like we was old friends, he passed his pipe to me. I knowed my life was safe then, though I wa'n't sure what he'd do with me.

"The Crees are enemies of the Blackfeet, an' so are we," he said, taking back the pipe. "Give us some powder an' lead an' I'll let ye go. But don't sleep no more."

I remembered what Dad had said of Rose. "Nez Coup," he called him. Likely he figured I'd he'p hold the Crees friendly to him. I took his hand and shook it. "I'll give you half I got," I told him, "and if after I get to the Crees, you ever need me, I'll he'p you, if I can."

He didn't answer nor speak for nigh a minute. Then he says, "Git the powder and lead. They won't bother ye. Then you git out of this country."

"I'm going to," I said "But do you know where I'm likely to find the Crees now?"

"Up, 'way up the Marias," he told me. "Remember, don't sleep, keep traveling," he says.

I give him four kegs of powder and half my lead.

"If the Blackfeet ketch ye they won't treat ye as I do," he says, like he was half-sorry he'd smoked with me.

But I hustled up and packed so I could travel with them as long as they went my way, for I knowed

that after making peace the way they did they would stay friendly while I was with them, anyway. They was bigger and taller than the Crees, I thought, and some of them was fat. All rode fine hosses and all had good weapons—bows and quite a few guns. Before sundown they turned off south, and I left them, to go it alone.

As soon as they was out of sight I tailed up my hosses and lit out as fast as I could go, tickled nigh to death to be alive.



CHAPTER XXXIX

I was rested and my hosses feeling a heap better; so I kept on till I come to a little stream that emptied into the Missouri, where I camped. I didn't make a fire but ate a cold snack of dried meat. The night was sultry and hot, and the buffalo-gnats mighty nigh drove the hosses crazy, and me too. They was thick in the air and I could hear them hum the night through, and twice breathed them into my lungs. "No-seeums," the Injins call them. I reckon nothing that lives is worse, or harder to get along with. I'd have gone on, only I knowed that I'd have to save my hosses more and more now, for I might be jumped any minute and have to make a run for it. I couldn't have slept if I'd wanted to. I sat out where I could see over the plains and along the willows and brush up and down the creek. Wolves fooled me more than once, slipping along the brush like shadows, and towards morning a band of antelope like to run over me. If I could only make the Ashley-Henry Post, I'd rest—for a whole week, before I went on.

I knowed that when the sun got up it would be hotter'n all time, so I was traveling before daylight, and kept a good gait for a long spell. I had been cutting across the country like we had done before, to save time, and by four o'clock made out by the trees where the Missouri and the Yellowstone come together. I knowed I could make it by sundown. It was worth trying, because once inside the stockade I could sleep and rest the hosses. I got on and whipped up, though I knowed it was

hard on them, telling myse'f it was right to hurry when I knowed it wa'n't, for I was so wore out I wa'n't myse'f.

I strained my eyes on the spot where I remembered the Post was, till the tears come. Nobody was in sight. I knowed my outfit would look small and no-account, but somebody would meet me; somebody would know I was white and ride out to say a "howdy." I was sure of it.

Directly I passed the spot where they'd met up with us before, and right then a dread layed hold of me that was hard and cold as ice. I tried to shake it off. "They're busy, likely," I says. But my feelings was hurt. I'd figured on being met up with, and for more'n a month it had seemed like a big gobbler at a turkey-shoot—something worth while to win. I didn't slow down. I couldn't. I was shaky all over, and hungry for cooked meat. Mebby they took me for an Injin. I reckoned that was it.

Directly I could see the mouth of the Yellowstone. There was the old cottonwood snag with the gooseneck on it, and the square-topped knoll, and the yellow bank. But where was the Post? Where was the people?

I got down off my hoss and run up a little knoll to look. The Post was gone! Plumb gone! Only a part of the stockade was standing and even that was black and charred by fire. The Blackfeet, or mebby Nez Coup and his Crows, had burned it. There wa'n't any Post!

It was a gut-shot. I sat down, plumb wore out, and sick, with a misery that a man hates to own up to knowing. I was scared and homesick and lonesome—all in one, and mighty bad. Sweat

prickled out all over me. Then a wild goose gonked down on the water, and I got hold of myse'f to think. He could take care of himse'f, and I could. I went back to my hosses. One of them was laying down with his pack, all sweaty and weak. I got him up, feeling plumb ashamed of myse'f, and mighty soon found a place to hide and rest up.

I knowed I wouldn't get any more sleep than a rabbit staked to an ant-hill; but just as soon as I did know it I cooled off and begun to figure. I'd crossed the Missouri where we had crossed it with Mike Fink, and I wouldn't go back. I'd cross the Yellowstone and then cut the country till I struck the Missouri again. When I did strike it, I'd cross it.

I had a time fording the Yellowstone, keeping my packs dry and safe, but after three days' rest I made it, and lit out. More than once I was sorry for leaving the Missouri, and thought sometimes I'd never reach it again. But I did, and crossed it, easy.

I hadn't built a decent fire in more'n a month, and was so plumb tired of half-roasted sage-hens that I'd have given a heap for a buffalo-steak. But I daren't kill anything with my rifle. I got my sage-hens with rocks, and more than once weakened and didn't cook them after I'd killed them.

When I crossed the Missouri I begun to hide out all day and travel all night. It was cooler and safer and my hosses even picked up a little, though their feet was mighty sore. I reckoned that if I could only get to the Crees I'd turn them into the pony band and just let them feed up and rest till they died.

The nearer I got to the Marias the more scared I

was that I'd never make it. I hadn't slept five hours in more'n a week, and nigh anything would make me jump and prickle. Once just at sunup signal smoke made me hide away mighty quick. Twice I found where buffalo had been fresh-killed, and one time I got some meat that was left, but only a little. My moccasins, the last I had, was playing out, for I'd walked a heap to keep my hoss rested. I never knowed when I'd need all that was in him, and I saved him what I could.

Passing in sight of the Little Mountains, blue in the sunset light, I run onto fresh Injin sign in a cottonwood grove. A big village had been there and had moved on down the stream, so that I figured I'd passed them without knowing it.

The nights had been getting cooler for a long spell, and the grass on the plains was dry now. Signs of fall was on every bush; and by the time I come to the Marias the leaves on the quaking aspens had turned yellow and gold.

Our stockade was gone—burned up, with only a charred log left here and there. I had figured on that, so it wa'n't a surprise to me like the other had been. It was getting daylight when I come onto it, so I hid away nigh half a mile up the Marias and waited for night to close in again. I didn't intend to move early, nohow, so when dark fell I slipped over to where Dad and Bill was resting and sat down. It was a chill night, and no moon, but the sky was plumb peppered with stars, like I'd seen it many a time before; and sitting there I felt like I was back with home-folks.

"Dad," I says out loud, like he could hear me, "I been down yonder for a spell, and I reckon I've come back here to stay. I remember all you said;

but it's a heap better here than in the lower country, and I've come back. I've got your rifle, Dad. I kep' it," I says, "an' always will. I'm plumb tired and off my feed and fretting, like, but I don't aim to go away any more, Dad. I'll come to see you again, some day, if they don't get me—and Bill," I says, feeling like I'd forgot and left him plumb out.

I mighty nigh let go, I was so wore out; but I held onto myse'f and went back where my camp was hid to pack up and light out again.

I didn't ride a step, though my feet was nigh bare, so that I flinched when I set them on sharp stones. I made out to keep at it right steady for three nights, feeling sure that luck was with me, but being half afraid to let on that I knowed it, for fear it would quit. On the fourth morning, and just when I'd begun to look for a place to hide for the day, I saw a hoss.

I turned into the brush quick, unpacked, and tied up the stock. Then I set out to see how bad a fix I was in. Goodness knows, I'd been hoping to see hosses, but it made a heap of difference who owned them. I slipped up a coulee till I come to a knoll high enough to he'p me look around, and climbed it. There, not two miles away, was a pony band, hundreds of hosses. I plumb had to know who they belonged to. I layed there flat on my belly till nigh noon, when I saw two Injins coming towards me, riding slow. Figuring that if they come on they'd see me, and that I could slip back and down the coulee, and mebbly get into the brush, I was about to move, when here come four more. I begun to wonder if I'd been seen, and if they was out to jump me. I slid back out of sight, but just as I

a band of antelope off to my left a little. My breath come easier. They was out to kill antelope, and was getting the wind of them, likely. I poked my head back up over the knoll. In a minute I knowed they was Crees. My heart skipped a beat, I was so glad.

First I thought I'd stand up and call; but I didn't; I let them go on. And I run down that little coulee, talking to myse'f and laughing like I was plumb crazy. I got the packs back on quick as I could, though my fingers fumbled, and headed across a big bend the Marias made. I'd seen it from the knoll, and figured the village was there behind the hill.

Directly I saw a scout stand up on the hilltop. He would signal the village. I'd stop him. I waved my rifle and hollered; but he swung a buffalo robe in a circle over his head, and before I could cut loose, disappeared. It would set men to running for their hosses. I tugged hard at the lead-rope, nigh dragging the packs to the top of the hill. There I saw them—more'n a hundred big lodges, sleek and smooth in the sunlight, beside the Marias.

I could see men mounting war-hosses and women running about the lodges. I'd stop the fuss. I commenced to sing a Cree song—a love song, riding down the hill and looking at the village like it was my home and I'd been gone too long.

The fussing stopped, and a drum begun to beat. They knowed me! Voices took up the song till half the village was singing. Wore out as I was I felt my heart jump and get light inside me. They was coming to meet me—Mac, good old Mac, was coming! I snatched off my head-silk and waved it, my

heels pounding my hoss's sides. He was bare-headed, the wind ruffling his hair; and he was laughing—laughing as a child laughs that is nigh to tears, when we met up.

"Oh, Lone Wolf!" he cried, throwing his arms 'round my waist like he'd lift me down. "I thought that I had lost you. My heart was on the ground!"

Yellow Bear, his good face smiling his gladness, struck his deep chest with his fist. "Ho! Lone Wolf, brother!" he cried. "My heart is big with the joy of your coming." He took the lead-rope from my hand to walk into the village beside my hoss. "See," he pointed, "Red Robe is waiting at his lodge door to give you welcome."

He was! And Bluebird, and all the family, nigh the open door. Her lips was smiling and I thought her eyes looked glad.

"Lone Wolf! Lone Wolf!" Men called my name, laughing happy, and women moving with them followed us to Red Robe's lodge, where I stopped and held up my hand.

"Hear, all the people!" I says, my heart filled with pride. "From this day on forever Lone Wolf is a Cree!"

To-tum, to-tum, to-tum, a drum begun to beat again, and some young men sang of hunting.

I got down from my hoss.

"I have not lied," I said to Red Robe. "The month of roses has not passed a second time since I went away. And now I have come back for your daughter; for Bluebird, my woman."

Then I looked at her, and her eyes was waiting. They couldn't lie. They was full of soft, unspoken words. I wondered how I could have left her. I heered Red Robe talking. "Shall you pitch your

lodge with us, her people, or shall you leave us, Lone Wolf?"

"Wherever you go, there I will go, Red Robe," I told him, and heered the people murmur, "Mee-wah-sin."

"Ho! my son," he said.

Then, gentle as a woman, he put Bluebird's hand in mine, and turned away.

And Mac, good Mac, to he'p us, pulled a robe from my saddle and tossed it over her head and mine.



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