

INDIAN COUNTRY

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FLAME ON THE FRONTIER

On Sunday morning, wearing white man's saber clothing, a Sioux chief named Little Crow attended the church service at the lower Agency and afterward shook hands with the preacher. On Sunday afternoon, Little Crow's painted and feathered Santee Sioux swooped down on the settlers in bloody massacre. There was no warning. . . .

Hannah Harris spoke sharply to her older daughter, Mary Amanda. "I've told you twice to get more butter from the spring. Now step! The men want to eat."

The men—Oscar Harris and his two sons, sixteen and eighteen—sat in stolid patience on a bench in front of the cabin, waiting to be called to the table.

Mary Amanda put down the book she had borrowed from a distant neighbor and went unwillingly out of the cabin. She liked to read and was proud that she knew how, but she never had another book in her hands as long as she lived. Mary Amanda Harris was, on that day in August in 1862, just barely thirteen years old.

Her little sister Sarah tagged along down to the spring for lack of anything better to do. She was healthily hungry, and the smell of frying chicken had made her fidget until her mother had warned, "Am I going to have to switch you?"

The two girls wrangled as they trotted down the accustomed path.

"Now what'd you come tagging for?" demanded Mary Amanda. She wanted to stay, undisturbed, in the world of the book she had been reading.

Sarah said, "I guess I got a right to walk here as good as you."

She shivered, not because of any premonition but simply because the air was cool in the brush by the spring. She glanced across the narrow creek and saw a paint-striped face. Before she could finish her scream, the Indian had leaped the creek and smothered her mouth.

At the cabin they heard that single, throat-tearing scream instantly muffled. They knew what had to be done; they had planned it, because this day might come to any frontier farm.

Hannah Harris scooped up the baby boy, Willie, and hesitated only to cry out, "The girls?"

The father, already inside the cabin, handed one rifle to his eldest son as he took the other for himself. To Jim, who was sixteen, he barked, "The axe, boy."

Hannah knew what she had to do—run and hide—but that part of the plan had included the little girls, too. She was to take the four younger children, including the dull boy, Johnny. She was too sick with the meaning of that brief scream to be able to change the plan and go without the girls.

But Oscar roared, "Run for the rushes! You crazy?" and broke her paralysis. With the baby under one arm she began to run down the hill to a place by the river where the rushes grew high.

The only reason Hannah was able to get to the rushes with her two youngest boys was that the men, Oscar and Jim and Zeke, delayed the Indians for a few minutes. The white men might have barricaded themselves in the cabin and stood off the attackers for a longer period, but the approaching Indians would have seen that frantic scuttling into the rushes.

Oscar and Jim and Zeke did not defend. They attacked. With the father going first, they ran toward the

spring and met the Indians in the brush. Fighting there, they bought a little time for the three to hide down by the river, and they paid for it with their lives.

Hannah, the mother, chose another way of buying time. She heard the invaders chopping at whatever they found in the cabin. She heard their howls as they found clothing and kettles and food. She stayed in the rushes as long as she dared, but when she smelled the smoke of the cabin burning, she knew the Indians would be ranging out to see what else might be found.

Then she thrust the baby into Johnny's arms and said fiercely, "You take care of him and don't you let him go until they kill you."

She did not give him any instructions about how to get to a place of safety. There might be no such place.

She kissed Johnny on the forehead and she kissed the baby twice, because he was so helpless and because he was, blessedly, not crying.

She crawled to the left, far to the left of the children, so that she would not be seen coming directly from their hiding place. Then she came dripping up out of the rushes and went shrieking up the hill straight toward the Indians.

When they started down to meet her, she hesitated and turned. She ran, still screaming, toward the river, as if she were so crazed she did not know what she was doing. But she knew. She knew very well. She did exactly what a meadowlark will do if its nest in the grass is menaced—she came into the open, crying and frantic, and lured the pursuit away from her young.

But the meadowlark acts by instinct, not by plan. Hannah Harris had to fight down her instinct, which was to try to save her own life.

As the harsh hands seized her, she threw her arm across her eyes so as not to see death. . .

Of the two girls down at the spring only Sarah screamed. Mary Amanda did not have time. A club, swung easily by a strong arm, cracked against her head.

Sarah Harris heard the brief battle and knew her father's voice, but she did not have to see the bodies, a few yards away on the path through the brush. One of the Indians held her without difficulty. She was a thin little girl, nine years old.

Mary Amanda was unconscious and would have drowned except that her guard pulled her out of the creek and laid her, face down, on the gravel bank.

The girls never saw their cabin again. Their captors tied their hands behind them and headed back the way they had come to rejoin the war party. The girls were too frightened to cry or speak. They stumbled through the brush.

Mary Amanda fell too many times. Finally she gave up and lay still, waiting to die, sobbing quietly. Her guard grunted and lifted his club.

Sarah flew at him shrieking. Her hands were tied, but her feet were free and she could still run.

The Indian, who had never had anything to do with white people except at a distance, or in furious flurries of raiding, was astonished by her courage, and impressed. All he knew of white girls was that they ran away, screaming, and then were caught. This one had the desperate, savage fury of his own women. She chattered as angrily as a bluejay. (Bluejay was the name he gave her, the name everyone called her, in the years she lived and grew up among the Sioux.)

She had knocked the wind out of him, but he was amused. He jerked the older girl, Mary Amanda, to her feet.

The mother, Hannah, was taken along by the same route, about a mile behind them, but she did not know they were still alive. One of them she saw again six years later. The other girl she never saw again.

For hours she went stumbling, praying, "Lord in thy mercy, make them kill me fast!"

When they did not, she let hope flicker, and when they camped that night, she began to ask timidly, “God, could you help me get away?”

She had no food that night, and no water. An Indian had tied her securely.

The following day her captors caught up with a larger party, carrying much loot and driving three other white women. They were younger than Hannah. That was what saved her.

When she was an old woman, she told the tale grimly: “I prayed to the Lord to let me go, and He turned the Indians’ backs on me and I went into the woods, and that was how I got away.”

She did not tell how she could still hear the piercing shrieks of the other women, even when she was far enough into the woods so that she dared to run.

She blundered through the woods, hiding at every sound, praying to find a trail, but terrified when she came to one, for fear there might be Indians around the next bend. After she reached the trail and began to follow it, she had a companion, a shaggy yellow dog.

For food during the two days she had berries. Then she came upon the dog eating a grouse he had killed, and she stooped, but he growled.

“Nice doggie,” she crooned. “Nice old Sheppy!”

She abased herself with such praise until—probably because he had caught other game and was not hungry—he let her take the tooth-torn, dirt-smearred remnants. She picked off the feathers with fumbling fingers, washed the raw meat in the creek and ate it as she walked.

She smelled wood smoke the next morning and crawled through brush until she could see a clearing. She saw white people there in front of a cabin, and much bustling. She heard children crying and the authoritative voices of women. She stood up then and ran, screaming, toward the cabin, with the dog jumping and barking beside her.

One of the hysterical women seized a rifle and fired a shot at Hannah before a man shouted, “She’s white!” and ran out to meet her.

There were sixteen persons in the cramped cabin or near it—refugees from other farms. Hannah Harris kept demanding, while she wolfed down food, “Ain’t anybody seen two little girls? Ain’t anybody seen a boy and a baby?”

Nobody had seen them.

The draggled-skirted women in the crowded cabin kept busy with their children, but Hannah Harris had no children anymore—she who had had four sons and two daughters. She dodged among the refugees, beseeching, “Can’t I help with something? Ain’t there anything I can do?”

A busy old woman said with sharp sympathy, “Miz Harris, you go lay down some place. Git some sleep. All you been through!”

Hannah Harris understood that there was no room for her there. She stumbled outside and lay down in a grassy place in the shade. She slept, no longer hearing the squalling of babies and the wrangling of the women.

Hannah awoke to the crying of voices she knew and ran around to the front of the cabin. She saw two men carrying a stretcher made of two shirts buttoned around poles. A bundle sagged on the stretcher, and a woman was trying to lift it, but it cried with two voices.

Johnny lay there, clutching the baby and both of them were screaming.

Kneeling, she saw blood on Johnny’s feet and thought with horror. “Did the Injuns do that?” Then she remembered, “No, he was barefoot when we ran.”

He would not release the baby, even for her. He was gaunt, his ribs showed under his tattered shirt. His eyes were partly open and his lips were drawn back from his teeth. He was only half conscious, but he still had strength enough to clutch his baby brother, though the baby screamed with hunger and fear.

Hannah said in a strong voice, “Johnny, you can let go now. You can let Willie go. Johnny, this is your mother talking.”

With a moan, he let his arms go slack.

For the rest of his life, and he lived another fifty years, he suffered from nightmares and often awoke screaming.

With two of her children there Hannah Harris was the equal of any woman. She pushed among the others to get to the food, to find cloth for Johnny’s wounded feet. She wrangled with them, defending sleeping space for her children.

For a few months she made a home for her boys by keeping house for a widower named Lincoln Bartlett, whose two daughters had been killed at a neighbor’s cabin. Then she married him.

The baby, Willie, did not live to grow up, in spite of the sacrifices that had been made for him. He died of diphtheria. While Link Bartlett dug a little grave, Hannah sat, stern but dry eyed, on a slab bench, cradling the still body in her arms.

The dull boy, Johnny, burst out hoarsely, “It wasn’t no use after all, was it?” and his mother understood.

She told him strongly, “Oh yes, it was! It was worth while, all you did. He’s dead now, but he died in my arms, with a roof over him. I’ll know where he’s buried. It ain’t as if the Indians had butchered him some place that I’d never know.”

She carried the body across the room and laid it tenderly in the box that had been Willie’s bed and would be his coffin. She turned to her other son and said, “Johnny, come sit on my lap.”

He was a big boy, twelve years old, and he was puzzled by this invitation, as he was puzzled about so many things. Awkwardly he sat on her knees, and awkwardly he permitted her to cuddle his head against her shoulder.

“How long since your mother kissed you?” she asked, and he mumbled back, “Don’t know.”

She kissed his forehead. “You’re my big boy. You’re my Johnny.”

He lay in her arms for a while, tense and puzzled. After a while, not knowing why it was necessary to cry, he began to sob, and she rocked him back and forth. She had no tears left.

Johnny said something then that he had thought over many times, often enough to be sure about it. “It was him that mattered most, I guess.”

Hannah looked down at him, shocked.

“He was my child and I loved him,” she said. “It was him I worried about. . . . But it was you I trusted.”

The boy blinked and scowled. His mother bowed her head.

“I never said so. I thought you knowed that. When I give him to you that day, Johnny boy, I put more trust in you than I did in the Lord God.”

That was a thing he always remembered—the time his mother made him understand that for a while he had been more important than God.

The Harris sisters were sold twice, the second time to a Sioux warrior named Runs Buffalo, whose people ranged far to the westward.

Bluejay never had to face defeat among the Indians. The little girl who had earned her name by scolding angrily had the privileges of a baby girl. She was fed and cared for like the Indian children, and she had more freedom and less scolding than she had had in the cabin that was burned. Like the other little

girls, she was freer than the boys. Her responsibility would not begin for three or four years. When the time came, she would be taught to do the slow, patient work of the women, in preparation for being a useful wife. But while she was little, she could play.

While the boys learned to shoot straight and follow tracks, while they tested and increased their endurance and strength, the little girls played and laughed in the sun. Bluejay did not even have a baby to look after, because she was the youngest child in the lodge of Runs Buffalo. She was the petted one, the darling, and the only punishment she knew was what she deserved for profaning holy objects. Once at home she had been switched by her father for putting a dish on the great family Bible. In the Indian village, she learned to avoid touching medicine bundles or sacred shields and to keep silent in the presence of men who understood religious mysteries.

Mary Amanda, stooped over a raw buffalo hide, scraping it hour after hour with tools of iron and bone, because that was women's work and she was almost a woman, heard familiar shrill arguments among the younger girls, the same arguments that had sounded in the white settlement, and in the same language: "You're it!" "I am not!"

That much the little Indian girls learned of English. Sarah learned Sioux so fast that she no longer needed English and would have stopped speaking it except that her older sister insisted.

Mary Amanda learned humility through blows. To her, everything about the Indians was contemptible. She learned their language simply to keep from being cuffed by the older women, who were less shocked at her ignorance of their skills than at her unwillingness to learn the work that was a woman's privilege to perform. She sickened at the business of softening hides with a mixture of clay and buffalo manure. If she had been more docile, she might have been an honored daughter in the household. Instead, she was a sullen slave. Mary Amanda remembered what Sarah often forgot: that she was white. Mary Amanda never stopped hoping that they would be rescued. The name the Indians gave her was The Foreigner.

When she tried to take Sarah aside to talk English, the old woman of the household scolded.

Mary Amanda spoke humbly in Sioux. "Bluejay forgets to talk like our own people. I want her to know how to talk."

The old woman growled, "You are Indians," and Mary Amanda answered, "It is good for Indians to be able to talk to white people."

The argument was sound. A woman interpreter would never be permitted in the councils of chiefs and captains, but who could tell when the skill might be useful? The girls were allowed to talk together, but Sarah preferred Sioux.

When The Foreigner was sixteen years old she had four suitors. She knew what a young man meant by sending a gift of meat to the lodge and later standing out in front, blanket-wrapped and silent.

When the young man came, Mary Amanda pretended not to notice, and the old woman pretended with her, but there was chuckling in the lodge as everyone waited to see whether The Foreigner would go out, perhaps to bring in water from the creek.

Her little sister teased her. "Go on out. All you have to do is let him put his blanket around you and talk. Go on. Other girls do."

"Indian girls do," Mary Amanda answered sadly. "That ain't the way boys do their courting back home."

The tall young men were patient. Sometimes as many as three at once stood out there through twilight into darkness, silent and waiting. They were eligible, respected young men, skilled in hunting, taking horses, proved in courage, schooled in the mysteries of protective charms and chanted prayer. All of them had counted coup in battle.

Mary Amanda felt herself drawn toward the lodge opening. It would be so easy to go out!

She asked Sarah humbly, “Do you think it’s right, the way they buy their wives? Of course, the girl’s folks give presents to pay back.”

Sarah shrugged. “What other way is there? . . . If it was me, I’d go out fast enough. Just wait till I’m older!” She reminded her sister of something it was pleasanter to forget, “They don’t have to wait for you to make up your mind. They could sell you to an old man for a third wife.”

When Mary Amanda was seventeen, a man of forty, who had an aging wife, looked at her with favor, and she made her choice. On a sweet summer evening she arose from her place in the tepee and, without a word to anyone, stooped and passed through the lodge opening. She was trembling as she walked past Hawk and Grass Runner and eluded their reaching hands. She stopped before a young man named Snow Mountain.

He was as startled as the family back in the tepee. Courting The Foreigner had become almost a tradition with the young men, because she seemed unattainable and competition ruled their lives. He wrapped his blanket around her and felt her heart beating wildly.

He did not tell her she was pretty. He told her that he was brave and cunning. He told her he was a skilled hunter, his lodge never lacked for meat. He had many horses, most of them stolen from the Crows in quick, desperate raids.

Mary Amanda said, “You give horses to buy what you want. Will Runs Buffalo give presents to you in return?”

That was terribly important to her. The exchange of gifts was in itself the ceremony. If she went to him with no dowry, she went without honor.

“I cannot ask about that,” he said. “My mother’s brother will ask.”

But Runs Buffalo refused.

“I will sell the white woman for horses,” he announced. “She belongs to me. I paid for her.”

Mary Amanda went without ceremony, on a day in autumn, to the new lodge of Snow Mountain. She went without pride, without dowry. The lodge was new and fine, she had the tools and kettles she needed, and enough robes to keep the household warm. But all the household things were from his people, not hers. When she cried, he comforted her.

For her there was no long honeymoon of lazy bliss. Her conscience made her keep working to pay Snow Mountain for the gifts no one had given him. But she was no longer a slave, she was queen in her own household. An old woman, a relative of his mother, lived with them to do heavy work. Snow Mountain’s youngest brother lived with him, helping to hunt and butcher and learning the skills a man needed to know.

Mary Amanda was a contented bride—except when she remembered that she had not been born an Indian. And there was always in her mind the knowledge that many warriors had two wives, and that often the two wives were sisters.

“You work too hard,” Snow Mountain told her. “Your little sister does not work hard enough.”

“She is young,” The Foreigner reminded him, feeling that she should apologize for Bluejay’s shortcomings.

Snow Mountain said, “When she is older, maybe she will come here.”

Afterward she knew he meant that in kindness. But thinking of Sarah as her rival in the tepee, as her sister-wife, froze Mary Amanda’s heart. She answered only, “Bluejay is young.”

Sarah Harris, known as Bluejay, already had two suitors when she was only fourteen. One of them was only two or three years older than she was, and not suitable for a husband; he had few war honors and was not very much respected by anyone except his own parents. The other was a grown man, a young warrior named Horse Ears, very suitable and, in fact, better than the flighty girl had any right to expect.

When Sarah visited in her sister's lodge, she boasted of the two young men.

Mary Amanda cried out, "Oh, no! You're too young to take a man. You could wait two years yet, maybe three. Sarah, some day you will go back home."

Two years after the massacre, the first rumor that the Harris girls were alive reached the settlement, but it was nothing their mother could put much faith in. The rumor came in a roundabout way, to Link Barlett, Hannah's second husband, from a soldier at the fort, who had it from another soldier, who had it from a white trader, who heard it from a Cheyenne. And all they heard was that two white sisters were with a Sioux village far to the westward. Rumors like that drifted in constantly. Two hundred women had been missing after that raid.

Two more years passed before they could be fairly sure that there were really two white sisters out there and that they were probably the Harrises.

After still another year, the major who commanded the army post nearest the settlement was himself convinced, and negotiations began for their ransom.

Link Bartlett raised every cent he could—he sold some of his best land—to buy the gifts for that ransom.

In the sixth year of the captivity, a cavalry detachment was ordered out on a delicate diplomatic mission—to find and buy the girls back, if possible.

Link Bartlett had his own horse saddled and was ready to leave the cabin, to go with the soldiers, when Hannah cried harshly, "Link, don't you go! Don't go away and leave me and the kids!"

The children were dull Johnny and a two-year-old boy, named Lincoln, after his father, the last child Hannah ever had.

Link tried to calm her. "Now, Hannah, you know we planned I should go along to see they got back all right—if we can find 'em at all."

"I ain't letting you go," she said. "If them soldiers can't make out without you, they're a poor lot." Then she jarred him to his heels. She said, almost gently, "Link, if I was to lose you, I'd die."

That was the only time she ever hinted that she loved him. He never asked for anymore assurance. He stayed at home because she wanted him there.

Mary Amanda's son was half a year old when the girls first learned there was hope of their being ransomed.

The camp crier, walking among the lodges, wailed out the day's news so that everyone would know what was planned: "Women, stay in the camp. Keep your children close to you where they will be safe. There is danger. Some white soldiers are camped on the other side of the hills. Three men will go out to talk to them. The three men are Runs Buffalo, Big Moon and Snow Mountain."

Mary Amanda did not dare ask Snow Mountain anything. She watched him ride out with the other men, and then she sat on the ground in front of his tepee, nursing her baby. Bluejay came to the lodge and the two girls sat together in silence as the hours passed.

The men from the Sioux camp did not come back until three days later. When Snow Mountain was ready to talk, he remarked, "The white soldiers came to find out about two white girls. They will bring presents to pay if the white girls want to go back."

Mary Amanda answered "O-o-oh," in a sigh like a frail breeze in prairie grass.

There was no emotion in his dark, stern face. He looked at her for a long moment, and at the baby. Then he turned away without explanation. She called after him, but he did not answer. She felt the dark eyes staring, heard the low voices. She was a stranger again, as she had not been for a long time.

Nothing definite had been decided at the parley with the white soldiers, the girls learned. The soldiers would come back sometime, bringing presents for ransom, and if the presents were fine enough, there would be talk and perhaps a bargain. Mary Amanda felt suddenly the need to prepare Sarah for life in the settlement. She told her everything she could remember that might be useful.

“You’ll cook over a fire in a fireplace,” she said, “and sew with thread, and you’ll have to learn to knit.”

Bluejay whimpered, “I wish you could come, too.”

“He wouldn’t let me go, of course,” Mary Amanda answered complacently. “He wouldn’t let me take the baby, and I wouldn’t leave without him. You tell them I got a good man. Be sure to tell them that.”

At night, remembering the lost heaven of the burned cabin, remembering the life that was far away and long ago, she cried a little. But she did not even consider begging Snow Mountain to let her go. She had offended him, but when he stopped brooding they would talk again. He had not said anything to her since he had tested her by telling her the ransom had been offered.

He did not even tell her that he was going away. He gave orders to the old woman in the lodge and discussed plans with his younger brother, but he ignored his wife. Five men were going out to take horses from the Crows, he said. Mary Amanda shivered.

Before he rode away with his war party, he spent some time playing with the baby, bouncing the child on his knee, laughing when the baby laughed. But he said nothing to Mary Amanda, and the whole village knew that he was angry and that she deserved his anger.

Her hands and feet were cold as she watched him go and her heart was gnawed by the fear that was part of every Indian woman’s life: “Maybe he will never come back.”

Not until the white soldiers had come back to parley again did she understand how cruelly she had hurt him.

She dreamed of home while they waited for news of the parley, and she tried to make Bluejay dream of it.

“You’ll have to do some things different there, but Ma will remind you. I’ll bet Ma will cry like everything when she sees you coming.” Mary Amanda’s eyes flooded with tears, seeing that meeting. “I don’t remember she ever did cry,” she added thoughtfully, “but I guess she must have sometimes. . . . Ma must have got out of it all right. Who else would be sending the ransom? Oh, well, sometime I’ll find out all about it from Snow Mountain. . . I wonder if she got Johnny and Willie away from the cabin safe. Tell her I talked about her lots. Be sure to tell Ma that, Sarah. Tell her how cute my baby is.”

Bluejay, unnaturally silent, dreamed with her, wide-eyed, of the reunion, the half-forgotten heaven of the settlement.

“Tell her about Snow Mountain,” Mary Amanda reminded her sister. “Be sure to do that. How he’s a good hunter, so we have everything we want, and more. And everybody respects him. Tell her he’s good to me and the baby. . . . But, Sarah, don’t ever say he steals horses. They wouldn’t understand back home. . . . And don’t ever let on a word about scalps. If they say anything about scalps, you say our people here don’t do that.”

“They do, though,” Sarah reminded her flatly. “It takes a brave man to stop and take a scalp off when somebody’s trying to kill him.”

Looking at her, Mary Amanda realized that Sarah didn’t even think taking scalps was bad, so long as your own people did it and didn’t have it done to them.

“You’re going to have to forget some things,” she warned with a sigh.

While the parley was still on Big Moon, the medicine priest, came to the lodge where The Foreigner bent over her endless work. He was carrying something wrapped in buckskin.

“Tell them the names of the people in your lodge before you came to the Sioux,” he said shortly as he put down the buckskin bundle. “They are not sure you are the women they want.”

In the bundle were sheets of paper and a black crayon.

Sarah came running. She sat fascinated as Mary Amanda wrote carefully on the paper: “Popa, Moma, Zeke, Jim, Johny, Wily.”

Mary Amanda was breathless when she finished. She squeezed Sarah’s arm. “Just think, you’re going to go home!”

Sarah nodded, not speaking. Sarah was getting scared.

The following day, the ransom was paid and brought into camp. Then The Foreigner learned how much she had offended Snow Mountain.

Big Moon brought fine gifts to the lodge, and piled them inside—a gun, powder and percussion caps and bullets, bolts of cloth, mirrors and beads and tools and a copper kettle.

“The Foreigner can go now,” he said.

Mary Amanda stared. “I cannot go back to the white people. I am Snow Mountain’s woman. This is his baby.”

“The gifts pay also for the baby,” Big Moon growled. “Snow Mountain will have another wife, more sons. He does not need The Foreigner. He has sold her to the white man.”

Mary Amanda turned pale. “I will not go with the white men,” she said angrily. “When Snow Mountain comes back, he will see how much The Foreigner’s people cared for her. They have sent these gifts as her dowry.”

Big Moon scowled. “Snow Mountain may not come back. He had a dream, and the dream was bad. His heart is sick, and he does not want to come back.”

As a widow in the Sioux camp, her situation would be serious. She could not go back to her parents’ home, for she had no parents. But neither could she leave the camp now to go back to the settlement and never know whether Snow Mountain was alive or dead. Sarah stood staring at her in horror.

“I will wait for him,” Mary Amanda said, choking. “Will Big Moon pray and make medicine for him?”

The fierce old man stared at her, scowling. He knew courage when he saw it, and he admired one who dared to gamble for high stakes.

“All these gifts will belong to Big Moon,” she promised, “if Snow Mountain comes back.”

The medicine priest nodded and turned away. “Bluejay must come with me,” he said briefly. “I will take her to the white soldiers and tell them The Foreigner does not want to come.”

She watched Sarah walk away between the lodges after the medicine priest. She waved good-bye, and then went in to the lodge. The old woman said, “Snow Mountain has a good wife. . .”

Ten days passed before the war party came back. Mary Amanda waited, hardly breathing, as they brought Snow Mountain into camp tied on a travois, a pony drag.

Big Moon said, “His shadow is gone out of his body. I do not know whether it will come back to stay.”

“I think it will come back to stay,” said The Foreigner, “because I have prayed and made a sacrifice.”

At the sound of her voice, Snow Mountain opened his eyes. He lay quiet in his pain, staring up at her, not believing. She saw tears on his dark cheeks.

Her name was always The Foreigner, but for the rest of her life she was a woman of the Santee Sioux.

Sarah Harris, who had been called Bluejay, was hard to tame, they said in the settlement. Her mother fretted over her heathen ways. The girl could not even make bread!

“I can tan hides,” Sarah claimed angrily. “I can butcher a buffalo and make pemmican. I can pitch a tepee and pack it on a horse to move.”

But those skills were not valued in a white woman, and Sarah found the settlement not quite heaven. She missed the constant talk and laughter of the close-pitched tepees. She had to learn a whole new system of polite behavior. There was dickering and trading and bargaining, instead of a proud exchanging of fine gifts. A neighbor boy slouching on a bench outside the cabin, talking to her stepfather while he got up courage to ask whether Sarah was at home, was less flattering as a suitor than a young warrior, painted and feathered, showing off on a spotted horse. Sometimes Sarah felt that she had left heaven behind her.

But she never went back to it. When she was seventeen, she married the blacksmith, Herman Schwartz, and their first baby was born six months later.

Sarah’s oldest child was six and her second child was three when the Indian man appeared at the door of her cabin and stood silently peering in.

“Git out of here!” she cried, seizing the broom.

He answered in the Sioux tongue, “Bluejay has forgotten.”

She gave Horse Ears a shrill welcome in his own language and the three-year-old started to cry. She lifted a hand for an accustomed slap but let it fall. Indian mothers did not slap their children.

But she was not Indian anymore, she recollected. She welcomed Horse Ears in as a white woman does an invited guest. In her Sunday-company voice she chattered politely. It was her privilege because she was a white woman. No need anymore for the meek silence of the Indian woman.

She brought out bread and butter and ate with him. That was her privilege too.

“My sister?” she asked.

He had not seen The Foreigner for a long time. He had left that village.

“Does Bluejay’s man make much meat?” Horse Ears asked. “Is he a man with many honors in war?”

She laughed shrilly. “He makes much meat. He has counted coup many times. We are rich.”

“I came to find out those things,” he answered. “In my lodge there is only one woman.”

She understood, and her heart leaped with the flattery. He had traveled far, and in some danger, to find out that all was well with her. If it was not, there was refuge in his tepee. And not only now, she realized, but any time, forever.

A shadow fell across the threshold; a hoarse voice filled the room. “What’s that bloody Injun doing here?” roared Sarah’s husband. “Are you all right?”

“Sure, we’re all right,” she answered. “I don’t know who he is. He was hungry.”

His eyes narrowed with anger, “Is he one of them you used to know?”

Her body tensed with fear. “I don’t know him, I told you!”

Her husband spoke to the Indian in halting Sioux, but Horse Ears was wise. He did not answer.

“Git out!” the blacksmith ordered, and the Indian obeyed without a word.

As Sarah watched him go down the path, without turning, she wished fervently that she could tell him good-bye, could thank him for coming. But she could not betray him by speaking.

Herman Schwartz strode toward her in silent, awesome, blazing fury. She did not cringe; she braced her body against the table. He gave her a blow across the face that rocked her and blinded her.

She picked up the heavy iron skillet.

“Don’t you ever do that again or I’ll kill you,” she warned.

He glared at her with fierce pride, knowing that she meant what she said.

“I don’t reckon I’ll have to do it again,” he said complacently. “If I ever set eyes on that savage again,

I'll kill him. You know that, don't you, you damn squaw?"

She shrugged. "Talk's cheap."

As she went down to the spring for a bucket of water, she was singing.

Her girlhood was gone, and her freedom was far behind her. She had two crying children and was pregnant again. But two men loved her and both of them had just proved it.

Forty years later, her third child was elected to the state legislature, and she went, a frightened, white-haired widow, to see him there. She was proud, but never so proud as she had been on a summer day three months before he was born.

THE UNBELIEVER

Mahlon Mitchell lived with the Crows for five years when he was a young man, left them without farewell and returned to them when he was old and defeated.

Whatever you think about Mahlon Mitchell, you must say he was a brave man. He was afraid to go back to the Crows, but he went anyway—and it does not matter that he went because he was desperate. He was never more afraid in his life.

There were six in the party that went looking for Yellow Calf's village. Lieutenant Bradford had with him Sergeant O'Hara and three troopers; that made five. The sixth man was red-haired Mahlon Mitchell, wearing buckskin while the others wore Cavalry blue. He was the scout who would find the Crows for them. He was the white man who knew Indians because he had been one. He was important for the first time in thirty years.

There was no man anywhere better fitted for his job as scout and interpreter, but he had to beg to get it.

"I got influence with the Crows," Mitchell had boasted to the major back at the fort. "I was a headman among 'em."

The major had frowned with a frozen look about his mouth that was as insulting as spoken doubt. Mitchell was not then a scout; he was only a rheumatic old civilian woodcutter for the fort, too stiffened with age and old wounds to do a good day's work. And he was desperate, because he knew he would be sent back to the States with the next wagon train, back to oblivion.

He volunteered for the mission to the Crows.

"I doubt if you could stand the trip," the major said coolly. "You might play out."

Mitchell forgot that he was a petitioner. "Play out?" he shouted. "I rode ninety miles and crawled ten with a broken leg one time. I didn't play out!"

"You're an old man now," the major reminded him.

This was no time for anger. It was a time for pride. With his head back, staring scornfully, he said, "I'm still Mahlon Mitchell. I'm the man they called Iron Head, for my red hair. I've counted coup with the best of 'em. And the Crows ain't forgot me!"

The major would not admit that white men, too, remembered Mahlon Mitchell. "Very well," he said at last. "Lieutenant Bradford is to find Yellow Calf's band and give them presents, promising more presents if they will stop trading ammunition to the Sioux."

Crows and Sioux were enemies, but they did business together when it was worthwhile—and ammunition the Crows got from white men was blasting at other white men out of Sioux guns.

"You will have an escort of twenty men as far as Green Springs," the major said. "That'll get you through Sioux country."

They had got through, and the escort had gone back, and the scout was Mahlon Mitchell, but that was all he had to cling to. The journey to the Crows was a new path to danger, and what end would there be if he lived through it? Only the perilous return to the fort, the banishment back to the States, the slow withering in a poorhouse.

But he would have this to remember: that he had once more courted danger.

The Crows had found them. Mitchell had been keeping the news to himself for a quarter of an hour, silently superior to the vigilant troopers who looked without seeing.

“Lieutenant,” he remarked, “here’s where we better wait. There’s a couple of Injuns up over that hill, and right here is a good place to talk.”

They waited, the soldiers as patient as their horses.

Mitchell remembered the way he had taken leave of the Crows thirty years before—on impulse, because the opportunity came, but the idea had been a long time growing.

It started with a sneer on the face of a fur trader’s clerk when Mitchell rode in to a trading post with a party of Crows and saw to it they drove a hard bargain. The clerk’s attitude had said without words: Squaw man. Injun lover. Living with a bunch of savages. And you were a white man once!

When the time came, Mitchell went back to be a white man again.

He had been one of a party that went afoot to steal horses from the Cheyenne. They were discovered, and, with a Crow named Drives His Horses, he had got separated in the resulting fight. Drives His Horses was wounded, and they had one horse for the two of them. When they reached a stream ten miles from the Cheyenne camp, Mitchell knew the wounded man could not live.

Mitchell stayed with him until dawn. Then he finished him off with a knife and rode away on the captured pony.

After a while he convinced himself that killing Drives His Horses had been necessary and even merciful; he had put the suffering man out of his misery. He had scalped him, too, to make it look like Cheyenne work, but he preferred to forget that. If the Crows, to whom he was now returning, guessed the truth about his departure, his own finish would not be quick or merciful.

When the two Indian scouts came down over the hill, Mitchell expelled his breath. Nobody could have said he sighed. With a sweeping gesture, he took off his ragged hat, so the Crows could see what remained of the bushy red hair that had been his pride. The thin, curling remnants hung to his shoulders.

Watching the two Indians sidle their horses down the hill, he realized: They’re too young to remember me.

They were seasoned warriors, from the looks of them, but not old enough to have been his comrades on horse raids against the Cheyenne or war parties seeking vengeance from the Sioux.

The two Crows pulled up their horses, staring. One of them asked a question; Mitchell could not catch the words. He knew cold terror: Have I forgot the Crow tongue, or am I getting deaf?

The Indian spoke again—and Mitchell no longer doubted anything. What the Crow said, in a tone of awe, was “Iron Head! Iron Head has come back!”

“I am Iron Head,” he answered. “I have come back to my brothers.”

The man who had spoken dismounted and walked forward. There was pride in his movements and honor in the ornaments he wore. He was a warrior with standing in the only profession fit for a man. But he came without arrogance. He came as one asking equality.

He stared into Mitchell’s face and said, “I am Bull Shoulders. I am the son of Iron Head.”

Mitchell squinted. “Well, by God,” he muttered, “it could be you are!”

And what about the Quiet One, your mother? he wanted to ask. Is she living and old? Or did she die young, long ago? He did not speak her name. There could be no good news about the Quiet One. He did not want to know that she was dead. He did not want to know that she was old.

He could feel the lieutenant's growing irritation, but he let Bradford wait for a translation of what they were saying.

To Bull Shoulders he said, "My son is a warrior. He has counted coup?"

"Many times," Bull Shoulders answered with proper pride.

Mitchell held out his hand, and the warrior took it.

Mitchell grinned at the lieutenant. "I told you I had influence with 'em. They ain't forgot Iron Head. This young fellow says he's my son, and I never knew I had one."

Mitchell and Bradford rode side by side when they entered the Crow village.

They never caught on about Drives His Horses, Mitchell told himself with relief. They remember only the good things—and that's how it ought to be. Well, I brought 'em luck all the time; they always said so. I was good medicine—until that last fight.

Their hunts were successful in those old days, and their war parties came home singing, with scalps and captured horses and tales of valor.

They were always lucky—until that last raid, when the warriors were surprised and scattered, and Iron Head killed his friend to become Mahlon Mitchell again.

"They think well of you," the lieutenant commented.

Mitchell could afford to be modest. "They said I was good medicine."

But I wasn't good medicine for myself after I left them, he admitted, remembering the dreary years of failure at farming and trading, as blacksmith and deck hand and bullwhacker.

He had drifted back at last to the frontier country of his youth to work for the Army, cutting wood. Life had no savor anymore. Before the years of dull disaster there had been the years of danger when his blood ran hot in his veins. Youth could not be revived, but its companion, peril, could still be found by a man who took the trouble to look.

When he volunteered as a scout on the mission to the Crows, he knew he might be setting forth to his last adventure.

"You know Yellow Calf, you said," Bradford reminded him.

"Well enough. I knowed his older brother." (And I left him dead beside a creek.) "Yellow Calf is maybe ten years younger'n me. He was just a boy, getting ready to pray for his medicine, when I first met the Crows. When I left, he was a brave. I remember the first war party he ever went on."

There was a stern, fierce orderliness about life for a Crow Indian. He grew up longing for glory; he starved and prayed for magic, for medicine; when he thought he had it, he went seeking danger. And after a while, he died. The life of a white man was infinitely more complicated. There were too many things a man could want, and too many ways to fail in trying to get them.

We were young a long time ago, Mitchell realized with a shock when the chief came toward them. Time had dug furrows in the dark cheeks.

Yellow Calf did not extend his hand. He stood staring into Mitchell's face. He asked with respect, almost with humility, "Is it Iron Head himself who has come back to his brothers?"

It ain't because he don't recognize me, Mitchell understood. It's because he's scared. Thinks maybe I'm a spirit. "It is Iron Head himself, who once lived with spirits," he answered. "The story is for Yellow Calf alone."

The warriors who sat and smoked with the lieutenant on that first night in the village were distinguished men of whose company no man need be ashamed. But they were only subchiefs.

In another lodge, Yellow Calf himself sat with Mahlon Mitchell, who was in no hurry to spin his tale.

“Yellow Calf is a great warrior and a leader of his people,” Mitchell said. “When we were young men, I knew it would be so.”

“I did not know it,” Yellow Calf answered thoughtfully. “Iron Head’s medicine must have told him. His medicine was always strong.” He added, after a pause, “I hope my brother Iron Head still has his medicine.”

Mitchell could not admit failure. Boasting was in his very blood. “I have better medicine now,” he lied. “Because for a time—I do not know how long it was—I lived with spirit people.”

He smoked silently, letting the chief’s anxiety increase, before he told the story. He made it up as he went, borrowing from all the magic tales he had ever heard in the Crow lodges. He told of fighting side by side with Drives His Horses against a warrior who grew taller and taller and finally turned into a white wolf that took Mitchell far away on a cloud to a place where all people were wolves, and kept him there.

Yellow Calf covered his mouth, indicating wonder, and shook his head in sympathy for his friend.

Mitchell ended, “I did not see Drives His Horses anymore. I did not see him today. Nor Hump Bull nor Whirlwind, who were with us that day.”

Yellow Calf shook his head. “They are dead, and many others. Whirlwind lies not very far from here. Long after that fight, I went back to that place and hunted until I found my brother, Drives His Horses. I knew his bones by the things that were with them. I brought them back wrapped in a blanket. I thought the Cheyenne had killed him. Now I know it was the white wolf spirit.”

Mitchell said sadly, “Even after the white wolf put me down by a river in the darkness with a crash of thunder, I did not come back to the Crows. I thought I might be unlucky for them, because the spirits took away my medicine bag. So I went back to the white men to find out. But it was not so. Everywhere I went, the white men were lucky. I think I have even better medicine now than before.”

“It is true they get stronger and richer,” Yellow Calf agreed. “I am glad Iron Head has come again to the Crows.”

As if, Mitchell thought, he figured I was going to stay. The Crows ain’t so well off as they used to be. Not so many good horses, and the lodges are ragged. Hunger is just over the next ridge.

“Iron Head planted a seed among the Crows,” Yellow Calf remarked. “It has grown to a strong tree. I have sons, too, and so I do not fight anymore in battle. In the lodge prepared for Iron Head, there is a woman waiting. She is old. Maybe Iron Head would rather have a young woman there.”

“Iron Head is not young anymore,” Mitchell answered, grinning.

Walking toward the lodge, he recalled: She never was a beauty, and she’ll be an old, sagging squaw now. But she never talked my head off, the way most of them do. By God, it’s like coming home!

Contentment warmed him. Here, he thought, they treat a man right. When he’s old, he don’t have to fight anymore.

She was waiting by the entrance, where old women were allowed to sit, with her blanket over her face. Without seeing, he knew how she looked. Shapeless and seamed with wrinkles, without joy—but with a silent pride that no one could take away unless she lost her son as she had lost his father.

Mitchell sat down in the master’s place. Without greeting, he said, “Iron Head wants his woman to brush his hair.”

She came without a word. In peaceful silence, she brushed his hair with the furry tail of an animal. She might have said his hair was thin or that he had deserted her. She might have railed in bitterness. But the only thing she said was, after a time, “It is good that Iron Head has come back to his people.”

My people, he thought. More than the whites ever were. And what if I was to stay with ‘em? “I had

two white women for my wives,” he told her. “The Quiet One is a better wife than either.”

That much he could give her to remember and to tell her friends. . . .

Lieutenant Bradford’s mission was accomplished with astonishing ease, though the talk about it took half a day of eloquence. Yes, the Crows would stop trading ammunition to the Sioux. The Sioux were enemies; the only reason for trading was to get things the Crows did not have. The Crows would be glad to accept these things as gifts from their white father.

Yellow Calf spoke. “Once our brother, Iron Head, lived with us. His medicine was good. We were a rich people with many strong fighting men and good horses. We were not often hungry.”

He went on in detail, with proofs of his people’s greatness and the bravery of Iron Head and the good luck Iron Head had brought them.

“Then Iron Head went away and we did not know why. Now he has come back to tell us what happened.”

Mitchell told them the same story Yellow Calf had heard, without deviation in a single detail, as stories were supposed to be told. Then he sat down again, and when Lieutenant Bradford frowned because he had not interpreted the long speech, he paid no attention. His medicine was good again.

One after another, the stern warriors spoke, offering him paradise. Iron Head had come back; Iron Head should stay and the Crows would be strong again.

For Mahlon Mitchell there could be no better life than this, among the Crows. Age had put aches in his bones, stiffness in his joints, but he was no longer required to compete with the young men for glory. He could count his coups among his equals, and his deeds were as splendid now as when he had performed them. As long as he lived, his deeds would be examples for the chattering women to pass on to little boys. His woman would look after his comfort.

True, the Indians were never far ahead of starvation, never safe from swift attack. But here was honor and as much security as a man could get anywhere—if the man was Mitchell. But he must not let them think he was easy to woo.

“Iron Head has come back to his brothers,” he replied gravely. “He would like to stay with them. But his medicine told him only to come back. He does not know whether he was meant to stay. He must ask his medicine. Tomorrow he will go to find out what to do.”

Ah, my brothers, you are easier to fool than the white men! I can wind you around my finger. I will never let you guess that only with you is my medicine strong!

When he set out for the hill where he would speak to his medicine, he took a roundabout way. Yellow Calf had told him where the body of Whirlwind had been placed after that warrior had died of wounds nine winters before. There had been great mourning. His women had cut their hair and gashed their legs.

On a platform of branches in a spreading tree, what was left of Whirlwind lay under the sky. Tatters of a blanket that had wrapped the body shredded down from the sagging platform. No birds were there; crows and buzzards had finished long ago. Under the tree were tumbled the time-whitened bones of a sacrificed horse.

Mitchell dismounted, grunting with stiffness and pain. He stood with his fists on his hips, looking up, feeling dull anger because the years were gone. Whirlwind had been born in a Crow lodge and had died on the prairie. He had lived with valor and without doubts, fitting the environment to which he was destined and never needing to search for a better one.

“Does that horse they killed for you come when you whistle?” Mitchell asked aloud. “Does that rotten

blanket keep you warm in winter?”

Superstitious fools, the lot of them, he told himself. They were all afraid of everything—except death. Any animal might be a spirit, any bird song might be a message. The messages were mystery, the spirits were almost always bad. The Crows were savages, shivering with terror of all that was around them, yearning for good medicine to save them from perils they did not understand.

But Mitchell burned with envy for a man whose life had been perfect, unquestioning, without deviation; for a man who was honorably dead and beyond all torment.

He hobbled his horse at the foot of a medicine hill, wanting to open his heart to the magic that would be there if he were an Indian, but scorning it as nonsense because he was a white man.

He had been through this before, the hunger and thirst alone on a mountain, and had gone back to tell the details of the medicine dream he had not had at all. But he had convinced the elders and he had got his medicine bag.

This time the misery was greater, because he was no longer young and had no hope of experiencing the awe and wonder that an Indian would find there because he expected it. He went through the motions of praying. Officially, he would not eat or drink until he had a message from a spirit. But who could see, after dark, if he chewed pemmican filched from a parfleche of the Quiet One or crept down to drink from a spring? In daylight he danced and chanted.

Aching with rheumatism, he danced stiffly before the unseen, unnamed spirits, but he got no message from them, because he knew they did not exist.

The third day, he rested from pain, waiting for time to pass. Mahlon Mitchell, who would soon be Iron Head again and forever, held up his face to the sun's warmth and smiled.

Lieutenant Bradford was with the Indians who came to meet him. He told Bradford his decision. “I'm going to live with the Crows,” he said.

“Really, Mr. Mitchell? The choice is up to you, of course.”

“It sure is. Nobody can make me go back to the fort, can they?”

Of course the white men wanted him to go back, to make sure they'd get there, maybe to back up the lieutenant when he reported to the major. But nobody was going to push Iron Head around. Mahlon Mitchell, that white man, he could be pushed; he could be licked—and had been, for too long. But Iron Head was a Crow warrior.

“I wouldn't even try to make you go back,” Bradford said. “But of course if you don't choose to go, you'll never collect your pay. It seems to me that in your place I would want to come back to them with presents. I wouldn't want to come empty-handed. Poor.”

“What I've got is worth more than presents,” Mitchell said. “What I can give them is good luck.”

They rode in silence thereafter, but Mitchell was thinking hard. Come to them poor and they'd take him in, sure, with their arms outspread in friendship. But they might remember if the good luck ran out. Come to them rich, with trade goods to hand out like a lord, and they wouldn't forget that, either.

He was still thinking about that after the sweat bath, when the Quiet One was, with humble pride, helping him to dress for the council at which he would relate what his medicine had told him to do. She brought him paint and a precious scrap of mirror. She brought him bead ornaments and a necklace made of claws. She had a feather for his hair—the single eagle feather that only a proved warrior could wear.

He was wrapped in contentment. He was going back to the good life he remembered, and this time he would stay. Oh, there would be hungry times, and winter cold was bitter when you lived in a lodge made of hides. A toothache could be sure hell, and a blacksmith with a pair of tongs could handle it better than any medicine man with all his charms. There were always stinks around an Indian camp, and their heathen religion was a nuisance, and there I was always too much racket. But respect and honor and being wanted

—these balanced all the rest.

The Quiet One stood away, murmuring, and he turned to see Bradford at the lodge entrance.

The lieutenant asked courteously. “Will they object if I am present at the council?”

“They might,” Mitchell said. “But I can talk ‘em into it.”

He was suddenly ashamed at being seen in this getup of nakedness and paint and beads and bits of fur and claws. When he was young, there had been nothing extraordinary about a white man wearing Indian trimmings. But in those days there had been no uniformed Cavalry officers to observe in silence that might hide scorn.

He wanted to put the lieutenant in his place. He said, “Reckon you boys can find your way back to the fort and keep your hair besides?”

“I think so,” Bradford answered. He added thoughtfully, “If it weren’t for your reputation for valor, I might think you were staying here because you don’t want to go back through Sioux country.”

Rage flooded through Mitchell, but caution tempered it. He spoke evenly. “I’ll let that pass, Lieutenant. You came to the Crows as a friend. We’ll let you go that way.”

When his son and several other warriors came to take him to the council lodge, Mitchell knew exactly what he was going to say.

Sitting in the council with the dark, stern-faced warriors ringing the fire, he sighed softly, letting himself sink into the warmth of old friendship, of being so much wanted. But before they could be sure of him, he would make them want him still more—and show the lieutenant something besides.

After the long smoking and the slow, ceremonial oratory, he stood. “Iron Head will live with his brothers, the Crows,” he said gravely. “He is coming back, and the Crows will be his people forever. His medicine told him this.” He said it again, in English, for Bradford, while the Indians waited.

The feathered heads moved, and firelight flashed on the fierce faces.

Yellow Calf said, “It is good that Iron Head comes back to his people. Now they will be strong again, because Iron Head is good medicine. But he says he is coming back. I would like to know what this means. He is here already.”

“Iron Head goes first to the fort where the white soldiers are,” Mitchell explained. “He has made a vow to go to the fort and tell the white chiefs that the Crows are their friends. Then he will come back with gifts.”

That, too, he repeated in English for the lieutenant.

The response was more than he had hoped. The Indians pleaded. One after another, they gave reasons why Iron Head should stay with them now and not go back to the fort at all.

Maybe he had not understood what his medicine said, one man suggested, and the rest agreed, murmuring, that this might indeed be true. They were deeply disturbed, Mitchell saw.

Sadly, he assured them there could be no mistake. He must go first to the fort. Then he would stay with the Crows forever.

It seemed to him that he saw grief in the dark faces. I’ve got them in the palm of my hand! he told himself.

One thing they demanded: that he remain another day. There would be a feast for him. . . .

The white men started back early in the morning after the feast was over. The procession that went with them honored Iron Head, the good medicine.

Mitchell wished his insides felt better, so he could better enjoy this triumph. Yellow Calf went with

them, and Bull Shoulders, and a dozen other men and even a few women to look after the baggage. His own woman, the Quiet One, was among them. She rode a spotted pony and led another that dragged a travois.

By noon he was feeling too sick to care what the rest of them were doing. The lieutenant commented, "Too much dog at the feast, perhaps? It turned my stomach at the time."

"I've et dog before," Mitchell grunted. "Dog meat's all right."

He almost collapsed when he dismounted. When he tried to sleep, the Quiet One sat beside him. He woke up, moaning, to feel her hand comforting his wet forehead.

In the morning he was no better.

"We'll hurry up to the fort," Bradford said.

Mitchell did not want to hurry anywhere. He was racked with stomach cramps. He could not remember how many days' travel they must be from the fort.

"I'll send a man on ahead for the doctor," Bradford promised, "when we get through Sioux country."

Mitchell, writhing, did not answer.

That day he did not ride. They tied him on a travois, to be pulled behind the spotted pony.

He revived enough to tell the lieutenant, "This is how—they brought me in—after a fight with Blackfeet."

I lived through that, he remembered, as he swayed into black sickness.

But he remembered something else: I never was as sick as this before. I could die this time!

Sometimes the blackness divided like a curtain, and behind it was Mitchell drowning in a flood of pain. He had glimpses of faces when the curtain parted: Bradford leaning over him, looking distressed, asking some question he could not answer; Sergeant O'Hara, bringing water he could not drink; the Quiet One, laying her hand on his forehead. That shocked him to consciousness. She had so far forgotten her place that, before them all, she showed her possession of Iron Head.

He began to know a kind of fear he had never felt before. He fought against panic. But he was too sick to push the Quiet One away.

He saw the face of his Indian son, Bull Shoulders, stern and watchful.

The lieutenant again, grim with worry.

"Stop the horse!" Mitchell gasped.

He had to wait for something. There was no use trying to keep ahead of it. Let it come now and end the agony.

He saw the dark face of his friend, Yellow Calf. The chief looked down at him with an expression he had never before seen on that dark, seamed face.

In a sweep of horror, Iron Head understood that he did not hold the Crows in the palm of his hand. For what he saw in that savage face was—compassion.

The feast—that's when they poisoned me! he realized. He cried out in English, "Why? Why?"

Yellow Calf answered in the Crow tongue, "We are sorry to do this thing. But Iron Head is good medicine for my people. Now he will never go away from his brothers who need him. . . ."

The white soldiers rode on fast, without their escort, after crossing a river.

On the bank, the Quiet One, with bleeding gashes on her arms, was at work with another squaw,

making a platform in a tree to receive the body of Iron Head, so that the good medicine could be kept safely forever in the country of the Crows.

THE PRAIRIE KID

When Elmer Merrick was eleven years old, he marched an outlaw off the Ainsworth place at the point of a gun.

They still talk about it in Montana, telling the story with a proud chuckle, implying that in the old days all the boys were men, and all the men were tough as saddle leather. After Elmer grew up, he was as tough as he needed to be, but when he held a gun on Buck Saddler on that summer night in 1888, he was a frightened, desperate child.

Except for size, he didn't look like a child. He walked like a tired old man, with his shoulders drooping; when he rested, he sagged with patient weariness, not fidgeting. He looked sullen and puzzled and hostile, and he felt hostile toward just about everybody except Lute Kimball. Lute was his idol, for two good reasons: Lute treated him like an equal, and Lute could do well everything that Elmer was still learning. But Lute lived up in Miles City in those days, close to two days' ride on a good horse, so they did not meet often.

In one respect only, Elmer doubted Lute's judgment. Lute was courting Charlotte Ainsworth, and Elmer considered her a fool and a tenderfoot. A tenderfoot she certainly was, for she had come out from the East only that summer to keep house for her brother, Steve. She had to be told the most elementary things, such as the rule that all comers had to be offered food, unless they were Indians.

More visitors came to Steve's place during her first month there than ordinarily passed in a year, so pretty Charlotte Ainsworth spent a great deal of her time cooking quick meals for staring, bashful cowboys, who pretended they hadn't known she was there.

The summer, while Charlotte Ainsworth was enjoying the privileges of being the only single white girl in almost a hundred miles, Elmer Merrick, on his father's ranch three hours' ride to the westward, was learning to live with fear. Waking or sleeping, it stalked him, and sometimes it leaped and took his breath away, and a jeering voice in his own mind demanded, If your pa dies, what are you going to do about Varina?

His sister Varina was six years old, sunny and carefree, unreliable and perverse. She did not know she was lonely, because she had always lived on the prairie. She played with a stick doll and sang to herself and carried on long, murmured conversations with a couple of entirely imaginary little girls named Beauty and Rose. Varina was of no use to anyone, and she worried about nothing except her chances of getting over to Steve's place fairly often to visit Miss Charlotte.

Miss Charlotte, she said, had a little rosewood melodeon that she had brought out in a trunk; Miss Charlotte was teaching her to play it; Miss Charlotte washed Varina's fair hair and made it hang in curls. Elmer, sick with his own worries, sometimes shouted, "Aw, shut up about Miss Charlotte!" but Varina would answer smugly, "Miss Charlotte likes me."

Once Elmer snapped, "Aw, she pretends she likes everybody," and then was ashamed of himself because Varina cried so hard.

He had enough to worry him. More than half his father's cattle starved in the snow in the terrible winter of 1887, his mother died the following fall, and his father, old Slope Merrick, was crippled with a

gnawing pain in his belly. Slope had arranged with three cowboys, who were following the roundups for other outfits, to brand and tally his remaining scattered cattle, and sell them if anyone wanted to buy, but that meant putting a lot of trust in frail human nature. He and Elmer, between them, had found and branded only twenty head of calves.

If Slope had any plans for the future, he did not confide in his son, and Elmer confided in nobody. He wanted to talk to Lute Kimball, but Lute spent his time shining up to Miss Charlotte.

The fear pounced at Elmer more than once that summer; he sent it slinking back by ignoring it. He could forget about it if he worked hard enough, and there was work enough to do, with Slope lying in his bunk a good share of the time. Even when Slope decided, one morning before dawn, that he had to get a doctor, the boy still did not quite face his problems. He was too busy to think about it for a while, after his father groaned, "Elmer! Elmer, git up! We're going to Steve's."

Elmer woke his sister by giving her tangled blonde hair a jerk. Varina whimpered and slapped at him blindly.

"We're going to Steve's place for a while," he snapped. "You want to go along, you pile out and git ready!" He was wide awake now and planning. "You're going over ahead of us, by yourself."

Slope groaned, "No! Not alone."

But Elmer had his first taste of mastery. "She kin do it," he answered, and his father did not argue.

Elmer pulled on his pants and the boots he had outgrown, wrapped his moccasins in his other shirt, and grabbed his throw-rope off its peg by the door. By the time Varina was dressed and had her extra dress rolled up, Elmer had roped and saddled three horses and tied a rope halter on the cow. It did not occur to him to help his sister mount her horse; she scrambled on with what what Lute Kimball, smiling, had called a flying clamber. It was the same system Elmer used himself.

"Hurry up!" Elmer barked. "Tell 'em to git the team and wagon ready to take Pa up to town. We'll be coming along directly."

It was midmorning when Steve Ainsworth helped Slope down from the saddle and into the hay-filled wagon bed.

"I'll take good care of the children, Mr. Merrick," Miss Charlotte promised. "Don't you worry about them for a minute." She held Varina by the hand.

Slope lay back on the blankets and the hay. "Elmer!" he said. "Look after the women."

Elmer answered, "Yuh, sure." He stood with his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched.

"My old Colt," Slope said between his teeth. "You can carry it."

Elmer said, "All right," as calmly as if a dream had not suddenly come true. The old cap-and-ball .44 was in Pa's saddle bag with its belt and powder flask and the leather sacks of lead bullets and caps.

Steve Ainsworth let go the brake on the wagon. "You'll be all right," he told his sister with what he hoped sounded like conviction. "We'll be back as soon as we can make it. Maybe I can send Lute Kimball down ahead."

"Take good care of Mr. Merrick," she cautioned. "Children, don't you want to wave good-bye?"

Varina obediently waved, but Elmer stood with his hands in his pockets, thinking, Children, huh!

The cow lowed, recalling him to duty.

"I gotta milk," he announced, turning his back as the wagon dropped out of sight beyond the first low ridge. "You could cook us some breakfast. We ain't et yet."

Miss Charlotte was off in a flurry of skirts, exclaiming, "Oh, dear, when will I remember that visitors have to be fed! Come, Varina—you may play the melodeon."

Elmer scowled. "Don't you let her fool around with that!" he ordered. "Make her do something useful. She's got a lot of things to learn."

Miss Charlotte turned, looking puzzled and amused. “She’s just a little girl, Elmer. What should she be learning at her age?”

“If I knowed,” he burst out in exasperation, “I’d learn her myself. Start her off with cooking. She won’t pay no attention to me.”

As he plodded with the bucket toward the cow, the fear came right up to meet him, and for the first time he faced it. It said, What you going to do about Varina if your pa dies? and he answered, I’m gonna leave Miss Charlotte look after her.

And what would Miss Charlotte or anybody want to have her around? How you going to fix that, eh?

He answered honestly, I ain’t got that quite figured out yet.

Then he milked the cow and started looking after the women, as he had been told to do.

Three days up by wagon, a day to see the doctor, and three days back, if all went well. A week before Steve could get back to the cabin. But Lute could make the return trip in less time. If Steve located him, he might get back late on the fifth day.

The first day Elmer kept busy cutting firewood by the river, annoyed because Miss Charlotte was pampering Varina, letting her waste time playing the melodeon, although when he came in for meals, Varina industriously peeled potatoes and wiped dishes. Varina helped Miss Charlotte spread the blankets smooth in the bunks. The two of them slept in the lean-to, and Elmer had Steve’s bunk in the main room, the kitchen.

The second day, seven Indians came by. Elmer sent them on their way—an old buck, four squaws, a young girl, and a boy about his own age—but he was embarrassed at having let them get clear to the cabin. He did not go back to cutting wood by the river.

After that, when the water buckets needed filling, he made the women go with him down to the river. Miss Charlotte obviously thought he wanted her for protection and made quite a show of being gay to let him know she wasn’t scared. Elmer didn’t tell her any different. He was learning the patience a man has to have with women.

When she wanted to help carry water, he growled, “I’d ruther carry the both buckets. It’s easier.” Even Varina knew that. One bucket pulled you down sideways. The old Cavalry Colt, sagging along his right leg, already did that.

Miss Charlotte was slightly amused about his wearing the Colt. With what Miss Charlotte didn’t know about guns, you could win battle. She didn’t even suspect the Colt was loaded; the bright copper caps were plain to see, but she didn’t notice. Elmer felt a little guilty about having all six chambers charged; Lute played safer than that, and he had a Frontier model—a Peacemaker—that took regular cartridges. Lute kept the hammer on an empty chamber. But Elmer Merrick preferred to take chances on shooting himself in the foot accidentally, as long as he could convince himself that he was ready for six kinds of trouble. Reloading took a lot of time; many a man had been killed and scalped, in the old days, while he fumbled with powder and ball.

The third day, Elmer chopped the wood into stove lengths, and on the day after that he started to dig post holes for Steve’s horse corral. Steve planned to drive a bunch of horses in from Oregon the following spring.

When Miss Charlotte saw what he was doing, she came flying out, exclaiming, “Elmer, now you stop that!”

Everything she said or did annoyed him, so he answered. “Digging’s got to be done, don’t it? Steve wants a corral, don’t he?”

“Let him go on building it himself, then. I don’t want you working so hard as you’ve been doing, Elmer Merrick. I want you to settle down. My goodness, don’t you ever play?”

He had not played for a long time; his spare time he had usually spent in practicing things he needed to learn, like roping, or pulling his gun fast. But while he was affronted by her insistence that he was a child, he was pleased that she had noticed how hard he worked.

“When there’s things to be done, someone’s got to do ‘em,” he told her.

“But not heavy work like that!” she insisted. “You’re liable to stunt your growth.”

That was enough to stop him. Maybe, he thought, she was right. But he could not admit that he was going to take her seriously. He said doubtfully, “Well, I’ll find something else.”

He set out to chink the cracks of the lean-to, built that spring for Miss Charlotte’s bedroom. While he worked at it, he solved part of his problem: What he was going to do if his father did not come back. Somewhere there must be an outfit that needed a wrangler on the home place, a helper to bring in the cavy for the cowboys and chore around for the cook. He dreamed about an imaginary boss saying, “That boy ain’t very big for what I had in mind,” and Miss Charlotte assuring him, “Oh, but he’s a very hard worker. Elmer just works all the time.”

And what are you going to do about Varina? his conscience nagged.

I’m figuring about that, he answered patiently. I’m figuring now to get Miss Charlotte to keep her.

That was on the fourth day. On the fifth, Lute Kimball might have come, but a fair-haired stranger got there first, a wary man with quick-darting gray eyes. It was Miss Charlotte’s fault that he stayed instead of riding on. She convinced Elmer all over again that she was a tenderfoot and a fool. But it was Elmer’s fault that the stranger ever had a chance to feel so much at home.

When the man came, Elmer was in sight, but he was down at the edge of the river grove, with Steve’s deer rifle, scouting around where he had seen deer signs. In the back of his mind was the thought, If she was to tell it around, “That Elmer is a good hunter; he got us venison,” that would sound good to the boss, I guess.

He did not hear the stranger’s horse, but a tingling on the back of his neck made him aware that something was going on. When he saw the buckskin horse and the buckskin-shirted rider, he set out for the cabin at a run.

But Miss Charlotte was already making the stranger welcome. And the man was saying, “Well, now, if you’re sure it ain’t too much trouble, I could eat all right, and that’s a fact.”

He whirled when he heard Elmer’s pounding feet on the hard earth but the steel-spring tension went out of him when he saw only a boy and not a man. He turned back to Miss Charlotte and took off his dusty hat with a flourish.

“Buck Saddler, ma’am, and pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“I am Miss Charlotte Ainsworth,” she answered smiling, “and these are the Merrick children, Elmer and Varina. If you’d like to wash up, Mr. Saddler, there’s the basin.”

The man hesitated for just a moment. “Thank you kindly. I’ll just look after my horse first.” He loosened the saddle cinch and walked around the horse, frowning and shaking his head. “Poor boy!” he murmured, slapping the animal’s shoulder. “Plumb beat, ain’t you?” Then he turned to Elmer and commented, grinning, “You sure carry a lot of artillery.”

Elmer glanced at the man’s sagging gunbelt and loaded saddle and answered, “So do you.” Buck Saddler carried a rifle and a shotgun on the saddle, and two belts of cartridges slung over the horn—not unreasonable armament for a long journey, but impressive.

The stranger glanced at the hog leg that pulled Elmer’s belt down and smiled with unwise condescension. “By gollies, one of them old cap-and-ball Colts! Let’s look at it, kid.”

Elmer backed off, scowling. “Nobody touches my gun but me.”

“If you was to show it to me,” the stranger offered, teasing, “I might let you see mine.”

“I kin see it,” Elmer informed him. “It’s a Peacemaker.” In the old days before he had so many other things to worry about, he had dreamed of owning a Peacemaker himself, and money enough to buy all the ammunition he wanted, and hands big enough to handle a man-sized gun easily.

Miss Charlotte called, “I’ve got the griddle heating pancakes. It’s close to suppertime, so we’ll eat.”

“You’ll be wanting to go on before dark,” Elmer told the stranger, hinting strongly. “We better git in there and eat, so’s you won’t be delayed.”

Buck Saddler looked down at him through half-shut eyes. “I might have to delay anyway,” he said deliberately. He walked toward the cabin and left Elmer worrying.

Miss Charlotte worried him more. She fussed as if Buck Saddler were a welcome guest. “Now, if you’ll sit here, Mr. Saddler. You prefer the other side of the table? Of course, of course. Varina, Elmer did you wash?”

Buck Saddler, Elmer noted, preferred to sit facing the window. You got some good reason for that, Elmer decided. And there’s nothing wrong with that horse you’re so cut up about.

Miss Charlotte raised her eyebrows at Elmer. “Young man, you can’t come to the table with that gun on.” Elmer kept his mouth shut, but it required effort. Never before in his life had he wanted so much to have a gun handy. But Buck Saddler stood up, grinning, unbuckled his own belt and hung it ostentatiously on a peg on the wall. Elmer did the same and sat down at the table without appetite.

Where’s Lute? he fretted. It’s time you come, Lute Kimball!

Lute Kimball was riding as hard as he dared on a spent horse, but he was also dreaming, as he often did, of being a hero for Miss Charlotte. No one would have suspected so stern-faced a man of dreaming about anything. He was a dark and silent man, thoughtful and practical. He had never stayed very long in any territory or on any job, but he had never quit any job so long as the boss needed him. He had made two trail drives up from Texas, and for most of his life had been looking for greener pastures. When Steve Ainsworth’s sister came West, he saw them for the first time—green pastures, full of flowers, wherever Miss Charlotte was. Lute Kimball was twenty-seven years old that summer, and ready to settle down.

He missed his chance to be a hero for Steve’s pretty sister, after all. He reached the cabin a few minutes too late.

Elmer had to admit that Miss Charlotte didn’t make anymore fuss over Buck Saddler than she did over anybody else; she always seemed delighted to see anyone who happened to come. But the stranger, following her quick movements with his darting eyes, assumed that he was a favored guest. He turned courtly and affable.

“That there pretty little organ,” he commented; “that’s a mighty nice thing to have. I bet you play it mighty pretty, Miss Charlotte.”

“Only a few tunes,” Miss Charlotte fibbed modestly. “But Varina, my goodness, Varina is learning to play it very nicely.” To Elmer’s disgust his little sister piped up, “I sure do play it good.”

Charlotte beamed and did not reprimand her for boasting.

If Miss Charlotte wanted to bring the little girl into the conversation, the stranger was willing to play along. He said fatuously to Varina, “You’re a real smart little girl, ain’t you? And all fixed up with your hair in curls, anybody’d think it was your birthday, maybe.”

“When is your birthday, dear?” Charlotte inquired.

Varina looked puzzled. Elmer answered, “Fifteenth of August. She don’t know nothing.”

Miss Charlotte glanced up at the calendar. “I declare,” she cried, “that’s today! If I’d known, I’d have

baked a cake!”

Birthdays had never been of much account in the Merrick cabin; Varina would never have thought of making a fuss if she hadn't been encouraged. But Buck Saddler encouraged her.

“By George, a nice bright little girl like that, and she ain't got no cake or no presents! Now that sure is a shame!”

Varina's eyes flooded with tears. She began to cry, with her face in Miss Charlotte's lap.

Elmer growled, “Shut up, Foolish!” Embarrassed, he explained, “She don't howl like that when she falls off a horse.”

Miss Charlotte patted the child's shoulder. “We'll have a present for Varina. I know just the thing—a pretty ribbon I brought in my trunk. Would you like a ribbon for your hair, Varina?”

Varina heard that, in spite of her squalling, and nodded emphatically.

The stranger said, “I can't have a lady beating my time with this here little girl. I'm gonna give her a present, too.” He dug in his pocket, fished around a little, and brought out a coin. He opened Varina's hand and closed her fingers over the gift. Tear-stained, she stared at it.

Miss Charlotte cried, “Mr. Saddler, you can't do that! Why, it's a double eagle!”

He said with reproach, “Wouldn't want me to take back what I give her, would you, Miss Charlotte? No sir, that's for the little lady.” He looked so smug that Elmer wanted to hit him.

And then he said the thing that scared Elmer: “Plenty more where that came from,” said Buck Saddler.

For a few seconds Elmer forgot to breathe. A man might possibly have one gold piece or a couple. But if there's plenty more where that come from, Elmer realized, he never earned it. Was it a bank or a stage?

Miss Charlotte's face had colored, and she looked even a little scared, Elmer thought. Glowering at her, he could suddenly tell what she was thinking: Go away, you man! We don't want you here!

Never before had he been able to see so clearly what was in an adult's mind. The revelation startled him so much that, for a moment, he was dazed by his own cleverness. And then, with desperate cunning, he arrived at the answer to that dismal question: What are you going to do about Varina?

If it was so Miss Charlotte owed me a debt, he thought, might be she'd take Foolish and raise her. Might be she'd be that grateful. Well, how can I get rid of this man?

That was how Elmer got on the track of saving Miss Charlotte—for cold, calculating reasons of his own. Lute Kimball, who had another reason for wanting to do the same thing if he ever had a chance—no less selfish a reason, but very different—still had nine miles to ride.

Miss Charlotte was not one to depend on someone else if she could do a thing herself. She started in a business-like way to pick up the dirty dishes. Pointedly she remarked, “It'll be dark in no time. You'll be wanting to go on, Mr. Saddler.”

The stranger frowned. “I don't rightly like to leave you all here without no menfolks,” he objected. “No telling what might come along.”

“How true,” Miss Charlotte murmured. “Don't give it a thought, Mr. Saddler. Elmer is our menfolks, and we are entirely confident that he will look after everything.”

Elmer stared, for the first time thinking that Charlotte Ainsworth was, though still a tenderfoot, not actually a fool.

He began to figure: If I do this, he'll do that, but maybe he won't. Well, if I do that, what'll he do? Elmer was eleven years old and scared silly. But he was a prairie boy, and if he had not been self-reliant,

he would not have lived to be eleven years old. He would have drowned at ten, when his horse threw him while fording a river, or he would have frozen in the blizzard that got him lost the year before that.

Buck Saddler gave him time to think. Buck wiped his mustache on his sleeve and strolled over to look at the melodeon. To the entranced Varina he suggested, "How'd you like to play me a little tune, girlie?"

Miss Charlotte said, "Varina is going to help me with the dishes," but Varina did no such thing. She started to pump the melodeon; she had to stand up to reach the keyboard, and pump the little metal pedal with one foot. Looking very well pleased with herself, she began picking out notes, making soft, pale-colored tones that you could almost see—silken ribbons of sound.

In the midst of figuring about Buck, Elmer thought, Oh, Lord, how would Miss Charlotte or anybody want to raise her, when she don't mind no better than that?

But he got his problem solved. If I do that, he will do this. There were only a few maybe's this time. Almost everything depended on: If I do that.

When he reached up to get his gun belt, Buck Saddler was instantly alert, but he only watched. He was within reaching distance of his Peacemaker. Elmer removed the old .44 from its holster, but left the belt and holster hanging on the peg. He walked over to Steve's small box of tools on the window sill and began to rummage.

Charlotte, scraping plates, asked tensely, "What are you looking for?"

"Worm," he muttered. "Think Steve's got a worm here. I want to unload my gun."

She looked so sick and helpless Elmer was afraid she would cry out and give everything away.

"This'll do it," Elmer remarked.

Buck watched him, slit-eyed, not moving. Elmer took his own sweet time. Never once did he move quickly; he kept the old Cavalry Colt carefully pointed at the wall while he worked, with the casual carefulness of one who had always handled firearms and had not pointed a gun at anyone since he got his ears boxed for it at the age of four. Delicately, he pried five caps off their nipples and let them lay on the table in plain sight. Painstakingly he reamed the powder and ball from five chambers, and Buck could count if he chose.

Buck relaxed enough to comment, "Mighty pretty tune you're playing, girlie." Miss Charlotte did not relax at all.

Elmer, on the far side of the table, put the gun down on the bench where he sat, with enough force to make it sound believable—and almost enough force to make his heart stop, because one chamber was still charged, and the cap was on the nipple. He sat for a little while, yawning, while he slid the long weapon down through his torn pocket and along his leg. The hold in his pocket was just right to catch and hold the hammer. When he stood up, yawning, Buck Saddler demanded, "Where you think you're going?"

"A person can go outside, can't they?" Elmer answered with elaborate dignity. "Maybe I'm gonna hunt rabbits."

Buck grinned. Hunting rabbits was what gentlemen passengers were invited to do when stage coaches with lady passengers made a comfort stop. Ladies "picked flowers."

When Elmer Merrick went outside to start to rescue Miss Charlotte, Lute Kimball was still two miles away.

"You was gone quite a while," Buck commented a little later.

"I come back," Elmer pointed out. "Your horse is down," he announced, as if he didn't care one way or the other. "I'll get the lantern if you'd like to take a look."

Buck scowled. "There wasn't nothing wrong with that horse!"

He was cornered and puzzled. But how could he be cornered by a small boy who had just unloaded his gun in plain sight? Buck Saddler relaxed and grinned.

“We’ll be right back,” he promised Miss Charlotte. “And the little girl can play me another tune.” So complete was his disdain that he did not even reach up to the peg for his gun belt. Elmer came close to choking, because he wanted to draw a deep breath of relief and could not. That had been one of the maybe’s.

He lighted the lantern and held it in front of him so that his shadow was in Buck Saddler’s path. Buck grunted and snatched the lantern. Beyond the saddle shed he held the lantern high.

“There’s nothing wrong with that horse!” he growled.

“Not a thing,” agreed Elmer. “He’s all cinched up and ready to travel.”

Saddler laughed. “I ain’t traveling nowhere. Not till I get ready.”

“You’re ready now, Elmer told him softly. “And this gun says so.”

Saddler sneered. “I seen you unload it.”

“You seen me unload five chambers. I got one charge left—and that’s all it takes. You want to find out for sure, mister?” he demanded with tense urgency. “You ever get hit with a ball from a .44 not ten feet away from you?” Buck glanced toward his saddle. “Your other artillery is on my saddle,” Elmer told him. “You’ll get it back, but not just yet. Hold the lantern nice and steady, Buck.”

Getting on his horse was another of the maybe’s, but Saddler was wise enough to make no false moves. Elmer went up to his saddle like a flying bird, and when he got there, he cocked the hammer.

He heard Buck’s grunt at the triple click, as the stranger realized that the gun had not been ready for action until that moment. Buck had been a man for too many years; he had forgotten that a boy’s hand might not be big enough to cock and fire a single-action revolver with one quick motion.

“Git on your horse, mister,” Elmer told him.

They rode away from the cabin. And Lute Kimball, coming over a hill, saw the lantern on the ground.

Half an hour later, several hills away, Elmer said, “You kin stop now. I’m gonna drop your guns and cartridge belts. You can pick ‘em up, and I’ll be watching, still with my gun in my hand, Buck. Still with my gun in my hand. Your rifle and shotgun are plumb empty.”

The cabin was dark when Elmer got back to it. He could feel the waiting silence. Lute Kimball called, “Elmer, anybody with you?”

Elmer went limp in the saddle as the strength went out of him along with the tension. “Nope,” he croaked.

Miss Charlotte called, “Are you all right?”

“Aw, sure,” he answered. But when he slid from the saddle, his knees went limber. He landed in a heap.

Lute said, “Come in the cabin. We’re not going to have a light anymore.” He was standing in the doorway with his rifle ready, watching into the darkness.

Miss Charlotte said, “Varina is asleep in the lean-to. She doesn’t know anything special happened.”

Foolish is the lucky one, Elmer thought. All hell could bust loose, and she’d never know it.

He remarked, “I don’t think he’ll come back.”

Lute laughed, one short laugh. “I don’t think he will. Getting run off by a runt of a boy with an empty gun.”

“It wasn’t empty,” Elmer explained. “I had one chamber loaded.”

“Did you now?” Lute sounded half smothered. “One charge, so you was all ready for bear!” He moved aside as Elmer entered the cabin, but he stayed near the doorway watching into the night with the rifle over his arm.

Elmer took three deep breaths and asked, “How’s Pa?”

Lute cleared his throat, and Miss Charlotte said softly in the darkness, “Elmer, come over here to me.

Please?” She put her arm around his shoulders, and he tried to stop shivering. “Lute?” she prompted.

Lute told him then. “Your pa died just before Steve got him to town. Steve stayed to see he got a good funeral. Your pa wanted him to.”

Elmer stepped away from the gentle pressure of Miss Charlotte’s arm, and his voice was gruff in his own ears. “I been figuring,” he said. “I can make out all right, but Varina—she needs looking after. Maybe we could make a deal.”

“What kind of a deal, Elmer?” Miss Charlotte’s voice was like rippling creek water.

“If you was to take her back East with you,” he stumbled along, “I’d turn over our stock to your brother, and maybe it would bring enough to pay for raising her.” He could not remind her that she owed him anything; he was suddenly a man, burdened with a man’s gallantry. He was asking her for a favor. “If it ain’t enough,” he offered, “I kin earn the rest after I git bigger.”

She said, “Oh, Elmer!” as if she might cry any minute. “I—I might not go back East,” she said. Lute, standing there black against the night, jerked his head.

“I don’t want her raised out here!” Elmer cried out frantically. “Ma always said this ain’t no country for women!”

“It will be,” Miss Charlotte promised. “It’s going to be, before long. Men like you and Mr. Kimball will make it. This is going to be a good place to live.”

He was not a man anymore. He was eleven years old and had nothing more to do with problems that were too big for him. He put his hands up to his face and began to sob. He cried for a long time, and neither Lute nor Miss Charlotte said a word or made a move.

When he was through, Lute spoke as if nothing had happened. “Tomorrow,” he said, “you can be a kid if you want to. If you haven’t forgotten how. You got that coming to you. But tonight I need a partner.”

Until dawn, Elmer stood in the doorway with his new gun in his hand—the Peacemaker that had been Buck Saddler’s. Lute prowled around farther away with his rifle, listening and watching. Nobody came.

Twelve years later, Varina Merrick spent her double eagle to buy her wedding clothes. Elmer, stiff and solemn in a new suit, tall and sturdy, a good hand at anything he undertook, gave the bride away. He had almost forgotten how hard he tried to give Varina away once before.

WARRIOR'S EXILE

Only four persons were in the buffalo-hide lodge on the day when Smoke Rising made up his mind to die. There was not much meat in the camp, so his father and younger brother were away on a hunt. Smoke Rising had been left behind with the women because he was known to be bad luck in important ventures.

He leaned against his backrest by the fire, hearing the chatter of his mother and older sister. They were sewing furs together for a warm robe. His sister's little boy sat watching them.

The old woman said to her grandson, "My father was a great man. He wore the eagle feather from the time he was sixteen. He counted coup many times on La-Cotahs and Cut Arms. He was a fine hunter. He had so many horses you could not count them, and everybody honored him. I think you will be a great man, too."

The little boy listened without answering, his eyes wide in the firelight, thinking about the time when he would be a warrior.

"He is sure he will be great," thought Smoke Rising, who was a failure. "And so was I sure, long ago."

At twenty-eight, he could not yet wear an eagle feather because he had never counted coup. He had never married because he was so unlucky that the young women of the tribe feared him.

"Water Bird is a great man," the old woman went on in the storytelling, teaching tone that women use in the education of small children. She was not saying anything new; she was only reminding the boy, as all little boys among the Apsaruke were constantly reminded, of the ideals for which he was expected to strive.

"Water Bird struck two enemies in one day with his coup stick when they were armed and trying to kill him," the woman murmured on. "Twice in one day he counted that great coup!"

"He has strong medicine," the little boy agreed, proud to be able to identify his betters. "Water Bird had a great dream, and a cricket is his helper. Pretty soon I will go out and have a dream, too."

"Not very soon," the child's mother warned. "Not until you are older." The dreaming was a necessary thing for a man, but a worry for those who stayed behind in the camp, thinking of him in his time of suffering and awe.

Smoke Rising felt the embarrassment that was suddenly in the lodge at the mention of a medicine dream. He went outside and stood with the sifting snow melting on his bare shoulders, a strong man, but a failure because he had never had a sacred dream.

"They will never tell little boys brave stories of Smoke Rising!" he thought. "They will say, 'Once there was a man who brought nothing but bad luck to the Apsaruke people. This is what happened to him. . . .'"

That was the moment when he decided to go out and die. First he would try again to dream, although he had tried five times already. He would not stop trying. He would freeze, or the wolves would kill him when he was weak from the ordeal that a dream required. He would not come back a failure.

He stood in the falling snow with his arms folded, making his plans, remembering the terrible things that had happened to the people of the village because he had no spirit helper, remembering the long years of hope before he understood that for some reason he had been born to be bad luck to everyone.

He was still remembering when, in the darkest part of the winter night, he went quietly out of the sleeping camp alone.

He went on foot, leading a horse, taking only a few things—one blanket and an extra pair of moccasins and a little dried meat, which he would not touch unless he was successful in dreaming. He had his weapons—a fine bow and twenty arrows and a knife.

Because hope was not quite dead in him yet, he carried also a small bag of paint. If he had had no hope, he would have hanged himself. That was a quicker way to die than the way he had chosen. But this time he might be lucky. He might, when he became sick and feverish, have a dream and find a spirit person to help him. With that help, he might perform some notable deed and come home triumphant. Then he would want to paint his face to show his people.

He had no trouble getting away from the sleeping village. The War Club Society, the camp police, had no watchers out on that cold night to prevent young men from going to seek glory without permission. If there had been watchers, Smoke Rising could have evaded them. He had been educated in cunning and strength and fleetness of foot. His training by the wise older men of his people had been long and hard. He had everything they could give him. All he did not have was luck.

He did not look back at the hide-covered lodges, black against the snow. Only a few persons there would mourn if he did not come back. His mother would grieve, because she loved him, though she had no reason to be proud of him. His sisters would wail, but they would not hack their arms or cut off their hair.

Bent against the wind, he went forward, remembering the first time he had gone out to dream when he was twelve years old. At that time he did not know what he faced, except that it would be terrible. But he had been eager for the thirst and hunger and exhaustion, because through them came mystic communion with the spirit persons that could make a man great.

He went with two friends that first time, and then they separated, each boy to his own hilltop. When it was over, after four days, the three went back to the village together, awed and proud and terrified, to face the stern warriors who had been their teachers and were now their solemn judges.

Wild Dog, thirteen years old, had told his dream first in the council lodge: "A beaver person said, Wild Dog, come with me." It took me over white mountains. My feet did not touch the ground at all. The sacred person took me under water to a lodge painted red."

Wild Dog told in detail all that had happened, and the old men decided that he had dreamed a great dream. The beaver was his helper, his medicine. Wild Dog went to battle thereafter with a stuffed beaverskin hanging from one shoulder, and prayed to it, and it brought him glory. He had dreamed three times since boyhood.

Wild Dog had become a great man, without fear, without pity. He was stern, fanatical, scarred with many self-inflicted, religious torments. His boasts of his triumphs when he counted coup took a long time to recite among the warriors. He was a young man to whose words old men listened. He had many horses and three young wives.

The other boy, Water Bird, had told his dream in council: Crickets had crawled all over him and had deafened him with their chirping, but after a time he could understand their words. He recalled the words, though the meaning puzzled him.

One of the wise men explained the meaning. Thereafter Water Bird wore a cricket in a tiny bag under his left braid when he went into battle, and he counted coup the first time when he was only fourteen,

creeping between the sleeping lodges of a La-Cotah village and taking a fine horse that was picketed there.

After his two friends, Smoke Rising told his experiences to the men who understood mysteries.

“I did not see any spirit person. Nothing came near me to be seen, and I did not hear any words spoken. But I heard a sound like a baby crying. I think it said something to me, but I could not understand.”

The old men deliberated for a long time while he waited, trembling, in the council circle. Then they told him that he had not had a dream, after all.

“The crying you heard,” they explained, “must have been your own voice.”

They suggested with sympathy that he try again when he felt able. Many men, they reminded him, did not dream the first time they tried.

He tried four more times as the years passed, but he did not even hear the crying sound again. He only fainted and fell down.

He was always a menace to his friends. Bad things happened when he was a member of a war party. (He went to war, though that required extraordinary courage for a man with no medicine helpers.) Once he tried to make the greatest coup of all; he crept to the back of an enemy lodge and cut the picket rope of a fine bay war pony. But the horse snorted, and the enemy warriors were aroused. In the battle that followed, a young man of the Apsaruke, named Stands in Water, was badly wounded.

In a fight with some La-Cotah raiders, Smoke Rising almost reached a wounded enemy in time to strike him for first coup, but his horse stumbled, and his companions reached the enemy before Smoke Rising could get free of his fallen pony. One of those companions died the next day of wounds received in the fight.

Other warriors had been wounded, and three had died, in circumstances that made it clear to everyone, finally, that the bad luck of Smoke Rising was to blame.

After a while, even the most ambitious and reckless young men no longer carried the invitational pipe to him when they were getting up a war party.

The worst thing that had happened to his village took place when he was away from it. That was so bad a thing that he tried not to think about it anymore.

By morning he was entirely safe from pursuit by the camp police. Then he set his course straight for a butte called Where the Eagles Rest. Other men had dreamed there successfully and had got protective charms from medicine persons.

He traveled the rest of that night, the next day, and half the following night before he reached the chosen spot, the place where he would dream or die. He did not stop to rest himself, because exhaustion was necessary. He stopped only long enough to keep from killing the horse he led. He did not touch his lips with snow. Thirst was necessary. Only through suffering could a man earn the right to dream.

When the sun came up, he was ready for his ordeal. He had made a bed of sage, had built a sweat lodge and purified himself in it. There was grazing for his pony on one side of the butte. There was even a kind of cave there, a hollow in the sandstone cliff, where he put his weapons and the few other things he had brought.

He danced and walked to exhaust himself, crying and praying as the snow fell on his body. When the sun went down, he was still enduring. When darkness came he fell dizzily and slept for a time on the sage bed with the snow drifting upon him. He had no dream of wonder, nothing but nightmares that were full of horror.

He awoke in darkness and lay still and cold, weak and sick with what he was remembering. He was so cold and stiff that it seemed someone was holding him to keep him from moving. He could not take his mind away from the nightmares. He had seen things happen that he had not really seen, though they had really happened.

A big war party had gone out from the village two years before, leaving only a few men behind. Half of those few had to hunt meat for the women and children and old people. While the hunting party was out, and Smoke Rising with it, a revenge party from the Cut Arms swooped down on the helpless lodges.

The Apsaruke hunters came back with meat, and the warriors came back with honors and booty, to find the lodges burned and the people who remained wailing their mourning, as they tried to start life over again.

The old men in the camp had fought as bravely as when they were young. Even the women had fought, and one girl, Rabbit Woman, had counted coup. There were dead in the camp when it was over, and six Apsaruke women were gone, captives of the Cut Arm raiders. One of them was young Rabbit Woman. Smoke Rising had wished to marry her, but the men of her family had refused his gift of horses because he had no honors.

Rabbit Woman's mother made the accusation against Smoke Rising. Pointing a gnarled forefinger at him, she had screamed, "It is his fault! He is to blame for what happened to us!"

There was no sense in that, of course—the hunt had been decided upon by the proper authorities, and Smoke Rising was not one of them. He had simply gone along as a hunter.

But the people listened and shuddered and believed Rabbit Woman's mother. She had had mysterious dream experiences of her own; once when she was very sick she had died and come to life again. Her words carried much weight.

After that, Smoke Rising was known to be a menace to his people. They were sorry for him, but they had their own relatives to think about. They could not waste much pity on a man so unlucky, so dangerous.

Stiffly and painfully he got to his feet and began to walk around on the butte, praying and singing. As the day passed, he sometimes stumbled with weakness and was glad of it. The weakness must come before the dream, and he was so strong that exhaustion took a long time. The world began to go far away, so that he was the center of a white nothingness full of weariness, hunger, thirst and fear.

After a while he fell down.

There was, after a vast, empty time had passed, pain but not quite consciousness. There was darkness. His heart beat sluggishly, and he thought, "Now I am freezing." He tried to call out to the spirits to pity him before it was too late, but no voice came from his lips.

But there was something, somewhere, like a sound, and his heart gave a great leap. He was twelve years old again, on a high hill on a summer night, and there was the voice of a baby crying.

He lay utterly still, hoping to hear a spirit person say, "Smoke Rising, come with me." But there were no words, only the faint mewling.

Then he did a thing that took more courage than he had ever needed before. He left the world of half-death and made his arms and legs move. He crept slowly to the edge of the place Where the Eagles Rest to see what made the baby sound.

It could be a bad spirit person, bringing him back to life so that he would go on being unlucky. Or it might be the one he had heard years before, this time willing to speak more plainly.

It took him a long time to inch to the edge of the butte. He rested there and looked. Something was down there in the snow, a dark huddle on the whiteness.

"I am having a dream!" he thought sickly. He waited for something to tell him what to do, but there was no sign, so he knew he would have to go down there and approach the being.

Part of the way he crawled, and part of the way he fell, without feeling pain. He lay in the snow, reaching toward the dark huddle. In all the medicine dreams he had heard recounted, there had been none that required such effort as was required of him. In this dream of his there was no floating through the air, no easy passage through unreality.

The sound came again.

“Mew! Mew!” was the sound, very faint. It was a spirit baby, bundled up in blankets, sounding very cold and sick.

He pulled himself toward the huddle and with great effort moved the blanket. There was a woman fallen there. He did not look at her closely, and when he tried to look at the baby there was a dizziness before his eyes. The baby was inside her clothing, against her body, for warmth. Smoke Rising thought the woman was dead, and that did not matter. What was important was that the baby lived, for it must be his medicine. It was poor, weak medicine. If it died, he would have no hope at all.

He put his hand against the woman’s skin and found it cold but, he thought, living. He tried to lift the mewling baby, and the woman moaned.

“You are not going to keep my helper away from me!” he said angrily. “You must be the spirit person who has made my luck bad for so long. But I am going to have this helper now!”

Still, the baby was warmer where it was than if he were to take it. He covered the child again with the blanket and shook his head, trying to think clearly.

He crawled back toward the sandstone hollow where his pack was stored, and as he went he prayed aloud weakly: “My helper is a baby, but it is all I have. I want you above there to tell me what I should do. I am going to try to save the spirit baby from freezing. If that is not the right thing, I want you to tell me. I am nobody. I do not know anything. I want to do the right thing, but I do not know what it is.”

He rested several times, waiting for an answer.

“Nothing helps me,” he thought. “Everything about getting my medicine helper has to be harder for me than for other men.”

After a long time he reached the cave. He had stored some wood there, without hope, facing the possibility that he might not die after all but might have a dream and be free to live and seek honor. He had his flint fire-maker, and he made a fire in the cave and put on his warm clothing. Every movement was pain, but that did not surprise him.

Then he crawled back to the huddled woman and took the baby inside his clothing, against his skin, and returned to the fire in the cave. The baby mewled again, and he prayed to it: “Help me. If I can help you, maybe you will help me. If I lose you now, then I am lost.”

The baby had to be fed. He took snow in his mouth and let it melt; he was able to keep from swallowing it in spite of his thirst. He put his lips to the baby’s lips and put the warm water into the baby’s mouth. The baby choked, and Smoke Rising was afraid it would die.

Warm water was not enough, even for a spirit baby. He would have to break his fast. He took some of the little piece of dried meat he had brought and chewed it, after eating snow. He transferred the warm meat juice to the baby’s seeking mouth, and it swallowed and jerked convulsively in his arm.

“I will get the woman for you if she is not dead,” he said. “I will put you here by the fire, and I will bring back the woman if that is what you want. . . . I wish you would tell me what you want,” he said reproachfully, knowing that this weak, half-frozen creature might be some powerful person in disguise, able to advise him if it wished to do so. But it only mewled stubbornly.

Bringing back the woman was hard, because she was cold and asleep. He dragged her, inch by inch, across the snow. He was afraid the baby might die before he got the woman to the cave, but it was still alive, and so was she. He put her by the fire and rubbed her skin with his hands.

When the fire flickered up, he blinked, having seen her face. He said indignantly to the baby person, “You are powerful and you want to fool me. You know I am nothing. You want me to think this woman is Rabbit Woman of the Apsaruke people! But you have dressed her in a dress like the Cut Arm women wear. Why did you do that? Why do you want to confuse me?”

He heard a wolf howling, not far away. He was so tired and so much afraid that he did not care to struggle anymore or to try to understand anything. He reminded the baby, “You have only made me suffer and have not told me anything that will give me good medicine.”

He gave up entirely the idea of fasting. To deal with these terrors required a clear head, and this was not a dream such as other men had. They did not have to make decisions. Something told them what to do, and they simply obeyed.

He ate snow and swallowed it, and he chewed dried meat. Meanwhile, snow melted by the fire in the little kettle he had brought, and he put dried meat in it to make soup. While that was cooking, he chewed meat again for the baby.

The woman moved and moaned. Smoke Rising looked at her, afraid, and once more she looked like Rabbit Woman. His head had cleared a little, and he remembered that Rabbit Woman had been taken captive by the Cut Arms, so she could be wearing a Cut Arm dress.

Smoke Rising sat staring at her, but he spoke to the baby person cradled in his left arm.

“I wish you would tell me whether this is Rabbit Woman, who was taken away from the Apsaruke people. Have you brought her here to make me more ashamed? Do you know how much I have been ashamed already?”

“I sent five horses to the lodge of Rabbit Woman as a gift to her father. I had taken them from some enemy horses. I wanted to marry that girl. But her father sent back the horses because I was too unlucky. He did not want me around. Then the Cut Arms took her and I did not expect to see her anymore.

“I am not seeing her now,” he told the baby firmly.

“I am seeing some other woman that you have brought to torment me because she looks like that lost one. I wish you would tell me why you do this.”

Perhaps, he thought, if the baby were stronger it might speak to him in words as a spirit person should. It was too young to drink, so he let the thin soup cool a little and then took some in his mouth and put it into the baby’s mouth. It coughed and swallowed and moved on his knee. He fed it soup until it stopped reaching with its mouth.

“Do you want me to do something for this woman?” he asked. There was no answer; the baby had gone to sleep. He laid it down carefully and built up the fire and rubbed the woman’s feet and legs, and after a while she whimpered.

So he looked after them through the night, drinking a little soup to bring back his own strength so that he could care for them.

“This is a great marvel,” he said aloud. “I am dreaming a dream that the old men will explain to me when I go back. I have waited a long time for this to happen.”

Toward morning he slept soundly. He awoke to the sound of two voices crying. One of them came from the baby in his arms, against his warm skin inside his clothing. The other came from the woman, who was reaching her hands and not finding the baby.

When he spoke, she cried out angrily in a language that he supposed was the Cut Arm tongue—a harsh, guttural language.

Smoke Rising could still lose his good medicine if the baby died. He needed this witch woman to feed it if she could. He said courteously, as a medicine person would require, "I have looked after you and kept you from freezing, and I want you to look after this small medicine person because it is my helper."

He spoke in Apsaruke, and she understood it. Her eyes opened, with understanding in them, the great dark eyes of Rabbit Woman. She did not know him, but she spoke his language.

"Give me my baby!" she demanded.

He put the baby carefully into her arms, but she had no milk. The seeking baby cried and then she cried wearily, too.

He gave her soup to drink, and she gave some to the baby. They both slept then.

When she awoke, she looked into his face and knew who he was but she would not say so. She looked angry and ashamed. "We are going to die here," she said.

"I am going to get you something to eat," Smoke Rising said. "I have brought wood for the fire. You stay here and look after my medicine."

He was too weak to go very far for meat, so he tracked the pony he had brought, and caught it after a long, patient time, and led it back to the cliff, stumbling often but never letting go of the rope.

"Come and help me," he told Rabbit Woman. "I am going to kill the horse, and I do not want to waste anything."

She crawled out of the cave, bringing the kettle, and Smoke Rising hobbled the pony. When he cut its throat they worked quickly to catch as much of the good, rich blood as possible. After they drank that, they were stronger. The woman nursed her baby a little and gave it soup made of the horse's blood with water, but she did not look up at Smoke Rising.

"If you are Rabbit Woman," the man said finally, "I would like to know it, and what you are doing here."

"I ran away from Many Bulls," she said sullenly. "I hate him. I think he is coming after me, but I will not go back with him. I do not see why you brought me back to life. All you bring me is trouble.

"I am not going to have a man again," Rabbit Woman said. "I wanted to go back to my own people, but now all I want is to die. I have a knife. I will kill the baby, too."

"Not the baby," Smoke Rising said firmly. "I will do anything you say if you will save the baby. It is my medicine. It is all I have."

She looked across the fire and smiled with the insolence a woman had a right to show toward a man who was nobody. "Count coup for me on Many Bulls!" she challenged. "Bring me his scalp. Then I will do anything *you* say."

Smoke Rising went out of the cave and walked back and forth in the snow, wondering how he could do the thing she required. He went back and asked humbly, "Was he tracking you?"

"I am sure he was. He bought me from another man, an old man who captured me in the fight at the camp. If he comes here, I will use my knife." She added, "I do not know how many days ago I ran away from him. But not much snow has fallen. He could follow my track."

Smoke Rising was embarrassed about what he had to do next. "I must talk to my medicine," he said. He crouched before the baby person and whispered, "Help me. help me! I have to do something. I am nobody, and I need your help."

The baby opened its dark, sleepy eyes, blew a bubble and yawned.

It was an answer. Smoke Rising took his knife and, apologizing to the baby, cut a little hair from its head. Very carefully he tied a few long hairs from one of his own braids around the lock so that he could not lose it.

He followed across the prairie the faint trail the floundering woman had made. He was sure he would

meet the enemy, and after half a day, he did. He saw, far off across the snow, a man leading a pony.

By that time, he was weak and tired, but his heart was big with confidence. This was a time for a gamble. He was going to make a coup or die.

When he knew the far-off man had seen him, he began to stumble and stagger like an exhausted woman. He heard the faint shout of the man and let himself fall down. He lay in the snow until the man approached, shouting and laughing in angry triumph.

Smoke Rising wished to make a moaning sound as a woman might do, but his voice was too deep for that. He could not risk frightening the enemy away. Huddled as if he protected a baby, he moved an arm in supplication.

He whispered to the lock of hair tied in his braid, "Now I will know if you are my medicine. Now I will find out if my luck has changed. Help me! Help me!"

He had always had courage, but now he had confidence to go with it. He was able to lie there while the enemy walked toward him, yelling threats in the Cut Arm tongue.

Then with a great spring Smoke Rising was on his feet. He swung his left hand with no weapon in it and struck the enemy's cheek, howling.

He felt something new surge in his heart and make it big. He had made a coup the hard way, close up, with his bare hand, on an armed, unwounded enemy.

He struck for the throat with his knife.

"Even if I die now," he shouted to his powerful helper, "I have made a big coup!"

The enemy dodged so the knife ripped his blanket but did not touch him. With his bow he struck Smoke Rising across the head, staggering him.

Smoke Rising dodged and let his blanket go. He sprang with his knife, shouting victory.

The fight did not last very long, because Smoke Rising had a strong helper at last. When the enemy warrior fell, bleeding, on the snow, Smoke Rising struck with the knife again and again. Then he lay down, panting.

When he had rested, he took up his knife once more. . . .

He did not know how he covered the last part of the journey to the cave under the butte. The last he remembered, that butte was far away, and he could see a tiny thread of fire-smoke rising there.

He lay down in the snow to sleep, but the witch woman's voice bothered him, and her hands pulled at him until he thrust her away in anger. Between sleep and waking, for a long time, he felt her pounding him with her fists. Moving was difficult, and it was foolish, he thought drowsily, for he had accomplished his purpose. There was no reason to struggle anymore.

But sometimes it was easier to crawl on, or to stumble as she held him up, than to endure the annoyance of her scolding. He heard her shouting at the captured pony, and then he was sliding along on the snow with the pony pulling him by a rope under his arms.

He felt and smelled the smoky warmth of the shallow cave and thought she must have hung a robe or a blanket in front to keep the heat and smoke in. He heard the yapping sound of a crying baby, and his heart was big with gratitude toward the little spirit person. The witch woman pulled at him, and he struck her with a sidewise sweep of his arm. Then he slept.

She could not make him sit up to drink, so she was putting soup in his mouth. He swallowed and coughed.

"Sit up and eat. Don't lie there and expect to be fed like a baby. Sit up!" She sounded very cheerful,

but she had no right to order him around that way.

He pushed his body up to sit and tried to focus his eyes on her.

“That is not the way for a woman to talk,” he said reproachfully, “to a warrior who has made a coup.”

She shrugged under her blanket. “You stole a horse. Anyone can bring back an enemy horse. How do I know you made a coup? Maybe you are lying.”

“You will be my witness in the council of warriors,” he answered. “I brought you something. After I eat, I will tell you. Now give me food.”

When he was satisfied, he dug into his clothing and brought out the trophy of proof and flung it to her. The scalp was still wet; he had carried it warm against his body.

“It is his!” Rabbit Woman exulted. “I know the scalp lock. It is Many Bulls you killed. Tell me how you did it!”

Sitting by the fire in the cave, he told her the story, as he would tell it thereafter in ceremonies when, with his equals among the warriors, he counted his triumphs. He told her twice, and she asked for the story again, leaning forward across the smoke, nodding Yes, Yes.

She held the scalp in her hands and even danced a little, stooping, in the low-ceilinged cave under the place called Where the Eagles Rest. She sang a triumph song for him, and he listened impassively. This singing was his due. He had waited a long time to hear it.

They would sing for him in the village when he rode in triumphantly on the enemy’s captured horse with Rabbit Woman walking behind him. She would be carrying his bow and her face would be painted proudly to show that she was a warrior’s woman.

But when he made that triumphal entry, he himself would carry the baby person that was his medicine in spite of the old men’s long-ago judgment. And when he went into battle thereafter he would wear, tied under his left braid, a medicine bag containing a lock of the baby’s hair with other secret, sacred things.

JOURNEY TO THE FORT

She stood where the harsh hands had pushed her. The Indians had thrown a slinking blanket over her head so that she could not see the soldiers just above her on the hill. Around her she felt the strength and menace of the Sioux; she heard rustlings and murmured growls. She listened, not breathing, trying to hear the talk of the chief with the soldiers.

She heard wagon wheels and a man's voice barking, "Whoa!" The ransom wagons! she thought. They have brought up the ransom wagons! She breathed again.

The chief's voice, old and querulous, came from a distance: "The gifts are enough. The white woman can go now to her people."

He was giving her freedom because she had healed his wound. There was angry murmuring among the Indian men around her, but someone snatched the blanket from her head and someone else pushed her so hard that she stumbled.

She walked up a hill on moccasined feet that had callused on bitter trails. But she was not walking on the ground: she was a little above it, she thought. It was safer that way, between heaven and earth, where she could not really be hurt. She had discovered many ways to keep from being hurt during the past seven months.

Now the real peril clutched her heart, because who could say that she would ever be allowed to reach the little group of waiting soldiers?

As she plodded along, she sought safely in a place no one else knew about. She had found it months before, when the Sioux had said they were going to kill her. The white soldiers had pursued them for so long that they had become irritable from the wearying retreat. Pleading was useless; Indians jeered at pleading. They had struck her when she went on her knees to beg for life.

So she had learned not to kneel or plead or even weep. Her soul simply hid behind her body for protection. Her self, her soul, was a fist-sized black cloud just in back of her heaving chest. She was hollow, she had no back. Her self, or soul, hovered behind her lungs, safe and protected.

She had stood alone before the threats, waiting for the blows, murmuring the words that the Sioux knew were magic because she had used them to calm the old chief when he was delirious from a wound. She had stared at the hating faces, whispering, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want . . . for Thou art with me, Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me . . . in the presence of mine enemies. . ."

Two of the squaws had beaten her with sticks, and when her body seemed no longer a hollow hiding place, she moaned. But her self was safe. Only her body was hurt.

She had sought that hiding place often and had found peace there when the danger was most terrible. You must stay in it now, she warned herself, until we reach the fort.

The white men stood on the hill. The old chief's aides had gone down to ransack the wagons and examine the horses that had drawn them. The Indians who had been with her were running to get their share. She stumbled on.

One of the soldiers was tall. She gasped at sight of him. Is that my husband in the blue uniform? But no, he must be dead.

The tall soldier bowed. "Lieutenant Widdicome, Mrs. Foster," he introduced himself. "We are relieved to see that you are well."

There must be some polite thing that she should say, but she could not remember. She had not slept for—how long? Staring at the tall officer, she moved her lips: "Mr. Foster? He was killed?"

"I am happy to tell you that he is safe in St. Louis. He arranged for your ransom."

She licked her lips and repeated, "Safe." Frank Foster, the tall protector, was alive instead of dead. I do not deserve him, she thought. She spoke a name: "Mary?"

The officer shook his head. "I'm sorry, ma'am. We haven't had any word of your little girl. We hope she was picked up by emigrants. Are you able to ride? We should reach the fort before dark."

She said strongly, "I can ride." She was used to walking, with heavy burdens on her back. She had not been allowed to ride since the first week of her captivity, when the war party had traveled fast.

The officer warned: "We must not seem to be in any hurry." He turned to signal a dignified farewell, with arm upraised, to the old chief. Down by the wagons, the yelling warriors were tearing apart the bundled ransom gifts, and wrangling.

A rifle shot cracked out as if the upraised arm had been a signal. The youngest soldier's horse began to shy. When he had quieted the animal, the soldier stared down at blood seeping through his trouser leg below the knee. He said gruffly, "I'm hit."

Mrs. Foster clutched at her saddle. "Nothing's happened," the lieutenant said fiercely to the hurt soldier. "We've no time to argue."

Then they were riding, and Mrs. Foster counted the soldiers. There were six of them, exactly the number specified in the last letter she had written to the fort. The old chief had dictated the terms, as she wrote.

They are brave men, she thought, and then she preferred not to think anymore except about the fort, walled in from peril.

But instead of the fort she saw, as she rode, a fair-haired child alone on the prairie that had no end or shelter, a little girl stumbling and crying, calling, "Mama! Mama!"

Mrs. Foster turned to the officer and said, "I must tell you about Mary, about my little girl." But when he answered sympathetically, she did not seem to be able to say more.

After a long time they stopped to rest. Mrs. Foster knew she should be looking after the wounded soldier—the healing that was in her hands and voice had kept her alive among the Sioux—but the officer took charge, and she did not dare push herself forward to help.

She heard the lieutenant warn: "We've got about forty miles to go yet." She heard the hurt soldier's stout answer: "I can do it, sir." But the boy could not mount his horse without help.

They rode fast until a soldier called sharply, "Dust!"

Mrs. Foster lay in a shallow ravine, and the wounded soldier was lying there too, with two other soldiers crouched down, watching something far away. When one of them glanced toward her, she said, "If the Indians come, I want you to shoot me."

He said, "Why, ma'am!" sounding shocked, and his face flushed red behind the sunburn and the dust. Mrs. Foster felt relieved, guessing that he had his orders.

She crept to the wounded boy. "Let me help you," she crooned. "I healed the chief. They called me a

medicine woman.”

He said stoutly, “I’m all right, ma’am.”

It was a test, Mrs. Foster thought. They were deceiving her, and if she did not heal the boy, she would suffer for it. She crouched down beside him and laid her hand on his forehead. He scowled, and then she began to whisper her charm: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want—”

Another soldier shouted from far away, and Mrs. Foster heard someone say she could stand up now, but she went on with her charm. If I cure him, she thought, maybe he will listen while I tell about Mary. If I tell someone now, then perhaps later I can bear to tell Mr. Foster.

A soldier came up the hill and said, “It’s five wagons of emigrants up ahead, ma’am. We’re to travel with ‘em to the fort.”

Mrs. Foster began to tremble. “Then we won’t get there tonight.”

“We might,” the soldier lied cheerfully. “Anyhow, we’ll be a stronger party.”

Mrs. Foster groped for the exact terms of the agreement with the Indians. She had written it down, translating the chief’s words for the soldiers at the fort to read if the letter ever got there, if the Indians were not lying again. “Only six men were allowed,” she murmured mutinously. “Only six men to take me to the fort.”

And yet the contract was to be broken. The emigrants would be a terrible danger to the ransom party, for it had been promised that only six men would travel from the rendezvous to the fort. The Indians, who would be watching, would believe the promise had been broken on purpose. She preferred not to think of it. She let her thoughts lie alone in the dark cavern of her mind; she let her hands weave their spell and her voice murmur the magic charm that had saved her. Clouds were white in the clear blue sky, and wind rustled the autumn-crisp prairie grass. There was no defense.

A soldier said, “We’re to catch up with the wagons, ma’am.” As if coaxing a child, he added, “There’s white women with the wagons. Wouldn’t you like to see some white women again, after all them squaws?”

“Oh, yes!” she cried, getting to her feet. “I only saw one white woman in all that time, and she was a captive, too. She drowned herself.”

I must look dreadful to be meeting white women, she thought, and her hands went to her hair. The hanging braids were crooked and mussed; the squaws had not let her borrow a comb in these last weeks, while the Indians were waiting to see whether the ransom would come. She brushed hopelessly at her dress, but brushing was no use when the dress was a greasy hand-me-down of deerskin.

As they rode on with a soldier close by the wounded man to see that he stayed in the saddle, Mrs. Foster began to feel the nearness of comfort. White women. Ladies to talk to, ladies to sympathize! They will understand when I explain, she told herself. Tears welled into her eyes, and she thought: We will cry together about my little girl.

As they came closer to the moving wagons, she could see a sunbonneted woman walking beside the last one, holding a small boy by the hand. She could not wait. She kicked her horse and rode ahead of the soldiers. She called out, choking, to the woman, “Hello! Hello!”

The woman turned a thin, dust-stained, sunburned face toward her, staring with squinted eyes. And Mrs. Foster saw not friendship but enmity, the same hatred she had seen in the dark faces of the Sioux. The woman turned away without speaking.

The lieutenant said, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Foster. The emigrants are afraid to have us with them for fear the Indians are following us—but they’re afraid to go on without us for fear of Indians, too. You’ll be in the second wagon, some people named Rice. A man and his daughter. You can ride in their wagon from now on. The girl’s fixing a bed so you can rest.

Mrs. Foster said harshly, "I'd rather ride with the soldiers. They're not afraid to have me."

"Mrs. Foster," he asked gently, "how long is it since you've slept?"

She blinked. "I don't know. Not last night or the night before. I was afraid to sleep."

"You'll sleep well tonight, then," the lieutenant said, and she read warning into the promise. Tonight the Sioux might attack because the contract had been broken.

She spoke suddenly. "Did you say my husband is all right?"

"He is, ma'am. He recovered entirely from his wound, and he moved heaven and earth to arrange the ransom. You are to join him in St. Louis when it is safe for you to travel."

She drew a deep breath. "I don't know how I can face him. I don't see how I can tell him about Mary. It was my fault, you know."

"Nothing was your fault," the lieutenant said sharply. She heard him call her a brave woman, but it was not true. She was only desperate and enduring—and cunning when she had to be. She rode with her head down, not awake but not sleeping.

"This is Bessie Rice," she heard the lieutenant say. She opened her eyes to see a round-faced girl of perhaps sixteen staring from the back of a wagon—a fair-haired girl with blue eyes.

"Not Mary," Mrs. Foster said, shaking her head. "She was only seven."

She shut her eyes so as not to have to see the girl, who might, after all, be a cruel illusion—or could Mary have grown older in months, or had years passed on the prairie?

"We're going to let our wounded man travel in the Rices' wagon," the officer said. "It would oblige me if you'd ride with him and get yourself some rest."

Rest, Mrs. Foster thought. Didn't the man understand that to rest was to die if the Sioux were following? Rest—laid to rest. That was what they did with dead people back home, laid them to rest, deep in the earth, so their bones did not have to bleach in the wind-rippled grass. But if others could speak with two tongues, she could be deceitful too. She would pretend to rest.

She answered meekly, "Yes, Lieutenant. whatever you think best." She let him help her up into the wagon where the wounded soldier lay.

The soldier was silent, but she felt him watching in the dimness. felt him wishing she were somewhere else. She lay down on quilts, and the wagon moved on. She lay in it, wide-eyed and watchful, moving with its jolting, and heard a man's voice outside the canvas say angrily, "Injun bait, that's what we picked up! Injun bait!"

Long ago she had learned that she could not afford to be angry at anyone for anything. She closed her eyes to subdue anger. Frank, I have to tell you what I did after the Indians took us. . .

When she woke up, everything was wrong. The wagon was still, and sounds of making camp came through the canvas, hushed by fear. She wondered: Do they think that by being quiet they can hide from the Sioux? Sleep, blessed sleep, had come to her—but it was not truly blessed, because it made her mind clearer to face horror to come.

A girl's voice outside the wagon, a voice young and light, frightened her. "Miz Foster? Miz Foster?" There was pleading in it.

Could that be Mary, grown older, almost a woman from the voice, grown older and implacable, hurt and deceived beyond forgiving, calling her Miz Foster for punishment, instead of Mama for love? She answered cautiously, "Yes, dear? Yes?"

"It's Bessie, Miz Foster. Bessie Rice. Supper's ready, such as it is. We ain't got no cooking fires. You

want to come out now and eat?"

"No," Mrs. Foster answered with cold determination. She could endure hunger; she had endured it before. But she would not face the accusing eyes that must be out there, the eyes of the emigrants who thought "Injun bait" even when they did not say the words. The wagon was a dark and hollow place of refuge. She would stay in it.

The young soldier spoke so suddenly that she was frightened. "Go eat, ma'am," he advised. "I already did." She had been cuffed and ordered around for so long by the Indians that it was easier to obey than to be stubborn. She climbed down from the wagon.

The accusing eyes were not there, after all. Nobody noticed her except the waiting Bessie, who was curious and concerned but had no hatred.

"I got a little piece of soap," the girl said, "if you was wanting to wash up." Mrs. Foster yearned toward her but remembered that no luxury of bodily cleanness could ever wash guilt from her soul. "I've been dirty so long it doesn't matter," she said.

She wolfed the food, cold bacon and corn bread, and when she was through, she sat holding the plate on her knees, blinking back tears. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." The girl Bessie, she began to understand, was the Lord's handmaiden. One more service Bessie must provide besides this. "I want to tell you about my little girl Mary," Mrs. Foster whispered.

Bessie said, "Shh! Did you hear that? A coyote howling off there?"

Mrs. Foster had learned patience. "Yes, dear. Only a coyote. Lots of coyotes out here. You must have heard them before."

"Yes," Bessie answered. "I've heard 'em before. Heard Injuns, too. Can you tell the difference?"

Mrs. Foster did not answer. She was reliving a night seven months before, the last time she had touched little Mary. There were coyotes howling then—or were they wolves?

The lieutenant said, "Mrs. Foster?"

"Here I am. With Bessie."

"I thought you were still in the wagon," he said.

She was on her feet instantly, remembering her duty to the wounded soldier. But her opportunity was lost already. The lieutenant was at the wagon and four men were lifting the soldier down. There was no moon, but she could see movement and form.

"Under the wagon," the officer said. "Prop him up against the wheel. Duncan, you're well enough to stand guard." The soldier said, "Yes, sir, if I can stand it sitting down." There was a low chuckle.

Every man would stand guard, Mrs. Foster understood. And not for a part of the long night to come, but for all of it, and especially toward the end, in that gray part that is not quite morning. And with the morning would come the Sioux—who were afraid to die in the dark.

"Mrs. Foster," the lieutenant said, "I want you and Bessie to stay with the wagon. All the women and children will stay with the wagons. Don't wander around. Is that clear?"

Mrs. Foster did not answer because she was thinking that a wagon was a trap.

Bessie said, "Sure. Her and me'll stay with the wagon, like you say."

Mrs. Foster's mind went searching into the other wagons and found the others who were trapped there—the trembling women, the children crying or asleep. Beside her she felt fear, and heard it in Bessie's breathing. She felt it under the wagon, too, where the soldier named Duncan sat propped against a wheel, staring out into the darkness, listening, listening, and everywhere around the wagons where men watched and waited.

"Your people are fools," she told Bessie, "to come with only five wagons in Sioux country. Why did you?"

The girl said, "I don't know. Some trouble among the men, and we went another way from the rest. I don't know what the trouble was."

Mrs. Foster felt pity, knowing she could not afford it—not after seven months of captivity, not when safety had been so close and the contract had been broken by the emigrants' stupidity. Pity welled into her throat; she choked it down.

Bessie must hear the story, she decided. Somebody had to hear it and try to understand. But Mrs. Foster was cunning. She would work up to the story so that Bessie would not know it was coming. "I'll bet you have some pretty clothes," she said. "In a trunk here in the wagon, I'll bet you have some."

Bessie was silent for a moment, shocked at this frivolity. "I got a red dress," she admitted.

"Show it to me. It's a long time since I saw a pretty dress."

Bessie drew away. "It's pitch dark in here."

"I can touch it, anyway. Get out the dress, dear. I'll help you put it on." She thinks I'm demented, Mrs. Foster realized. Am I?

Wedged as far into the corner as she could get, Bessie whispered, "How was it when they captured you folks? Was you all waiting like this?"

"We had no warning at all," Mrs. Foster answered gently. "They were just there all of a sudden. They killed four men and captured three women and two children. I thought they killed my husband, but the lieutenant says he is safe." She would have to tell Frank Foster sometime, but she must rehearse the telling first. "I have to tell you about Mary," she said. "Will you listen?"

Bessie took a deep breath and answered. "Tell me."

Mrs. Foster was riding again with the Sioux, through a canyon. Before her on the horse's back was Mary, whimpering. "I had to let her go," she whispered. "I thought maybe I could save her that way. You see, they burned her arm."

Bessie repeated, "Let her go?"

"The Indians pushed her into the fire the first night they had us. One of them hit me with his fist when I pulled her out. Her burned arm hurt her so, she cried all night until I scared her to make her quiet." She found that she did not want to tell it after all, but Bessie prompted, "Go on."

There was good in the world, after all. There was Frank Foster, alive and safe, making possible her rescue. There were the soldiers, and a girl named Bessie, who was willing to listen.

"She was only seven. I thought an emigrant train might come along if she got back to the burned wagon. I set my little Mary down off the horse in the darkness. I set her afoot, all alone. 'Run back to where the Indians got us,' I told her. 'Try to remember where we came. I dropped bits of letters as we rode. In daylight you can find them and follow them back. Find where the wagon is. That's the emigrant road, and somebody will come along.' "

"Sure, there'd be wagons," Bessie agreed without conviction.

"Seven years old. Mary was only seven. The last thing she said, before I kissed her and let her down off the horse, was, 'Mama, I'm hungry.' "

Now it was said, the confession was ended. The horror was a burden now for young Bessie Rice, and lessened a little for Mary Foster's mother. She owed Bessie a debt. "Put on your pretty dress for me," she said. "Show me how the ruffles go."

"I get it." Bessie opened a chest. "It's got a ruffle around the bottom, and the dress is red."

"Pretty, it's real pretty. Put it on."

"Help me, over my head. Can you find the hooks?"

"That doesn't seem right. There, that's how it goes."

"Miz Foster, I got a knife. Right here— Them hooks ain't just straight, I guess."

“You sew very well, dear. Now, how does the neck go?”

“That’s right, yes— The knife, we can both use it if—”

“Yes, dear. It’s a long time since I wore a pretty dress.”

“You can put it on.”

“No. Wear your pretty dress.”

They were silent, thinking of morning, of death in a red dress. Then they refused to think of morning.

They went through the chest, item by item, touching, questioning, describing, not seeing. When they were silent, they heard the vast silence or the howling that might be coyotes or signals from the hills.

“I want to show it to Mr. Duncan,” Bessie said.

Mrs. Foster did not at first remember the name. Then she recalled that it belonged to the young soldier under the wagon, with his rifle across his knees. She wondered why Bessie should yearn toward him, almost a stranger. Then she remembered: Why, I was young once, too, when I married Mr. Foster. I am twenty-seven now.

Quietly they descended from the wagon, and Bessie’s voice was velvet in the darkness: “Mr. Duncan, want to see something pretty?”

“Sure do,” he answered. “Like to see ninety-’leven cavalymen coming fast. That’d be pretty.”

“I only got a red dress,” Bessie said in a pouting voice.

Duncan’s voice changed; there was sunlight in it. “Well, Miss Bessie, I reckon I’d rather see you in a red dress than any bunch of dirty soldiers. Don’t git in front of me, though. Reckon you could both set down.”

Mrs. Foster wondered: How long till dawn? And did not know she had spoken.

Duncan answered, “Can’t be long now. Been here about ten years already by my figuring.”

Mrs. Foster felt like crying. They were so young, the flirting girl and the boy who was a soldier. They were so much afraid, but Bessie held off fear with the ruffles of a dress unseen, and Duncan pretended there was no fear, only boredom, for a soldier.

“Miss Bessie,” he said, “I’d be obliged for a drink of water.”

The girl scrambled up, delighted, fluttering to serve him. When she had gone, he whispered to Mrs. Foster: “This here’s a revolver, ma’am. It’s loaded and primed. You know how to cock it and pull the trigger? Take it, ma’am, and don’t tell her. But keep her near you if they come. Do that for me, ma’am?”

With the cold weight of the revolver in her callused hands, she pitied him, for this might be the last, as well as the first, gift he would ever have for Bessie Rice. “Yes,” she answered.

“I will. Mr. Duncan, do you know about my little girl?”

“Heard you lost one, ma’am. Sure sorry to know that.”

“Lost, only lost, maybe not dead, Mr. Duncan.” It was important to convince him, so as to convince herself. “Not as you say ‘lost’ about someone you’ve taken to the grave. I set her down in the darkness and told her to go back by following the letters I’d dropped along the way. She might be safe? She might have got back to the emigrant road?”

“Sure she might,” he agreed with conviction.

Mrs. Foster felt lighter. Anxiety was taking the place of guilt. But she could bear anxiety, now that she was learning to hope again. Twice now she had rehearsed what she must tell her husband if she still lived after this night was ended.

“There were settlers coming into the fort when we left there, ma’am,” Duncan said. “Maybe some of them would have heard of your little girl.”

Later, when Bessie came back, he growled, “Took you long enough. Must have gone clean back to the Missouri River.” Bessie giggled as he drank. He made a bold show of cheer, sighing with satisfaction as

he put down the cup. "There's men would envy me," he remarked, "sitting here talking to two purty women. Seems like daylight's coming over there."

The women stared at the paleness in the sky.

"You'd oblige me by getting back in the wagon," Duncan said. "I might need room here."

When they were back in the trap of darkness, Bessie began to cry. Mrs. Foster leaned against a barrel with the revolver under her knee. Outside, she heard the lieutenant speak briefly to Duncan. She heard the wind in the grass and a baby crying. She heard a faraway sound that cut the night like a thin, sharp knife, and her mouth went dry before she understood.

The cheering of the men in the cramped wagon circle told her the meaning, that and the glad screams of the women. The sound came clearer in the night; it was a cavalry bugle.

Bessie clung to her, crying and laughing, and Mrs. Foster warned, "Hush! I want to hear the horses!" But there was too much noise. Duncan, under the wagon, was roaring his jubilation.

Mrs. Foster threw the revolver out the back of the wagon as hard as she could. Then she began to cry with Bessie as the music of the bugle came closer and they heard faintly the drumbeat of horses' hoofs.

A captain and half a dozen troopers rode with her toward the fort. The lieutenant was following with the wagon train at a slower pace.

"We have some refugees at the fort," the captain told her. "Settlers who got a scare. They're about ready to give up and go back to the States."

"I'm thankful Mr. Foster is safe in St. Louis," Mrs. Foster said. "I will go there when it is safe to travel."

"It will be safe soon," he promised. He was squinting ahead. "Now don't be alarmed, Mrs. Foster," he urged. "That's a messenger you see coming over the hill."

A rider in cavalry blue was coming toward them at a gallop. The message was written. The captain read it and, seeing that she was tense, remarked with a little smile, "It is not bad news, ma'am. We will ride a little faster, but it is not bad news."

Emigrant wagons were outside the fort, not too close, not so close that flames, if the Indians should set them afire, could leap to the wooden walls.

"Some new refugees have arrived," the captain commented. "Most of those wagons weren't there yesterday. There's not room for them inside."

They rode in through the cautiously opened gates. She swayed in the saddle when she heard the gates closing, the blessed gates that shut out danger. A sunbonneted woman stared, and Mrs. Foster thought: I'd like to see you look any better than I do if you'd been seven months among the savages!

The captain helped her dismount. He did not release his grip on her arms after her feet were on the ground.

"Now I can tell you what was in that message," he said. "You must not scream. You must not panic these frightened people."

"I am quite calm," she answered softly, but her voice was trembling like her body.

"There is a little girl here named Mary, came in this morning with some settlers. They picked her up on the trail months ago—don't scream, Mrs. Foster!"

She tore away from his grip at the sound of a shrill, remembered voice crying, "Mama! Mama!" In obedient silence she ran and stumbled and spread her arms as a little fair-haired girl came running from among the people.

Then she could not see because of tears, but the thin, living body was against her breast and the arms were clinging. Crooning without words, she patted the warm flesh frantically and felt the healed scar of a burn.

THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE

Bert Barricune died in 1910. Not more than a dozen persons showed up for his funeral. Among them was an earnest young reporter who hoped for a human-interest story; there were legends that the old man had been something of a gunfighter in the early days. A few aging men tiptoed in, singly or in pairs, scowling and edgy, clutching their battered hats—men who had been Bert's companions at drinking or penny ante while the world passed them by. One woman came, wearing a heavy veil that concealed her face. White and yellow streaks showed in her black-dyed hair. The reporter made a mental note: Old friend from the old District. But no story there—can't mention that.

One by one they filed past the casket, looking into the still face of old Bert Barricune, who had been nobody. His stubbly hair was white, and his lined face was as empty in death as his life had been. But death had added dignity.

One great spray of flowers spread behind the casket. The card read, "Senator and Mrs. Ransome Foster." There were no other flowers except, almost unnoticed, a few pale, leafless, pink and yellow blossoms scattered on the carpeted step. The reporter, squinting, finally identified them: son of a gun! Blossoms of the prickly pear. Cactus flowers. Seems suitable for the old man—flowers that grow on prairie wasteland. Well, they're free if you want to pick 'em, and Barricune's friends don't look prosperous. But how come the Senator sends a bouquet?

There was a delay, and the funeral director fidgeted a little, waiting. The reporter sat up straighter when he saw the last two mourners enter.

Senator Foster—sure, there's the crippled arm—and that must be his wife. Congress is still in session; he came all the way from Washington. Why would he bother, for an old wreck like Bert Barricune?

After the funeral was decently over, the reporter asked him. The Senator almost told the truth, but he caught himself in time. He said, "Bert Barricune was my friend for more than thirty years."

He could not give the true answer: He was my enemy; he was my conscience; he made me whatever I am.

Ransome Foster had been in the Territory for seven months when he ran into Liberty Valance. He had been afoot on the prairie for two days when he met Bert Barricune. Up to that time, Ransome Foster had been nobody in particular—a dude from the East, quietly inquisitive, moving from one shack town to another; just another tenderfoot with his own reasons for being there and no aim in life at all.

When Barricune found him on the prairie, Foster was indeed a tenderfoot. In his boots there was a warm, damp squidging where his feet had blistered, and the blisters had broken to bleed. He was bruised, sunburned, and filthy. He had been crawling, but when he saw Barricune riding toward him, he sat up. He had no horse, no saddle and, by that time, no pride.

Barricune looked down at him, not saying anything. Finally Ransome Foster asked, "Water?"

Barricune shook his head. "I don't carry none, but we can go where it is."

He stepped down from the saddle, a casual Samaritan, and with one heave pulled Foster upright.

“Git you in the saddle, can you stay there?” he inquired.

“If I can’t,” Foster answered through swollen lips, “shoot me.”

Bert said amiably, “All right,” and pulled the horse around. By twisting its ear, he held the animal quiet long enough to help the anguished stranger to the saddle. Then, on foot—and like any cowboy Bert Barricune hated walking—he led the horse five miles to the river. He let Foster lie where he fell in the cottonwood grove and brought him a hat full of water.

After that, Foster made three attempts to stand up. After the third failure, Barricune asked, grinning, “Want me to shoot you after all?”

“No,” Foster answered. “There’s something I want to do first.”

Barricune looked at the bruises and commented, “Well, I should think so.” He got on his horse and rode away. After an hour he returned with bedding and grub and asked, “Ain’t you dead yet?”

The bruised and battered man opened his uninjured eye and said, “Not yet, but soon.” Bert was amused. He brought a bucket of water and set up camp—a bedroll on a tarp, an armload of wood for a fire. He crouched on his heels while the tenderfoot, with cautious movements that told of pain, got his clothes off and splashed water on his body. No gunshot wounds, Barricune observed, but marks of kicks, and a couple that must have been made with a quirt.

After a while he asked, not inquisitively, but as one who has a right to know how matters stood, “Anybody looking for you?”

Foster rubbed dust from his clothes, being too full of pain to shake them.

“No,” he said. “But I’m looking for somebody.”

“I ain’t going to help you look,” Bert informed him. “Town’s over that way, two miles, when you get ready to come. Cache the stuff when you leave. I’ll pick it up.”

Three days later they met in the town marshal’s office. They glanced at each other but did not speak. This time it was Bert Barricune who was bruised, though not much. The marshal was just letting him out of the one-cell jail when Foster limped into the office. Nobody said anything until Barricune, blinking and walking not quite steadily, had left. Foster saw him stop in front of the next building to speak to a girl. They walked away together, and it looked as if the young man were being scolded.

The marshal cleared his throat. “You wanted something, Mister?”

Foster answered, “Three men set me afoot on the prairie. Is that an offense against the law around here?”

The marshal eased himself and his stomach into a chair and frowned judiciously. “It ain’t customary,” he admitted. “Who was they?”

“The boss was a big man with black hair, dark eyes, and two gold teeth in front. The other two—”

“I know. Liberty Valance and a couple of his boys. Just what’s your complaint, now?”

Foster began to understand that no help was going to come from the marshal.

“They rob you?” the marshal asked.

“They didn’t search me.”

“Take your gun?”

“I didn’t have one.”

“Steal your horse?”

“Gave him a crack with a quirt, and he left.”

“Saddle on him?”

“No. I left it out there.”

The marshal shook his head. “Can’t see you got any legal complaint,” he said with relief. “Where was

this?"

"On a road in the woods, by a creek. Two days' walk from here."

The marshal got to his feet. "You don't even know what jurisdiction it was in. They knocked you around; well, that could happen. Man gets in a fight—could happen to anybody."

Foster said dryly, "Thanks a lot."

The marshal stopped him as he reached the door. "There's a reward for Liberty Valance."

"I still haven't got a gun," Foster said. "Does he come here often?"

"Nope. Nothing he'd want in Twotrees. Hard man to find." The marshal looked Foster up and down. "He won't come after you here." It was as if he had added, *Sonny!* "Beat you up once, he won't come again for that."

And I, Foster realized, am not man enough to go after him.

"Fact is," the marshal added, "I can't think of any bait that would bring him in. Pretty quiet here. Yes sir." He put his thumbs in his galluses and looked out the window, taking credit for the quietness.

Bait, Foster thought. He went out thinking about it. For the first time in a couple of years he had an ambition—not a laudable one, but something to aim at. He was going to be the bait for Liberty Valance and, as far as he could be, the trap as well.

At the Elite Cafe he stood meekly in the doorway, hat in hand, like a man who expects and deserves to be refused anything he might ask for. Clearing his throat, he asked, "Could I work for a meal?"

The girl who was filling sugar bowls looked up and pitied him. "Why, I should think so. Mr. Anderson!" She was the girl who had walked away with Barricune, scolding him.

The proprietor came from the kitchen, and Ranse Foster repeated his question, cringing, but with a suggestion of a sneer.

"Go around back and split some wood," Anderson answered, turning back to the kitchen.

"He could just as well eat first," the waitress suggested. "I'll dish up some stew to begin with."

Ranse ate fast, as if he expected the plate to be snatched away. He knew the girl glanced at him several times, and he hated her for it. He had not counted on anyone's pitying him in his new role of sneering humility, but he knew he might as well get used to it.

When she brought his pie, she said, "If you was looking for a job. . ."

He forced himself to look at her suspiciously. "Yes?"

"You could try the Prairie Belle. I heard they needed a swamper."

Bert Barricune, riding out to the river camp for his bedroll, hardly knew the man he met there. Ranse Foster was haughty, condescending, and cringing all at once. He spoke with a faint sneer, and stood as if he expected to be kicked.

"I assumed you'd be back for your belongings," he said. "I realized that you would change your mind."

Barricune, strapping up his bedroll, looked blank. "Never changed it," he disagreed. "Doing just what I planned. I never give you my bedroll."

"Of course not, of course not," the new Ranse Foster agreed with sneering humility. "It's yours. You have every right to reclaim it."

Barricune looked at him narrowly and hoisted the bedroll to sling it up behind his saddle. "I should have left you for the buzzards," he remarked.

Foster agreed, with a smile that should have got him a fist in the teeth. "Thank you, my friend," he said with no gratitude. "Thank you for all your kindness, which I have done nothing to deserve and shall do nothing to repay."

Barricune rode off, scowling, with the memory of his good deed irritating him like lice. The new

Foster followed, far behind, on foot.

Sometimes in later life Ranse Foster thought of the several men he had been through the years. He did not admire any of them very much. He was by no means ashamed of the man he finally became, except that he owed too much to other people. One man he had been when he was young, a serious student, gullible and quick-tempered. Another man had been reckless and without an aim; he went West, with two thousand dollars of his own, after a quarrel with the executor of his father's estate. That man did not last long. Liberty Valance had whipped him with a quirt and kicked him into unconsciousness, for no reason except that Liberty, meeting him and knowing him for a tenderfoot, was able to do so. That man died on the prairie. After that, there was the man who set out to be the bait that would bring Liberty Valance into Twotrees.

Ranse Foster had never hated anyone before he met Liberty Valance, but Liberty was not the last man he learned to hate. He hated the man he himself had been while he waited to meet Liberty again.

The swamper's job at the Prairie Belle was not disgraceful until Ranse Foster made it so. When he swept floors, he was so obviously contemptuous of the work and of himself for doing it that other men saw him as contemptible. He watched the customers with a curled lip as if they were beneath him. But when a poker player threw a white chip on the floor, the swamper looked at him with half-veiled hatred—and picked up the chip. They talked about him at the Prairie Belle, because he could not be ignored.

At the end of the first month, he bought a Colt .45 from a drunken cowboy who needed money worse than he needed two guns. After that, Ranse went without part of his sleep in order to walk out, seven mornings a week, to where his first camp had been and practice target shooting. And the second time he overslept from exhaustion, Joe Mosten of the Prairie Belle fired him.

"Here's your pay," Joe growled, and dropped the money on the floor.

A week passed before he got another job. He ate his meals frugally in the Elite Cafe and let himself be seen stealing scraps off plates that other diners had left. Lillian, the older of the two waitresses, yelled her disgust, but Hallie, who was young, pitied him.

"Come to the back door when it's dark," she murmured, "and I'll give you a bite. There's plenty to spare."

The second evening he went to the back door, Bert Barricune was there ahead of him. He said gently, "Hallie is *my* girl."

"No offense intended," Foster answered. "The young lady offered me food, and I have come to get it."

"A dog eats where it can," young Barricune drawled. Ranse's muscles tensed and rage mounted in his throat, but he caught himself in time and shrugged. Bert said something then that scared him: "If you wanted to get talked about, it's working fine. They're talking clean over in Dunbar."

"What they do or say in Dunbar," Foster answered, "is nothing to me."

"It's where Liberty Valance hangs out," the other man said casually. "In case you care."

Ranse almost confided then, but instead said stiffly, "I do not quite appreciate your strange interest in my affairs."

Barricune pushed back his hat and scratched his head. "I don't understand it myself. But leave my girl alone."

"As charming as Miss Hallie may be," Ranse told him, "I am interested only in keeping my stomach filled."

"Then why don't you work for a living? The clerk at Dowitts' quit this afternoon."

Jake Dowitt hired him as a clerk because nobody else wanted the job.

“Read and write, do you?” Dowitt asked. “Work with figures?”

Foster drew himself up. “Sir, whatever may be said against me, I believe I may lay claim to being a scholar. That much I claim, if nothing more. I have read law.”

“Maybe the job ain’t good enough for you,” Dowitt suggested.

Foster became humble again. “Any job is good enough for me. I will also sweep the floor.”

“You will also keep up the fire in the stove,” Dowitt told him. “Seven in the morning till nine at night. Got a place to live?”

“I sleep in the livery stable in return for keeping it shoveled out.”

Dowitt had intended to house his clerk in a small room over the store, but he changed his mind. “Got a shed out back you can bunk in,” he offered, “You’ll have to clean it out first. Used to keep chickens there.”

“There is one thing,” Foster said. “I want two half-days off a week.”

Dowitt looked over the top of his spectacles. “Now what would you do with time off? Never mind. You can have it—for less pay. I give you a discount on what you buy in the store.”

The only purchase Foster made consisted of four boxes of cartridges a week.

In the store, he weighed salt pork as if it were low stuff but himself still lower, humbly measured lengths of dress goods for the women customers. He added vanity to his other unpleasantnesses and let customers discover him combing his hair admiringly before a small mirror. He let himself be seen reading a small black book, which aroused curiosity.

It was while he worked at the store that he started Twotrees’ first school. Hallie was responsible for that. Handing him a plate heaped higher than other customers got at the café she said gently, “You’re a learned man, they say, Mr. Foster.”

With Hallie he could no longer sneer or pretend humility, for Hallie was herself humble, as well as gentle and kind. He protected himself from her by not speaking unless he had to.

He answered, “I have had advantages, Miss Hallie, before fate brought me here.”

“That book you read,” she asked wistfully, “what’s it about?”

“It was written by a man named Plato,” Ranse told her stiffly. “It was written in Greek.”

She brought him a cup of coffee, hesitated for a moment, and then asked, “You can read and write American, too, can’t you?”

“English, Miss Hallie,” he corrected. “English is our mother tongue. I am quite familiar with English.”

She put her red hands on the cafe counter. “Mr. Foster,” she whispered, “will you teach me to read?”

He was too startled to think of an answer she could not defeat.

“Bert wouldn’t like it,” he said. “You’re a grown woman besides. It wouldn’t look right for you to be learning to read now.”

She shook her head. “I can’t learn any younger.” She sighed. “I always wanted to know how to read and write.”

She walked away toward the kitchen, and Ranse Foster was struck with an emotion he knew he could not afford. He was swept with pity. He called her back.

“Miss Hallie. Not you alone—people would talk about you. But if you brought Bert—”

“Bert can already read some. He don’t care about it. But there’s some kids in town.” Her face was so lighted that Ranse looked away.

He still tried to escape. “Won’t you be ashamed, learning with children?”

“Why, I’ll be proud to learn any way at all,” she said.

He had three little girls, two restless little boys, and Hallie in Twotrees' first school sessions—one hour each afternoon, in Dowitt's storeroom. Dowitt did not dock his pay for the time spent, but he puzzled a great deal. So did the children's parents. The children themselves were puzzled at some of the things he read aloud, but they were patient. After all, lessons lasted only an hour.

"When you are older, you will understand this," he promised, not looking at Hallie, and then he read Shakespeare's sonnet that begins:

*No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell*

and ends:

*Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
But let your love even with my life decay,
Lest the wise world should look into your moan
And mock you with me after I am gone.*

Hallie understood the warning, he knew. He read another sonnet, too:

*When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state,*

and carefully did not look up at her as he finished it:

*For thy sweet love rememb'ed such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

Her earnestness in learning was distasteful to him—the anxious way she grasped a pencil and formed letters, the little gasp with which she always began to read aloud. Twice he made her cry, but she never missed a lesson.

He wished he had a teacher for his own learning, but he could not trust anyone, and so he did his lessons alone. Bert Barricune caught him at it on one of those free afternoons when Foster, on a horse from the livery stable, had ridden miles out of town to a secluded spot.

Ranse Foster had an empty gun in his hand when Barricune stepped out from behind a sandstone column and remarked, "I've seen better."

Foster whirled, and Barricune added, "I could have been somebody else—and your gun's empty."

"When I see somebody else, it won't be," Foster promised.

"If you'd asked me," Barricune mused, "I could've helped you. But you didn't want no helping. A man shouldn't be ashamed to ask somebody that knows better than him." His gun was suddenly in his hand, and five shots cracked their echoes around the skull-white sandstone pillars. Half an inch above each of five cards that Ranse had tacked to a dead tree, at the level of a man's waist, a splintered hole appeared in the wood. "Didn't want to spoil your targets," Barricune explained.

"I'm not ashamed to ask you," Foster told him angrily, "since you know so much. I shoot straight but slow. I'm asking you now."

Barricune, reloading his gun, shook his head. "It's kind of late for that. I come out to tell you that Liberty Valance is in town. He's interested in the dude that anybody can kick around—this here tenderfoot

that boasts how he can read Greek.”

“Well,” said Foster softly. “Well, so the time has come.”

“Don’t figure you’re riding into town with me,” Bert warned. “You’re coming all by yourself.”

Ranse rode into town with his gun belt buckled on. Always before, he had carried it wrapped in a slicker. In town, he allowed himself the luxury of one last vanity. He went to the barbershop, neither sneering nor cringing, and said sharply, “Cut my hair. Short.”

The barber was nervous, but he worked understandably fast.

“Thought you was partial to that long wavy hair of yours,” he remarked.

“I don’t know why you thought so,” Foster said coldly.

Out in the street again, he realized that he did not know how to go about the job. He did not know where Liberty Valance was, and he was determined not to be caught like a rat. He intended to look for Liberty.

Joe Mosten’s right-hand man was lounging at the door of the Prairie Belle. He moved over to bar the way.

“Not in there, Foster,” he said gently. It was the first time in months that Ranse Foster had heard another man address him respectfully. His presence was recognized—as a menace to the fixtures of the Prairie Belle.

When I die, sometime today, he thought, they won’t say I was a coward. They may say I was a damn fool, but I won’t care by that time.

“Where is he?” Ranse asked.

“I couldn’t tell you that,” the man said apologetically. “I’m young and healthy, and where he is is none of my business. Joe’d be obliged if you stay out of the bar, that’s all.”

Ranse looked across toward Dowitt’s store. The padlock was on the door. He glanced north, toward the marshal’s office.

“That’s closed, too,” the saloon man told him courteously. “Marshal was called out of town an hour ago.”

Ranse threw back his head and laughed. The sound echoed back from the false-fronted buildings across the street. There was nobody walking in the street; there were not even any horses tied to the hitching racks.

“Send Liberty word,” he ordered in the tone of one who has a right to command. “Tell him the tenderfoot wants to see him again.”

The saloon man cleared his throat. “Guess it won’t be necessary. That’s him coming down at the end of the street, wouldn’t you say?”

Ranse looked, knowing the saloon man was watching him curiously.

“I’d say it is,” he agreed. “Yes, I’d say that was Liberty Valance.”

“I’ll be going inside now,” the other man remarked apologetically. “Well, take care of yourself.” He was gone without a sound.

This is the classic situation, Ranse realized. Two enemies walking to meet each other along the dusty, waiting street of a western town. What reasons other men have had, I will never know. There are so many things I have never learned! And now there is no time left.

He was an actor who knew the end of the scene but had forgotten the lines and never knew the cue for them. One of us ought to say something, he realized. I should have planned this all out in advance. But all I

ever saw was the end of it.

Liberty Valance, burly and broad-shouldered, walked stiff-legged, with his elbows bent.

When he is close enough for me to see whether he is smiling, Ransome Foster thought, somebody's got to speak.

He looked into his own mind and realized, This man is afraid, this Ransome Foster. But nobody else knows it. He walks and is afraid, but he is no coward. Let them remember that. Let Hallie remember that.

Liberty Valance gave the cue. "Looking for me?" he called between his teeth. He was grinning.

Ransome was almost grateful to him; it was as if Liberty had said, *The time is now!*

"I owe you something," Ransome answered. "I want to pay my debt."

Liberty's hand flashed with his own. The gun in Foster's hand exploded, and so did the whole world.

Two shots to my one, he thought—his last thought for a while.

He looked up at a strange, unsteady ceiling and a face that wavered like a reflection in water. The bed beneath him swung even after he closed his eyes. Far away someone said, "Shove some more cloth in the wound. It slows the bleeding."

He knew with certain agony where the wound was—in his right shoulder. When they touched it, he heard himself cry out.

The face that wavered above him was a new one, Bert Barricune's.

"He's dead," Barricune said.

Foster answered from far away, "I am not."

Barricune said, "I didn't mean you."

Ransome turned his head away from the pain, and the face that had shivered above him before was Hallie's, white and big-eyed. She put a hesitant hand on his, and he was annoyed to see that hers was trembling.

"Are you shaking," he asked, "because there's blood on my hands?"

"No," she answered. "It's because they might have been getting cold."

He was aware then that other people were in the room; they stirred and moved aside as the doctor entered.

"Maybe you're gonna keep that arm," the doctor told him at last. "But it's never gonna be much use to you."

The trial was held three weeks after the shooting, in the hotel room where Ransome lay in bed. The charge was disturbing the peace; he pleaded guilty and was fined ten dollars.

When the others had gone, he told Bert Barricune, "There was a reward, I heard. That would pay the doctor and the hotel."

"You ain't going to collect it," Bert informed him. "It'd make you too big for your britches." Barricune sat looking at him for a moment and then remarked, "You didn't kill Liberty."

Foster frowned. "They buried him."

"Liberty fired once. You fired once and missed. I fired once, and I don't generally miss. I ain't going to collect the reward, neither. Hallie don't hold with violence."

Foster said thoughtfully, "That was all I had to be proud of."

"You faced him," Barricune said. "You went to meet him. If you got to be proud of something, you can remember that. It's a fact you ain't got much else."

Ransome looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Bert, are you a friend of mine?"

Bert smiled without humor. "You know I ain't. I picked you up off the prairie, but I'd do that for the lowest scum that crawls. I wisht I hadn't."

"Then why—"

Bert looked at the toe of his boot. "Hallie likes you. I'm a friend of Hallie's. That's all I ever will be, long as you're around."

Ranse said, "Then I shot Liberty Valance." That was the nearest he ever dared come to saying "Thank you." And that was when Bert Barricune started being his conscience, his Nemesis, his lifelong enemy and the man who made him great.

"Would she be happy living back East?" Foster asked. "There's money waiting for me there if I go back."

Bert answered, "What do you think?" He stood up and stretched. "You got quite a problem, ain't you? You could solve it easy by just going back alone. There ain't much a man can do here with a crippled arm."

He went out and shut the door behind him.

There is always a way out, Foster thought, if a man wants to take it. Bert had been his way out when he met Liberty on the street of Twotrees. To go home was the way out of this.

I learned to live without pride, he told himself. I could learn to forget about Hallie.

When she came, between the dinner dishes and setting the tables for supper at the cafe, he told her.

She did not cry. Sitting in the chair beside his bed, she winced and jerked one hand in protest when he said, "As soon as I can travel, I'll be going back where I came from."

She did not argue. She said only, "I wish you good luck, Ransome. Bert and me, we'll look after you long as you stay. And remember you after you're gone."

"How will you remember me?" he demanded harshly.

As his student she had been humble, but as a woman she had her pride. "Don't ask that," she said, and got up from the chair.

"Hallie, Hallie," he pleaded, "how can I stay? How can I earn a living?"

She said indignantly, as if someone else had insulted him, "Ranse Foster, I just guess you could do anything you wanted to."

"Hallie," he said gently, "sit down."

He never really wanted to be outstanding. He had two aims in life: to make Hallie happy and to keep Bert Barricune out of trouble. He defended Bert on charges ranging from drunkenness to stealing cattle, and Bert served time twice.

Ranse Foster did not want to run for judge, but Bert remarked, "I think Hallie would kind of like it if you was His Honor." Hallie was pleased but not surprised when he was elected. Ranse was surprised but not pleased.

He was not eager to run for the legislature—that was after the territory became a state—but there was Bert Barricune in the background, never urging, never advising, but watching with half-closed, bloodshot eyes. Bert Barricune, who never amounted to anything, but never intruded, was a living, silent reminder of three debts: a hat full of water under the cottonwoods, gunfire in a dusty street, and Hallie, quietly sewing beside a lamp in the parlor. And the Fosters had four sons.

All the things the opposition said about Ranse Foster when he ran for the state legislature were true, except one. He had been a lowly swamper in a frontier saloon; he had been a dead beat, accepting

handouts at the alley entrance of a cafe; he had been despicable and despised. But the accusation that lost him the election was false. He had not killed Liberty Valance. He never served in the state legislature.

When there was talk of his running for governor, he refused. Handy Strong, who knew politics, tried to persuade him.

“That shooting, we’ll get around that. ‘The Honorable Ransome Foster walked down a street in broad daylight to meet an enemy of society. He shot him down in a fair fight, of necessity, the way you’d shoot a mad dog—but Liberty Valance could shoot back, and he did. Ranse Foster carries the mark of that encounter today in a crippled right arm. He is still paying the price for protecting law-abiding citizens. And he was the first teacher west of Rosy Buttes. He served without pay.’ You’ve come a long way, Ranse, and you’re going further.”

“A long way,” Foster agreed, “for a man who never wanted to go anywhere. I don’t want to be governor.”

When Handy had gone, Bert Barricune sagged in, unwashed, unshaven. He sat down stiffly. At the age of fifty, he was an old man, an unwanted relic of the frontier that was gone, a legacy to more civilized times that had no place for him. He filled his pipe deliberately. After a while he remarked, “The other side is gonna say you ain’t fitten to be governor. Because your wife ain’t fancy enough. They’re gonna say Hallie didn’t even learn to read till she was growed up.”

Ranse was on his feet, white with fury. “Then I’m going to win this election if it kills me.”

“I don’t reckon it’ll kill you,” Bert drawled. “Liberty Valance couldn’t.”

“I could have got rid of the weight of that affair long ago,” Ranse reminded him, “by telling the truth.”

“You could yet,” Bert answered. “Why don’t you?”

Ranse said bitterly, “Because I owe you too much. . . . I don’t think Hallie wants to be the governor’s lady. She’s shy.”

“Hallie don’t never want nothing for herself. She wants things for you. The way I feel, I wouldn’t mourn at your funeral. But what Hallie wants, I’m gonna try to see she gets.”

“So am I,” Ranse promised grimly.

“Then I don’t mind telling you,” Bert admitted, “that it was *me* reminded the opposition to dig up that matter of how she couldn’t read.”

As the Senator and his wife rode home after old Bert Barricune’s barren funeral, Hallie sighed. “Bert never had much of anything. I guess he never wanted much.”

He wanted you to be happy, Ranse Foster thought, and he did the best he knew how.

“I wonder where those prickly-pear blossoms came from,” he mused.

Hallie glanced up at him, smiling. “From me,” she said.

WAR SHIRT

Bije Wilcox leaned against a cottonwood trunk and watched Francis Mason's nervous fussing, half amused and half exasperated. Bije was a grim man, lean and hard as jerked buffalo beef, with hair and beard the color of melting snow in a chinook. He was not completely relaxed as he stood there, smoking his stub of a pipe—no man lived in Injun country very long after he stopped watching for trouble, and Bije had been there for forty years.

With a casual movement he glanced back the way they had come, toward the Army fort, two days' ride north. Danger could come to this rendezvous from that direction if the major guessed that Mason was looking for Cheyennes, but nothing stirred across the prairie.

Danger could come from the south, too, from the Cheyenne camp that was down there—or had been, a week earlier. The good thing about waiting under the cottonwoods was that, if trouble came, a man could see its dust far off.

Bije scorned the man who had hired him, this Francis Mason from Philadelphia, but he admitted that the greenhorn had courage and determination. Also, he had money. He paid for what he got. For two years the Easterner had been searching for his lost brother, at trading posts and Army forts all along the frontier.

Francis Mason sat down to smoke but did not finish the pipe. He went over and fussed again with the arrangement of the gifts he had laid out on a blanket, moving the carbines, the red cloth, the beads and the knives so everything would show up to best advantage.

“When did he say he would come?” Mason demanded.

“Never said he'd come at all,” Bije Wilcox growled. “Said maybe somebody would come, sometime.” He added, “If he does come, he'll bring an interpreter. He don't talk English, only Cheyenne and sign.”

“You speak Cheyenne,” Mason argued. “Why does he need an interpreter?”

Bije shrugged. “Why should he trust me? I'm a white man.”

“How could he be my brother Charles?” Mason demanded in an arguing sort of way. “Charles was well-educated. He wrote poetry. The green book on the blanket contains the poems he left. We had them published.”

“I never promised to bring any brother of yours to this rendezvous,” Bije reminded him. “The man I talked to is a Cheyenne war chief.” And after a while, he thought, I'll get around to telling you what he was when I first knew him, thirty years ago.

The Cheyenne war chief, Bije reflected complacently, had been making medicine on the other side of that yellow hill since noon. By the flight of a bird he knew someone was there; by the thin streamer of smoke he knew there was a medicine fire. The fact that he had seen these things was a good sign. When Injuns wanted to keep hidden, there was nothing to see.

Francis Mason murmured, “The mark you said was on his cheek. The big red mark as if a man's hand had been pressed there. How many men like that would there be in the world?”

Only one, thought Bije Wilcox. And the white man who had it used to call it the Mark of Cain.

He answered, “Injuns paint. You know that. It's his medicine, that red hand is. A man goes out on a hill

and starves himself to get a vision, or he goes through the torture at the pole, and his dream tells him his medicine. . . . All I said I'd do was take a message to a Cheyenne with a red hand on his face and promise him presents if he'd come here for you to talk to. And I done it and I like to lost my hair when his young men came out to meet me.

"He takes a risk, coming so far with no war party," Bije reminded Mason. "But he wouldn't let me take you near his camp. He protects his people."

And wouldn't the major like to ride out and catch him here! Bije reflected. For years the Army had tried to get Medicine Mark to come in and touch the pen to a treaty, but the message he sent was always the same—an arrow with blood dried on it. The Army still wanted Medicine Mark, but not to talk of treaties.

Bije leaned against the cottonwood trunk, waiting for time to pass, aware that the thin streamer of smoke was gone, and feeling the sun work on his stiffening joints.

"He wouldn't come," Bije said, "if I hadn't promised him guns and ammunition. The horses, they're for show, and the rest is for pretty."

Except the things Mason had put on the blanket to trap him, Bije thought. Might work, too. It might.

The cunning man from Philadelphia! The *vèho* spinning a web! Was it an accident that in the Cheyenne tongue *vèho* meant *white man* as well as *spider*?

The *vèho* said, as if he had read Bije's mind, "As I told you, I'd pay a thousand dollars to the man who could bring me my brother."

Bije grunted. The *vèho*'s web was hung with gold, enough to keep a man in comfort for quite a while. Comfort was a thing a mountain man did not think about, except when he happened to have it. But when his occupation was gone with the fur trade and his youth gone with the years, when his ancient wounds irked him and supple joints were stiffening, what then for one who had been a mountain man? The Army had no use on its civilian payroll for a scout too stiff to ride all day or a hunter who brought in little meat. But a man with a thousand dollars for a stake, a man who knew Injun trading—Bije started planning what stock a trader should have.

Francis Mason shivered and looked back the way they had come.

"I been watching," Bije informed him. "Nothing's coming from that way. But somebody's going to come around that yellow hill yonder in a few minutes. Wisht you'd set down and act like it didn't matter."

After a while he remarked, "There comes two Injuns." He fired his rifle in the air and walked forward, away from the fire, shouting in Cheyenne, "Welcome, friends! Welcome!"

That gunshot greeting, the ancient sign of peace, was pointless in these modern times. When Bije was young and the rifle was a flintlock Hawken, the greeting emptied it and proved good will. Now he carried a Henry with five cartridges remaining in the magazine. The greeting was nothing but a lie. Bije had met a lot of lies in his lifetime.

The whole meeting was risky, and he did not welcome danger with the high heart of a young man. But the risk was worthwhile. Mason had paid him for arranging the rendezvous, would pay him another thousand dollars when he said, "That's the man you're looking for." Besides, Bije was going to learn the answer to a riddle that had been fretting him for thirty years: why such a man as Cain had come West in the first place, and why he had turned Injun. . . .

The two riders greeted him from far off—a lithe young Cheyenne, perhaps seventeen, almost naked because he had not yet enough war honors to show up in his costume, and a stately older man who had about all the war honors a man was likely to live long enough to earn.

"There's Medicine Mark," Bije announced. "The young one is his third son, Rules His Horses. He'll interpret."

Mason had not thought of asking how a young Indian might have learned English if he had never lived with white men.

Looking at the haughty youth and at the stately warrior, Bije was wrenched with envy. If I'd kept a woman, he realized, instead of sending 'em back to their fathers' lodges—the Shoshone girl, them two Hunkpapas, the Crow I called Sally, even that Ree that come near talking me to death—if I'd kept one of 'em for more than just a winter, I'd have boys of my own by now to bring in meat. No need for the *vèho's* Judas money then.

But I sent 'em back, and my sons, if I had any, went with 'em. I wonder how many tall half-blood boys of mine are living in the peaked lodges? But I never could stay with 'em. I couldn't turn Injun. By God, I'm still a white man. A *vèho* myself. He smiled meagerly, glancing slit-eyed at the chief, Medicine Mark, hating him for what he had.

The Cheyenne warrior's hair hung in two gray braids wrapped in otter skin. The medicine mark was vivid, a great red hand printed on the side of the brown, seamed face. From slits in his ears hung silver medals.

He wore the insignia of courage proved in many battles, the costume that could be bought only with boldness and with blood. So fully proved in valor that he could afford not to boast too much about it, he did not wear an eagle-feather war bonnet. The war shirt told enough—the buckskin shirt fringed with human hair.

Francis Mason stepped forward with a quick sound that was not quite a name, and Bije warned, "I'll talk. That's his war outfit he's got on."

Bije spoke at length, piecing out the harsh, choking syllables of the Cheyenne tongue with accustomed gestures of the sign language. The man with the red hand on his cheek answered briefly.

Bije explained to Mason, "He says he can't stay. Just happened to come here." He spoke further, coaxing, gesturing toward the spread presents on the red blanket.

The old warrior rode over and looked down at the gifts. He nodded and got off his horse.

A little lame now, eh? Bije thought, meanly pleased to see him limp. But you got sons to make your meat and a woman to cook it.

The young Indian picketed the horses and came back, his chin up and his eyes wary, never letting go of his rifle. Part of the metal of the side plate was missing, replaced with hardened hide.

Bije Wilcox said, "This man is Mason. Will you smoke with us?"

The young man answered, "He says yes."

Bije took a stone pipe from his possible sack and filled and lighted it with proper ceremony. He was relieved when they were through smoking, when Mason had finished his awkward performance with the pipe.

"Now you can talk," he told the Easterner.

Mason had been staring at the old Cheyenne. Now he said to the young one, with complete confidence, "Tell him I am his brother Francis."

Bije was embarrassed, but the young man translated and answered steadily, "He does not know you. He does not know what you mean. His brothers are the Cut-Arms, the Cheyennes."

"But the mark!" the Easterner cried, "I know him by the red mark on his face!"

When the young man translated that, the old one launched into a longer speech.

The young man replied, "The Great Medicine gave him the mark so that no man would kill him. He does not know why you want to see him. He wants you to go away and leave him alone."

Francis Mason cried in despair, "Tell him Father is dead. We want him to come home."

"He can't mourn with you, he does not know your father. He does not need to go home, because this is his home, this place where we are and farther than you can see. Where the Cheyennes go, there is his home, in the lodges of the Cut-Arms."

The old warrior moved as if to get up, and Bije thought: No! There's two things to find out yet: why you came out here, old hoss—you never told me, the winter we trapped together; and why you turned Injun—a thing I couldn't do myself.

Francis Mason was staring at the old warrior with tears running down his cheeks, weeping without shame. At last he said the right thing. Humbly he asked, "Will my brother the Cheyenne listen to my story?"

"He will listen. He is sad that you have lost your brother."

"There was a duel, many years ago," Mason began. "And a man was killed."

Bije prompted him: "Tell it easier. Duel's a hard word. Tell the story." And now, Bije rejoiced silently, I'm going to find out about a young fellow who called himself Cain because of the mark the Lord put on him.

Mason tried again. "Long ago two young men had a quarrel. I was one of them. The other man was named Cawshorne. We said we would fight about it. We shot at each other with pistols when the sun came up. The man on my side was my half brother, Charles. I shot the man named Cawshorne, and he died."

The old warrior had a question: "Did the man who died have someone on his side, or was he alone?"

"He had a friend, too. There was also a doctor. A medicine man. There were old rules to follow in a case like that. We followed the rules."

The young man interpreted Medicine Mark's querulous reply: "He does not understand what white men do. Was the man who died from an enemy tribe?"

Mason said in a choked voice. "He had been my friend until we quarreled."

Rules His Horses interpreted with a tinge of superiority: "Among the Cheyennes a man who kills another man of the tribe is put away from the people, because he has done a bad thing. My father does not understand."

Mason's voice had pleading in it. "Yes, it was a bad thing. We followed a custom that was against the law. My father said that someone had to be—put outside the tribe." After a moment he was able to continue: "He put Charles outside. He gave him money to go away and never come back."

"But the young man who was put outside, your brother—he had not killed anyone?"

"He had not done anything wrong, except be on my side in the fight. I asked him to do that."

"Then why did he go?"

Mason said slowly, "He saw that he was not wanted. It made his heart sick. He must have hated us for what we did to him!"

The old warrior thought for a while, then spoke, and his son said, "My father wants to know, did you try to stop your brother from going?"

"I didn't know he was going," said Francis Mason. "My father made me stay in my room—my lodge—and I didn't know until Charles was gone." He burst out, "I should have gone after him then. I could have found out where he went. But I was—afraid of my father."

"It is a bad thing to be afraid, but telling about it cleans the heart," the young man translated. "My father does not understand. Among the Cheyennes, a son is not afraid of his father. He wonders why your

father loved one of his sons more than the other.”

“Because,” Francis Mason said in a tone almost too low to be heard, “because of the mark on my brother’s face. It made him different from other men. A mark like a red hand. Like the mark on the face of my brother the Cheyenne war chief.”

Medicine Mark and Francis Mason looked into each other’s dark eyes. . . .

Bije Wilcox, looking at the face of Cain, saw what the years had made of it. Hauteur and conscious pride were in the tilt of the chin, endurance was in the set of the broad mouth. Mourning and triumph had seamed the cheeks. Bije noted the old man’s honors and knew their making. The brown, tireless hands of an Indian woman had woven the dyed porcupine quills, sewed the beads and tanned the soft buckskin of the scalp shirt. A medicine man had chanted prayers when the fringes of hair were affixed to the sleeve seams, and the hair came from an enemy, dead by the hand of Medicine Mark.

I’ve lifted hair in my time, Bije recollected, but I never went so far as to smoke the scalps or sing songs over ‘em!

The Cheyenne warrior murmured at length, and Rules His Horses said, “He does not understand how a father could throw his son away. He would not do that with one of his sons. He tells you this story.

“Three years ago the Cheyennes had a fight with white soldiers. Five soldiers were killed, and the Cheyenne camp was surrounded. The white chief said he would shoot into the lodges and kill women and children if he did not have five Cheyenne men to shoot.

“The Cheyennes who had killed the white soldiers had run away. But five Cheyenne warriors went to the fort anyway. The white soldiers killed them there.

“My oldest brother sang his death song that day. But it was not because my father did not want him anymore. It was because my brother was a brave man, not afraid to die for his people.”

Francis Mason murmured, “My father was cruel, and I was afraid and am ashamed. That is all I can say.”

Bije Wilcox broke the silence finally, saying in English, “Mason asked me to try to find a man with a red mark. That is why I went to the lodges of Medicine Mark’s people. I know the warrior Medicine Mark.”

Rules His Horses answered, “My father knows you. But he does not know a white man with a medicine mark on his face. Maybe the white man is dead.”

Bije squinted toward the yellow hill, saw no danger signals there. He noted that Medicine Mark, like the younger man, was watching in the other direction for signs that might mean soldiers were coming. There had been smoking together, but in these days it meant truce, not friendship.

Bije said, “I will tell a story of a long time ago. The Cheyenne war chief remembers when there were not many white men. I was a young man then, a trapper. I had a fight with some Piegans, lost everything—horses and furs and gun.”

The young Indian said, “My father thinks you counted coup that day.”

Bije smiled grimly. “I counted coup four times before I ran. But I went hungry, because a man cannot eat scalps or anger. I came to the trading post after many days, but I had nothing to trade. I needed horses, traps, blankets, a gun, trade goods. I met a young white man at the fort who gave them to me. He had a red mark on his face like a hand; he said his name was Cain.”

Francis Mason gave Bije a shocked look but managed not to speak.

“Cain never talked much. He had come up the river with trappers, looking for something, but he never said what he was looking for. He had learned to kill buffalo with a bow and arrow. He had a good rifle, a Manton rifle, and nobody could see why he wanted to shoot with a bow. He talked to the Indians at the trading fort and learned some of their words.”

As the young Indian translated, Bije observed that the old warrior made no move to hide the rifle across his knees. The shattered stock was wound with copper wire, but the rifle was a Manton.

“We spent a season trapping,” Bije went on. “He wanted to learn how to live in the woods.”

When this was translated, the old man laughed shortly, and his son said, “He says it is a joke. No one has to learn a thing like that. Everybody knows how to live in the woods.”

“It was no joke for this young man I used to know. We trapped together and sometimes we froze and went hungry, but oftener we ate fat buffalo ribs. Once we fought the Crows, and once Shoshones, and twice the Blackfeet chased us. . . Cain used to write in a little book.”

He wrote poetry in the book, Bije recalled, but there’s no hurry about telling that. Go ahead, old man, tell him you’re his brother.

It was not betrayal he had in mind, after all. It was going to be triumph for two men who were no longer young—for Bije Wilcox who needed a thousand dollars, and for the man who had been Charles Mason, who had been cast out by his own father.

Go back home now with your hair in braids and the ornaments sagging in your ears, Bije urged silently, and let them see what you’ve turned into! It’s a chance to get even that few men ever have. Go back and be Charles Mason after thirty years. Your woman is old; your sons will look after her. Go back and be a white man before you die.

“We headed south for the rendezvous in the spring,” Bije went on. “I had a Blackfoot arrowhead in my knee, and Cain cut it out with his Green River knife, but the flesh rotted. I couldn’t ride anymore, and there were Indians behind us.

“Cain was a brave man. He didn’t know what Indians those were, but he went back and met them, and he brought a medicine man to cure my wound. In four days I was well again, I could ride.”

Mason burst out. “For the love of Heaven, what happened to the white man?”

“Don’t interrupt,” Bije growled. “To Injuns, that’s bad manners.” He looked into the old warrior’s face as he went on: “I don’t know what happened to the young man called Cain. I don’t know what Indians those were. I was too sick to know, and when the fever went away, I was alone with my horses and fur packs.”

There would be time enough, a little later, to take back the part of that that was a lie. What Cain had said was, “I’m not going on with you, Bije. I’ve found what I was looking for. I’ve found my own people.” Bije knew at last what he had meant.

And before they parted, Bije recollected, Cain had burned the little book he used to write in, and the Bible he carried in his possible sack.

Bije said, “If he is dead, my heart is heavy. He was a brave man.”

Medicine Mark spoke briefly, and his son said, “My father tells you he was born a Cheyenne.”

Francis Mason looked stricken but said nothing.

The young Indian went on: “His father was Bull Man. His mother was She Sings.”

Bull Man, Bije thought. He had been mourning for his son. So that’s who adopted Cain!

The young Indian said, “Medicine Mark says he was born in a lodge of the Cheyennes. Bull Man and She Sings were pleased with him because he was their son and he had the mark on his face. It was good medicine. It meant no enemy would kill him.”

Bije remembered something the young white man had said during that winter they trapped together: “The Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should smite him.”

Medicine Mark got to his feet, and his son said, “He will tell you a story.”

Chanting, with the dignified gestures of Indian oratory, the man whose gray braids were bound in otter skin spoke, and Rules His Horses interpreted:

“When I was a young man, I was selfish. I was always looking for what I wanted, not for the good of other people.

“I went to war and brought back eight horses to the lodges of the Cheyennes. I wanted to have a wife. I wanted a girl named Grass Woman. All those horses I sent as a gift to her father, Stands Tall. But he would not take them.”

Bije thought: He was afraid you wouldn't stay with the tribe. He couldn't trust a white man, Cheyennes was always careful of their women.

“I made up my mind I would hang at the pole in the Medicine Lodge. Then maybe I would get the girl. Bull Man was my teacher in the holy lodge. Bull Man wanted me to have what I wanted. For four days I did not eat or drink, but prayed and sang. Then Bull Man slit the skin on my breast and tied me to the pole and I danced, but I could not break the skin.”

Francis Mason shuddered.

“I prayed to the Wise One Above to let me break the skin, but I could not. I hung at the pole until almost sunset. Then I had a vision. It was a red hand. I knew it was good medicine.

“While I hung there, my people brought gifts to hang on the thong that tied me to the pole, to make it heavier, to help me break away.

“My mother, She Sings, laid on the thong a painted robe for a gift to the poor. Her sisters laid on it other heavy things. My heart was strong then, to know how much they gave to let me be free. I pulled harder, but the skin was too tough to break.

“Then Grass Woman came, the girl I wanted for my wife. On the thong she tied a very valuable present for the poor, a heavy kettle.

“Then I knew she wanted me and her father would take the horses. I felt the great heart of my people, the Cut-Arms. I broke away, and the spirit left my body, but the hands of Bull Man caught me and did not let me fall.

“I was born again. Since that time I have not been selfish. I try to help my people. Now I am an old man. I wear the war shirt, and it is a heavy burden, but I will wear it as long as I live.”

He sat down by the fire and covered his face with his blanket. . . .

Francis Mason sat with his hands gripped into fists, staring at the Cheyenne warrior with an expression between horror and admiration. Bije himself was as close to feeling horror as he ever got.

Injuns go through the torture, he meditated, but I never heard of a white man doing it.

Francis Mason said wearily, with more courtesy than Bije had expected of him, “I thank my brother the Cheyenne warrior for telling me the story. . . I wish my brother would come home with me.” There was no hope in his voice, no belief—only stubbornness.

Rules His Horses translated: “Medicine Mark thanks his white brother, but he cannot go. It is too far, and he must look after his people. They have enemies and sometimes they are hungry because the buffalo herds are hard to find.

“My father thinks the young man named Cain is dead a long time.”

Francis Mason nodded slowly without speaking. He glanced at Bije Wilcox, asking for instructions about ending the talk, but Bije waited. The end was for Medicine Mark to decide, because he had the most honors, the greatest prestige. And he was well aware of it. He spoke and his son interpreted:

“Medicine Mark says now he will look at the white man's presents, given because he came so far to talk.”

The gray-braided Cheyenne walked with dignity to the spread gifts on the blanket.

Medicine Mark picked up the three Sharps carbines, one by one, nodding and murmuring, and handed them to his son. He examined the powder, the lead, the percussion caps, the bullet molds and good, strong knives. He took up the razor awkwardly, with an admiring exclamation, rubbed his thumb across the edge and cut himself. He sucked his thumb like a surprised child.

Bije Wilcox said in Cheyenne, "That gift is from me to my Cheyenne brother."

That brotherhood, he reflected, was worth a thousand dollars.

Medicine Mark answered in the same tongue, "An old man's face is tender, and when hair grows on a man's face he must pull it out."

"Indians don't have much hair on their faces," Bije reminded him, but the war chief answered patiently, "I was born a Cheyenne when I hung at the pole."

Francis Mason looked suspicious, and Bije spoke English again: "The three good ponies are gifts also from Mason."

Medicine Mark took his time looking over the ponies. He nodded acceptance. He handed his son more of the things from the blanket—the bolt of red cloth, the sacks of colored beads, the mirrors and awls and strong needles for sewing skins.

Bije said, "Those are for Medicine Mark's wife, Grass Woman, if he wants to give them to her."

There was nothing left on the blanket except the items that were the traps, the web spun by the spider.

Now, thought Bije, is the time you can get even. My pa whipped me and I run away, but he never put me out the way yours did. Now tell Francis Mason the truth. Whether you do it or I do, I get my thousand dollars. And you get your revenge.

He watched the man in the Cheyenne war shirt and felt the tenseness of Francis Mason. Medicine Mark bent at last to pick up the gold locket. He should have taken it before; perhaps even the greenhorn knew that an Indian would not delay so long before taking that small, bright bauble. ("This is a miniature of Charles' mother," Francis had said when he laid it there.)

The Cheyenne war chief let the locket turn on its gold chain and glimpsed the painting of a smiling white woman, long ago dead. But he looked without comprehension.

How long, Bije wondered, was he going to go on playing with the Easterner? Ah, the long patience, the cunning cruelty of a hating Indian!

Medicine Mark tossed the locket to his son. It was only something bright to hang on a warrior's neck among beads and bear claws and small birds' feathers. He picked up the big silver watch, hanging from its chain, and looked at it with innocent admiration. Hearing it tick, he put it to his ear. With an exclamation of dismay and anger, he threw it as far as he could.

Francis Mason gasped.

Medicine Mark scolded, and Bije translated: "He says that must be bad medicine or it wouldn't talk. Only living things talk, and ghosts. He don't want anything to do with white men's ghosts."

The Cheyenne warrior stood scowling and suspicious, glaring at Francis Mason. Then he turned his back.

Twice he had evaded the web of the spider, but one more thing remained on the blanket—the small green book. He picked it up carefully, clumsily, with hands accustomed to the bow and the knife, hands that had dripped blood to match the red hand on his face.

Bije drew in a slow breath and held it as Medicine Mark politely examined the small book. He held it far away, he held it close, he turned it around, riffled the pages—reverently, as one handles a sacred object, a religious charm of feathers and fur.

Do you see the name Charles Mason on the front in gold? Bije wondered.

The spider's web wavered but it caught nothing. Bije saw that the eyes of the Cheyenne were blind to

the gold lettering of a white man's name. The Cheyenne's pride was strong. He had suffered in the Medicine Lodge. He had hung at the pole, and the hearts of the Cut-Arms had beat with him and helped him tear free, and he had been born again.

He had hungered with his people and bled from wounds in battle—and from cuts self-made on his body to win the favor of spirits. He had endured with the Cheyennes, and he could also endure never to have the book the white man would have prized.

Medicine Mark handed the book of Charles Mason's poems to his brother Francis, saying politely in Cheyenne, "Maybe there is medicine in this for white men, but I don't know. It is not for my people."

Bije Wilcox wanted to yell, but he choked it down.

After Rules His Horses had wrapped up the gifts in the blanket and tied them to one of the horses, the old warrior made another speech:

"I can't understand the white men and I don't want to see them anymore. They kill the buffalo, and my people go hungry. They shoot my young men, and our women wail in the lodges. Our children have no fathers to make meat. I don't want to see anymore white men. I will kill all I can until I die.

"Mason should go back to his own place and mourn for his brother. I think the Pawnees killed that man when he was young. I was born a Cheyenne. My father was Bull Man, my mother was She Sings.

"I have gone to war many times. I used to go to war with only a lance, to show I was not afraid to die. But now I go to war with guns, because I am afraid my people will die."

The warrior went on, chanting, swaying. The hair fringe swung on the sleeves of his war shirt, and the sun shone on the red hand on his face and on the scars of the sacrifice cuts across his arms.

"I wear the war shirt. It is a heavy burden. A man who wears it must always be at the front in battle, he must be the last to go back. He must look after his people and give them what they need. He must never be angry if one of his people does wrong to him. A man took two horses from me, but I forgave him and gave him another horse. I keep peace among my people. I would like to put off the war shirt, but my people need me. I will wear it as long as I can."

When Rule His Horses had finished translating. Medicine Mark said, "Now we will go back."

Awkwardly, an Indian trying to imitate white men's ceremonies, the warrior shook hands with Mason and Bije Wilcox. To each he said in Cheyenne. "My brother, good-by." He turned away.

Bije watched him go, thinking: I gave him his chance and he wouldn't take it. I can still call him back. Mason can't hurt him. All I need to do is say, "This is the man," and I've got a thousand dollars.

He glared after the Indians, who were getting on their ponies, and he argued silently: He saved my life that time, but it's paid for with the carbines.

The words formed in his mouth, but no sound came.

He sighed and said, "The young man I used to know must have died long ago. A man that took chances like he did wouldn't last long."

Francis Mason asked, "That hair on his sleeves—is that. . ."

"Injun scalps, and he took 'em himself."

Mason said flatly, "There were two men in the world with that birthmark, then. My brother Charles could never have become a savage. And I was so hopeful. So sure."

The Indians, leading the extra ponies, had almost reached the yellow hill.

Francis Mason brooded, "Strange, with all those hideous customs, that a heathen savage should follow the rules the old man mentioned, such as having to forgive one of his own people who does him wrong, because he wears the war shirt. A kind of Indian version of the golden rule."

Bije said harshly, "That man was born in a Cheyenne camp. He never heard of the golden rule."

The two Indians disappeared at last around the yellow hill.

As Bijé went forward, a little lame, to get his horse and the greenhorn's, he understood finally why he could not speak to claim the Judas money.

We go by different rules, the old war chief and me, Bijé thought. He goes by the Injun way he chose—but me, by God, I'm still civilized.

BEYOND THE FRONTIER

In times of stress you think of foolish things. As long as he had his horse at a hard run, sometimes ahead of his partner Edwards and sometimes behind, as long as they were on their way back to the ranch, Priam thought of nothing much except getting there and the chances of his horse catching a leg in a prairie-dog hole.

But when he got near enough to the smoking, half-burned house to see that the two women at least were safe there in the yard, through his mind kept running a useless thought, *Too late. Too late for mending now.*

His partner said sharply, "They're all safe. But Blossom—"

It was right that Edwards should think of Blossom first; she was his wife. She was standing in the yard in front of the still-smoking log house, her long skirts blowing, her hands up to her mouth in a theatrical gesture that said, *Rancher's wife waiting for husband's return after Indian raid.*

Blossom will always come out all right, Priam thought. She'll see to that.

Edwards leaped from the saddle and ran toward her. Her frozen silence said, I told you so. This is what happens in Montana Territory. Edwards took her in his arms and she wept.

Priam glanced at the two silent, towheaded little Freese children, waiting in a kind of tableau. They stood near Laura, watchful and alert, as if they might disappear at any instant, the way prairie dogs do.

Laura sat on a log where the woodpile had been, watching Priam's approach with big dark eyes, not moving, not speaking. And the Dogie Kid waited, leaning on an ax with a charred handle. Something had changed about the Dogie Kid, but Priam did not know yet what it was. Not physical, he thought, but something else—a kind of dignity, a sureness, that had not been there before.

Priam asked, "Everything all right?" knowing as he said it that he could hardly have asked anything sillier.

"All O.K.," the Dogie Kid reported with no emotion in his husky, changing voice.

Blossom lifted her face from her husband's chest and cried out, "Everything is wonderful! Yes, it's all perfect!" and began to laugh hysterically.

The Dogie Kid explained briefly: "The Injuns come night before last. I heard 'em running off the horses, and I got the women and kids down to that cave under the river bank. Had my forty-five. No rifle. We stayed there, and this morning we come out. Nobody killed. Laura hurt her arm, that's all. Fell down, getting there."

Priam glanced at Laura. She still sat quietly on the log, resting her left arm in her lap. Her eyes were closed.

Too late, he realized again. She'll never stay out there now. I'll never know whether she would have been willing. I never asked her. And now I can't.

"I was going to see about her arm," the Dogie Kid said defensively. "But I took a look around the place first to see how much damage they done. They butchered the milch cow; horses all gone. Stripped the house—nothing left but that old skillet and the ax. We cooked up some garden sass to feed the kids with."

Priam nodded. "I'll look at the arm." He glanced at the Dogie Kid, still puzzled about the change. He's not a kid anymore, he realized. He did a man's job this time.

"You did all right," he said briefly.

He knew at once that the Kid did not need that commendation, or appreciate it. He had done only what any man would try to do if Injuns came and there were women and kids to look after. He had watched over them, through two nights and a day, down there in the cave in the cutbank, with his gun in his hand. If the Injuns had found them, the Kid would have fired four shots there in the cave, and a fifth one for himself if he had time. The Injuns had not found the cave, and everyone was safe. The Kid would never be a boy again, that was all.

Edwards tenderly patted Blossom's arm and walked over to Priam, looking grim.

"This ends it," he announced. "I don't care what we do with the ranch or the cattle; I'm taking my wife and Laura back to Pennsylvania."

Priam answered, holding back his anger, "You ain't aiming to start this minute, I hope. There's seven of us here, with two beat-up horses and the wagon burnt." His own horse stood with head down, not even grazing. Edwards' buckskin was feebly trying to roll, to clean the sweat off.

"Yank them saddles off," he told the Dogie Kid. "And hobble the horses. They're all we got."

Priam sat down beside Laura on the log as if he had all the time in the world. Her arm was probably broken, and waiting wouldn't help it any, but making a fuss wouldn't heal it either. "You all right?" he asked.

She opened her eyes and almost smiled. "We're alive and well, thank you," she answered. "We were worried about you."

"Bunch of Injuns passed us in a hurry this morning when we was up on a butte. We come home on a hunch." He touched her arm with thumb and forefinger, and she flinched. It was badly swollen, and there was a lump that meant a broken bone. "It'll take us three days to get up to Miles," he said. "Even after we get a team and wagon. We can see to that after the horses rest. Better work on that arm now. It'll travel easier."

She drew her breath sharply and let it out slowly. "Whatever you say," she agreed. "But get the children away from here. I don't want them watching."

The Dogie Kid laid a saddle carefully on its side on the ground and remarked, "I'll take the kids back of the cabin. Might find something the Injuns dropped." He took each of them by the hand.

He wouldn't have done that a couple days ago, Priam realized. He can do it now because he's not a kid anymore himself.

"What I aim to do," Priam told Laura gently, "is pull that arm some and tie it, with sticks for braces, like. I'll go see what I can find to work with."

"I'll wait for you," Laura answered, and he thought she was going to go hysterical—her lips were curved into a strange sort of smile—but she only closed her eyes and kept on sitting there.

From the cabin walls he pulled some of the thin wooden strips that had helped to chink between the logs; they were charred, but he could whittle them to shape. He went into the house for something that might be used for bandaging. Blossom stood there in the thin curls of stinking smoke, staring at the ruin. Nothing remained of any use; there had been wanton destruction. "My linen tablecloth," Blossom whispered. "Even that. And my wedding dress."

Priam picked up the scorched shreds. "That'll do for bandages," he said. "Thanks."

Blossom stared at him as if she thought he was crazy, but that was nothing new.

Edwards helped with the arm, holding it in place while Priam bandaged the splints. When he had finished, sweat was running down all their faces. There were tears on Laura's cheeks, but she had cried

out only a couple of times.

Edwards grunted suddenly, "Riders coming!" and jumped for his saddle with the rifle in the boot.

Priam squinted across the prairie and answered, "White men. Now we'll have some help."

The Dogie Kid came around the cabin at a run, carrying the smallest Freese child and dragging the other by the hand. He blinked, but said nothing. Priam realized that the Kid couldn't see very well; after two nights of alert wakefulness in the cave, he was dead on his feet.

"Go find yourself a place and catch some sleep," he advised, but the Dogie Kid shook his head.

Buck Rangoon, a widower rancher from down the creek, had his two grown sons with him. As he swung down from the saddle, he remarked, "The cook heard Injuns going by last night. We been camping down in the hay meadow; didn't get home till this morning. Thought we better come over."

"Edwards and me were away for a week, hunting for horses," Priam explained. "We seen 'em this morning. . . . Everything's gone. Laura broke her arm. Nobody else hurt. Can you spare a wagon and team, get 'em up to Miles?"

Buck motioned to his oldest son. "Pack some grub and blankets," he ordered. The young man whirled his pony and started back fast.

Buck's bushy eyebrows went up. "Them's the Freese kids. What are they doing here?"

"Their pa took their ma up to Miles three days ago; having another baby. Left 'em here to be looked after. We ought to get up there quick. News'll travel and she'll be worried."

Buck looked around at the ruined house, at the wreckage of the saddle shed and wagon.

"Going to start over?" he asked.

Priam shrugged. "Ask my partner. He put up the money. About all I had to put into cattle raising was knowing how."

He walked over to Laura, who was watching him. "We'll start for Miles City soon as the team and wagon gets here," he told her.

"Thank you," she said politely. She began to smile at something back of him. "Look," she said, "the Dogie Kid has been foraging, and he's found a chicken for supper. Really, he took very good care of us. He's reliable."

Priam turned to look at the Kid, stumbling toward them, carrying a speckled hen by the legs.

"That's something nobody ever called him before," he commented.

Blossom remarked bitterly, "He took excellent care of us. We didn't have any drinking water for twenty-four hours, right there with the river not thirty feet away. When I offered to crawl out and get it, he threatened to shoot me."

Priam explained patiently, "If they'd have seen one, they'd have got the lot of you. He took a hell of a chance going for water when he did go."

He guessed at the stories she would tell back in Pennsylvania, acting the brave, bright-eyed little woman who had gone through untold dangers with a smile on her lips. She would say, "It was only five years after Custer's command was massacred that we went out to Montana Territory. My husband went into the cattle business out there, you know, with a man named Priam King. Of course, I wanted to be with my husband."

A woman can be hell for a man, Priam thought. Or heaven, he guessed, but he had no way of knowing. When he and Edwards were batching it, getting the log house built and making a start with cattle, they had done a lot of planning about how things would be when Blossom came out. Edwards had worried some; not enough, though. Not nearly enough.

"It'll be a hard life for a woman," Edwards had admitted. "But she's eager to come out. Blossom is a very brave girl."

“Other women make out all right,” Priam had said to comfort him.

The word “brave” had never appealed to him; it left a bad taste in his mouth. For one thing, a brave was an Injun, and you never knew quite where you stood with Injuns. They got riled up and there was no guessing what they’d do, except that it would be bad. For whites, “brave” was a word that didn’t fit. You did what you had to do, that was his idea of it.

Blossom was fine at first. She sang and was merry; she loved to ride, but not alone. She couldn’t cook, but she thought it was great fun to have the men teach her. She was more for funning over a bunch of wild flowers on the table than for sweeping dried mud off the floor, more for telling a bright story about a chipmunk than for having a meal cooking when they came in. Her lips quivered when she mentioned not liking to be alone.

“But we don’t never leave you alone!” Priam reminded her indignantly. “We made a rule about that. There’s one or another of us around all the time, not more’n half a mile away at most.”

At first they had a hand named Isaacs with them. When he quit, Priam picked up the boy in Miles City, hired him at man’s wages and named him the Dogie Kid because he was a stray. The Kid had come up from Texas with a trail herd, and he was as ornery as any mossy-horn. Edwards bought some steers out of that herd while it was moving north. When Priam saw the Kid a second time, the boy had just been thrown out of a saloon in Miles City and fought for a chance to go back in and prove he had a right to be there.

Priam held him at arm’s length with one hand and asked, narrow-eyed, “How old are you?”

The boy fought to get free. “Fourteen. Thirteen, I don’t know. And what’s it to you? I done a man’s work coming up from Texas.”

“A man could get away from me if he wanted to,” Priam warned him. “Why don’t you?”

The boy stared at him sullenly. “Just because I ain’t big enough,” he said between his teeth. One thing you had to say for the Dogie Kid, he was honest.

“You come work for my partner and me,” Priam suggested, “till you get your growth. Man’s wages. And man’s work.”

“All right,” the boy answered, suddenly cheerful.

Blossom detested him from the beginning. He was the only male in a hundred miles who never flattered her. Even Priam complimented her sometimes, at first. The Dogie Kid acted as if she weren’t there.

In the spring, when Blossom had been out there for a year, she got her cousin Laura out for company, for a visit. Laura was dark and quick and quiet; she didn’t expect to be fussed over. The first time she ever chopped the head off a chicken she sat down suddenly on a log and hid her face so as not to see the fowl flopping around as it died. Priam, out in the saddle shed, grinned as he watched her. She stripped the feathers off the chicken and walked briskly into the house with it. He waited to see what she would have to say about it later, but she had nothing to say.

She came in the spring, and she was due to go back before snow flew. Twice Priam took her for a long ride across the prairie, and although she didn’t say much, her eyes were bright and she smiled most of the time. It was hard to get her away from her cousin, though. Blossom made it clear that she depended on Laura for companionship, even when she urged, “Yes, do go riding, dear. I’ll be perfectly all right. I’ve been alone so much, it doesn’t matter. And when you go back home, I’ll be alone again.”

Priam wondered how Edwards felt about his wife’s pretending he was nobody or absent, but Edwards never said anything about it. He got thinner and sterner, that was all. “I should have stayed back East,” he remarked once, and Priam answered, “When I was riding on somebody else’s pay roll I didn’t know I was well off.”

And now he was going out of the cattle business with a bang, back to riding the grub line. Edwards

would sell the cattle; there was no doubt about that. Blossom had won, and they were going back home. Priam's lips curled in a cynical smile at the thought that the Indians had really won Blossom's battle for her.

He heard Blossom's question, "When will the team and wagon get here? How much longer do we have to wait?"

"Before sundown," Edwards answered patiently. "We can get a few miles toward town before pitch dark if we're all ready to start."

"We're ready," Blossom said bitterly. "We have no packing to do. There is nothing left to pack."

The Dogie Kid had his chicken stewing over a fire he had built out in the yard. The cookstove they had freighted in for Blossom at great expense lay doorless and legless in the ruined house. The two Freese children sat on the ground, watching the Kid. The sight of them suddenly offended Priam.

"Somebody ought to wash them kids up," he remarked. "It must hurt to be that dirty."

Blossom glanced at Laura, then offered, with the air of a martyr, "I'll do it. Cold water, no soap, no towel. And they behave like coyote pups." She took each of them firmly by the hand and started down toward the river.

When she was beyond hearing, Laura suddenly remarked, "They're wild, all right, but what else could they be? And what does it matter anyway?"

"Nothing matters much," Priam grunted. "How's your arm feel?"

She glanced up at him, her head held sideways. "How do you think?" she countered.

Why you little flirt, he almost said. I think you might not have minded if I'd courted you while there was still some chance. Since when did Priam King have to have a cinch hand before he'd dare to bet? But everything is too late now.

"How long will it take to Miles City?" Laura asked casually.

"Three days, at the rate we'll travel . . . and if we're lucky. That'll be hard enough on you."

Priam blinked. Three days. Everything was too late . . . except for three days.

She's never seen the good of living out here, he realized. Only the bad was all she had a chance to see. He wondered what she would say about life in the territory when she got back home to Pennsylvania.

I will see to it she has something to tell about, he resolved. Thirty years from now she can tell her grandchildren, if she still remembers, "When I was young, a man named Priam King courted me."

They covered seven or eight miles before pitch dark. Priam's and Edwards' horses were too tired to be pushed farther. The Dogie Kid, in a borrowed saddle on a borrowed horse that Buck Rangoon's son had brought with the team, rode with his chin on his chest, sleeping most of the way.

Once Edwards asked Blossom, sitting in the wagon bed, whether she was comfortable. She was bright and brave about her answer. "I'm all right, dear. It's only fair that Laura should ride in the seat."

The Dogie Kid woke up long enough to unsaddle his horse, stumble out of the way and roll up in a blanket. He could have ridden in the wagon, but he had been coldly furious when Edwards suggested it.

"I didn't ride in no wagon coming up the trail from Texas," the Kid snapped.

Priam made for Laura as good a bed as he could with a padding of grass and weeds.

"I don't think you're going to sleep very well," he commented. "Arm's hurting, ain't it?"

Laura nodded. "I've never slept outdoors before," she said. "If I can't sleep, I'll watch for shooting stars and listen to the coyotes."

"You can listen to me, too, if you want," he suggested boldly. "I'll be on guard the first part of the

night.”

But even after the others were quiet and the fire had dickered down, even when there was nothing to interfere with his courting, he had no idea how to proceed. He sat beside her on his saddle blanket trying to think of something to say.

Finally Laura yawned. “I’m sleepy,” she said. She added, “We were certainly glad to see you coming today.” Then, as far as Priam could tell, she went to sleep.

The second day was like the first, except that the Dogie Kid was possessed of a devil. At breakfast he handed his tin cup of coffee to Laura, commanding, “Here, take this.”

She did, remarking, “Nothing the matter with that, as far as I can tell.”

He drank from it himself, watching her with dancing eyes. “I just wanted it sweetened up a little,” he told her, grinning.

Priam said, “Hey!” and Laura said, not very severely, “Why, Robert!”

Priam gave the Kid a hard look. Now, how the hell, he wondered, did she know what his real name is? I never did . . . and never cared, either.

“I’ll take the first watch tonight,” the Dogie Kid offered gravely.

“You will not,” Priam informed him. “You’ll take the second.”

The Kid did not argue; he only grinned, as if to say, You’ve got a rival.

That night the Kid went to bed docilely, without any discussion of watches. Priam, having had all day to think of something to talk to Laura about, still had no ideas, but Laura, in her blanket by the fire, did.

“Tell me about yourself,” she urged dreamily.

He could think of nothing that was both suitable and interesting.

“Well, I worked for lots of outfits. Come up from Texas with a trail herd three years ago, run into Edwards, and we decided to go to ranching.”

She sniffed. “Don’t tell me about that. Tell me—Oh, tell me what you were like when you were a boy.”

“I run away from home in Kansas when I was fifteen. What I was like,” he confessed, trying to be honest about it, “was . . . something like the Dogie Kid, I guess.”

“I thought so,” she said with satisfaction. “I thought so all the time!”

Everything’s ruined now, thought Priam. Who’d want to know a man that used to be a boy like that?

“You seem to understand him,” Laura added. She yawned, “I’m sleepy now. . . . I think,” she added in a muffled voice, “the Dogie Kid will be quite nice when he’s a little older.”

Priam said, “Great Lord in heaven!” and stared at her, but her eyes were closed. Feeling dizzy, he put more wood on the fire.

Next morning while they ate breakfast Blossom remarked solicitously, “I do think, Laura, that you’re not getting enough sleep. You were talking quite late. It didn’t disturb me a bit, of course, but I was thinking you need more rest.”

Laura replied, with surprising spunk, “Try sleeping sometime with one arm in splints,” and Blossom looked hurt.

The last night they stayed at a road ranch—all except young Rangoon, who rode on to Miles City to report the Indian attack and notify the Freeses that their children were safe. Mrs. Hoke, at the ranch, a hale and hearty woman as wide as she was tall, greeted them with enthusiasm.

“We ain’t got but the two rooms,” she apologized. “Mr. and Miz Edwards, they can have bunks in the front room, and Mr. and Miz King can have my room, seeing Miz King’s got a broken arm. I’ll sleep in a bunk.”

Priam blinked and waited for Laura to speak. She was smiling at him like a docile wife; she didn’t

say a word. He felt his neck burn as he replied hastily, "We ain't married. This here is Miss Laura Bellman, Miz Edwards' cousin."

Mrs. Hoke laughed heartily. "I declare, that's a good one on me! You was so careful of her, getting out of the wagon, and still so kind of bossy, I figured you was bride and groom."

"You figure out where the women will sleep," Priam said hurriedly. "I'll go to the barn with the other men."

They reached Miles City around noon the next day and turned the children over to their anxious father. Holding each of them in one arm, he told them, "You got a new brother, two hours old. Your ma's been wondering how you was getting along."

Laura refused to let Priam go along to the doctor's office, so he wandered off to look for the Dogie Kid, who had been missing from the minute they hit town.

If anybody wants to throw him out of a saloon, Priam decided, I'm just going to let him bounce when he hits.

But he found the Kid in a barbershop, lathered up for a shave. Priam commented, "Didn't need that very bad, did you?"

The barber sighed, "That's what I told him, but it's his face and his money."

"That," the Kid remarked, "is what I just told the barber."

Priam sat back in the second chair. He did need a shave, and his hair was almost to his shoulders.

Afterward, to nobody's surprise, they walked side by side into the saloon that had once been the Kid's Waterloo. Half a dozen men greeted them, inquiring about the raid.

If the Kid acts smart, Priam thought, I'll cut him down to size myself.

The Kid didn't. He said casually, in answer to a question, "I herded the women and kids down to a cave in the riverbank. Wasn't nothing else could be done."

News of the Indian attack had reached town the day before, by tumbleweed telegraph, and soldiers from the fort had gone after the Indians.

"The sheriff went out with a posse earlier," a whiskery old-timer commented. "So the soldiers can feel perfectly safe."

Someone asked curiously, "You do any shooting, Kid?"

The boy said soberly, "I did not. Most of the time I held a gun on the women and kids, to keep 'em quiet. One of the women got kind of upset."

A tall, bearded man in dusty clothes asked, "What you aiming to do now?"

"Get another job," the Kid said.

"You got one," the man told him, "Two days' ride north. Leaving tomorrow morning. I got some spare horses in the town corral, and I'll stake you to a saddle."

"I'll go with you," the Kid decided.

Priam thought, Likely I'll never see him again or know what became of him. I'll be riding south. To his surprise, he realized that he was going to be sorry not to know.

"I'm buying," the bearded man announced.

Priam stopped him. "I'm buying," he corrected.

The bartender busied himself, remarking, "Can't say I ever seen you take a drink, Priam. This here's a kind of an occasion, eh?"

"That's right," Priam answered shortly. He glared at the Dogie Kid. "I guess one won't stunt your growth," he admitted. The Kid grinned.

Priam smiled one-sidedly at him over his own glass. This, he thought, was the nearest the Kid would ever come to graduating exercises like they had in schools. He wasn't going to worry about the Dogie Kid

anymore. "Here's luck," said Priam briefly.

The Kid answered wickedly, "You need it worse'n I do."

When they separated out on the street, the Kid cleared his throat and remarked, "Laura, she made you a dried-apple pie a while back. Put it out in the saddle shed where you'd find it." He cleared his throat again. "I found it first." He ducked around a corner, laughing.

At the hotel, Blossom reported that Laura was lying down and should not be disturbed.

"I'll wait in the lobby here," Priam said, looking Blossom in the eye. "Reckon she's bound to come out sooner or later."

Blossom recognized the challenge. She said sympathetically, "Priam, I don't think you should waste your time."

"It's no waste," he answered. "Time's about all I've got anyhow."

He smoked a cigar and read the papers. Two hours passed, and three.

The Dogie Kid came stomping in, his hat on the back of his head. "Outfit's pulling out tonight, 'stead of tomorrow," he remarked. "Want to say good-bye to Laura. Where's she at?"

Priam jerked his head, "Up there, with Blossom riding shotgun,"

The Kid looked at him and began to grin. "Hell, I ain't scared of Blossom."

Before Priam could stop him he yelled, "Laura! Come on outa that before I come pull you out!"

The desk clerk began to wring his hands, and Priam leaped to his feet, scowling. "Are you drunk?" he demanded.

"Nope," the boy answered. "Just determined. . . Laura, you coming?"

Blossom's plaintive arguments came down the stairs, with Laura's laughter. Laura, with her arm in a neat sling the doctor had provided, descended.

The Dogie Kid announced, "I come to say good-bye."

Laura raised her eyebrows, but did not succeed in looking severe. "Do you always do it at the top of your lungs?"

"I do it this way," the Kid explained. He put one arm around her waist, tilted her head back and kissed her lips. Then he ran, laughing.

Laura said, "My goodness!"

"You want me to whale him?" Priam inquired. "I can catch him."

"Dear me, no," Laura answered. "Don't you see why he did that? He's a man, and he's going away. He just had to kiss some girl good-bye, that's all."

"If you're not sore, I got no call to be," Priam said stiffly. He looked at her, feeling suddenly sick that she was going away. "If you're not feeling too bad," he suggested, "I'd be obliged if you'd have supper with me or go for a walk . . . or anything."

They strolled to a clump of cottonwoods, with Priam wondering unhappily whether he was permitted to take her arm or not. It was the truth, he reflected, what somebody had said—that there were only two things a cowboy was afraid of: getting set afoot, and a decent woman.

"How you feeling?" he asked gravely.

She didn't answer that. "The doctor said you did a good job of bone setting," she remarked.

"I've had practice," Priam answered. "More'n I cared for."

When he spread his neckerchief on a log to protect her dress, she laughed. "I haven't had this dress off since we ran for the cave," she reminded him. "Nothing could possibly hurt it now. Blossom is arranging to buy one for each of us from a lady in town, to travel in."

"Guess you'll hang on to that one, though," Priam suggested, "to show your grandchildren, tell 'em what kind of things happened to you in Montana."

She smoothed her soiled and wrinkled skirt. "I won't need a dress to remind me."

"What are you going to remember, Laura?" he demanded.

"Everything," she answered. "You, too, of course." She looked up into the rustling leaves with great interest.

"How will you remember me? As a cowboy who took on more than he could handle, I guess, and went back to Texas to work for somebody else."

"I'll remember the way you looked when you swung down from your horse in the yard there, counting all of us to see that we were safe." She smiled a little. "You looked as if you could eat Indians for breakfast."

Priam could not guess whether she had any regard for a man who looked that way, so he did not answer.

Laura asked suddenly, "Cowboys don't get married, do they?"

"How could they? Work for one outfit after another, got no way to make a home for a woman. Man's got his own outfit, then he can think about it. If he can find a woman." This was the time to tell her; he could do that much, and it was all he could do. "If I had my own cattle, Laura," he said in a voice he did not recognize, "I could—well, it would be different. But it was Edwards' money."

"Most of it is Blossom's," she corrected calmly. "I inherited the same amount that Blossom did, from our grandfather. I was wondering about buying her out."

Priam stared at her with his mouth open. She stared innocently back.

"In spite of everything?" he asked, unbelieving. "In spite of— The house is half burned," he reminded her.

"The house is half standing," she corrected.

"That's one way to look at it," he agreed. He took her hand. He cleared his throat and began, "Laura —"

She tipped her head on one side and suggested, "Please smile a little, Priam. This isn't a funeral you're going to talk about."

His laughter was a shout that scared a chipmunk in the cottonwood above them.

SCARS OF HONOR

Charley Lockjaw died last summer on the reservation. He was very old—a hundred years, he had claimed. He still wore his hair in braids, as only the older men do in his tribe, and the braids were thin and white. His fierce old face was like a withered apple. He was bent and frail and trembling, and his voice was like a wailing of the wind across the prairie grass.

Old Charley died in his sleep in the canvas-covered tepee where he lived in warm weather. In the winter he was crowded with the younger ones among his descendants in a two-room log cabin, but in summer they pitched the tepee. Sometimes they left him alone there, and sometimes his great-grandchildren scrambled in with him like a bunch of puppies.

His death was no surprise to anyone. What startled the Indian agent and some of Charley's own people, and the white ranchers when they heard about it, was the fact that some of the young men of the tribe sacrificed a horse on his grave. Charley wasn't buried on holy ground; he never went near the mission. He was buried in a grove of cottonwoods down by the creek that is named for a dead chief. His lame great-grandson, Joe Walking Wolf, and three other young Indians took this horse out there and shot it. It was a fine sorrel gelding, only seven years old, broke fairly gentle and nothing wrong with it. Young Joe had been offered eighty dollars for that horse.

The mission priest was disturbed about the killing of the horse, justifiably suspecting some dark pagan significance, and he tried to find out the reason the young men killed it. He urged Joe's mother, Mary, to find out, but she never did—or if she did, she never told. Joe only said, with a shrug, "It was my horse."

The white ranchers chuckled indulgently, a little shocked about the horse but never too much upset about anything Indians did. The rancher who told the story oftenest and with most interest was the one who had made the eighty-dollar offer to Joe Walking Wolf. Joe had said to him, "Ain't my horse." But Joe was the one who shot it on old Charley's grave, and it didn't belong to anyone else.

But the Indian agent guessed what had been going on. He knew more about Indians than the Federal Government required him to know. The horse was not government property nor the tribe's common property; everybody knew it belonged to Joe. The agent did not investigate, figuring it was none of his business.

That was last summer, when old Charley died and the young men took the horse out to where he was buried. The story about the killing of the horse begins, though, in 1941, before that horse was even born. The young men were being drafted then, and the agent explained it all, over and over again, through an interpreter, so nobody would have an excuse for not understanding. In the agent's experience, even an Indian who had been clear through high school could fail completely to understand English if he didn't happen to want to.

Some of the white ranchers explained it, too. Some of them were expecting to go, or to have their sons or hired cowboys go, and the draft was a thing they mentioned casually to the Indians who worked for them at two or three dollars a day, digging irrigation ditches or hoeing in the kitchen garden or working in the hay fields. So the Indians understood the draft all right, with everybody talking about it.

The agent kept telling them, "In the World War you were not citizens, so you did not have to go in the

Army.” (He meant the First World War, of course. The United States hadn’t got into the second one yet; there was only the draft.) “Many of your fathers enlisted in the Army anyway and they were good fighters. They did not have to go, but they wanted to. Now you are citizens, you can vote, and some of you will have to go in the Army. When the letters come for you, we will talk about it again.”

Well, some of the young men didn’t want to wait until the letters came. Fighting was part of their tradition. It was in the old men’s stories, and the names of their long-dead warriors were in history books, as well as in the stories the old men told around the cabin stoves when snow was deep outside and the cabins were crowded with many people and the air foul with much breathing and not much bathing. (Long ago, before any of these young men were born, their forefathers had bathed every morning in rivers or creeks, even if they had to break the ice, but that custom had passed with their glory.)

The middle-aged men of the tribe remembered the white man’s war they had fought in, and some of them still had parts of their old uniforms put away. But the stories they told were of places too distant for understanding, foreign places with no meaning except for the men who had been there. The stories the grandfathers told were better. They were about the stealthy approach through the grass after the men had prayed and painted, the quick, sharp action on river banks that were familiar still or in tepee camps where white men now live in brick houses.

The grandfathers’ stories were of warriors who never marched or drilled but walked softly in moccasins or rode naked on fleet war ponies. They had no uniforms; they wore mystic painted symbols on face and body. In those battles there was the proud waving of eagle-feathered war bonnets and the strong courage of warriors who dared to carry a sacred buffalo shield, although a man who carried one was pledged not to retreat. They were battles without artillery, but with muzzle-loading rifles and iron-tipped lances and the long feathered arrows hissing out from a horn bow. Killing was not paramount in those old battles; more important was proof of a man’s courage in the face of death, and the bravest were those few who dared to carry no weapon at all, but only a whip, for counting coup on a living, unhurt enemy. Nobody was drafted for those battles, and death was often the price of glory.

Only two or three of the old men remembered so far back. One of them was Charley Lockjaw. He was suddenly important. If he had not lived two generations too late, he would have been important simply because he was old. His people would have taken it for granted that he was wise, because his medicine had protected him for so long against death. They would have listened respectfully when he spoke. There was a time when it was a good thing to be an Indian, and old. But Charley was cheated—almost—of his honors, because he lived at the wrong time.

Suddenly he was needed. He was sitting in front of his summer tepee, nodding in the sun, with the good warmth seeping into his joints, when four young men came to him. They were modern Indians, with white men’s haircuts. They wore torn blue jeans and faded shirts and white men’s boots, because they were all cowboys, even the lame one, his great-grandson, Joe.

Charley looked up, ready to be angry, expecting some disrespectful, hurried greeting, like “Hey, grampa, look here.”

They did not say anything for a while. Embarrassed, they shuffled their boots in the dust. Joe Walking Wolf took off his broad-brimmed hat, and the other three took their hats off, too, and laid them on the ground.

Joe cleared his throat and said in Cheyenne, “Greetings, my grandfather.” It was the way a young man talked to a wise old one in the buffalo years that were gone.

Old Charley blinked and saw that Joe was carrying, with awkward care, an ancient ceremonial pipe of red stone.

Joe asked gravely, “Will you smoke with us, my grandfather?”

Charley was at first indignant, thinking they meant to tease him, because they were atheists who did not believe in the old religion or any of the new ones. He railed at them and said, "Goddamn!" in English. But they did not go away; they stood there respectfully with their heads bent, accepting what he said and, in the old, courteous way, not interrupting.

He looked at their sober faces and their steady eyes, and he was ashamed for his own lack of courtesy. When he understood that they were sincere, he would have done anything for them, anything they asked. There was not much he could do anymore, and nobody had asked him to do anything for a long time.

If he took the pipe and smoked, that said, "I will do whatever you ask." He did not know what they were going to ask, but he would have let them cut him into pieces if that was what they wanted, because his heart was full at being approached in the remembered, ceremonial way, clumsy as these modern Indians were about it. He answered in his reedy voice, "I will smoke with you."

They were going to do it all wrong. One of the young men brought out a sack of tobacco, and that was all right if there was none that had been raised with the right prayers said over it. But Joe pulled out a pocket lighter a white man had given him and another young man brought out some kitchen matches and old Charley could not endure such innovations.

He made them build a fire in the center of his summer tepee, under the fire hole in the peak, and he sat down with a groan of stiffness at the back, in the honor seat, the place of the lodge owner. The young men were patient. They sat where he told them to, on the old ragged carpet his granddaughter had put on the earth floor.

He filled the pipe with pinches of tobacco without touching the bowl and lighted it with a coal from the fire. With slow, remembered ceremony he offered the pipestem to Heammawihic, the Wise One Above, to Ahktunowihic, the power of the earth below, and to the spirits of the four directions—where the sun comes up, where the cold wind goes to, where the sun comes over and where the cold wind comes from.

He spoke reverently to each of these. Then he himself took four puffs and passed the pipe, slowly, carefully, holding the stem upright, to young Yellowbird, who was on his left.

Yellowbird smoked, though awkwardly, in the sacred manner and passed the pipe to Joe Walking Wolf. When Joe had finished, he stood up to take the pipe to the two young men on the other side of Charley, but the old man corrected him patiently. The pipe must not cross the doorway of the lodge; it must be passed back from hand to hand, first to Robert Stands in Water and then on to Tom Little Hand.

The young men were humble when he corrected them. They thanked him when he told them how to do things right.

When he signified that the time had come for them to talk, young Joe, the lame one, said formally in Cheyenne, "My grandfather has told of the old times long ago, and we have listened. He has told how the warriors used to go on a hilltop with a wise old man and stay there and dream before they went on the warpath."

Old Charley said, "I told you those things and they were true. I dreamed on a hilltop when I was young."

Joe Walking Wolf said, "We want to dream that way, my grandfather, because we are going to war."

The old man did not have to promise to help them. He had promised when he took the pipe. He sat for a while with his eyes closed, his head bowed, trying to remember what his instructors had said to him the three times he had gone through the *wu-wun*, the starving. How would anyone know the right way if the old men had forgotten? But he was able to remember, because he remembered his youth better than yesterday.

He remembered the chanted prayers and the hunger and thirst and the long waiting for mystery to be

revealed. He remembered the grave warnings, the sympathetic teaching of the wise old men seventy years before.

“It is a hard thing to do,” he told the young men. “Some men cannot do it. Alone on a high place for four days and four nights, without food or water. Some men dream good medicine, and some dream bad medicine, and some have no dream. It is good to finish this hard thing, but it is no disgrace not to finish.

“A man lies on a bed of white sage,” he told them, “and he is alone after his teacher, his grandfather, has taught him what to do. After four days, his grandfather goes up the hill and gets him—if he has not come back before that time.”

Charley Lockjaw remembered something else that was important and added firmly, “The young men bring the grandfather a gift.”

And so they went through the *wu-wun*, each of them alone on a high hill, starving and thirsting for four days and nights. First they brought Charley gifts: four silver dollars from one, new moccasins from another, and two bottles of whiskey. (After the ordeals were over, he spent the four silver dollars for whiskey, too, getting it with difficulty through a man who was going off the reservation and who did not look like an Indian, so he could buy it, though it was against the law. An Indian could vote and be drafted, but he could not buy whiskey.)

The whole thing was secret, so that no one would complain to anybody who might want to interfere. Charley Lockjaw had been interfered with so much that he was suspicious. All his long life, white men had been interfering with him and, he thought, his own granddaughter might go to the priest if she knew what was going on, or the other young men’s families might make trouble. No good would come of telling what went on.

Because of the secrecy, the old man had to ride horseback several times. Usually he had to be helped into a saddle because his joints were stiff and his legs hurt, so that if he did not stop himself and remember that now he could be proud again, he might groan.

He took each young man out separately to a hill chosen because of its height, its loneliness and its location. It had to be south or west of a river; that had always been the rule. He had never known the reason, and neither did anyone else. It was one of the things that was right, that was all, and he was very anxious to do everything right.

At the foot of the hill, he and the young man left the horses hobbled. The young man helped Charley up the hill, respectively and with great patience. He made a bed of white sage, and Charley sang his prayers to the Spirit above.

He added a humble plea that had not been in the ritual when he was young. “If I make a mistake,” he cried to the blue sky, “it is because I am old. Do not blame the young man. He wants to do right. If he does wrong, it is my fault. Give him good medicine.”

Then he stumbled down the hill and got on the borrowed horse by himself and rode home. If the young man should give up before his time had passed, he could catch up the horse that was left.

None of them gave up, and none of them cheated. Each of them lay alone on the sage bed on the hill, singing the songs Charley Lockjaw had taught him, sometimes watching the sky (and seeing airplanes more often than wheeling eagles) and three times a day smoking the sacred pipe.

The first was Joe Walking Wolf. Charley was proud of him when he toiled up the hill with a canteen of water and a chunk of dry bread. He was proud when the boy first splashed water on his face and then drank, unhurriedly, from the canteen.

When Joe’s tongue was moistened enough so he could talk, he said briefly, “I dreamed a horse was kicking me.”

“I do not know what that means,” Charley told him. “Maybe you will know after you think about it.”

He was afraid, though, that the dream was bad. The reason Joe limped was that a horse had kicked him when he was three years old.

The second man was Yellowbird. He was impatient. He was standing up, watching, when Charley Lockjaw came in sight on his old bag-of-bones, borrowed horse, and he came down the hill to gulp the water the old man had brought. But he had endured the whole four days.

He said in English, "I dreamed I was dead and gone to hell." Then he said it in Cheyenne, except "hell," and Charley knew what that word was. There was no hell for Cheyennes after they were dead, according to the old religion.

Charley said, "That may be good medicine. I do not know."

The third man was Robert Stands in Water. He was sick and he vomited the first water he drank, but he got better in a little while and they went home. He didn't say what his dream was.

The fourth and last was Tom Little Hand, a laughing young man except when there were white people around. He was a proud rider and a dandy; he wore green sunglasses when he went outdoors, and tight shirts like the white cowboys. When Charley brought the water, he was no dandy anymore. Naked to the waist, he lay flat on the sage bed, and the old man had to help him sit up so he could drink and eat.

"There was a bright light," he said when he felt like talking. "It floated in the air and I tried to catch it."

Charley didn't know what kind of medicine that was, but he said Tom Little Hand would probably be able to understand it after a while.

Anyway, they had all done the best they could, the right thing, and they were ready to be warriors. They had endured in the old fashion.

When they got back to the cabin settlement beside the creek that is named for a dead chief, old Charley dug up his whiskey and went into his lodge and drank, and slept, and drank some more. A teacher is worthy of his hire, and Charley Lockjaw was tired out from all that riding and climbing of high hills. For all that time, four days for four men, sixteen days altogether, he had not slept very much. He had been singing in his lodge or in front of it, in his reedy voice like the wailing of the wind across the prairie. The little boys had not bothered him by crowding in to tumble around like puppies. They were afraid of him.

While Charley was having his drunk, the four young men went down to town to enlist in the Army. He did not know that. When he was sober again, two of them had come back—his grandson Joe and Tom Little Hand, the dandy.

Tom said, "They don't want me. I don't see so good."

Joe Walking Wolf didn't say anything. He went around with his bad limp and got a job for a few days on a white man's ranch, sawing branches off some trees in the yard. The cook gave him his meals separate from the white hired hands, but he heard them talking about the draft and joking with each other about being 4F. Some were 4F because cowboys get stove up by bad horses. Joe felt better, knowing he was not the only one.

In the winter the war clouds broke with lightning and thunder, and the Army decided Tom Little Hand could see plenty well enough to go to war. The Army began to take some married men, too, and almost all the single ones except lame Joe Walking Wolf, and a couple who had an eye disease, and six who had tuberculosis and one who was stone-deaf.

Then for a couple of years old Charley Lockjaw wasn't important anymore. The people who were important were those who could read the letters that came to the cabin settlement, and those who could write the answers.

Some of the young men came back on furlough, hitchhiking eighty miles from the railroad. In wartime people would pick up a soldier, even if he was an Indian. They strolled around the settlement and rode

over to the agency in their uniforms and went to the white men's store, and some of the white ranchers went out of their way to shake hands with them and say, "Well, boy, how goes it?" They were important, the fledgling warriors.

Old Charley, sitting in front of his peaked lodge in the summer, saw them strut, saw the shawl-wrapped, laughing girls hang around them. He saw them walk down the road after dark, and he felt bad about some of the girls. When he was a young man, the Cheyennes took pride in the virtue of their women. His first wife had worn the rope of chastity until he removed it himself, the fourth night after her father had accepted his gift of captured horses.

He was ashamed of the Cheyenne girls, but not of the young warriors. He pitied them a little, remembering the proud nodding eagle-feathered war bonnets and the tall, straight men who wore them. He remembered his own courting; for five years it had gone on. There were many other gallants who had stood in front of the girl's lodge, blanket-wrapped, waiting for her to come out.

One of the letters that came to the reservation had bad news in it. It was in a yellow envelope, and the agent brought it over himself and explained it to the mother of Tom Little Hand.

Tom had been wounded, it said, and was in a hospital. The next morning Joe Walking Wolf, the lame one, made a ceremonial visit to old Charley, carrying the old stone pipe. He was not embarrassed this time, because he knew how to smoke in the sacred way.

Charley drew in a breath sharply and was ashamed because he trembled.

"The gift for that, to the grandfather," he cautioned, "must be a big gift, because it is a hard ceremony."

"The gift is outside with the pole," Joe said humbly. And outside was picketed Joe's good sorrel colt.

There was a time when the Cheyennes, the Cut Arm people, could be lordly in their generosity with gifts of captured horses, sometimes bought with their blood. They could be splendid in their charity, giving buffalo meat to the needy and fine robes to the poor. But that time was when Charley Lockjaw was young. He had not owned a horse of his own for thirty years. And this was the only horse his great-grandson had, for the old mare this colt belonged to had died.

Charley blinked at the horse, a beautiful colt without a blemish. He walked over to stroke its neck, and the colt threw its head back and tried to get away. Charley spoke to it sharply, with approval. The colt was no stable pet, but used to running across the prairie with its mane flying in the wind and the snow. It would throw a rider before it was broke, Charley thought.

He nodded and said, "The gift is enough."

When he was a young man, he had paid many fine horses to the old one who taught him the ceremony for swinging at the pole and whose hard, gentle hands had supported him when he fainted. But he had had many horses to give, and plenty of them left. This was a finer present than he had given, because it was all Joe had.

"We will have to wait," Charley said. "We cannot do this thing today. We will wait four days."

He chose four because it was the sacred number and because he needed time to remember. He had been a pupil for this sacrifice, but never a teacher.

"Come back in four days," he said.

In the time while he was remembering and praying for a return, in some part, of his old strength and steadiness, he fasted for one whole day. His granddaughter fretted and murmured, coming out to the lodge to bring soup because he said he was sick and could not eat.

"I will send one of the children to tell the nurse at the agency," she decided, but he waved her away, promising, "I will be well tomorrow."

He was afraid, not only because he might forget something important or his hand might slip, but because someone might find out and try to stop him. Somebody was always interfering. For years the old

religion had been outlawed by the government in Washington. For years no one dared even to make the Medicine Lodge when the grass was tall in summer, so those years passed without the old, careful ceremony of prayer and paint and reverence that brought new life to the tribe and honor to the Lodge Maker.

This was no longer true by the time of the Second World War, though. Every year now the Medicine Lodge was made by some man who could afford it and wanted to give thanks for something. Perhaps his child had been sick and was well again. A man who made the Lodge, who learned the ritual, could teach another man. So that was not lost, though some of it had changed and some was forgotten, and it was very hard to find a buffalo skull to use in the ceremony.

The white ranchers and their guests came to the reservation in July to watch the making of the Lodge and see the prayer cloths waving from the Thunderbird's nest, and Charley took part in those ceremonies. The white people vaguely approved of the Indians keeping their quaint old customs.

But the Medicine Lodge, the Sun Dance, was a public ceremony. Swinging at the pole, as Joe Walking Wolf wanted to do it, was private suffering.

It was a long time since a young man had wished to swing at the pole. There was no one left in the tribe, except Charley Lockjaw, who could instruct a pupil in the ceremony. No one could teach it except a man who had himself endured it. And only Charley had on his withered breast the knotted scars of that ordeal.

Now that Joe was going to do it, Charley could not keep this great thing to himself. A man who suffered at the pole gained honor—but how could he be credited if no one knew what he had done?

At sunrise on the fourth day, Joe and Charley rode far out to a safe place among the sandstone cliffs.

Then Charley was shaken by terror. He denied his gods. He said, "Do not be too sure about this thing. Maybe the spirits will not hear my voice or yours. Maybe they are all dead and will never hear anything anymore. Maybe they starved to death."

Joe Walking Wolf said, "I will do it anyway. Tom Little Hand has a bad wound, and he is my friend. I will make this sacrifice because maybe it will help him get well. Anyway, I will know what it is to be wounded. I did not go to war."

Charley dug a hole to set the pole in. He told Joe how to set up the pole and fasten a lariat to it, and all the time he was thinking about long ago. He could not remember the pain anymore. He remembered his strong voice crying out prayers as he jerked against the thong. He had not flinched when the knife cut or when the thong jerked the skewers in the bloody flesh.

He said, "I did this to pay a pledge. My wife, Laughing Woman—my first wife—she was very sick, and I pledged this sacrifice. The baby died, because it was winter and the white soldiers chased our people through the snow in the bitter cold. Lots of people died. But Laughing Woman lived, and in the spring I paid what I had promised."

He had Joe make a bed of white sage. When everything was ready, Joe said, "Fasten it to my back. I don't want to see it."

Charley said, "Kneel on the sage bed."

He made his gnarled hands as steady as he could and pinched up the skin on Joe's right shoulder. He tunneled through the pinched part with a sharp knife, and the bright blood sprang to the dark skin. Through the tunnel he thrust a wooden skewer three inches long. Joe did not move or murmur. Kneeling on the sage bed, with his head bowed, he was silent as a stone.

Charley put another skewer under the skin on the left shoulder, and over each skewer he put a loop of rawhide, which he tied to the lariat that hung from the pole. The skewers would never be pulled out as they had been put in.

He lifted Joe to his feet and made him lean forward to see that the rope was tight and the pull even. Joe walked a quarter of a circle to the right four times, and back, sagging forward hard on the lariat's pull, trying to tear the skewers through. Then he walked four times to the left, with his blood running down his back.

Charley left the red stone pipe where he could reach it and said, "Three times before the sun goes down, stop and smoke for a little while."

His heart was full of Joe's pain. He ached with tenderness and pride.

"Break away if you can," he urged, "but if you cannot, there is no wrong thing done. If you cannot break away, I will cut you free when the sun goes down. Nobody can take away the honor."

Joe said, "I am not doing it to get honor. I am doing it to make Tom Little Hand get well again."

He kept walking with his bad limp and pulling mightily, but he could not break through the tough flesh that stretched like rubber.

"I will come back when the sun goes down," Charley Lockjaw said.

Back in the settlement he went around and told a few safe, religious men what was happening in the sandstone cliffs. They said their hearts were with Joe, and Charley knew that Joe would have his honor among his people.

When he went back to the pole at sunset, Joe was still walking, still pulling.

Charley asked, "Did you have a dream?"

Joe said, "I saw Tom Little Hand riding a horse."

"What a man dreams when he swings at the pole," Charley told him, "is sure to come true. I saw myself with thin, white braids, and I have lived to be old instead of being killed in battle." He got out his knife and said, "Kneel down."

He cut out a small piece of skin from the right shoulder and the left, freeing the skewers, and laid the bits of bloody skin on the ground as an offering.

He touched Joe's arm and said gently, "It is ended."

Joe stood up, not even giving a deep breath to show he was glad the suffering was over.

Charley did something new then. He bandaged the wounds as well as he could, with clean gauze and tape from the white man's store. These were new things, not part of the ceremony, but he saw that some new things were good as long as there were young men strong enough to keep to the old ones.

"Tonight," he said, "you sleep in my lodge and nobody will bother you." In the sagging bed in the cabin where Joe slept, there were also two or three children who might hurt those wounds.

"Now," Charley said, "I am going to give you something."

He brought from a hiding place, behind a rock, a pint whiskey bottle, still half full, and said, "I am sorry there is not more here."

He told Joe, "Now you can teach the ritual of swinging at the pole. Two men can teach it, you and I, if anyone wants to learn. It will not be forgotten when my shadow walks the Hanging Road across the stars."

The spirits may be dead, he thought, but the strong hearts of the Cheyenne people still beat with courage like the steady sound of drums.

Charley never rode his sorrel horse, but when it was three years old, Joe broke it. The horse threw him two or three times, and the old man cackled, admiring its spirit, while Joe picked himself up from the dust, swearing. Joe used the horse, but he never put a saddle on that sorrel without first asking Charley's permission.

Some of the short-haired young men never did come back from the Army, but Joe's three friends came back, wearing their uniforms and their medals. Tom Little Hand walked on crutches the first time he came home, with a cane the second time, but when he came home to stay he needed only a brace on the leg that

had been wounded, and a special shoe on that foot.

The three soldiers went to the agency to show off a little, and to the white man's store off the reservation, to buy tobacco and stand around. The white ranchers, coming in for the mail, shook hands with them and called each one by name and said, "Glad to see you back, boy! Sure glad to see you back!"

The Indian soldiers smiled a little and said, "Yeah." The ranchers never thought of shaking hands with Joe Walking Wolf. He had been around all the time, and the marks of his honor were not in any medals but in the angry scars under his faded shirt.

After all the girls had had a chance to admire the uniforms, the young men took off their medals, to be put away with the broken-feathered war bonnets and the ancient, unstrung bow. They wore parts of their uniforms to work in, as few white veterans did, and they went back to raising cattle or doing whatever work they could get.

Tom Little Hand, that proud rider, never wore his old cowboy boots again because of the brace on his leg. He could not even wear moccasins, but always the special shoe. But he walked and he rode, and pretty soon he married Joe's sister, Jennie, whose Cheyenne name was Laughing Woman, the same as her great-grandmother's. That's all there is to the story, except that last summer Charley Lockjaw died. He had thought he was a hundred years old, but his granddaughter told the Indian agent that he had always said he was born the year a certain treaty was made with the white chiefs. The agent knew what year that treaty was, and he figured out that Charley must have been ninety when he died.

The agent was interested in history, and so he asked, "Was Charley in the fight with Yellow Hair at the Little Big Horn?" Charley's granddaughter said she didn't know. Her son, Joe Walking Wolf, knew but did not say so.

Charley Lockjaw had been there, a warrior seventeen years old, and had counted coup five times on blue-coated soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry that June day when General Custer and his men died in the great victory of the Cheyennes and the Sioux. But Joe did not tell everything Charley Lockjaw had told him.

When Charley died, he left his horse to Joe. So Joe wasn't lying when, after he shot the beautiful eighty-dollar sorrel on Charley's grave, he simply said, "It was my horse."

The three other young men were there when Joe killed it. That was the right thing to do, they agreed soberly, because in the old days when a warrior died, his best horse was sacrificed for him. Then he would have it to ride as he went along the Hanging Road to the place where the shadows of the Cheyenne people go. The place is neither heaven nor hell, but just like earth, with plenty of fighting and buffalo and horses, and tall peaked lodges to live in, and everybody there who has gone before. It is just like earth, as Charley Lockjaw remembered earth from his young days.

When Joe had shot the horse, the young men took the sharp knives they had brought along and peeled the hide off. They butchered the carcass and took the great hunks of horse meat home to their families.

Because the buffalo are gone from earth now, and in the dirt-roofed cabins of the Cheyennes, the conquered people, there is not often enough food to get ready a feast.

LAUGH IN THE FACE OF DANGER

Gray-haired Alice tucked down the shawl and asked, “All comfortable now, Grandma? You sure you want to be here on the porch?”

Grandma nodded slightly, not wasting her breath in speech.

“I declare,” Alice fretted, “I wish you’d let me cover you with your pretty afghan, not that old shawl. Anyway when someone’s coming, like today.”

Grandma did not answer. She could not remember just now why she always wanted the shawl, mended as it was, and threadbare. It was part of her life, as the years were; that was all.

Alice reminded her, “It’s a Mrs. Dickerson that’s coming, from the University. To ask you some questions about the old days. She’s writing a book.”

“I been in enough books,” Grandma whispered. For twenty years she had known that she was something more than Will Foster’s widow—she was living history, if she could only remember.

“Came out in ‘eighty-two with my uncle,” she began to recite in the frail whimper that was the only remnant of a voice that had once laughed and cried and shouted for joy. “The Indians was bad then, just after Custer’s massacre—”

“Yes, Grandma,” Alice soothed. “I know all about that.”

Not all, Grandma thought mutinously. No, you don’t know all about it.

She heard a car coming; not caring, she did not stir. Then Alice was talking inside the house: “She can’t remember clearly. Don’t be surprised at anything she tells you. Just ask me; we know all the facts.”

Alice again, explaining: “Yes, Grandma raised seven children. Oh, she could tell you a lot about the early days, but she forgets.”

Alice brought the woman out, said she was Mrs. Dickerson. The woman said kindly, “I don’t want to tire you,” and looked on the majesty of age and history wrapped in an old shawl.

Grandma remembered suddenly about the shawl. It was on the cradle for seven babies, she recalled. I wrapped the two littlest ones in it all night that time we had to run and hide from the Indians.

“Here’s a picture of someone you may remember,” Mrs. Dickerson coaxed. “Do you remember this man here?”

“Her sight’s about gone,” Alice warned.

“Will Foster,” Grandma whispered, not looking. Will’s picture was in books about the early days.

“No, it’s not,” Alice said, puzzled. “I know Grandpa’s picture when I see it. This is a man with light hair and mustache, taken in some photograph studio in Miles City.”

Grandma closed her eyes, trembling. How did they find me out, she wondered. Everyone else who knew him is dead long years ago.

Mrs. Dickerson said gently, “It’s a picture of Latigo Randy.”

“Who?” asked Alice. “Oh, that one! Why, Grandma couldn’t have known him. Latigo Randy was an outlaw of some kind, wasn’t he? Rustler, road agent, horse thief—I don’t remember just what.”

Grandma held out her hand and felt the picture placed in it. Without looking, she knew how he stood, in his high boots, in his good clothes, beside a curly-backed chair with a painted backdrop behind him,

his blond hair slicked down and his mustache trimmed.

I lost my picture of him when the Indians burned my house, she remembered. Was this the one he had made for the yellow-haired woman at the road ranch? She relaxed her hand and heard the picture drop to the porch floor.

“I’ll pick it up,” Mrs. Dickerson said. “Latigo Randy claimed to have shot eight men. He died when he was twenty-six years old.”

I never knew how old he was, thought Grandma Foster, or how many men he killed. I never cared about that. Oh, Latigo, Latigo Randy!

She was eighteen when she went west with Uncle Lee. They shipped their goods from Ohio, and from Miles City down to the new ranch they freighted by team. Uncle Lee’s partner, Mr. Thomas, couldn’t meet them. Uncle Lee was afraid, making a beginning in a new country, but Emma Prince had not learned to be afraid of anything.

“Sleep in the wagon,” Uncle Lee advised when they made camp the first night in the cottonwoods by a creek. “There’s rattlesnakes in this country.”

She laughed at him. “I’ll sleep on the ground, under the wagon.”

In the dark of night when coyotes keened on the billowing hills, she raised up on her elbow and listened, wanting to scream back at them. But she did not answer them; she only smiled eagerly into the darkness all about her.

In the morning when she combed out the two heavy braids of her hair, she did not pin it up; she put the pins away and let her hair curl out behind her on the wind. She threw back her head and laughed at the sagebrush.

Uncle Lee demanded, “Girl, what’s got into you?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I don’t know what it is. The wind in the long grass, maybe.” She yelled, “Who-ee! Wah-yoo!”

“This country’s going to tame you down,” Uncle Lee warned sourly. “They say it’s wicked on women and horses.”

“Pooh!” said Emma Prince. “How could it hurt a person? It’s just lying there.”

She drove the team most of that day, but Uncle Lee took the reins when he figured they were nearing the road ranch.

“Put your hair up, girl,” he growled. “Look like a wild woman, coming to where there’s people.” She obeyed because she wanted to.

The woman at the road ranch was named Carrie; she had yellow hair and sly green eyes.

“We got the two rooms here,” she pointed out. “My man and me, we use the bedroom, and visitors sleep in the bunks in the common room. But when there’s a woman, she can sleep in the bedroom with me.”

Emma Prince said politely, “Don’t discommode yourself.” They measured each other with level eyes.

The road ranch was a stopping-place for travelers, with feed and shelter for horses as well as grub and lodging for humans. The only other guest at supper was a sad-looking man named Perks.

But after supper a rider came into the yard, yelling a greeting. The woman with yellow hair jerked around from her dishpan as if she could not control her movement and said, “Some cowhand, I guess.” But Emma knew from the narrowing of her eyes and the faint smile on her lips that the hollering voice was known to her and she was glad to hear it.

“You know who it is,” Emma challenged.

The knowing eyes turned to her and the smiling lips said, “Sure I know. Look out for him, he’s a bad one.”

Emma shrugged. “They say he is, likely.”

“He’s a killer,” Carrie answered as if she were proud of it. “Them that knows him steers clear.”

After he had unsaddled and fed his horse, he came in quietly but without sneaking, walking with authority, as if he belonged there or anywhere he chose to go. He came straight in and shut the door behind him. He glanced around the room quickly and then at the two women.

“Howdy,” he said, and looked at Emma with a question in his eyes. His eyes were gray.

“This here is Latigo Randy,” Carrie said, looking straight at him. Without taking her eyes off him she added, “This here is Missus—Missus Lee, is it?”

With her chin high, Emma answered, “My name is Emma Prince, and I’m not married.”

The man ducked his head and said. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Emma.” He threw his hat toward a peg on the wall. “Expecting anybody?” he asked. “I seen the men at the barn already.”

“Not expecting anybody,” Carrie drawled, still smiling. “But anybody might come.”

“Let them come,” said Latigo Randy. He unbuckled his sagging gun belt and hung it on the wall.

“I’ll put your supper on,” offered Carrie, and began to bustle around.

Emma went on washing dishes.

“You folks aiming to settle?” asked Latigo Randy.

“Got a ranch and a pardner down to the south,” Emma answered. “I’m going to keep house for the two men and a couple of hired hands.”

Latigo nodded. “Heard you folks was coming.” Then he ate his supper, facing the door, a long arm’s reach from his gun belt.

Next morning Emma awoke to the smell of frying pork. When she came out of the bed room, his gun belt was gone from the peg. Carrie saw her glance and remarked with smug triumph, “Latigo left early.”

The man named Perks grumbled, “Wisht I knowed which way he went. I’d go the other. Makes a man uncomfortable, not knowing where he is.”

“He ain’t wanted for nothing in this part of the territory,” Carrie’s man said in defense. “Besides, we take in travelers, whatever comes—as long as they pay, of course. The law’s not looking for Latigo hereabouts.”

“It will be, like as not,” Perks prophesied darkly. “Where he goes, there’s trouble.”

At noontime they reached a river, and Uncle Lee said, “We’ll have our grub now and rest the horses, then ford the wagon over after.”

Emma remarked placidly, “There’s a man below the cutbank. I saw his hat.”

Uncle Lee began to moan about Indians, and when Latigo rode up into view he was not cheered.

“Thought you might like a little help crossing the river.” Latigo suggested. “I wasn’t in no hurry, so I waited.”

Uncle Lee was voluble in his gratitude, but Emma Prince kept her eyes down and smiled and was silent. After the crossing, Latigo went his own way.

On the fourth day they reached the two-room log house that Uncle Lee’s partner had built. Two days after that, a young fellow rode in from down the river, a tall, dark, stern young man. His name was Will Foster, and he was starting his own cattle spread with longhorns driven up from Texas. He stayed for

dinner and hung his gun belt on the wall but did not look at it again until he was ready to leave. He looked at Emma often, but when she glanced up he looked away. He did not talk to her until he was saying good-bye.

“Going to be a doings at the Buttes a week from Saturday, dance and all that,” he recited all in one breath as if he had memorized a speech. “I’d be pleased if Miss Emma would accompany me,” he added, speaking to Uncle Lee after all.

Emma yawned prettily and answered, “I couldn’t hardly make up my mind so fast, without any warning. Suppose you come over for me when the time comes. Then I can decide.”

Uncle Lee scolded afterward, saying that was no way to treat Will Foster, making him come so far out of his way without knowing for sure. Emma laughed and said, “Never mind, he’ll come.”

He did, and she went to the dance with him. Five other men had been over by then, from miles away, to ask for the pleasure of her company, but she went with Will Foster because none of the others was Latigo Randy.

A week after the dance she was alone on the place, with Uncle Lee two miles off, cutting hay, when she heard the halloo she had first heard at the road ranch. Before Latigo rode away again, he kissed her and they laughed at each other for no good reason. She walked with him through the long grass when he went to catch up his horse.

“Ain’t you scared of rattlers?” he asked, glancing sideways at her.

“Do I seem so?” she answered.

“Whether you are or not. they can kill you,” he warned. “Seems like you’re not scared of anything much.”

“That’s the way it is,” she answered, smiling. “And what are you scared of?”

He smiled strangely. “Never mind. What makes you think I’m scared of anything?”

“Why, I hadn’t thought about it at all,” she disclaimed. “Nor about you either.”

“Think of me when you have time,” he urged. “I’ll be back.”

The men at the ranch never knew how many times he came, or that he came at all. They spoke of him sometimes; one of the cowboys said Latigo had killed six men, and the other argued that it was seven. They spoke of him with respect but without admiration. But killing was not quite real to Emma Prince in those days.

Latigo never talked of shooting or of dead men. There was no need to talk at all when he came to the ranch. They needed only to look into each other’s eyes and laugh at what they saw there.

“Well matched,” Latigo said once. “Well matched and two of a kind. If I was a woman, I’d be like you. If you was a man, you’d be like me.”

How many meetings were there, with all the men away from the ranch and nobody the wiser? Meetings beyond counting, because the men were away most of the time in those days before barbed wire, when the cattle strayed far. Emma Prince was not afraid to be alone, like most women.

Latigo said he lived with the Indians, but she didn’t care where he lived so long as he came sometimes to where she was. She did not look ahead or back, but took the days as they came, and sometimes a day brought Latigo and made her glad. The present was enough. It was afterward that she learned to be afraid of the future because of what the past had been.

There was a time when he came soberly, not laughing anymore, sending word by an Indian named Blanket Man to meet him by the river. She saw by Latigo’s face that there was trouble, but she went in to his arms

and was not afraid.

“Maybe I’m leaving,” he said, with his lips against her hair and his left arm tight around her, but with the right hand free, the gun hand unhampered. “Maybe I will, maybe I won’t. Emma?”

With her face against his shirt, hearing the thud of his heart, she answered, “Latigo.”

“Wouldn’t want to come with me, would you? Going to New Mexico. Got friends in New Mexico. Got me the start of a ranch there. Emma, what’s the difference to you if you live on a ranch here or in New Mexico?”

“Not much difference,” she said.

“Where I go, there’s trouble,” he admitted. “But I never had no trouble in New Mexico. I been raising hell a while, now I’ll stop and go to raising cattle. Wouldn’t want to come along, would you, Emma?”

She put her head back and promised, smiling, “I’ll go anywhere with you.”

“It won’t be easy.” he warned, “A wanted man rides hard. We’ll ride at night when we’re near towns, and by day we’ll camp and hide.”

She saw herself riding beside him, heard the thud of the horses’ hooves. The hoofbeats drummed a rhythm: Ride by night and hide by day—and laugh in the face of danger.

“All right,” said Emma Prince, dreaming.

“I’ll send you word,” he promised. He kissed her lips over and over again. Then he reached into his shirt pocket. “Emma, girl, this is for you. Had my picture made.”

She looked at the picture and at him and smiled at both. In the picture his hair was slicked down and his mustache trimmed. He was standing by a fancy chair in his good clothes and his high boots.

“It’ll be nice to have,” she remarked, “if I don’t lose it.”

“If you keep it with half the care I’ll give to keeping you,” he promised, “you’ll have it to your dying day.”

A bird chirped on the riverbank and he pulled away, tense and ready.

“Blanket Man sees somebody—your uncle, likely. Be ready if you want to go when I go.” He kissed her, and they laughed with smothered laughter. “A woman to tie to, I knowed that when I seen you. Only woman I could ever trust. I don’t trust many people.”

“I don’t trust anybody,” she said to plague him.

He went away, walking like a king, and stepped up to his saddle like a king to his throne.

Ride by night and hide by day and laugh in the face of danger. . . . Slyly she made a bundle of the things she would take with her on the journey. She used the bundle for a pillow in the bunk where she slept, and having it beneath her cheek she smiled in the darkness and thought of Latigo Randy. Nearing settlements or ranches, they would hide by day and ride by night, and laughter would ride with them, because who could harm Latigo Randy?

It was Will Foster, coming by on his way back from a trip to Miles City, who mentioned Carrie, the woman at the road ranch.

“U.S. marshal is looking for Latigo,” he remarked to Uncle Lee. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Carrie knows where he is. Wouldn’t be surprised at all. She’s got a picture of him—he had his picture made not long ago. I bet Latigo wouldn’t like it at all if he knew she told that.”

Emma could not recall emotion, she remembered only her hand tightening white-knuckled on the knife as she sliced bread, hearing the men talk.

“Good thing all around,” her uncle growled, “if Carrie’s man shot ‘em both.”

Will Foster commented dryly, “When there’s shooting, Latigo generally shoots first.” Then he stopped talking about unpleasant things and remarked with great boldness, “Miss Emma, here, she thrives on this country, wouldn’t you say? Gets prettier every day.”

When she went out to see to the chickens, Blanket Man chirped from behind the shed. He motioned toward the riverbank.

“No!” she said harshly. “Tell him no. Understand? No!”

Back in the house she coaxed, “Will Foster, you don’t have to hurry back. Spend the night—there’s an extra bunk.” She widened her eyes. “Please?”

Will Foster was reaching for his hat and gun belt, but his hand stopped in midair.

“You mean that?” he asked with wonder and surprise. “You don’t mind if I stay around a while longer?”

She put her head on one side. “I like to have you around,” she said, and Uncle Lee scowled at her boldness. But Will Foster was stunned by the coming true of an impossible dream.

“When I was riding over, I seen some pretty flowers down by the cutbank,” he recalled. “Had a notion to bring you some, but then I thought you might not care for them.”

She pouted, “Why, Will, whatever made you think I wouldn’t? Show me where they are.”

They walked together down by the cutbank. He held her in his arms and said over and over, “I can’t believe it. Didn’t think you cared a snap for me. Oh, Emma, Emma!”

Emma Prince smiled and said, “I just wanted to keep you guessing.”

He laughed with pride in her ability to fool him so, pride in his own final triumph.

“Some women are scared in this country,” he told her. “But you’re not, are you?”

“What’s there to be afraid of?” she challenged.

He laughed again, deep in his throat. “Let’s go up to the house and tell your uncle and the others. I got to tell somebody right away.”

Before they reached the house, he turned suddenly and grasped her by the shoulders, staring into her uplifted face. “Some things a person ought to be afraid of,” he warned her. “You got to be afraid sometimes, to save your own skin. There’s things that will hurt you whether you overlook them or not.”

“You want me to be scared?” she challenged again, laughing.

Will Foster took her in his arms. “Be scared sometimes,” he pleaded. “Oh, be scared sometimes, Emma, because now you’re going to belong to me.”

They were sitting around the table that evening, the lot of them, the men and Emma, toasting the bride-to-be with whiskey in tin cups, yawning a little but very gay, when the door was flung open. There had been no sound outside, no halloo in the yard for warning. They stared at Latigo Randy.

He scowled from the doorway. His thumbs were hitched into his gun belt.

“Emma,” he said urgently. “Emma Prince!”

They are far from their guns, she thought. They are good men who dare to be careless. Nobody is hunting these good men. And Latigo Randy has come for me to go to New Mexico.

Will, starting to rise, asked sharply, “What business you got—” but Latigo motioned and Will remained half-standing.

Then Emma had her triumph. “Hello, Latigo,” she said. “You know Will Foster here, I guess. We’re getting married. Going to Miles City one of these days.”

He blinked twice, not moving. “Good luck, Emma,” he said. He shut the door and was gone.

“Emma!” her uncle yelled, furious and helpless. “That outlaw—have you been—”

Will interrupted him. “Never mind Latigo,” he said shortly. “Emma told me all about him. She was just joking him along.”

Emma stared at Will Foster and could not decide whether to despise him or be grateful that he had defended her.

None of them ever told about that incident; it was a disgrace to them, all those men in the house,

helpless before one man.

She saw Latigo once more before he died. She went into the yard to hang up the washing, and he stepped around the corner of the barn, grimly accusing.

She asked lazily, "Thought you were going to New Mexico."

"Not while you're free," he said harshly. "Going to stay right here in the Territory long as you're free."

"Better not," she warned lightly. "You're wanted, I hear."

"You come with me and I'll settle down and raise cattle."

"Will Foster raises cattle. Will Foster doesn't have to settle down. Nobody is gunning for Will Foster."

He was angry, as angry as she was whenever she thought of the woman at the road ranch. But he was helpless in his anger, and Emma was not.

He almost begged. "No other woman ever had me going like you have. I'm a fool about you, and that's the truth of it."

"I hear tell, though," she taunted, "that another woman has your picture."

His lips parted as if he were going to explain away that other picture. Then he smiled with narrow eyes, understanding that she was vulnerable to hurt. He did not abase himself by explaining.

"That may be," he admitted. "That may well be."

He turned and walked away, and she never saw him again.

Mr. and Mrs. Will Foster spent four days in Miles City on their wedding trip and drove back behind a fast team of half-broke broncs. Neither going up nor returning did they stop at the road ranch. On the first day of the return journey, they met a rider who stopped to tell the news:

"Trouble last night at the road ranch. Two men shot—the marshal and Latigo Randy."

Dimly Emma heard her husband say, as any righteous man should say, with relief but without triumph, "Well, good riddance for all of us."

Will Foster whipped up the team when they came in sight of the road ranch. Emma, sitting stiffly beside him, glanced once toward the house. Nobody was in sight. They might all have been dead there, whoever was there.

When they were past, she could breathe again, but she was trembling. Long afterward she knew that that was when she began to be afraid, but at that moment she tried to evade fear, to use Will Foster as a shield against it. She said in a shaking voice, "I'm glad you never killed anybody."

He answered gravely, "So am I, Emma."

But I have killed a man, she realized with terror. I killed Latigo Randy.

When they had been married almost a year, she told Will casually, "We're going to have a baby." She had waited a long time to tell him, and telling was easy because she had thought about it for so long.

He was joyful, then worried. "When? We'll have to make sure you get to the doctor up in Miles in plenty of time. Got to plan ahead for that."

Once he had been her shield from fear, but now she had no shield. She thought, I can never again go to Miles City, I can't go to the doctor at all. Because I can't pass the place where Latigo Randy died.

And she could not tell even her husband that. "Won't be till late April, I figure," she said.

It was early in March, as she knew it would be, and there was no time to argue about going up to Miles. There was only time to get Uncle Lee to ride over for an Indian squaw, and the squaw was useless. I'm going to die, Emma thought as she gripped Will's hands.

Through the hours she kept thinking, I'm going to die, until it became a goal rather than a doom.

Will kept repeating, "Emma, you're going to be all right."

At the last, she wished she had explained to him why she could not go to Miles City, but by that time she had neither the breath nor the strength. She could only gasp, "A life for a life," and Will Foster did not understand.

"You're going to be all right," he insisted.

She was right, after all, about the price to be paid for Latigo, but she was wrong about the life that paid it. She lived, but the baby died. It was Will Foster's son who died for Latigo Randy.

Each day while she was regaining strength she told herself, Today I will tell Will all about it, so he will know why I can never go to Miles City. But she never did tell him, after all, because Uncle Lee arrived with news.

"The house at the road ranch burned clean to the ground," he reported. "Barn caught too. Clean to the ground. You'd never know anything had been built there, for all you can see from the road. Never know you was passing the place."

She bore Will Foster four more sons and three daughters: Henry, who raised cattle; LeDuc, who became a doctor; Warren, who ran a grocery store in Miles City; Hilton, who was drowned at fifteen while fording a river; Matilda and Frances, who married ranchers; and Elizabeth, who died at the age of twenty, during childbirth.

Grandma Foster, who had been Emma Prince, drooped in her chair, and Alice asked with concern, "Are you all right?"

Grandma summoned her breath and whispered, "I'll tell you everything. I have never told anyone, and it's time I did." Her mouth opened, but no words came. She stared with fog-dim eyes and saw a dead dream shining. She knew then how it must have been: she remembered that it had really been that way. Ride by night and hide by day and laugh in the face of danger.

"We went to New Mexico," she said hoarsely. "Him and me to get her. Rode at night, hid by day." Oh, that must have been the way it was! And it was no fault of hers that Latigo Randy died.

Alice laughed apologetically. "Now that isn't so at all," she contradicted. "She gets mixed up sometimes."

It's clear now for the first time! Grandma Foster wanted to tell her. That is the way it must have been. . . . But Latigo is dead long years ago, she remembered. Everybody is dead but me, of the old days. Now what became of Latigo Randy?

"We had three children," she said with feeble force. "Then the Indians killed him."

Alice said, "Well, I never! How it really was, she's remembering she had three small children at the time the Indians burned her house. The oldest—my father, that was—was five then."

Alice was pursuing her as relentlessly as the Indians had done, and she was alone and defenseless. Grandma tried again, desperately: "Went to Canada."

Yes, that was better. Somebody shot him, and he died in my arms. Oh, that is the way it should have been if he had to die, and all men die. I heard his heart stop beating. Then what? What do you do with a dead man? She said aloud, "I buried him."

Where was that? she wondered. I never knew where his grave was. I wish I could remember.

“She never went to Canada,” Alice corrected. “About the burying, she must be thinking about her first baby. That one died because the weather was so bad they couldn’t make it up to Miles where the doctor was.”

The visitor said gently, “Mrs. Foster lived through many terrible experiences, I know. She probably doesn’t even recall Latigo Randy.”

Wearily and stubbornly Grandma Foster insisted, “I remember.” Searching through the fog of memory, she told them the only thing that was certain, the only fact that was sure. She said in a triumphant whisper: “His eyes were gray.”

Mrs. Dickerson patted her gently on the knee. “I won’t bother you anymore, Mrs. Foster. I’ve tired you too much already. It was good of you to let me come.” She stood up, commenting, “I’ve often heard that Latigo Randy had gray eyes. It’s a strange thing, many of the early-day killers had gray eyes.”

“I guess that don’t prove anything about ‘em,” Alice answered. “Before the cataracts came on, Grandma had gray eyes too.”

A MAN CALLED HORSE

He was a young man of good family, as the phrase went in the New England of a hundred-odd years ago, and the reasons for his bitter discontent were unclear, even to himself. He grew up in the gracious old Boston home under his grandmother's care, for his mother had died in giving him birth; and all his life he had known every comfort and privilege his father's wealth could provide.

But still there was the discontent, which puzzled him because he could not even define it. He wanted to live among his equals—people who were no better than he and no worse either. That was as close as he could come to describing the source of his unhappiness in Boston and his restless desire to go somewhere else.

In the year 1845, he left home and went out west, far beyond the country's creeping frontier, where he hoped to find his equals. He had the idea that in Indian country, where there was danger, all white men were kings, and he wanted to be one of them. But he found, in the West as in Boston, that the men he respected were still his superiors, even if they could not read, and those he did not respect weren't worth talking to.

He did have money, however, and he could hire the men he respected. He hired four of them, to cook and hunt and guide and be his companions, but he found them not friendly.

They were apart from him and he was still alone. He still brooded about his status in the world, longing for his equals.

On a day in June, he learned what it was to have no status at all. He became a captive of a small raiding party of Crow Indians.

He heard gunfire and the brief shouts of his companions around the bend of the creek just before they died, but he never saw their bodies. He had no chance to fight, because he was naked and unarmed, bathing in the creek, when a Crow warrior seized and held him.

His captor let him go at last, let him run. Then the lot of them rode him down for sport, striking him with their coup sticks. They carried the dripping scalps of his companions, and one had skinned off Baptiste's black beard as well, for a trophy.

They took him along in a matter-of-fact way, as they took the captured horses. He was unshod and naked as the horses were, and like them he had a rawhide thong around his neck. So long as he didn't fall down, the Crows ignored him.

On the second day they gave him his breeches. His feet were too swollen for his boots, but one of the Indians threw him a pair of moccasins that had belonged to the halfbreed, Henri, who was dead back at the creek. The captive wore the moccasins gratefully. The third day they let him ride one of the spare horses so the party could move faster, and on that day they came in sight of their camp.

He thought of trying to escape, hoping he might be killed in flight rather than by slow torture in the camp, but he never had a chance to try. They were more familiar with escape than he was, and knowing what to expect, they forestalled it. The only other time he had tried to escape from anyone, he had succeeded. When he had left his home in Boston, his father had raged and his grandmother had cried, but they could not talk him out of his intention.

The men of the Crow raiding party didn't bother with talk.

Before riding into camp they stopped and dressed in their regalia and in parts of their victims' clothing; they painted their faces black. Then, leading the white man by the rawhide around his neck as though he were a horse, they rode down toward the tepee circle, shouting and singing, brandishing their weapons. He was unconscious when they got there; he fell and was dragged.

He lay dazed and battered near a tepee while the noisy, busy life of the camp swarmed around him and Indians came to stare. Thirst consumed him, and when it rained he lapped rainwater from the ground like a dog. A scrawny, shrieking, eternally busy old woman with ragged graying hair threw a chunk of meat on the grass, and he fought the dogs for it.

When his head cleared, he was angry, although anger was an emotion he knew he could not afford.

It was better when I was a horse, he thought—when they led me by the rawhide around my neck. I won't be a dog, no matter what!

The hag gave him stinking, rancid grease and let him figure out what it was for. He applied it gingerly to his bruised and sun-seared body.

Now, he thought, I smell like the rest of them.

While he was healing, he considered coldly the advantages of being a horse. A man would be humiliated, and sooner or later he would strike back and that would be the end of him. But a horse had only to be docile. Very well, he would learn to do without pride.

He understood that he was the property of the screaming old woman, a fine gift from her son, one that she liked to show off. She did more yelling at him than at anyone else, probably to impress the neighbors so they would not forget what a great and generous man her son was. She was bossy and proud, a dreadful sag of skin and bones, and she was a devilish hard worker.

The white man, who now thought of himself as a horse, forgot sometimes to worry about his danger. He kept making mental notes of things to tell his own people in Boston about this hideous adventure. He would go back a hero, and he would say, "Grandmother, let me fetch your shawl. I've been accustomed to doing little errands for another lady about your age."

Two girls lived in the tepee with the old hag and her warrior son. One of them, the white man concluded, was his captor's wife and the other was his little sister. The daughter-in-law was smug and spoiled. Being beloved, she did not have to be useful. The younger sister had bright, wandering eyes. Often enough they wandered to the white man who was pretending to be a horse.

The two girls worked when the old woman put them at it, but they were always running off to do something they enjoyed more. There were games and noisy contests, and there was much laughter. But not for the white man. He was finding out what loneliness could be.

That was a rich summer on the plains, with plenty of buffalo for meat and clothing and the making of tepees. The Crows were wealthy in horses, prosperous, and contented. If their men had not been so avid for glory, the white man thought, there would have been a lot more of them. But they went out of their way to court death, and when one of them met it, the whole camp mourned extravagantly and cried to their god for vengeance.

The captive was a horse all summer, a docile bearer of burdens, careful and patient. He kept reminding himself that he had to be better-natured than other horses, because he could not lash out with hoofs or teeth. Helping the old woman load up the horses for travel, he yanked at a pack and said, "Whoa, brother. It goes easier when you don't fight."

The horse gave him a big-eyed stare as if it understood his language—a comforting thought, because nobody else did. But even among the horses he felt unequal. They were able to look out for themselves if they escaped. He would simply starve. He was envious still, even among the horses.

Humbly he fetched and carried. Sometimes he even offered to help, but he had not the skill for the endless work of the women, and he was not trusted to hunt with the men, the providers.

When the camp moved, he carried a pack, trudging with the women. Even the dogs worked then, pulling small burdens on travois of sticks.

The Indian who had captured him lived like a lord, as he had a right to do. He hunted with his peers, attended long ceremonial meetings with much chanting and dancing, and lounged in the shade with his smug bride. He had only two responsibilities: to kill buffalo and to gain glory. The white man was so far beneath him in status that the Indian did not even think of envy.

One day several things happened that made the captive think he might sometime become a man again. That was the day when he began to understand their language. For four months he had heard it, day and night, the joy and the mourning, the ritual chanting and sung prayers, the squabbles and the deliberations. None of it meant anything to him at all.

But on that important day in early fall the two young women set out for the river, and one of them called over her shoulder to the old woman. The white man was startled. She had said she was going to bathe. His understanding was so sudden that he felt as if his ears had come unstopped. Listening to the racket of the camp, he heard fragments of meaning instead of gabble.

On that same important day the old woman brought a pair of new moccasins out of the tepee and tossed them on the ground before him. He could not believe she would do anything for him because of kindness, but giving him moccasins was one way of looking after her property.

In thanking her, he dared greatly. He picked a little handful of fading fall flowers and took them to her as she squatted in front of her tepee, scraping a buffalo hide with a tool made from a piece of iron tied to a bone. Her hands were hideous—most of the fingers had the first joint missing. He bowed solemnly and offered the flowers.

She glared at him from beneath the short, ragged tangle of her hair. She stared at the flowers, knocked them out of his hand, and went running to the next tepee, squalling the story. He heard her and the other women screaming with laughter.

The white man squared his shoulders and walked boldly over to watch three small boys shooting arrows at a target. He said in English, "Show me how to do that, will you?"

They frowned, but he held out his hand as if there could be no doubt. One of them gave him a bow and one arrow, and they snickered when he missed.

The people were easily amused, except when they were angry. They were amused at him, playing with the little boys. A few days later he asked the hag, with gestures, for a bow that her son had just discarded, a man-sized bow of horn. He scavenged for old arrows. The old woman cackled at his marksmanship and called her neighbors to enjoy the fun.

When he could understand words, he could identify his people by their names. The old woman was Greasy Hand, and her daughter was Pretty Calf. The other young woman's name was not clear to him, for the words were not in his vocabulary. The man who had captured him was Yellow Robe.

Once he could understand, he could begin to talk a little, and then he was less lonely. Nobody had been able to see any reason for talking to him, since he would not understand anyway. He asked the old woman, "What is my name?" Until he knew it, he was incomplete. She shrugged to let him know he had none.

He told her in the Crow language, "My name is Horse." He repeated it, and she nodded. After that they called him Horse when they called him anything. Nobody cared except the white man himself.

They trusted him enough to let him stray out of camp, so that he might have got away and, by unimaginable good luck, might have reached a trading post or a fort, but winter was too close. He did not

dare leave without a horse; he needed clothing and a better hunting weapon than he had and more certain skill in using it. He did not dare steal, for then they would surely have pursued him, and just as certainly they would have caught him. Remembering the warmth of the home that was waiting in Boston, he settled down for the winter.

On a cold night he crept into the tepee after the others had gone to bed. Even a horse might try to find shelter from the wind. The old woman grumbled, but without conviction. She did not put him out.

They tolerated him, back in the shadows, so long as he did not get in the way.

He began to understand how the family that owned him differed from the others. Fate had been cruel to them. In a short, sharp argument among the old women, one of them derided Greasy Hand by sneering, "You have no relatives!" and Greasy Hand raved for minutes of the deeds of her father and uncles and brothers. And she had had four sons, she reminded her detractor—who answered with scorn, "Where are they?"

Later the white man found her moaning and whimpering to herself, rocking back and forth on her haunches, staring at her mutilated hands. By that time he understood. A mourner often chopped off a finger joint. Old Greasy Hand had mourned often. For the first time he felt a twinge of pity, but he put it aside as another emotion, like anger, that he could not afford. He thought: What tales I will tell when I get home!

He wrinkled his nose in disdain. The camp stank of animals and meat and rancid grease. He looked down at his naked, shivering legs and was startled, remembering that he was still only a horse.

He could not trust the old woman. She fed him only because a starved slave would die and not be worth boasting about. Just how fitful her temper was he saw on the day when she got tired of stumbling over one of the hundred dogs that infested the camp. This was one of her own dogs, a large, strong one that pulled a baggage travois when the tribe moved camp.

Countless times he had seen her kick at the beast as it lay sleeping in front of the tepee, in her way. The dog always moved, with a yelp, but it always got in the way again. One day she gave the dog its usual kick and then stood scolding at it while the animal rolled its eyes sleepily. The old woman suddenly picked up her ax and cut the dog's head off with one blow. Looking well satisfied with herself, she beckoned her slave to remove the body.

It could have been me, he thought, if I were a dog. But I'm a horse.

His hope of life lay with the girl, Pretty Calf. He set about courting her, realizing how desperately poor he was both in property and honor. He owned no horse, no weapon but the old bow and the battered arrows. He had nothing to give away, and he needed gifts, because he did not dare seduce the girl.

One of the customs of courtship involved sending a gift of horses to a girl's older brother and bestowing much buffalo meat upon her mother. The white man could not wait for some far-off time when he might have either horses or meat to give away. And his courtship had to be secret. It was not for him to stroll past the groups of watchful girls, blowing a flute made of an eagle's wing bone, as the flirtatious young men did.

He could not ride past Pretty Calf's tepee, painted and bedizened; he had no horse, no finery.

Back home, he remembered, I could marry just about any girl I'd want to. But he wasted little time thinking about that. A future was something to be earned.

The most he dared do was wink at Pretty Calf now and then, or state his admiration while she giggled and hid her face. The least he dared do to win his bride was to elope with her, but he had to give her a horse to put the seal of tribal approval on that. And he had no horse until he killed a man to get one. . . .

His opportunity came in early spring. He was casually accepted by that time. He did not belong, but he was amusing to the Crows, like a strange pet, or they would not have fed him through the winter.

His chance came when he was hunting small game with three young boys who were his guards as well as his scornful companions. Rabbits and birds were of no account in a camp well fed on buffalo meat, but they made good targets.

His party walked far that day. All of them at once saw the two horses in a sheltered coulee. The boys and the man crawled forward on their bellies, and then they saw an Indian who lay on the ground, moaning, a lone traveler. From the way the boys inched eagerly forward, Horse knew the man was fair prey—a member of some enemy tribe.

This is the way the captive white man acquired wealth and honor to win a bride and save his life: He shot an arrow into the sick man, a split second ahead of one of his small companions, and dashed forward to strike the still-groaning man with his bow, to count first coup. Then he seized the hobbled horses.

By the time he had the horses secure, and with them his hope for freedom, the boys had followed, counting coup with gestures and shrieks they had practiced since boyhood, and one of them had the scalp. The white man was grimly amused to see the boy double up with sudden nausea when he had the thing in his hand. . . .

There was a hubbub in the camp when they rode in that evening, two of them on each horse. The captive was noticed. Indians who had ignored him as a slave stared at the brave man who had struck first coup and had stolen horses.

The hubbub lasted all night, as fathers boasted loudly of their young sons' exploits. The white man was called upon to settle an argument between two fierce boys as to which of them had struck second coup and which must be satisfied with third. After much talk that went over his head, he solemnly pointed at the nearest boy. He didn't know which boy it was and didn't care, but the boy did.

The white man had watched warriors in their triumph. He knew what to do. Modesty about achievements had no place among the Crow people. When a man did something big, he told about it.

The white man smeared his face with grease and charcoal. He walked inside the tepee circle, chanting and singing. He used his own language.

"You heathens, you savages," he shouted. "I'm going to get out of here someday! I am going to get away!" The Crow people listened respectfully. In the Crow tongue he shouted, "Horse! I am Horse!" and they nodded.

He had a right to boast, and he had two horses. Before dawn, the white man and his bride were sheltered beyond a far hill, and he was telling her, "I love you, little lady. I love you."

She looked at him with her great dark eyes, and he thought she understood his English words—or as much as she needed to understand.

"You are my treasure," he said, "more precious than jewels, better than fine gold. I am going to call you Freedom."

When they returned to camp two days later, he was bold but worried. His ace, he suspected, might not be high enough in the game he was playing without being sure of the rules. But it served.

Old Greasy Hand raged—but not at him. She complained loudly that her daughter had let herself go too cheap. But the marriage was as good as any Crow marriage. He had paid a horse.

He learned the language faster after that, from Pretty Calf, whom he sometimes called Freedom. He learned that his attentive, adoring bride was fourteen years old.

One thing he had not guessed was the difference that being Pretty Calf's husband would make in his relationship to her mother and brother. He had hoped only to make his position a little safer, but he had not expected to be treated with dignity. Greasy Hand no longer spoke to him at all. When the white man spoke

to her, his bride murmured in dismay, explaining at great length that he must never do that. There could be no conversation between a man and his mother-in-law. He could not even mention a word that was part of her name.

Having improved his status so magnificently, he felt no need for hurry in getting away. Now that he had a woman, he had as good a chance to be rich as any man. Pretty Calf waited on him; she seldom ran off to play games with other young girls, but took pride in learning from her mother the many women's skills of tanning hides and making clothing and preparing food.

He was no more a horse but a kind of man, a half-Indian, still poor and unskilled but laden with honors, clinging to the buckskin fringes of Crow society.

Escape could wait until he could manage it in comfort, with fit clothing and a good horse, with hunting weapons. Escape could wait until the camp moved near some trading post. He did not plan how he would get home. He dreamed of being there all at once and of telling stories nobody would believe. There was no hurry.

Pretty Calf delighted in educating him. He began to understand tribal arrangements, customs, and why things were as they were. They were that way because they had always been so. His young wife giggled when she told him, in his ignorance, things she had always known. But she did not laugh when her brother's wife was taken by another warrior. She explained that solemnly with words and signs.

Yellow Robe belonged to a society called the Big Dogs. The wife stealer, Cut Neck, belonged to the Foxes. They were fellow tribesmen; they hunted together and fought side by side, but men of one society could take away wives from the other society if they wished, subject to certain limitations.

When Cut Neck rode up to the tepee, laughing and singing, and called to Yellow Robe's wife, "Come out! Come out!" she did as ordered, looking smug as usual, meek and entirely willing. Thereafter she rode beside him in ceremonial processions and carried his coup stick, while his other wife pretended not to care.

"But why?" the white man demanded of his wife, his Freedom. "Why did our brother let his woman go? He sits and smokes and does not speak."

Pretty Calf was shocked at the suggestion. Her brother could not possibly reclaim his woman, she explained. He could not even let her come back if she wanted to—and she probably would want to when Cut Neck tired of her. Yellow Robe could not even admit that his heart was sick. That was the way things were. Deviation meant dishonor.

The woman could have hidden from Cut Neck, she said. She could even have refused to go with him if she had been *ba-wurokee*—a really virtuous woman. But she had been his woman before, for a little while on a berrying expedition, and he had a right to claim her.

There was no sense in it, the white man insisted. He glared at his young wife. "If you go, I will bring you back!" he promised.

She laughed and buried her head against his shoulder. "I will not have to go," she said. "Horse is my first man. There is no hole in my moccasin."

He stroked her hair and said, "*Ba-wurokee*."

With great daring, she murmured, "*Hay-ha*," and when he did not answer, because he did not know what she meant, she drew away, hurt.

"A woman calls her man that if she thinks he will not leave her. Am I wrong?"

The white man held her closer and lied, "Pretty Calf is not wrong. Horse will not leave her. Horse will not take another woman, either." No, he certainly would not. Parting from this one was going to be harder than getting her had been. "*Hay-ha*," he murmured. "Freedom."

His conscience irked him, but not very much. Pretty Calf could get another man easily enough when he

was gone, and a better provider. His hunting skill was improving, but he was still awkward.

There was no hurry about leaving. He was used to most of the Crow ways and could stand the rest. He was becoming prosperous. He owned five horses. His place in the life of the tribe was secure, such as it was. Three or four young women, including the one who had belonged to Yellow Robe, made advances to him. Pretty Calf took pride in the fact that her man was so attractive.

By the time he had what he needed for a secret journey, the grass grew yellow on the plains and the long cold was close. He was enslaved by the girl he called Freedom and, before the winter ended, by the knowledge that she was carrying his child. . . .

The Big Dog society held a long ceremony in the spring. The white man strolled with his woman along the creek bank, thinking: When I get home I will tell them about the chants and the drumming. Sometime. Sometime.

Pretty Calf would not go to bed when they went back to the tepee.

“Wait and find out about my brother,” she urged. “Something may happen.”

So far as Horse could figure out, the Big Dogs were having some kind of election. He pampered his wife by staying up with her by the fire. Even the old woman, who was a great one for getting sleep when she was not working, prowled around restlessly.

The white man was yawning by the time the noise of the ceremony died down. When Yellow Robe strode in, garish and heathen in his paint and feathers and furs, the women cried out. There was conversation, too fast for Horse to follow, and the old woman wailed once, but her son silenced her with a gruff command.

When the white man went to sleep, he thought his wife was weeping beside him.

The next morning she explained.

“He wears the bearskin belt. Now he can never retreat in battle. He will always be in danger. He will die.”

Maybe he wouldn't, the white man tried to convince her. Pretty Calf recalled that some few men had been honored by the bearskin belt, vowed to the highest daring, and had not died. If they lived through the summer, then they were free of it.

“My brother wants to die,” she mourned. “His heart is bitter.”

Yellow Robe lived through half a dozen clashes with small parties of raiders from hostile tribes. His honors were many. He captured horses in an enemy camp, led two successful raids, counted first coup and snatched a gun from the hand of an enemy tribesman. He wore wolf tails on his moccasins and ermine skins on his shirt, and he fringed his leggings with scalps in token of his glory.

When his mother ventured to suggest, as she did many times, “My son should take a new wife, I need another woman to help me,” he ignored her. He spent much time in prayer, alone in the hills or in conference with a medicine man. He fasted and made vows and kept them. And before he could be free of the heavy honor of the bearskin belt, he went on his last raid.

The warriors were returning from the north just as the white man and two other hunters approached from the south, with buffalo and elk meat dripping from the bloody hides tied on their restive ponies. One of the hunters grunted, and they stopped to watch a rider on the hill north of the tepee circle.

The rider dismounted, held up a blanket and dropped it. He repeated the gesture.

The hunters murmured dismay. “Two! Two men dead!” They rode fast into the camp, where there was already wailing.

A messenger came down from the war party on the hill. The rest of the party delayed to paint their faces for mourning and for victory. One of the two dead men was Yellow Robe. They had put his body in a cave and walled it in with rocks. The other man died later, and his body was in a tree.

There was blood on the ground before the tepee to which Yellow Robe would return no more. His mother, with her hair chopped short, sat in the doorway, rocking back and forth on her haunches, wailing her heartbreak. She cradled one mutilated hand in the other. She had cut off another finger joint.

Pretty Calf had cut off chunks of her long hair and was crying as she gashed her arms with a knife. The white man tried to take the knife away, but she protested so piteously that he let her do as she wished. He was sickened with the lot of them.

Savages! he thought. Now I will go back! I'll go hunting alone, and I'll keep on going.

But he did not go just yet, because he was the only hunter in the lodge of the two grieving women, one of them old and the other pregnant with his child.

In their mourning, they made him a pauper again. Everything that meant comfort, wealth, and safety they sacrificed to the spirits because of the death of Yellow Robe. The tepee, made of seventeen fine buffalo hides, the furs that should have kept them warm, the white deerskin dress, trimmed with elk teeth, that Pretty Calf loved so well, even their tools and Yellow Robe's weapons—everything but his sacred medicine objects—they left there on the prairie, and the whole camp moved away. Two of his best horses were killed as a sacrifice, and the women gave away the rest.

They had no shelter. They would have no tepee of their own for two months at least of mourning, and then the women would have to tan hides to make it. Meanwhile, they could live in temporary huts made of willows, covered with skins given them in pity by their friends. They could have lived with relatives, but Yellow Robe's women had no relatives.

The white man had not realized until then how terrible a thing it was for a Crow to have no kinfolk. No wonder old Greasy Hand had only stumps for fingers. She had mourned, from one year to the next, for everyone she had ever loved. She had no one left but her daughter, Pretty Calf.

Horse was furious at their foolishness. It had been bad enough for him, a captive, to be naked as a horse and poor as a slave, but that was because his captors had stripped him. These women had voluntarily given up everything they needed.

He was too angry at them to sleep in the willow hut. He lay under a sheltering tree. And on the third night of the mourning he made his plans. He had a knife and a bow. He would go after meat, taking two horses. And he would not come back. There were, he realized, many things he was not going to tell when he got back home. In the willow hut, Pretty Calf cried out. He heard rustling there, and the old woman's querulous voice.

Some twenty hours later his son was born, two months early, in the tepee of a skilled medicine woman. The child was born without breath, and the mother died before the sun went down.

The white man was too shocked to think whether he should mourn, or how he should mourn. The old woman screamed until she was voiceless. Piteously she approached him, bent and trembling, blind with grief. She held out her knife and he took it.

She spread out her hands and shook her head. If she cut off anymore finger joints, she could do no more work. She could not afford anymore lasting signs of grief.

The white man said, "All right! All right!" between his teeth. He hacked his arms with the knife and stood watching the blood run down. It was little enough to do for Pretty Calf, for little Freedom.

Now there is nothing to keep me, he realized. When I get home, I must not let them see the scars.

He looked at Greasy Hand, hideous in her grief-burdened age, and thought: I really am free now! When a wife dies, her husband has no more duty toward her family. Pretty Calf had told him so, long ago, when he wondered why a certain man moved out of one tepee and into another.

The old woman, of course, would be a scavenger. There was one other with the tribe, an ancient crone who had no relatives, toward whom no one felt any responsibility. She lived on food thrown away by the

more fortunate. She slept in shelters that she built with her own knotted hands. She plodded wearily at the end of the procession when the camp moved. When she stumbled, nobody cared. When she died, nobody would miss her.

Tomorrow morning, the white man decided, I will go.

His mother-in-law's sunken mouth quivered. She said one word, questioningly. She said, "*Eerooshay?*" She said, "Son?"

Blinking, he remembered. When a wife died, her husband was free. But her mother, who had ignored him with dignity, might if she wished ask him to stay. She invited him by calling him Son, and he accepted by answering Mother.

Greasy Hand stood before him, bowed with years, withered with unceasing labor, loveless and childless, scarred with grief. But with all her burdens, she still loved life enough to beg it from him, the only person she had any right to ask. She was stripping herself of all she had left, her pride.

He looked eastward across the prairie. Two thousand miles away was home. The old woman would not live forever. He could afford to wait, for he was young. He could afford to be magnanimous, for he knew he was a man. He gave her the answer. "*Eegya,*" he said. "Mother."

He went home three years later. He explained no more than to say, "I lived with Crows for a while. It was some time before I could leave. They called me Horse."

He did not find it necessary either to apologize or to boast, because he was the equal of any man on earth.