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FUR BRIGADE

A STORY OF THE TRAPPERS OF THE EARLY WEST

BY HAL G. EVARTS

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FUR BRIGADE



CHAPTER I

The singing river crooned its seductive song to Hunter Breckenridge as he leaned upon his long rifle and gazed out across its swirling waters. Its gurgling current chanted a refrain of far places and battles unrecorded. It whispered to him invitingly, the Missouri. No doubt it was partly the fascination that the river held for him that caused his first glimpse of the girl Nepanamo to be so strangely stirring. She came floating down from the distant regions drained by its headwaters. Perhaps that fact served to invest her with some of the mystery he had always sensed in the river that carried her. Then, too, her hair was yellow, the first of that color that had ever come under his observation. Always, thereafter, the girl and the river were inextricably associated in his mind. She seemed to personify its alternating moods of benign placidity and wild turbulence.

A tall youth of sixteen summers, his was a man's estate in point of productivity, labor and defence. Throughout the day, in company with four of his younger brothers and sisters, he had toiled in the clearing. Ordinarily, he deemed that sort of activity too trivial to necessitate his own participation. It might well be left to the younger members of the household while he aided his father in clearing more land or in hunting to supply the family larder. But since the father's departure down river two weeks before in a bateau loaded high with the winter's catch of fur, the weeds, left to the devices of the youngsters, had threatened to take the clearing and crowd out the crops. So on this day Hunter had assumed personal supervision of the work.

Save for the tiny meadow that had tempted the elder Breckenridge to settle on this creek, which now bore his name, the clearing was dotted by the charred stumps of the trees that had been removed, the Indian corn, potatoes, beans, squashes and watermelons having been scratched in between these blackened relics. Shoots persisted in springing from the living roots of these dead stumps and it was the self-appointed task of Hunter Breckenridge to cut the troublesome volunteer saplings beneath the surface with an ax while directing the energies of his minions to the easier chore of slaying the weeds with their rude homemade hoes.

In mid-afternoon, having laid low the greater part of the upstart saplings, he picked up his long rifle and hied himself to the adjacent forest, leaving the small laborers under the protection of his younger brothers,—Tod, aged thirteen, and Thomas, ten. These two, aware of their responsibilities, moved their guns from place to place as they transferred the scene of their activities. Tod's weapon was a fowling piece heavily charged with buck-shot; Thomas carried a long squirrel rifle. Never were these weapons deposited save at some point within easy reach of the scene of their owners' labors. Nor was this precaution merely a piece of boyish affectation. Instead, it was a habit bred in the very bone of them. The war whoop was by no means unknown to either. Only two years before, it had echoed terrifyingly through the clearing at break of day and the children had been engaged in reloading all available family weapons while the father, mother, Hunter and the elder sister had shot down every paint-bedaubed savage that showed himself in the clearing.

The few local Missouri Indians, already nearly exterminated or driven out by their enemies, were peacefully inclined and ardently desirous of the protection of the whites, but there were occasions when some war party of Sauks, bent upon avenging some actual or fancied affront, swooped from the north and left a bloody trail behind, sometimes even penetrating south to the Arkansas country to raid on the outskirts of the Osage nation. The few isolated cabins of settlers that had emigrated from the United States were too tempting to be passed by if opportunity offered for a surprise attack.

Small wonder that those of the breed who survived to manhood became such redoubtable warriors. From earliest infancy they were schooled to carry guns to their work, to be prepared for attack at any instant of the night or day. As they toiled in the field, went out to drive in the cows of an evening, stepped out to carry a bucket of water from spring or stream at dawn, when gathering wild fruit in the autumn, running trap lines in the winter, when fishing on the streams, hunting in the forest or journeying to pay a friendly visit to the nearest neighbor, their eyes were ever alert to detect some alien movement in the surrounding landscape, their ears attuned to catch the first yelping gobble of the dread war whoop. From a lifetime of familiarity with savage warfare and pitting themselves against a crafty foe, they fought as naturally and adeptly as they toiled, shooting at a human foe as coolly and accurately as when potting deer or turkeys. It was all a part of the day's affairs.

Perhaps half an hour after Hunter's departure, the distant detonation of black powder drifted from the depths of the forest. Tod Breckenridge leaned on his hoe.

"I reckon as how Hunt got him a deer," he sagely pronounced in his soft Southern drawl.

Toward sundown Tod gave the signal and the quartet of two brothers and two sisters gathered implements and weapons and repaired to the cabin. The elder sister was swinging an ax at the woodpile, its sharp strokes ringing cheerily through the evening quiet. Tod relieved the girl and she withdrew into the cabin to aid the mother in the preparation of the evening meal.

Hunt Breckenridge was still standing on the banks of the river for a final survey of its waters before turning up the course of Breckenridge Creek to the cabin. It was not a deer, as Tod had surmised, but a turkey that had been laid low by Hunter's shot. The big gobbler was now suspended from his shoulder. He lingered, loath to remove his gaze from the turbulent expanse of the Missouri. Its roily waters swirled in myriad eddies and miniature whirlpools near the shore. Always it called to him, the river. Coming from a tribe of restless souls that had pressed ever deeper and deeper into the wilderness generation by generation, he inherited the wandering feet of his breed. The river spoke to him of new and untried fields. Down its boiling course came canoes and batteaus, scows and rafts, manned by savages or traders returning from the head reaches of the river and its tributaries, more than two thousand miles beyond. They voiced wild chants, these voyageurs of the fur brigades, and told wilder tales; tales of the Iowas and Cheyennes; of the Sioux and the Assiniboines of the northwestern prairies, both of which tribes had been driven west of the Mississippi by those wolves of the forest, the Iroquois, a century before; of the Absarokas, or Sparrowhawks, erroneously called Crows by the whites, a nation boasting twenty-five thousand warriors; of the savage Blackfeet, the Gros Ventres and the Snakes.

The chuckling current, dark and mysterious, sang its seductive song to Hunt Breckenridge, inviting him to embark upon its waters and play his part in the mighty deeds of which it sang.

Two savages were paddling a canoe down the stream near the farther shore and save for the fact that his eyes were trained on them, Hunter would have seen her sooner.

A big raft, close inshore, swept round the bend. It was piled high with bales of fur, all lashed securely. A huge figure manned a long sweep-oar at the rear. A man in a skiff, with a line attached to the prow of the raft, was lustily pulling riverward to head the clumsy craft farther out in rounding the bend, lest the current should drive it ashore. Two other men were aboard the raft, both poised on the inshore edge and balancing a long pole apiece, ready to aid in fending off if the action of the sweep aft and the outward pull of the prow line by the man in the skiff should fail to clear her. Now they were stowing away their poles, the danger past. Hunter, however, observed these things but semi-consciously, and knew the portent of the activity because he knew the river and her ways. His entire consciousness was centered upon the figure that graced the prow of the raft. She stood there on its very peak. Someway, in that first glimpse of her, it seemed to Hunt Breckenridge that she was not riding the raft but that the raft was following her down the river, her wild vitality leading it. She was garbed in loose buckskin jacket from beneath which showed a faded blue calico skirt. A stiff upriver wind tore at her, pressing the soft garments revealingly against her body. She was younger than himself, perhaps by two or three years, yet even now her youthful figure gave promise of the future, presaging the fact that she would be of Junoesque proportions,—full-bosomed, ample-hipped, abundantly equipped by nature and training to bear the burdens and stand the hardships of mate and helpmeet and mother to the hardiest breed of pioneers that the world has ever known.

All this Hunt Breckenridge sensed but vaguely. It was the girl's hair that caught and held his eye. It was tawny—yellow as the seared leaves of Indian corn in early autumn. The last rays of the declining sun struck a golden glint from it. It had been drawn back smoothly across her head and secured by a band of brightly decorated buckskin that encircled her head above the ears. From within this band a single long feather of the whooping crane, dyed blood-red, slanted up and back, Indian fashion. Behind her, the unconfined yellow length of it streamed in the whistling wind like the plumed tail of some golden wild stallion of the prairies.

One of the men observed Hunter on the shore and spoke a few words to his companions. The occupants of the raft looked up and for just an instant they gazed into each other's eyes—the tall straight youth with his long rifle, the turkey slung from his shoulder, his hair black as a crow's wing, and the girl, equally tall and robust, with the streaming golden hair. And in that instant of passing, Hunt Breckenridge saw that her eyes were the deep blue of the first woodland violets of spring. Then she was gone and he stood gazing after the swift-gliding raft on the muddy flood tide of the Missouri.

A half-mile downstream from his point of vantage the current thrust away from the shore, providing a landing spot of sorts in the relatively quiet water just below. The boy watched the occupants of the raft make preparations to effect a landing and knew that they intended to camp there for the night.

He turned up Breckenridge Creek to the cabin, entering as the family sat down to the evening meal of roast venison, vegetable stew, corn bread and strong tea. The meal ended, the mother and elder sister began the process of stowing a veritable swarm of youngsters in the one adjoining room and in bunks ranged along the wall of the main room. Mrs. Breckenridge, as had been her nightly custom since the arrival of the twins six years before and the subsequent arrival of four other infants, voiced a mild complaint as to lack of space and the necessity for more ample quarters.

Hunt listened absently. His thoughts had strayed down to the point where the occupants of the raft had put ashore. Presently his feet trod the path blazed by his thoughts. Silent as some cat-footed denizen of the forests through which he trod, his approach unheralded by so much as the snapping of a twig, he appeared in the circle of light cast by their camp fire and presented the turkey without a word.

Black of hair, moccasin-shod and attired in jacket and fringed trousers of home-tanned buckskin, he might have been mistaken for one of the Indians whose ancestral wilderness his family had invaded.

Dubois and Charteris, the two Frenchmen from the little village of St. Louis, he had seen once before, when they had stopped at the Breckenridge cabin. The genial Dubois thanked him cordially for the turkey. Wordlessly, the visitor seated himself upon a down log and listened to the conversation, from which he gathered that the big sandy individual who had manned the sweep was a Scotch Canadian named McKenzie. He was father of the girl whom he sometimes addressed as Ann, more frequently as Nepanamo, an Indian name meaning Hair-that-shines, bestowed upon her by the Minatarees of the Saskatchewan prairies. McKenzie, after the death of his Norwegian wife, had moved ever westward across Canada as factor of various posts operated by the powerful and far-flung Northwest Company, on beyond Lake Winnepeg and Port Du Prairie to where the streams that flowed north to the Assiniboine, Saskatchewan and Athabasca rivers were separated from those that flowed south to the Missouri by no more than a gentle swell of the prairies.

It was evident to Hunter that there was little love lost between the two Frenchmen and the fifth member of the party. The latter, a big fellow named Leroux, was of ferocious cast of countenance, his facial contours resembling those of a baboon. His mouth was his most prominent feature, protruding even beyond the powerful shovel nose, the lips thrust out in that fashion by protruding buck teeth which gave him a peculiarly wolfish expression. From this out thrust, misshapen mouth his whole countenance seemed to recede sharply to the crown of his head. A dozen or more human scalps, well smoked and dried, hung at his belt by way of ornament, evenly spaced and lending the effect of a fringed girdle.

This last touch was in accord with the fashion of the day. All of the voyageurs of the fur brigades and the majority of the settlers had adopted the Indian custom of scalping enemies that were slain in battle. The man was McKenzie's assistant, Hunter gathered. The McKenzies and Leroux had traveled southwest from Fort Du Prairie to the upper Missouri and had there pooled forces with the two Frenchmen for mutual protection during the two-thousand-mile journey down river to St. Louis.

Hunt Breckenridge, however, acquired this information more by absorption than by active interest in the conversation. His eyes were trained steadily upon the tawny girl as if he would drink in every detail of this glorious vision while he might.

Dubois, the amiable Frenchman, smiled as he observed this intent regard. It was natural enough that a boy of Hunt's years should admire Nepanamo, he thought. But throughout the trip he had observed another fact at which he had not smiled. The little black eyes of Leroux had hovered hungrily about the girl with an ominous persistence. McKenzie, considering her a mere child, had failed to notice it. Dubois was not sure that the girl herself had been conscious of the man's regard, or, if conscious of it, whether or not she was aware of its portent.

The conversation turned upon the increasing hostility of the Western tribes. More and more they resented the presence of the trappers that encroached upon their domain. Parties of whites were set upon and murdered by prowling bands of almost any tribe one cared to name.

McKenzie, who had seemed to withdraw into his own thoughts, finally contributed a comment. The Minatarees and Assiniboines, the Chippewyans and other tribes of the Canadian Northwest were under better control than those of the Upper Louisiana country that was claimed by the United States, he said. One seldom heard of Canadian fur brigades being annihilated or of the sacking of Canadian trading posts. The Northwest Company understood how to deal with savages and keep them under control.

Dubois replied to the effect that the Minatarees and Assiniboines were the worst of the lot. They might respect the lives

and property rights of Canadian traders, but they were persistent enough in their attempts against American traders on the Missouri and perpetually at war with the tribes that traded with them.

Leroux inquired what could be said for the Crows. Hadn't a war party of Crows swooped north into Assiniboine country only the year before, killing some three hundred Assiniboines, capturing almost an equal number of women and children and stealing two thousand head of horses?

That, said Dubois, was ever the way of Indians. It had nothing to do with the way in which they dealt with the whites. The Crows, in all their history, had never killed a white man. On the contrary, they protected all whites against the depredations of other tribes. So steadfastly did they cling to that rule that even during the war they had refrained from slaying the Canadians who had marshalled the Assiniboines against the Crows.

The war to which he referred was that of 1812. While the navies of Great Britain and the United States had come to grips on the Great Lakes and at sea, a no less bitterly contested war, though of lesser proportions, had been waged between fur traders of the rival nations all along the vaguely defined and debatable boundary lines, the length of the far northwestern prairies. The Indians had been armed and incited to make war upon tribes that traded at posts of the enemy nation. Naturally, the enmities thus fanned to flame between Indian tribes had not been abandoned at the cessation of hostilities between the whites of the two principal nations.

The conversation turned to recitals of various operations of the Indians against the settlers of the two contending countries. Dubois cited the harrying of the settlers from the upper Mississippi by Indians under the leadership of an unknown white man known as Wolf-strike.

These depredations were fresh in Hunter's mind. Terror-stricken survivors had come down the Mississippi to St. Louis with harrowing reports of atrocities, of whole families put to death horribly and without mercy by the fiendish Wolf-strike. Dubois gave it as his opinion that it was well for the renegade leader in those outrages that his identity was unknown; that he would be shot down on sight by any American settler.

"He's no renegade," Leroux insisted. "It was war time, Frenchy, and he led his men against the enemy."

"War tam, shees no axcuse for burn women and enfant," Dubois objected. He also asserted that it was by no means certain that the unknown white leader of the Indians had operated under the sanction of the enemy commanders. It was well-nigh certain that he had been actuated not by patriotism but from a personal desire to pillage.

Hunter had heard all that threshed out before. The war had come to an end but two or three years back. He absorbed the conversation absently, his regard seldom wavering from the girl Neapanamo. Dubois smiled as he observed the fact that Leroux was nettled at the boy's steadfast regard of the girl.

The argument grew more emphatic as Dubois remarked that some of the British traders did not seem to know that the war was over and insisted upon invading American territory in the northwest and establishing posts.

"Hell, Frenchy," Leroux snarled. "American traders, including all the French and Spanish scum on the Mississippi, are territory thieves and fur thieves too. The Northwest Company established posts clear past Lake Winnepeg to the Athabasca twenty year ago, and laid claim to all that country in the name of England. When the French sold Upper Louisiana to the Colonies they sold something they didn't own. The English will get the trade of the whole country in the end, clean to every creek head that flows to the Missouri—and own the country too!"

Hunter Breckenridge, springing from a line of patriots that had instilled into him a profound Americanism and pride of race, now contributed his first remark.

"I reckon you're mistaken, Mister," he said in his soft Southern drawl. "First off, you referred to the United States as the Colonies; which they ain't no longer colonies and won't ever be again. Furthermo', the very ground you're setting on right now is in the United States, and it's not becomin' of you to speak ary word of disparagement."

Technically, his statement was correct, but even now, a dozen years after the consummation of the Louisiana Purchase, those who roamed in the uncharted regions to the west of the Mississippi were wont to compare its geology, flora, fauna, the customs of the natives and the topographical features of the landscape with "those of the United States", namely, with the country to the eastward of the Mississippi.

"There won't be ary hostile Britisher hoist the English flag the length of the Missouri," the youth confidently concluded.

Leroux turned on his malignant, wolfish grin.

"If they do—and it's dead sartin they will, clean down to St. Looey on the big river—I s'pose as how you'd go up and throw them out, my fine young cockerel," he said with heavy sarcasm.

"I would that," Hunter told him quietly. "There was Breckenridges helped to throw the Redcoats out in seventy-six. There was Breckenridges quit Virginia with Dan'l Boone and helped to settle up Kentucky. There was Breckenridges come from Kentucky with Dan'l Boone to settle Missouri fo' the Union. My Pap was one, a few years after I was bo'n. And there'll be Breckenridges to help kick the Britishers off the length of this here river any time there's need fo' it."

Dubois, knowing the deadly temper of Leroux, and knowing also what prompted the man to enter into an altercation with young Breckenridge, feared for the boy and hastened to interpose a few words of his own.

"Yes. Missouri, hees soon be a State now, sure enoff," he said.

Hunter Breckenridge, having settled the argument to his entire satisfaction, lapsed again into the far more absorbing occupation of feasting his eyes upon the golden-haired Neapanamo. For the next half-hour he contributed not so much as a syllable to the conversation and his gaze seldom wavered from the girl. Apparently unaware of this intent regard and glancing at him but infrequently, it was nevertheless evident that the girl was acutely conscious of his steadfast gaze and of the manifest if silent homage thus accorded her; also that she was not ill pleased by it.

Leroux was becoming increasingly irritated by the girl's awareness of Hunter's inspection of her. He rose to put fresh wood upon the fire and in resuming his seat moved close to her.

"Our young cockerel holds his tongue while he thinks up more ancestors," he remarked in an undertone, as if to convey the impression that he intended the words for her ears alone. "It's big odds that he don't own an ancestor that he knows of; a wood colt manufacturing himself a family tree."

He chuckled softly as if sharing with her some confidential joke known only to the two of them, pretending to believe that his words had not been clearly audible to the others. In what purported to be a friendly gesture, he placed his arm across her shoulders. Instantly, with almost pantherish swiftness, the girl moved to elude his touch. Then she did know, Dubois decided. And the Frenchman observed the one brief glance of positive aversion with which she favored Leroux in moving. Then, as if instinctively, her eyes sought those of Hunter Breckenridge. Dubois, detecting the sudden look of astonishment that crossed her face, followed the direction of her gaze as an ominous click sounded in his ears.

Hunter, resenting this impeachment of his veracity, filled with fierce pride of family and deeming himself and his illustrious ancestors insulted by the intimation that he was a wood colt—the nameless offspring of some illicit union and deserted at birth to conceal the guilt of his unknown parents—had shifted his long rifle until it rested across his knees with muzzle trained upon Leroux.

With a strangled snort of rage, Leroux stretched a swift hand to his own gun that stood against a black walnut tree within easy reach. Dubois, his gaze riveted upon Hunter, observed a barely perceptible tightening of his lips coincident with a slight contraction of the hand that caressed the lock of his rifle.

Then McKenzie, with an agility remarkable in one of his bulk, attained his feet with a bellowing admonition to Leroux. Roused from his abstraction, he had observed only Leroux's move to drape his arm across Ann's shoulders and the girl's brief glance of aversion as she avoided his touch. He had not observed the rôle that Hunter Breckenridge played in the tableau and believed that Leroux's snarl was an expression of anger toward the girl.

"We'll have none o' that!" he rumbled at Leroux. "Keep yer hands to yerself, ye scum! No man lays his hands on Big Mack's girl. Bear it well in mind that it'll be an ill day for ye when next ye lay a finger to Neapanamo."

As if that settled the entire matter, he resumed his seat with a few wordless rumblings such as might emanate from the throat of a grouchy bear.

"That's all o' that!"

"Not quite all," Hunt Breckenridge declared, his eyes resting steadily on Leroux.

"What's that? What's that?" McKenzie demanded testily, observing the rifle that menaced Leroux from its position across their visitor's knees. "Not quite all of what?"

"He," Hunt answered, not removing his eyes from Leroux, "remarked that I had lied about my family and that likely I was a wood colt. He's about to explain that he was misinfo'med."

Leroux grunted savagely and seemed upon the point of reaching again for his rifle but was deterred by a sharp admonition from Big Mack.

"Because if he don't—and sudden," said Hunter, "I'll be fo'ced to shoot his black heart out where he sits." This was uttered without a trace of heat or bluster and it somehow impressed every person around the fire as being a simple statement of fact.

"Whatever possessed ye to malign his parentage?" McKenzie demanded of Leroux. "Devil take us! He's only a boy. It's small business ye're in, a-hounding a young un. Take back what ye said, numbskull!"

Leroux knew that this was in the nature of an edict. He did not lack courage. On the contrary, his was the courage of a wild beast. But he was also endowed with a wild beast's cunning. He could not afford an open break with Big Mack at this stage of his affairs. The metal of this upstart youth was such that if prompt retraction were not forthcoming it would result inevitably in the death of one of them. Leroux felt that he could put an end to Hunter with no little pleasure; but under the circumstances, it would be a foolish thing to do. His mouth expanded in what was intended as an amiable grin.

"I was having a mite of fun with the lad," he said to Big Mack. Then, to Hunter, "Sartin, Sonny, I was mistook. Far as I'm concerned, England can lay all o' her reverses in America to the fightin' clan of Breckenridge. And I doubt not that the proudest entry in the family Bible was wrote there the day you was whelped."

"Handsome enough," Hunter said, dismissing the incident as closed. He rose to take his departure.

"Hah!" Dubois exclaimed, pointing to two tufts of hair suspended from Hunter's belt. "Where you find thees scalps?"

"I taken them myself," the boy informed him. Then, silently as he had come, he faded into the timber.

"Yes. Now I come to think, me. Ah hear about zat fight myself," Dubois said, recalling that the Breckenridge family had beaten off a Sauk war party that had attacked the cabin. "Zat was one beeg battle, sure enoff. Leroux, my bucko, if you had make hold to lif' zat gun, he mos' certainly do what he promise—shoot your black heart out where you sit."

Leroux grunted scornfully. But Dubois knew that if the man's hand had lifted his rifle from where it rested, the boy would have killed him as unerringly as he would have potted a gobbler. He knew the breed of American that had migrated from Kentucky to the shores of the Missouri. They were a shooting people. A boy might be young in years, but if he could shoot the head off a squirrel at sixty yards, which most of these Kentuckians could, and if possessed of the will to match that skill against a human foe, the size or age of his antagonist would be but a trivial detail.

CHAPTER II

The elder Breckenridge, having disposed of his furs to advantage in St. Louis, returned with the necessary supplies that he had purchased; various cloths, from some of which warm underwear would be fashioned for the entire family, dresses for the female members from others, shirts for the males, the balance to be used for trading purposes; bars of iron of assorted thickness, from which hoes, trade axes and other implements would be forged; tea, coffee, salt, tobacco, a quantity of powder and lead; also sundry trinkets dear to the savage heart. Every settler's cabin on the Missouri was a trading post of sorts.

Summer merged into autumn. The crops were gathered and stored. The first stiff frosts touched the hardwood hills with magic wand, transforming them from uniform green to a riotous blaze of color, brilliant yellows contrasting with purples that shaded into mauve, scarlet competing with blazing orange. Out in the open hills where the grass still showed green, startling pools of crimson revealed the location of sumach thickets, as if nature had spilled the life blood of the waning summer to enhance the last-minute splendor of its passing—the brief glorification of a landscape that all too soon would assume the bleak and barren garb of winter. As spring, once winter has relaxed its grip, is not in itself bountiful but merely blossoms forth in lovely promise of future plenty, so autumn is the season of promise fulfilled—the most bountiful period of all the year as Nature brings all creation to lavish fruition just prior to the lean days that are soon to come.

It was evident to Hunter Breckenridge that the least of Nature's creatures were aware of the portent of present plenty. The Northern migrants winged their way south in whistling flocks. The deer and elk were feasting heartily and putting on tallow against the winter months when feed would be scarce and covered with snow. The bears were gorging on ripened fruit and storing up sufficient fat to nourish them through the long winter sleep of hibernation. Squirrels were busily storing nuts and acorns in the timber and the beavers were sinking their food caches of succulent willow and cottonwood to the floors of the beaver ponds before the day when the ice should "take." Bees feverishly buzzed among the late fall flowers on warm days in their efforts to store up a few additional drops of honey before winter should shut down.

And as with these lesser creatures, so it was with man. Savage and settler alike, each in the measure of his need or foresight, engaged in harvesting the treasures that Nature spread before him. The Breckenridge family thriftily gathered and stored huge quantities of the season's delicacies. Great baskets of wild grapes and elderberries were collected by the youngsters and made into wine by the mother and the elder sister. Luscious pawpaws, larger than the average potato, had been ripened to dull yellow, verging upon black. There were red haws and black, and an occasional tree of wild persimmons, now ripened by the frost. Two score bushels of nuts—black walnuts and hickory nuts in the timber and hazel nuts in the brush thickets of the more open country—were collected and stored for winter use. Currants, gooseberries, raspberries and wild plums were gathered and transformed into jams and jells. Three bee trees, located earlier in the season, were cut and the great store of honey harvested. And throughout these excursions, wherever the younger members roamed in search of such delicacies, Hunt and his father were ever close at hand, either helping with the work or hunting in the adjacent forest.

In mid-autumn the elder Breckenridge dropped off downstream to visit a neighbor named Garrison, intending to help the man to round up and butcher some of his hogs that ranged half-wild in the forest. His intention was to bring back upriver with him a quantity of pork and ten gallons of white corn whisky.

Hunter pursued the routine of his days, felling trees at the far edge of the clearing, parts of which would be used for firewood, some split for rails and the rest piled round the stumps and burned. Then, as the meat supply was running low, he and Tod hunted for two days upriver, bagging five deer, two black bears and several turkeys, bringing the meat by boat down the current of the Missouri and up Breckenridge Creek to the clearing.

The day following his return he set forth to work as usual, felled a big walnut tree and piled it round the stump to be burned when sufficiently dry. Then he sized up the next, a big oak, but on this day he felt a vast disinclination to put forth further effort. Since his visit to the camp where the members of the raft's crew had put ashore on that night some months before, he had gone about his work at times with an air of preoccupation. New and untried impulses were stirring in him. His periods of restlessness and vague longings seemed now of more frequent recurrence. And when restless, it was ever his habit to resort to the river.

He returned to the cabin to find Tod engaged in stretching the two bearskins on the north side of the cabin where the sun

would not strike them. His elder sister, over an open fire in the dooryard, was trying out the fat of the bears and rendering it into lard for family use. Hunter tentatively investigated a vat in which a number of deer hides had been put down in wood ashes for the purpose of leaching the hair from them, then absently estimated the weight of a bricklike fortification composed of many large brownish-yellow cakes of the most recently manufactured batch of homemade soap. Then he motioned to Tod.

"We'd better run the throw lines and rebait them now, I reckon."

They repaired to the river, Tod seized a heavy cord that was tied to a sapling on the bank and hauled it in hand over hand. A weighty but sluggish tugging apprised him of the fact that there was prey at the end. He extracted a ten-pound Missouri catfish, rebaited the six hooks that were attached by staging to the main line at intervals, then heaved the sizable rock at the end of the throw line out into the river.

Two canoes, each occupied by three savages, came moving upstream.

"Sauks," Hunter pronounced, frowning.

He knew that it was but a question of time before marauding war parties of these or allied miscreants, on their way to or from raiding expeditions in the Osage country to the southward, would consider the moment opportune to ravage the countryside. Then that sound which every pioneer family had cause to dread above all others, the shrill, gobbling yelps of the war whoop, would sound again on the shores of the Missouri. Columns of smoke would mark the location of burning cabins and one would visit a neighbor's home only to find the members of the household, rigid in death, sprawled in the dooryard. Hunter had viewed such scenes. The savages were loud-voiced and vociferous, their gesticulations expansive and violent. Hunter observed a small keg in each canoe.

"Drunk," he asserted. "They stopped at Garrison's to trade for some corn licker. Likely they'll get stiff drunk and put ashore to sleep it off. Then some Missouri Injun will lift six sets of hair."

The two brothers progressed downstream until they reached the spot where the occupants of the fur raft had camped.

"You go on and run the rest of the throw lines, Tod," Hunter instructed, "I'll loiter round here till you come back and maybe shoot me a passel of squirrels to while away the time."

He hunted no squirrels, however. Instead, he sat on a log and gazed across the dead ashes of the camp fire, endeavoring to conjure up again the vision of the girl as she had sat there across from him with the firelight in her hair.

"Nepanamo—Hair-that-shines," he said. "Injuns have the knack of handing out names that have the correct meaning."

Tod rejoined him and they angled through the forest toward the clearing. On entering it, they saw a cluster of savages before the cabin. The six Sauks had put ashore, probably for no good purpose. Mrs. Breckenridge and the elder daughter, each armed with a rifle, stood in the open doorway, firmly declining to grant the Sauks' insistent demand that they be permitted to enter and partake of food.

The instant that his eyes rested upon the scene, Hunter lifted his voice in a long-drawn hail. The startled savages, thus taken in the rear, whirled to confront the newcomers. The two boys advanced steadily but without haste. Upon nearing the door, Hunter motioned the savages to stand from his path, and so commanding was the gesture that the Sauks instinctively obeyed.

"Inside, Tod," Hunter ordered, and the younger brother replaced his sister, taking his place at his mother's side just far enough within the doorway so the muzzles of their weapons were flush with it. Hunter, his back to the cabin some three feet to one side of the door, faced the Sauks.

"What do you want here?" he demanded in their native tongue.

The spokesman for the Sauks explained that they came in peace. The Sauks had buried the hatchet and were now the sworn brothers of the whites. But what sort of treatment was this, to be refused the hospitality of those whom they viewed as friends and brothers? Was the white man's lodge closed to the Sauks when they were hungry?

"Yes. It is closed to the Sauks," Hunter informed him quietly. "You can not go in."

The spokesman launched into a vindictive tirade. "Who are you to speak of friendship for the Sauks?" he demanded. "Only two short years ago this clearing ran red with the blood of our warriors. Two of these men that you see before you wore their hair short in mourning for relatives who fell before your guns."

"And one year before that we wore our hair short in mourning for the little girl, our baby sister, that Sauk warriors shot down as she played," Hunter replied. "The little one's grave is yonder. When your warriors returned another year, they found men, not women and children, to make war upon, and left seven of their dead behind."

The towering savage, with a scornful glance at the two brothers, demanded to be informed if they considered themselves men.

Hunter shrugged carelessly. "Did I not just say that the Sauks left seven dead behind? Decide for yourself whether we are men or boys. Do children so easily slay your best warriors?"

The Indian was foaming but Hunter's gun was trained upon him. He was similarly menaced by the muzzles of the two guns held by Tod and Mrs. Breckenridge. Behind them were other children, he knew not how many. And the young of these white people fought like devils.

"We grieve for our dead of two summers ago," he said. "Give us presents and we will forget and will tell our people that you are friends of the Sauks. Give us many presents to prove your friendship."

"I will give you nothing. You may tell your people that we have no friendship for the Sauks," Hunter informed him. "We have only hot lead to give to those who slay children and boast that they are warriors. We have plenty of that. If you do not leave, I will give you your share now and your scalp shall hang at my belt."

There was a moment's tense silence as all parties awaited the outcome of this clash of wills, both factions poised at hair-trigger tension to follow the first move of their respective spokesmen.

The tall savage worked himself into an undignified frenzy, delivering a violent harangue, calling upon his tribal gods to witness his oath that some day in the not-distant future he would avenge this insult and wipe it out in blood and fire. The mere fact that his threats were couched in the future tense informed Hunter, who knew Indian nature to the core, that the danger of immediate hostilities had passed. The spokesman was engaging in a frenzy of vituperation and threats of future vengeance to save his face with his followers for his failure to engage in immediate action.

Tod, standing within the doorway and unable to see Hunter, understood but few words of the Sauk tongue. He recognized a few epithets and the threat of tone and manner, interpreting the savage's attitude as of immediate menace to his brother. The Sauk, in the course of his violent gesturing, accidentally discharged his musket. Tod, believing that the shot had been fired at his brother, instantly shot the Indian dead. The Sauk pitched on his face as the heavy charge of buck-shot riddled his chest. Reaching a swift hand behind him, Tod exchanged the discharged piece for a rifle which his elder sister thrust into his outstretched hand. Its muzzle swung in line with the remaining Sauks before they had recovered from their astonishment. Tod was clearly upon the point of duplicating his performance of two seconds past—would have, save for the fact that Hunter's voice, cool and collected, reached his ears from outside the door, apprising him of the fact that his brother was unhurt.

"Take him with you and be getting out of here," Hunter ordered.

The Sauks obeyed, carrying their fallen leader down the creek. Tod joined his brother outside the cabin and they stood looking after the retreating savages.

"Wisht I could have snatched off his scalp," Tod said regretfully.

Hunter nodded. "But one day, if you don't change your shootin' tactics, some red miscreant will have your scalp instead," he predicted.

"Why so?" Tod demanded aggrievedly. "I shot as stiddy as if gunning for a rabbit. The varmint was cold dead before he was halfway to the ground."

"It was only that you shot the wrong Injun, Tod," Hunter explained. "That one had done fired his gun and it was empty. You'd ought to have shot down one whose musket was still loaded. Pap has told you that, and so have I. Just narrow it

down some. Supposing you're a-sauntering along and two Injuns spring up in your trail and gobble at you, and one shoots at you and misses. Which of the pair do you shoot?"

"The one that didn't shoot at me," Tod confessed. "The one whose gun is still unfired. But I thought that critter had downed you, Hunt, and I went so black mad that I drapped him without thinking."

"You done all right, Tod," Hunter said. "I ain't a-finding fault, but just reminding you not to do it thataway another time. It's thinking quick and keeping little things like that in mind that enables some folks to retain their hair longer than them that fails to think. Pap was expecting to draw in home to-day, sometime sho't of nightfall. I'll saunter after those Sauks and see where they head to. It wouldn't do for Pap to run foul of them unexpected, the way they're feeling now. You stay here and see to things. Don't let ary young un stray outside the cabin till me or Pap gets home."

He followed the trail of the five marauders. They took to their canoes and headed upriver. After following them for some five miles, Hunter halted, satisfied that they intended to keep going.

The sun was dropping behind the western horizon. Hunter leaned on his long rifle and looked out across the foam-flecked Missouri on whose roily waters the shadows were deepening with approaching night. As always, it sang its siren song to him. There was seductive invitation in the sucking gurgle of the current as it lapped the banks. The many swirling little eddies seemed to him a thousand eyes, winking wisely at him as if wishing to convey the knowledge of the things that they had witnessed at the headwaters of distant creeks, two thousand miles away. The droning undertone of its waters was muttering and deep-chested, its accents guttural, as if in imitation of the speech of the savages who dwelt upon its tributaries. Fancifully, he imagined that these sounds had been absorbed far upstream and carried as the water carried sediment, to be released now as messages for his eager ears. The varying notes that rose above the booming throb of the river's song could be interpreted, he thought. There was the gobble of the war whoop, the wailing of Indian villages mourning for warriors slain in battle, the triumphant clamor of the scalp dance after a successful foray, the rhythmic chant and shuffling feet of ceremonial and war dance; the slow sucking of the pipe passed from hand to hand around the council fires, the rumbling hoofs of a stampeded herd of buffalo or the drumming vibration of thousands of ponies charging across the sagebrush plains. All these things were related to Hunter by the deep-throated song of the river. Its voice as a whole was a symphonic chant, the saga of the great Northwest.

He stood watching the play of the muddy current until night shut down and the prowlers of darkness came on shift. A screech owl gave vent to its quavering falsetto overhead. A great horned owl, as if to silence this runt of the species, hooted gruffly from the forest on the farther shore. Then all notes ceased as a timber wolf threw full volume of its lungs into the tribal call of its clan. From far and near, other big gray hunters gave tongue in answer.

Hunter headed homeward through the darkened forest and he knew that the potent call of the Missouri could not much longer be ignored. Its boiling waters were attuned to the restless blood that surged through his pioneer veins.

"She's done laid her spell on me," he said. "She's got me, I reckon—the river has."

CHAPTER III

Hunter joyously bucked the muddy tide of the Missouri on the first lap of his journey, the third that he had made to its headwaters. He was off on a two-years' trapping expedition, having joined the brigade that General Ashley, head of the Rocky Mountain Company, was conducting up the river. The brigade was to ascend the distant Yellowstone and scatter along its two chief southern tributaries, the Powder River and the Bighorn, and trap their creeks. The following summer they would collect in small bands or travel singly and make their way to the appointed rendezvous. There they would meet other mountain men who were trapping for the company from the Sweetwater to the Musselshell; from the Niobrara to the Snake River and the shores of Great Salt Lake, west of the Great Divide.

The six heavily loaded bateaux took advantage of a fair wind and hoisted sail. The forests on either shore of the river were still drab and colorless, composed of gaunt and tangled skeletons that had not yet sent forth, the first budding green shoots of spring. The bateaux put ashore at the big flat where the waters of the Kansas River emptied into the Missouri. The flat was graced by the log structures of Ely's Fort, a trading post operated in the interests of the Rocky Mountain Company. Not many years thereafter this spot was to become known as Westport Landing, destined eventually to be the jumping-off place for the overland stampeders of the California gold rush; for the wagon trains of the Oregon emigrants that were to settle Oregon and claim it for the Union; for the tremendous bull-train trade that was to spring up with New Mexico by the way of Sante Fe trail; for many of the disciples of Joseph Smith, exiled from Nauvoo, Illinois and joining the great Mormon migration that was to result in the settlement of Utah; for the Free-Staters who would pass through the slave State of Missouri to settle the Kansas prairies, and for the members of many another historic movement that was to play a part in the shaping of the West. But now it was well beyond the jumping-off place itself, a mere outpost of civilization on the flat where, a scant half-dozen years before, there had been only the lodges of the Kaw or Kansas Indians.

The thirty-odd men who had just ascended from St. Louis were joined by almost as many more at Ely's post. Some of these last had been left here the preceding fall to guard the horses and to secure more from the Indians. A great quantity of white corn liquor had been distilled for the Indian trade and the reunited voyageurs kindled a huge fire and broached a keg of whisky preparatory to an all-night spree. As the revelry progressed, the trappers, in imitation of Indian practice, weaved round the camp fire with the hop, shuffle and chant of the scalp dance and the war dance.

Dubois, the Frenchman from St. Louis, was a member of the party that had remained in charge of the horses. Hunter, after drinking throughout the night with his companions, withdrew to one side at dawn, in company with Ashley, Dubois and another voyageur and proceeded to cook breakfast.

A weird figure rode across the flat. At first glance the four men at the fire mistook him for an Indian. He was hatless, his skull shaved except for a scalp lock. So diminutive of size was the stranger that he might have been mistaken for a half-grown lad except for his wrinkled countenance. He addressed the quartet in English, identifying himself as a white man who had "gone Injun." His case was not unusual. The great majority of the fur brigaders took Indian wives. Many, for the purpose of furthering trade or for greater safety when trapping, lived in various Indian villages. Some few, discarding all civilized customs, went over to the savages in every particular. It was from the latter element that the renegade was to spring; for the renegade was destined, in the not distant future, to play his bloody part west of the Mississippi as in the immediate past he had left his hideous trail east of it. Not all white men who went Indian, however, were renegades, save in the sense that they had deserted their own race to adopt the ways of the savages. Some of them exerted constructive and beneficial influence upon the tribes with which they affiliated.

Kentuckians, however, had been treated to too many frightful examples of the ways of renegades to view any man who had gone Indian without acute suspicion. Fresh in every Kentuckian's mind was the record of the monstrous Simon Girty, who for thirty years had led the Indians against the settlers of Ohio and Kentucky and built up a total of more massacres, torturings and atrocities than could be ascribed to any half-dozen Indian chiefs that America had produced. And the fiendish Girty had only recently met his just deserts.

The newcomer gave his name as Haddock and stated that he was now a sub-chief of the Loup Pawnees. His Indian name was Little Bull Buffalo, which, he assured them, had been bestowed upon him from the fact that though small in stature, he was mighty in battle. His undersized frame seemed charged with compact energy and he was endowed with the agility of an ape. He had left his own tribe and had wandered widely, he explained, and now wished to accompany the brigade upriver as a protection against the Sioux, with whom his own nation, the five allied tribes of the Pawnees, was at war.

Breckenridge, questioning Haddock about the unexplored regions, found that the little man virtually had a map of the stream lines from the Canadian River in the southwest to the Green River west of the Rocky Mountains etched upon his brain. Hunter, his Kentucky-bred suspicion of white Indians waning, began to feel a curious friendship for Little Bull Buffalo of the Loup Pawnees.

There was great bustle of preparation, as the brigade was to set forth at dawn of the following day. Toward nightfall, a group of trappers stood watching a distant bateau move up the river toward Ely's Fort.

"Big Mack's outfit," one of them stated.

Hunter straightened suddenly to attention. Where went McKenzie, there also went Big Mack's daughter, Nepanamo, Hair-that-shines. Hunter had seen the girl but twice since the night of that first meeting on the Missouri—once in St. Louis and once on the Osage River. He stood watching that approach of the bateau, listening meanwhile to the comments of the trappers.

McKenzie, a dyed-in-the-wool Britisher at heart, made no effort to conceal the fact that he considered all American colonists as traitors who had deserted the mother country. Some day, he was quite certain, the rebellious colonies would be soundly chastised and be brought back under the British flag. The open expression of such sentiments, coupled with the fact of his long association with the Northwest Fur Company, chief competitor of the two big rival companies, the Rocky Mountain and the Great American, that operated under the American flag in the West, had not smoothed the way for Big Mack to secure any very responsible position with either of the two latter companies. He had served both of them on occasion, but only at posts well removed from regions where the Northwest Company operated. The heads of the two American fur companies were not above suspecting that a former henchman of the great Northwest Company might be tempted to divert to it the trade of the Indians of his vicinity instead of striving to retain it for some American concern. Big Mack, still further embittered against Americans by this attitude, was now heading back to his old range in the far Northwest. Not one among the trappers knew his plans. It seemed not so much that there was any intentional secrecy veiling McKenzie's destination, they said, as that the old man himself seemed rather vague upon that score. He spoke hazily of setting up for himself as a free trader in some indefinite locality.

Hunt Breckenridge watched the bateau effect a landing. That night he sat again at the McKenzie camp fire.

"You remember him, Father—Hunter Breckenridge?" the girl said, when Big Mack accorded their visitor a mere absent-minded nod.

McKenzie peered more closely at their guest. His stubborn old eyes lightened with brief amusement.

"Sure enough, Hair-that-shines," he said, dropping an affectionate hand upon his daughter's shoulder. "Sure enough! If 'tain't our young firebrand that brang us the turkey five year back—and threatened Leroux with his gun; grewed up now to six foot and more."

Thereafter, according to his usual custom, he retired to the shelter of his own brooding thoughts and sucked comfortably at his pipe, paying little heed to what transpired about him. He had aged noticeably, Hunter thought. The girl Nepanamo had developed into a tall, powerful woman, lithe as a panther and with the strength of a man. The girl herself knew little of her father's plans beyond the fact that Leroux was to meet them on the Upper Missouri and that they were to travel north to the prairies of Saskatchewan before settling the details of his project.

"If you're anywheres in the Northwest, I'll be finding you there," Hunter said in parting. "Till then, Hair-that-shines."

"I'll be expecting you," she said. But she knew that Big Mack would not tolerate any save the most casual acquaintance between his daughter and any rebel American. "Be sure to come," she nevertheless called after him.

Hunter learned from General Ashley that the McKenzie bateau was to accompany the Rocky Mountain brigade upriver for protection against savages. In the same breath he detailed Breckenridge as one of the hunters of the party. Thus it happened that when the brigade got under way at dawn, Ann McKenzie's eyes roved over the throng of men in vain as she sought for a glimpse of the tall Kentuckian. The bateaux were loaded down with trade goods and supplies and launched upon the current of the Missouri. Half a hundred horses were packed and headed upriver under the care of a score or more of mounted men. With this latter contingent rode the squaws of such voyageurs as had Indian wives with them.

Ashley had detailed eight men, four to each shore of the river, to ride a day in advance of the brigade. These were the hunters who were to kill the meat for the party. Since the brigade would live almost entirely off the country as it progressed, whenever the hunters should fail in their appointed task the main party would go hungry. Because of their peculiar expertness as hunters and their resourcefulness in coping with savages, Hunt Breckenridge, Dubois and a trapper named Brady had been detailed to one shore of the river. With them, largely for the reason that Hunter was friendly to him while the other Kentuckians in the brigade eyed askance his shaved skull and scalp lock, rode Haddock, Little Bull of the Loup Pawnees.

The quartet left Ely's Fort three hours before dawn. From the outset, game abounded in unbelievable profusion, but they did no shooting until shortly after noon when they neared the spot which Ashley had designated as the point where the brigade would camp on the first night out from the mouth of the Kansas. The hunters scattered through a timbered bottom. Breckenridge, observing tawny bodies ahead of him among the trees, dismounted and advanced on foot. He came within sixty yards of a band of elk, drew a bead behind one's shoulder and the animal went down. Before stirring from his tracks, he reloaded and carefully primed his piece. This was the inevitable custom of the pioneer. While dressing the elk he heard the scattered reports of his companions' guns. Two black bears raced past him but the distance was too great for accurate shooting. A band of deer drew near and halted to look back. Again he fired and felled a buck, reloaded and advanced to dress it. While so engaged, he observed several flocks of turkeys moving toward him and presently he potted a big gobbler. He packed half of the elk upon his horse, took the deer intact upon his own shoulders and advanced to the point which had been designated by Ashley. Then he returned for the turkey and the rest of the elk meat.

Big red fox squirrels were numerous in the timber and coveys of quail flushed from every thicket. Flocks of ducks and geese winged up and down the river or bobbed on the surface of the water. Upon his return to the river it was to find that his companions had brought in their first load of meat and had gone back for more. He waited there, seated on a down log and smoking his Pipe, as he gazed contentedly out across the sinuous flow of the Missouri. The hunters returned with their second load. The kill consisted of two elk, five deer, four turkeys, a raccoon and a small black bear.

Then the hunters resumed their way up the river, not halting to make camp until nightfall. Thereafter, they would have no way of knowing at what point the brigade would camp. It would depend wholly upon the nature of the going encountered by the packers and their horses, upon the difficulties of wind and current encountered by the boatmen. There would be long stretches where a line could be attached to the prow of each bateau and its upstream progress aided by horses that traveled unobstructed shore lines; other days when the nature of the terrain would prohibit such means of assistance from ashore. At times, the land party would cut off across big bends of the river and gain a half-day's march on the boats. There would be periods when, with a fair wind, sails would be hoisted on the bateaux and the boats would leave the packers a day's march behind.

The hunters, therefore, shot game at various points along the river and left the meat on the banks, where it could be located by the boatmen as they passed. On the second day's march the hunters encountered vast herds of buffalo that grazed on the prairies. Scores of wolves were hanging about the buffalo herds. Wolf hides were just coming into demand by the fur companies and as a consequence the great campaign of wolf poisoning that was soon to begin and which would last for half a century was not yet under way; the wolves, therefore, were plentiful, and it was not unusual for Breckenridge to see upwards of a hundred of the big gray killers of the prairies in the course of one day's ride.

The buffalo were quite thin as the first faint trace of green was only now beginning to tint the tawny prairies as the new spring grass pushed through. Their meat was tough and stringy, almost unfit for consumption. Then, too, except when coming to the river to drink or to swim the stream, the buffalo herds fed back on the open prairies, some little distance from the river. The deer and elk were in somewhat better shape and these animals haunted the timber along the stream and the meat had to be packed but a short distance. Thus there was a double reason why the hunters chose them instead of the buffalo.

Hunter selected a spot where a creek emptied into the river and the hunters made camp an hour before sundown on the third night out. The horses were hobbled and turned out to graze on a tongue of prairie between the timber that flanked the courses of creek and river. Dubois killed the elk within two hundred yards of camp. Breckenridge set forth to prospect up the creek for beaver sign. He encountered two bands of elk that grazed near the edge of the timber. Deer bounded away on every hand and big flocks of turkeys were numerous.

Even at that early date, the first thousand or more miles of the Lower Missouri and the mouths of its tributary streams had been heavily trapped by the members of the fur brigades that passed up and down its course. The beaver, once to be

found in such vast numbers, were already disappearing from its waters. There were no signs of flourishing colonies on the creek but beaver cuttings were sufficiently in evidence to indicate the presence of a few of those animals. Breckenridge discovered an old dam that had been repaired. It backed up the water, transforming a willow slough into a beaver pond. He examined the signs round the pond; only one stray pair had taken up residence there, he judged.

He stiffened suddenly to attention. Five sleek heads marred the surface of the water, each leaving a furrow in its wake. The otters emerged from the pond and played along the dam. The watching man did not make a move until one of the animals ventured ashore. Then he shot it dead in its tracks and the remaining four disappeared on the instant. He heard Dubois shoot again as he returned to camp. The Frenchman had killed a large, almost white wolf, one of four that had crossed through the strip of prairie near the camp.

The two men selected the choice cuts of the elk, skinned the wolf and the otter and returned to camp. They dined on elk steaks and strong tea, then sat for a space before the fire.

Dubois, with a reminiscent chuckle, mentioned that Leroux, Big Mack's former chief assistant, was again to join out under the leadership of his old chief. Hunter nodded. He held no grudge against Leroux. To one who, from infancy, had viewed warfare as part of the day's affairs, there was little of malice expended upon former adversaries. Most of the voyageurs of the West viewed the matter in that light, cherishing no particular enmity against any tribe of Indians with which they might have had a brush. The Blackfeet proved the exception to this more or less general rule. The Blackfeet hunted trappers ceaselessly and by way of retaliation, the trappers, whenever the odds against them was too great, hunted Blackfeet as they hunted wolves and cherished a sincere loathing for that tribe. Hunter, despite the fact that he and Brady had had two sanguinary encounters with Blackfeet on the Flathead River two years before, took the matter impersonally and had not yet developed any particular antipathy toward the Blackfeet such as he had felt for the Sauks in his youth. And so far as treasuring malice against Leroux on account of their one exchange of words, it was far from his thoughts—foreign, indeed, to his whole philosophy of life. With active warfare ever looming as the prospect for the immediate future, life was too short to waste in cherishing resentment over hostilities that had occurred in the past.

"Hees one bad rascal, thees Leroux," Dubois declared.

Little Bull glanced up quickly at the name.

"Leroux? What Leroux—the one whose Indian name is Loup?"

"Never heard his Injun name," Breckenridge replied. "Is he one of your Loup Pawnees? Loup means wolf in the Pawnee tongue, don't it, Little Bull? Your branch of the tribe is the one I've heard trappers call the Wolf Pawnees."

"Yes—it means wolf," Little Bull agreed. "But Leroux ain't no Loup Pawnee."

"He sure enough looks like a wolf in the face," Hunter said. "Likely the Indians do call him that. Every mountain man has got from one to a dozen Injun titles." Breckenridge himself, in fact, was known the length of the Missouri by a many-syllabled Indian name of peculiar meaning. Many in the brigade addressed him by his Indian title, frequently in a spirit of good-natured raillery. "Is this Leroux a former mate of yours, Little Bull?"

"No—by gar!" Haddock denied. "I've heered strange rumors among the Pawnees about a man named Leroux. Likely it's a different party. The name ain't nowadays uncommon."

He declined to go into detail as to the nature of the rumors he had heard.

The seventh day out from the mouth of the Kansas the four hunters decided to wait for the arrival of the brigade in order to make sure that they were not traveling too far in advance of it. Hunter shot an elk at the edge of the timber and there the quartet made camp. About noon, Breckenridge glanced up to see a mounted warrior on a rise of ground a half mile away. The Indian signalled and was presently joined by others. They continued to pop up on the sky line until fifty or more mounted savages were clustered there.

"Iowas," Breckenridge said, and Haddock nodded confirmation of the pronouncement.

"Hunting party, likely," Hunter amplified. "Their village is along the river somewhere's close, I reckon. Maybe they've moved it down a hundred miles or so from where they were a-holding out last year."

The smoke of the hunters' fire had attracted the Indians. Presently the Iowas raced their ponies furiously across the prairies. When within a few yards of the fire they pulled their horses back upon their haunches and slid to the ground. The four hunters were surrounded by fifty-odd Iowa bucks, hungry as usual. Breckenridge invited them to eat. They devoured the generous roasts of elk meat that had been placed over the fire, then fell upon the remains of the elk. With knives and war hatchets, the carcass was hacked to shreds and devoured to the last morsel. The offal, which had been removed and cast to one side by the whites in dressing the animal, was likewise apportioned and consumed. Entrails of fresh-killed game were considered a special delicacy by all savage tribes of the West.

The head man of the party explained that his followers had set out to kill buffalo for the village but that the herds had moved back some fifteen miles from the river. Ever ready to alter their plans at a moment's notice, it was suggested that the whites accompany them back to the Iowa village instead, killing such elk and deer as were available along the river en route and they would call off the buffalo hunt until a later date.

The four white hunters rode ahead, their weapons being far superior to the bows, arrows, lances and smooth-bore muskets of the Indians. Hunter, jumping a black bear in the timber, dropped the animal with a single shot through the shoulders. He reloaded and rode on, without even pausing to dress the animal, leaving that task to the Iowas who came on behind. Off to the right, riverward, he heard the report of Brady's rifle and that of Dubois; the heavy boom of Haddock's sounded off to the left. A half mile farther on he rode among a band of elk in a thicket and dropped the nearest animal in its tracks. Game was abundant and very tame in the timbered bottoms. Every few hundred feet some creature, deer, elk or turkey, fell to Hunter's rifle fire. The reports of his companions' rifles testified by their frequency that the kill would be of generous proportions.

The party entered the Iowa village in jubilant spirits. The squaws and children were dispatched to retrieve such meat as had not been brought in by the hunting party. Lashing travois poles to half-wild ponies, the squaws set forth.

Hunt Breckenridge repaired to the chief's lodge, made him a present of tobacco and a bright cotton handkerchief, presented each of his three squaws with a few beads, and settled down to listen to the inevitable complaint. It was not long in coming, deferred only until Breckenridge and the Iowa chief had passed the red-stone pipe—charged with a mixture of trade tobacco and the dried inner bark of the red willow—from one to another perhaps half a dozen times and partaking of a few brief whiffs on each occasion.

"Things must change," the Iowa then asserted. "This can not go on. Already the beaver is gone from the land of the Iowas. The first traders to come urged my people to secure many beaver pelts, which they did, and the white men gave trade goods for them. They lived in peace, as brothers. Then more white men came and trapped the beaver themselves, giving nothing in exchange. They trapped too well. The beaver has gone. Still the white traders urge us to collect many beaver pelts. But how can my young men take beaver pelts when the beaver is no more? And without beaver pelts, how are my warriors to secure the guns and other weapons necessary to protect our lodges and our women against enemies that have armed themselves by trading with the whites? The white man traps too well. The Indians have lived here always, yet the beaver numbered more than the hairs in a buffalo robe when the first white men came to the Missouri. My life was more than half spent before the first white came up the river. Yet in that short time, the beaver has gone from the country of the Iowas. It is not good."

Breckenridge, in reply to this lengthy harangue, declared that the Iowa chief spoke straight words. There was no doubt but that the beaver had disappeared from the lower Missouri, he said, but that was only a temporary state of affairs. They would come in from other regions and repopulate the streams until once again the Iowas could listen at night to the whack of the beaver's tail upon the waters throughout the land. This was by way of being somewhat of a formula by which the white traders answered the general complaint that was prevalent among the tribes of the Lower Missouri.

In common with all voyageurs, Hunter believed that the vast uncharted areas of Upper Louisiana held an inexhaustible supply of fur. In any event, it was the business of the men employed by the Rocky Mountain Company to search out spots where beaver were plentiful, not to concern themselves about districts where fur was scarce.

Toward nightfall of the following day, the land contingent of the brigade came into view and the flotilla of bateaux was discernible far down the river. Hunter had told the Iowas that the brigade would trade for forty bushels or more of Indian corn, which amount had been unearthed by the squaws. The village was thrown into a state of high excitement. Squaws and children hurried to the banks of the river. When the boats were still a quarter of a mile distant, Hunter could distinguish the uncovered yellow hair of Ann McKenzie among the fur-capped heads in Big Mack's bateau.

As the boats prepared to make a landing, the girl's glance roved over the weaving throng on shore until her eyes came to rest upon a tall, rangy figure. She watched the man who stood motionless among the restless ones, the long rifle resting in the crook of his arm, and averted her gaze only when the bateau drew in to shore.

Hunter had small desire to attend the council that would be held that night. It would be but a repetition of the harangue in which he and the Iowa chief had indulged the night before. A strong guard was detailed to watch the equipment and supplies. The horses were not only hobbled but were placed under the protection of a strong detail that was to ride herd on them throughout the night. Pilfering, and particularly horse stealing, was so much a part of Indian custom, even among those whom they hailed as friends, that no chances could be taken. Hunter sat with Ann McKenzie at the separate fire that had been kindled by the members of Big Mack's bateau. When he believed it so late that she might wish to retire, Breckenridge moved over to the nearest of the three fires round which the men of the brigade were grouped.

The girl did not immediately seek her robes but instead sat gazing into her fire. There was a strip of darkness between her and the fire where Hunter sat. She did not face him but could almost feel his regard spanning that bridge of obscurity and resting upon her with almost the palpable touch of a caressing hand. She was inured to the stares of male humanity; the invitational glances of the men in the towns that she had visited; the curious, appraising stares of the bucks in many an Indian village; the gaze—admiring, respectful, inflamed or predatory and all shades in between—accorded her by the half-wild rivermen and voyageurs of the fur brigades.

Someway, however, the quiet, unobtrusive regard of this tall Kentuckian seemed subtly different. She recalled the night of their first meeting when, as a boy, he had appeared unannounced at their camp fire on the Lower Missouri and had riveted his spellbound gaze upon her throughout his visit; and, a shade less openly, on the occasion of their few subsequent meetings. There was some quality in his regard that seemed to set it apart from that of all other men. She sensed in it something almost of devoteeism, as if he came to worship at her shrine. Some primitive spark deep within her warmed in response to it. Presently she retired to the darkness beyond the light shed by her fire and spread her blankets and buffalo robes.

The Iowas, as was customary with many Western tribes, offered the hospitality of their respective lodges to such of the white visitors as roused their individual regard. This hospitality, once extended, was understood to encompass the sharing of all family privileges, including the society of the wives and sisters of the particular buck who offered to open his lodge to some particular white man. To the voyageurs of the fur brigade, this was commonplace enough, merely the customary thing in entertainment.

However, to the few among the voyageurs who did not avail themselves of these opportunities, such an invitation became an actual embarrassment. The Indian who extended it considered that his honor was at stake. If the white man declined, the savage mind ascribed it to one of two reasons—either that he scorned the Indian who made the offer or that the woman found no favor in the white man's eyes. In nearly every instance, the Indian's self-respect was bolstered by ascribing it to the latter cause, with the consequence that, since the woman found no favor with the white man, she was forthwith viewed with less favor by her spouse. The result was that a wife so declined by a white visitor was all too frequently sold to any party who would purchase her. Often, in his shame, the husband would beat most severely the luckless one whose favors had been spurned.

Indians moved among the groups round the fires, inviting those of the whites who took their fancy to reside for the night in their respective lodges. More frequently than not the female who was deemed the most attractive of the household accompanied the lord and master, in order that the prospective guest might succumb the quicker.

Ann McKenzie had cruised with the fur brigades since infancy and this custom was an old tale to her. Indeed, she had become so inured to it that she gave it little thought except for an occasional moment of thankfulness that the way of the white man with his women was the profound opposite of that which obtained among the Indians of the West.

She became conscious of a sudden hush among the group round the fire next to that of her own party and propped herself upon one elbow to determine what had stilled their tongues. A sub-chief of the Iowas stood there among the seated figures of the voyageurs, and with him stood an Indian woman, young and comely and adorned in the finery that bespoke a well-to-do warrior for a husband. She could not be over seventeen or eighteen years of age. The Iowa buck had come with his youngest and most attractive wife for the purpose of inviting some trapper to share the hospitality of his teepee for the duration of his stay in the Iowa village.

The white girl was about to return to her pillow with unassumed indifference when a sudden cold ache struck at her very heart. The Iowa was accosting Hunter Breckenridge. Without the least warning, the white girl was assailed by a blazing hatred for the tall Kentuckian, for the Iowa buck and for the comely Indian girl who smiled her shy invitation to Breckenridge. Out in the darkness, the lips of the girl who watched this tableau at the fire seemed to dry and parch, the constriction of her throat was akin to physical pain. She herself was at a loss to account for the intensity of the emotion which assailed her. She had seen this thing occur a thousand times before, so commonplace a thing that she had given it scarcely a thought. Someway, it had seemed a custom that did not touch her own life in the least, something with which she was no more concerned than with the customs of birds and beasts. Why, then, should this one occurrence affect her so strangely? She could not answer her own bewildered query. The soft, drawling tones of the tall Kentuckian, always seeming to play strange and alluring tunes upon her heart strings, now seemed to sear that same heart with living fire as he smiled and addressed the young Iowa woman and her brave. His words reached her but she did not know the Iowa tongue. Presently he would rise and accompany the pair to the warrior's lodge. A savage desire to kill both Breckenridge and the young Iowa woman swept through Ann McKenzie with such intensity as to leave her weak and shaken.

The Iowa had drawn himself into a pose that was pregnant with offended dignity. The Indian girl lowered her head as if in shame, her eyes upon her moccasins as one of them traced a restless pattern on the ground. Then the old trapper, Brady, addressed the Iowa. The watching girl saw Brady gesture toward Hunter Breckenridge, making use of the many-syllabled Indian name by which she had heard many of the men refer to Breckenridge. The meaning of the name she did not know. The Indian seemed to drop his mantle of offended dignity and to regard Hunter with fresh interest. The downcast eyes of the Indian girl were now lifted. She asked Hunter a question, giggling as she spoke, and at his reply there was a roar of laughter from the mountain men. The Iowa joined heartily in the general merriment, and Ann McKenzie's grief and rage reached a pitch that seemed unbearable agony.

Then Dubois spoke to the Iowa. The two conversed jerkily, apparently in amicable argument, for a space of two minutes. Then the Indian trapper departed with a new trade gun, a war ax, three pieces of bright cloth and a pound measure of powder. The Iowa girl settled herself down contentedly beside Dubois. The watching white woman did not know the language in which the deal had been transacted but she had witnessed so many similar transactions that she was well aware of its portent. Dubois had purchased the Iowa woman from the warrior and she would now proceed upriver with the brigade as the Frenchman's wife. But just where had Hunter Breckenridge come in on this transaction?

A youth who was making his first trip up the Missouri made inquiry as to the substance of the conversation and as to the meaning of Hunters' Indian name, which apparently had affected the Iowa buck so pleasantly. Brady, the old trapper, explained.

"That there name is in the Snake dialect. They give it to Hunt first. But he's knowed by it the length of the Missouri—a natural cu'r'osity. It means 'Man-takes-no-woman.' Soon as I called him by name, it healed the ruffled dignity of that savage. It ain't any disgrace for any one woman to be spurned by a party who's notorious for scorning all women. See? That's what it was all about."

"What was it she asked and Hunter answered that struck you as so all-fired humorous?" the lad inquired.

"Sh—Sonny!" Brady waggishly admonished. "Injun ladies discuss matters with menfolks that ain't spoke above a whisper in proper circles. It ain't fitten for youngsters' ears."

Ann McKenzie, gazing up at the sky, was equally bewildered at the sudden peace of soul that had superseded her unaccountable fit of rage and pain. What ailed her, anyhow? She felt suddenly protective toward the new young wife of Dubois and decided that she would be-friend the girl during the trip upriver. Two warm drops splashed down her cheeks. But it was not raining, for the stars were shining bright in the sky above her bed.

CHAPTER IV

Breckenridge, when hunting and following the trap-line through the forests of the Lower Missouri in his youth, had acquired certain precautionary habits from which he never deviated. When in hostile country he would not stand before a fire after nightfall. A man's eyes adjusted themselves to the blaze and prevented his seeing into the outer darkness.

"It makes me uneasy to outline myself against a light and a target for arrow or musket ball, when I can't see to shoot back," he informed Brady, when the old trapper rallied him upon that point and also for the custom of taking himself off to sleep alone. "I build my cook fire early and then sleep somewheres else. An Injun can see a fire many a mile across the prairie. It holds out a promise of a few scalps that maybe will be easy to collect. Every marauding band will investigate any camp fire they set eyes on."

Brady also, in common with most voyageurs, scorned the cumbersome pistols of the period. Few mountain men carried them, deeming them futile and ineffective weapons. Hunter, however, had perfected himself in the use of the short gun. Wherever he rode, the buckskin holster that suspended his long-barreled pistol from the cantle of his saddle went with him. When hunting ahead of the brigade, he kept his hand in by shooting game from the saddle with the pistol instead of resorting to his rifle. At ranges up to fifty yards he dropped deer and turkeys with unfailing regularity. Brady, observing this amazing proficiency, nevertheless continued to make slighting reference to all pistols. He relished his joke and Hunter did not mind.

The brigade had been on the march for more than a month out of Ely's Fort when the four hunters made camp one evening on a high prairie headland that overlooked the river. A small quantity of wood had been brought from the last patch of timber. This, supplemented by a great pile of buffalo chips, was sufficient for their needs.

"A fire will show up for twenty miles from this headland after nightfall," Hunter said. "Better douse it before sundown."

"This here's in Mandan country and the Mandans is friendly," Brady demurred. "Old fellows like me and Dubois need a fire to warm our bones. Anyhow, with you and Little Bull sleeping on the outskirts like coyoties, no Injun could creep up on us without tackling you all first."

It was such callous disregard of danger by men who had faced it hourly throughout their lives, their lack of caution and their calm confidence in their own ability to cope with any situation as it came up, that cost the lives of many a fearless voyageur of the West. Hunter picked up his equipment and moved away from the fire when night shut down.

"Thar he goes again—off to bed down by hisself like an old dog wolf," Brady chided, as was his nightly custom.

"I figure to have need for my hair for a long time yet," the tall Kentuckian replied.

Hunter selected a buffalo wallow seventy-five yards from camp. It was dry, there having been no recent rain. He propped his saddle against one edge of the wallow to serve as a breastwork to protect his head from arrow or musket ball. The pistol was propped muzzle-up against the saddle, its butt resting upon the ground while a piece of buckskin was spread across the lock to protect the priming against dew or frost. The rifle was taken to bed with him, sheltered by the edge of the buffalo robes. This arrangement never varied. On any night of his life his hand could close instinctively on rifle lock or pistol butt at the instant of waking. There was additional reason for this habit of isolating himself. Savages crawling upon a camp focussed their attention upon it so exclusively that they almost invariably overlooked an isolated slumberer some distance away, unless they chanced to stumble square upon him.

Brady and Dubois piled a great stack of buffalo chips upon the blaze and rolled up in their robes near the fire. The horses, equipped with hobbles of buffalo hide, cropped the succulent prairie grass close at hand. Listening to them, Hunter fell asleep.

It was the sound of the horses, also, that waked him some two hours later. The animals had started suddenly into the lumbering, awkward gallop that is acquired by ponies long broken to the hobble. They had halted after that first tumultuous start and now stood huddled together on the prairie. One animal snorted. Another stamped nervously. Hunter surveyed the surface of the prairie beyond him. Nothing stirred in the darkness. Had a wolf startled the horses?

Soundlessly, he turned in his robes and looked toward camp. Were his eyes dancing, or did he actually behold a number of low mounds on the prairie? One of the mounds moved slightly, hitching forward toward the tiny remaining glow of the

dying camp fire. Savages, a score or more of them, creeping upon the camp! The nearest was a scant ten yards from Hunter.

He planned his campaign as coolly as he would have mapped out a campaign against a flock of turkeys. His rifle was trained, not upon the nearest savage but upon the one that was third removed from him. At the roar of his rifle the object of his aim collapsed with a wild shriek. Crouching figures leaped erect. As if propelled by springs, Brady and Dubois, dim flitting shadows in the night, shed their robes and leaped for the shelter of the river's bank. The startled savages discharged muskets and arrows in the general direction of the camp. Before the foremost stalkers could determine whether or not that first shot had been fired prematurely by one of their own number in the rear, another crumpled to the prairie as Hunter brought his pistol into play. With a mighty spring, he left the sheltering wallow and crushed the skull of the nearest Indian with a blow from the heavy barrel of his rifle. Then, with the high-pitched war cry of his kind—a cry that was to become known in border warfare almost a half century later as the "Missouri yell"—he charged down upon the rear of the savages.

Coincident with Hunter's second shot, a rifle crashed from sixty yards across the prairie, as Little Bull went into action from his own buffalo wallow. Then, mingling with the triumphant notes of the Missouri yell, the night resounded with the dread war whoop of the Loup Pawnees, as Little Bull charged the far flank of the attacking party.

Taken thus in flank and rear, the bewildered savages fled across the prairie and after them, wielding a mighty battle-ax as if it were a straw, leaped Little Bull, who split another brace of skulls before the Indians made good their escape.

A towering savage loomed in Hunter's path and swung a war ax at his head. He warded the blow with the barrel of his rifle but the force of it knocked the weapon from his hand. He grappled with the Indian, clamping his left hand upon the wrist that wielded the war ax while with his right he sought to drive his long knife home in his adversary's body. The Indian was powerful and endeavored to seize Hunter's knife-arm. His fingers caught and held. The Kentuckian twisted, forcing the bent arm back until the point of the knife touched his foeman's breast. The Indian, suddenly releasing his hold, sprang back, but Hunter's grip on his antagonist's right wrist held, and he jerked the Indian toward him, driving powerfully with his knife at the same instant. Three times he sent the long blade home.

Then the affray was over, having lasted less than two minutes after Hunter's opening shot.

"You boys hurt any?" Brady called from the river bank. From out on the prairie the voices of Breckenridge and Little Bull gave assurance of their safety.

"I'll bring in the horses and we'll drift," Hunter presently called. "Likely they're only a small detachment from a big war party and the whole passel may swoop down on us."

He and Little Bull came driving the horses to the fire. Hunter carried four fresh scalps, Little Bull three. They were burdened with the spoils stripped from their fallen foes—three muskets, seven war axes and as many knives, in addition to other trinkets that would prove valuable as trade goods.

"You two warriors counted plenty coos," Brady said, eyeing the seven scalps. "Counting coos" was a custom and a term prevalent among all Western tribes, the expression no doubt having been derived from the French word "coup" of the early French voyageurs. "I didn't think the Mandans was up to that sort of thing right in the heart of their own country. Should think they'd be afraid the brigade would wipe out a village for them."

"They weren't Mandans. They're Brule Sioux—Burnt-thighs," Hunter said, indicating certain insignia on the captured equipment. "They were on a raiding foray in the Mandan nation and figured if they collected our hair the brigade would lay it on the Mandans. That's what made me think they was maybe merely a small detachment of a big war party. We'll move upriver. They'll figure us to fall back toward the brigade and will be looking to cut us off downstream." They packed swiftly and headed up the river. After covering perhaps five miles, they halted in a depression in the river bank, a little basin graced by a cluster of stunted trees. The night passed without incident and in the morning they decided to wait until overtaken by the brigade with which they had last established contact some ten days before.

Dubois shot an antelope for breakfast. Thousands of those animals were moving north across the prairie, flanking the course of the Missouri. Great bands of them took to the river and swam across. Fleet as the wind on their native prairies, the pronghorns proved to be but indifferent swimmers, their slender legs and tiny hoofs being ill-adapted to serve as propellers in the water. Nevertheless, they plunged in valiantly by the hundred and gamely tackled the crossing of the

river. Some were swept down two or three miles by the current before effecting a landing on the opposite shore. The buffalo, too, were moving north and hundreds of these animals also swam the river.

A small hunting party of Mandans appeared on the far shore of the river to intercept the migrating game. Squaws followed with ponies that dragged travois loaded with household effects, also with the houses themselves, as subsequent events soon proved. Travois poles served also as teepee poles on occasion and the squaws erected several teepees, covering the poles with dressed buffalo skins. The red hunters shot down antelope and buffalo as they emerged from the water. Others came darting down the current of the Missouri in tiny skin canoes, each fashioned from the hide of a single buffalo. They shot the swimming animals with arrows or pierced them with lances. So engrossed were they with the chase that for some time they failed to observe the four white hunters in the depressed basin on the opposite shore. More Mandans were arriving at frequent intervals.

Then a half-grown boy, cruising midway of the stream in his canoe, noticed the hunters. He put in toward them but refused to land, holding his tiny craft steady in the current abreast of their camp and some thirty yards out in the stream. Presently he gathered sufficient confidence to land. Hunter presented him with a long knife that he had taken from one of the dead Brule Sioux. He related the details of the fight on the prairie during the night. The boy eyed the scalps with manifest eagerness, then put off in his little craft in high excitement. Presently there was a general cessation of the slaughter on the opposite shore. Teepees were hastily struck. Effects were lashed on ponies or stowed in the tiny canoes. One and all, the Mandans took to the river, a churning throng of swimming ponies. They surrounded the four hunters with vast evidence of admiration and extravagant expressions of friendship.

The Mandans were a harassed people. Once a great nation, it was now going into swift decline. The Assiniboines swept down from the Canadian prairies to slaughter and rob among the Mandans. The Brule Sioux—known as Burnt-thighs from the fact that, being horse Indians, they rode with bare thighs which were darkened to a deeper tint than the rest of their bodies by the action of the sun—harried the Mandans from the east.

The Indians hailed the four hunters as deliverers, declaring that the Brules undoubtedly had been planning a raid on a Mandan village and that their defeat at the hands of the hunters had saved many a Mandan scalp. A sizeable village sprang up around the camp of the whites, the Indians very much excited at the prospect of meeting the brigade.

CHAPTER V

Occasional scouting parties were sent out from the brigade to penetrate the country well to either flank of the river. One such expedition returned with the news that a large war party of Brule Sioux had headed upriver some two or three days before. The trappers, accustomed to reading Indian signs with great accuracy, estimated that there were probably a thousand warriors in the band. The lack of travois marks and the fact that there were no feminine trinkets along the trail was evidence that it was a war party that had passed, not the removal of a village to some new hunting country. Insignia on discarded bits of equipment and the nature of cast-off moccasins identified the marauders as Brule Sioux. A dog that had accompanied the party but which had strayed and dropped behind on account of sore feet, had been captured. The animal bore a light pack of extra moccasins of Burnt-thigh make; and it was customary for war parties to be accompanied by fleet dogs thus lightly packed with extra equipment. The fact that the war party was heading into Mandan territory and keeping a dozen miles back from the river furnished conclusive evidence that its purpose was to surprise some Mandan village on the Missouri, swooping upon it from the rear while the river would effectively cut off the victims' retreat.

All this the trail revealed to the eyes of the experienced mountain men as unerringly as the city dweller interprets the printed page. Also, being intimately acquainted with Indian nature, the trappers entertained grave fears for the lives of the four hunters. If the Sioux spotted them, which seemed certain in that open prairie country, they would be slain in the belief that the brigade would blame the deed upon the Mandans. Should the four hunters attain to the first Mandan village, they would be in no better shape. The Sioux would surprise the village and cut down every soul in it.

For two nights Ann McKenzie slept but little and by day, as she sat in her father's bateau, her anxious eyes were trained upon the foremost riders of the land contingent. Round noon of the third day after the discovery of the war party's train, the riders in the vanguard came upon the scene of the fight. The fact that the hunters had scalped their slain foes and despoiled them of equipment was evidence that they had beaten off their assailants in this first brush with the Sioux and had effected a retreat upriver; but there was no indication of the ultimate termination of the affair.

A swarm of tiny dark specks was seen swooping down river toward the brigade. These specks resolved themselves into an excited array of Mandans, riding furiously and discharging their muskets in the air. They brought the news that the four hunters had inflicted a crushing defeat upon the Brules and were safe in the Mandan camp.

Mandan scouts, despatched by Hunter for the purpose earlier in the day, had returned with reports which verified his suspicions that a large force of Sioux had invaded the neighborhood. The scouts also reported that the big war party had turned back the day before. Such unaccountable changes of front and the abandonment of well-laid plans on account of some trivial mishap was typical of savage warfare. So doubt Sioux scouts had reported the rapid advance of the brigade and the leaders of the war party had feared that the white trappers would arrive in time to lend their support to the Mandans. It was evident that the attack on the four hunters had been launched by an offshoot band of young bucks, over-eager for scalps, that had remained behind for the purpose.

The Mandans, declaring that the presence of the brigade on the Missouri had saved them from annihilation, proclaimed Hunter the mightiest of all warriors and Little Bull next in order. Huge fires were built and round them gathered the combined personnels of brigade and Mandan village. Hunter was called upon for a recital of his victories.

"I am a mighty warrior," he recited with approved Indian boastfulness. "My enemies tremble in their lodges. My arm is strong. Two year ago I fought the Blackfeet and took many scalps."

He launched into a recital of a hand-to-hand encounter with a big Blackfoot warrior during one of the fights he and Brady had had with marauding parties of that tribe. He related graphically every move in the struggle until, at the end, he split the foeman's crown with his war ax.

"I remember!" Brady shouted at the appropriate point, according to approved Indian custom of corroboration. "I myself was there. I saw the blow struck!"

"Ay-e-e-e!" Dubois interjected some minutes later, as Hunter related the taking of Sauk scalps in his youth. "I remember! I myself saw him wearing Sauk scalps at his belt when he was a mere infant."

"Hol-a-a-a—ee-yah!" Little Bull chanted, as Hunter described the vanquishing of the Brule warrior with his knife the

night before. "I remember! His strength was great! I saw the knife fall!"

"I am a great warrior and the Mandans are my brothers," Hunter concluded his oration. "My hand is against all enemies of the Mandans. All such are my enemies also, and I will strike them until my lodge is black with their scalps."

Little Bull then recited his own victories, while his companions corroborated them at appropriate intervals.

The Mandans greeted these speeches with mighty grunts of approval. Preparations had been made for an all-night scalp dance. The fresh scalps, all save one each to dangle at the belts of Breckenridge and Little Bull, were attached to the tip of a pole erected for the purpose. Huge fires were kindled. The night air pulsated with the tee-dum, tee-dum, tee-dum of skin drums, that throbbed in barbaric rhythm, the triumphant chant of half a hundred trappers and double the number of Mandan bucks and squaws as they danced endlessly in a weaving throng.

Breckenridge, as he danced near the outer edge of the shifting crowd after a period of performing on its inner circle, was suddenly seized by the arm and drawn to one side. Hair-that-shines, her blue eyes blazing and her breast heaving tumultuously, addressed him tensely.

"What devil's business are you at now?" she demanded, pointing to the fresh scalp that dangled at his belt. "Do you have to make a savage of yourself?"

"Every man takes scalps," he answered stiffly, bewildered by this unexpected outburst. "You know it. A white man stands that much higher in the estimation of the Indians. It is always done."

The girl knew this. The taking of scalps by mountain men was almost universal, sanctioned by custom, and it was destined to be so sanctioned for more than half a century to come.

"Anyway, if you're expecting to come north to see me, you needn't come dragging gory fresh scalps with you," she flared. As abruptly as she had accosted him she left, disappearing into the night. Hunter returned to the dance but his former enthusiasm waned. It would not return and presently he deserted the revelry and sought his bed. The throbbing of the tom-toms, the shuffling thud of feet and the frenzied chants of the revellers beat against his ears till sunrise. He was at a loss to account for Nepanamo's sudden outburst over so commonplace a thing. Why should she have singled him out from among half a hundred others as the object of her displeasure? The girl herself was no less mystified at her own unpremeditated and impulsive outburst.



CHAPTER VI

This chance affray of the four hunters and the Brules reacted very favorably to the interests of the Rocky Mountain Company. The Mandans were wont to trade almost exclusively at a post maintained half a hundred miles upriver by the Great American, chief rival in the West of Ashley's company. The Mandans now evidenced a willingness to trade with the men of the Rocky Mountain brigade if the latter so desired.

On several occasions, the Great American had set up rival posts in regions that had been opened up to trade by the Rocky Mountain. Ashley was too shrewd an adventurer to overlook so golden an opportunity. This fortunate break afforded a chance to secure a portion of the Mandan trade. He ordered a move to the next stand of timber upriver. What had been intended as an overnight stop for the brigade now lengthened into a stay of considerable duration. All hands were engaged in the work of felling trees and erecting log quarters for a post.

Hunter's sanguinary encounter with the Brules had endeared him to the Mandans. He was therefore detailed by Ashley to open trade with the tribe. Breckenridge advised a high trade schedule to the end that the Rocky Mountain should earn the reputation of liberal dealing and solidify itself in the Mandan trade. It was popularly believed that the Mandans had traded off their furs almost to the last pelt to the Great American, so the opening of negotiations was not expected to be immediately profitable but was to be conducted as the entering wedge, designed to draw all possible future trade of the Mandans from the rival company.

Competition among traders had roused a canniness among the savages of the West. They no longer traded a beaver pelt for a fishhook. No longer would they pile beaver pelts flat, one upon another, until the pile equalled in height the length of the smooth-bore trade gun that they received in exchange.

The beaver was the chief item of the fur trade of the period and upon the pelt of that animal all prices were based. The accepted range of trade prices now called for two beaver skins in return for one iron war ax, lance head or long-bladed scalping knife. Other pelts were rated at so many to the beaver pelt.

Breckenridge opened shop in a large oval lodge of buffalo hides erected for him by the Mandans. There was no rush to trade as had once been the case, whenever a white trader displayed his wares in an Indian encampment. The Mandans looked over Hunter's merchandise. It made a goodly showing as Ashley had opened the entire contents of two of the bateaux to impress the Mandans with the wealth of the Rocky Mountain Company.

A big warrior, a sub-chief, was first to trade. He strode in, followed by his squaws, who carried a fairly large assortment of furs and spread them for Hunter's inspection. The white man nodded.

He first took out the five beaver pelts that graced the collection. Before him was the "bullet dish." By means of the "bullet count" the simple, unmathematical mind of the redskin was enabled to check all transactions while his friends looked on. Breckenridge deposited five pieces of lead, molded in a certain design. The Mandan nodded that all was well, as he carefully counted the "bullets" with his forefinger.

Hunter next selected three otter pelts. The accepted trade ration was that three otter pelts equalled two beaver pelts. The white man was now expected to deposit two more leaden counters in the "bullet dish." Instead, he deposited three. The Indian grunted his surprise.

"The Rocky Mountain men are rich. They have many goods," Hunter orated by way of explanation. "We look upon the Mandans as brothers and would share our riches with them. We are generous with those we esteem. To the Mandans, but to no other tribe, our eyes are closed when they bring in otter pelts. We mistake them for beaver." By way of illustration, he closed his eyes and stroked the three otter skins. "Yes. Coming from our Mandan brothers, they are beavers," he proclaimed.

A murmur ran through the throng of savages that looked on. Each Mandan was struggling with a mental revision in terms of otter pelts and trade goods. Several slipped out of the lodge. Ashley smiled. This young Kentuckian knew savage nature. His pronouncement would be productive of more otter pelts if the tribe possessed them—not merely because the price was better than the customary rate of exchange, but for the reason that it was to Mandans only that the rate was offered. They were favored above other people.

The Mandan then offered six finely dressed buffalo robes. These rated two robes for one beaver pelt. Hunter paid the regular schedule for these, depositing three counters in the "bullet dish."

A pack of beaver consisted of one hundred skins and brought an even thousand dollars in St. Louis. At a later date—when the beaver had almost disappeared from the streams of the West and the fur trade had nearly perished from its own insatiable greed for pelts—beaver skins were destined to shrink in value to a third that price. Indian-tanned buffalo robes now brought five dollars each in St. Louis. A half-century later, the hide hunters of the plains were to ship millions of the dried and undressed hides of these animals for a dollar apiece and less.

The Mandan displayed three wolf pelts. Three wolves equalled one beaver. Hunter deposited another counter. Next the chief offered three mink skins. Three mink also equalled one beaver and another leaden counter changed hands. The Indian, knowing the ratio, had brought quantities of each fur that would work out in even "beavers." He was taking no chances of becoming confused with fractional beavers.

This end of the transaction completed, it was now time for the Indian to make his selections and pay back to the white man the counters which he had just received. The Mandan fingered the long iron lance heads, selected one that pleased his fancy and nodded. Two beavers was the price he expected to pay. Hunter casually extracted a single bullet from the dish.

The Indian gave vent to a vast grunt of astonishment as he waited for the white man to observe his error.

"We are rich and we view the Mandans as brothers," Hunter proclaimed in ringing tones. "Have the Rocky Mountain men not fought the Sioux and slain their warriors, the enemies of the Mandans, so that the Mandan women have washed their faces for the first time in months and are now healing the wounds of mourning! One lance head for one beaver is the way we trade with our Mandan friends."

There were various ejaculations of astonishment and pleasure at this unexampled liberality. Those assembled watched eagerly as the warrior selected a forged iron tomahawk head. Again Hunter extracted but a single counter. Suppressed excitement, now relieved, was expressed in grunts that bordered on the explosive. Various onlookers hastened out. The day had been when traders offered better prices to first comers in order to hasten trade but this had produced so much ill feeling on the part of the later arrivals, resulting in the killing of numerous traders by incensed tardy ones who felt themselves cheated, that the practice had been abandoned. Perhaps this white man was opening trade in the old way. Why else should he pay such prices on the start? Was his tongue straight and did he pay so liberally merely from his admiration for the Mandans, as he claimed? In any event, every one present wished to trade early against the probable contingency of a later slump in prices. Furs and robes were produced in considerable quantities. Prices were maintained. Even the pelt of a prairie skunk brought a small looking glass and a large fishhook. Youngsters who had slain and skinned such creatures, and had been permitted to retain them by indulgent parents, hastened in to barter them off for such small prizes, taking an actual part in trade for the first time in their lives. The pelts of skunk, kit fox, mink and others appeared as if by magic.

Hunter complimented various of his patrons, not in broadcast fashion as was practiced by many traders and which the savages recognized for what it was—a manner assumed for trade purposes—but wisely, as one who knew Indian nature to the core. He gave compliments where compliments were due. To one sub-chief, he said:

"You are a great warrior and have counted many coos upon your enemies. I greet you as one great warrior to another and would have you fill your pipe from my private plug of tobacco. You will inhale my friendship with the smoke."

To a winsome young squaw, considered the beauty of the Mandans, he presented a small looking-glass.

"So that your own eyes may behold the beauty that the eyes of all men see in you. Man-takes-no-woman is not blind. He can see beauty where it is, even though he desires it not for himself. Your father will receive many fine horses and other valuable presents from the warrior who is so fortunate as to take you from the lodge of your parents."

This compliment, coming from the lips of one notorious for his avoidance of Indian women, was considered very good. The Mandans were delighted with him. News of his generous dealings seemed to spread with the wind throughout the Mandan nation. A huge assortment of lodges, destined to become the largest permanent village of the Mandans, had sprung up around the new post before its completion. At the expiration of the second week of trade, Hunter had collected five packs of beaver pelts, more than nine hundred finely dressed buffalo robes and a goodly quantity of the pelts of

otter, wolf, fox, wildcat, mink, skunk, cougar and others. All told, there were more than twelve thousand dollars' worth of fur in the assortment.

Ashley was delighted at uncovering this unexpected vein of wealth in a tribe that was supposed to have bartered away the greater part of its furs to a rival concern.

The new post was well stocked. Ashley prepared to return down the Missouri with three bateaux, taking with him the furs collected and picking up en route the relatively small quantities previously traded for among the Ogallala Sioux, the Iowas and the Kansas Indians on the way upriver. The brigade was to proceed on up the Yellowstone and scatter on the tributaries of Powder, Bighorn and Wind rivers, assembling at the appointed rendezvous on the Sweetwater the following spring. Ashley himself would return upriver with all dispatch, winter somewhere on its course and proceed to the rendezvous by horse in the spring. Preparations were under way for this separation when Ashley made the announcement which he had reserved for a final surprise for Hunter Breckenridge. General Ashley was always very formal in his speech. His every utterance seemed in the nature of an oration.

"Young fellow, you will make a great trader," he predicted. "Your talents in that direction are wasted when you go out for a year alone to trap beaver, dodging savages to save your scalp and living like a lone wolf. Leave that to the men who know trapping and Indian fighting only. There are hundreds of that sort. Men who understand Indian psychology and can live among them and gain both their admiration and their trade are rare. I am putting you in charge of this post to represent the interests of the Rocky Mountain Company. Pick any two men you desire from the brigade to act as your assistants. Your salary will be one thousand dollars a year and that of your assistants three hundred dollars each."

A thousand-dollar salary was considered almost in the big-money class in that day. Strangely enough, the offer failed to rouse any elation in the breast of Hunter Breckenridge. On the contrary, it came as somewhat of a shock. Money was a scarce commodity in the frontier settlements. Throughout his life, Hunter had seen practically all business conducted by means of barter and exchange. If one was possessed of sufficient quantity of almost any one commodity—a surplus of corn, liquor, pork or fur—he was in a position to barter his surplus for such necessities as he might desire. If one was generously supplied with the necessities of life, he had small need for more. Except for the one overwhelming impulse to own land that would produce the basic necessities of life—the one seemingly almost instinctive urge that drove successive waves of settlers into the wilderness—acquisitiveness, in so far as that term signified the hoarding of possessions beyond logical requirements, was not a highly developed trait among the frontier families of America.

Breckenridge was accustomed to think in terms of necessities—food, clothing, powder, lead, guns, traps, horses; for those who were permanently located on the land, as were his parents, he recognized the desirability of possessing livestock—sheep, swine, cows and poultry. He was familiar, of course, with the value of money as a medium of exchange, but the idea of hoarding such a medium far in excess of his requirements was foreign to his viewpoint. When the time came, he would settle upon a piece of rich land which, combined with his own labor, would supply him with all that he needed in life.

In common with the great majority of the fur brigadiers of the West, he took the trail in search of adventure to an even greater extent than he did from any prospect of large gain. Many a mountain man risked his life hourly throughout the year, dodged savages and encountered incredible hardship, turning up at the yearly rendezvous with a small fortune in furs that he had trapped for some big company for an annual wage amounting to but a mere fraction of the value of his catch. He might as easily have trapped for himself. Most of the mountain men, however, were perfectly willing to bring in from three to five thousand dollars' worth of beaver pelts, turn them over to the company for which they trapped, be credited on the company's books for a few hundred dollars and set forth again to pit their wits against savages and the elements for another year. That, also, was Hunter Breckenridge's philosophy of life. He wanted to ascend the Yellowstone and trap alone or with a few companions on its tributaries, later to cross the great divide of a continent and view its western slope. The prospect of living among the Mandans, remaining stationary when there was so much of the world that he had yet to see, engaging in the humdrum routine of trade when stirring adventure called, was not an alluring picture.

Ashley insisted, however, arguing at some length, and Breckenridge at last gave in. This decision was destined to alter greatly the trend of his career.

Leroux, who had been waiting at the Great American post upriver, came down before the brigade departed. He seemed to urge haste in the departure of the McKenzie party. Big Mack traded for horses and prepared to set off at once toward

the north to where an escort of Assiniboines waited to conduct them to the new post. Six Assiniboine warriors accompanied Leroux. The Mandans viewed these newcomers with thinly veiled hostility. They had suffered much at the hands of the Assiniboines, but now the two tribes were presumably at peace, even though indulging in an occasional interchange of raids.

Leroux was surlily unfriendly to the Americans. That he possessed great courage was unquestionable; but fearlessness was merely a quality common to all voyageurs of the West. A man lacking in unflinching courage could not brave for a day the savage wilderness in which these men had elected to spend their lives. The Americans resented his insolence but through respect for Big Mack they tolerated Leroux.

Hunter approached Nepanamo the day following the arrival of Leroux in the Mandan village.

"Hair-that-shines, on what stream is this new post of Big Mack's?" he asked. "I am to stay here. It cannot be more than three hundred miles, a forced march of six days, to where you will be. Sometime during the summer, when trade is dull and the Mandans are out hunting buffalo, I will make the trip and see you."

"I do not know the name of the stream where the new post is located," she said. "If my father knows, he will not say."

Leroux neared them and the girl turned to him.

"To what stream do we go?" she asked. "And how many sleeps is it from here? I wish to know, so that Hunter will be able to find us when he comes north this summer."

"So you're coming north this summer?" Leroux queried insolently. "It is many sleeps from here and the stream is not named. We do not tell trade secrets. It is ordered that no American should know its location. Find it if you can."

"I will find her," Breckenridge stated quietly.

Leroux strode away through the village and Hunter, not wishing to become embroiled with Big Mack's henchman, endeavored to bottle his wrath.

An hour later, Leroux approached a group composed of a score of mixed Mandans and trappers that loitered before the trading post. His wolfish features were grim and unsmiling. He took occasion to object to some remark that Breckenridge contributed to the conversation.

"That's of a piece with all American boastfulness," he said. "They're all big-mouthed and windy when it comes to words. They're poltroons and cowards when it comes to deeds."

He had no fear. Neither had any voyageur present. Any of them would have fought the man in a second—bare-handed or with war ax, knife or gun. But every man held his peace. It was evident to all of them that Leroux had come for the deliberate purpose of picking a quarrel with Breckenridge and that he was wasting no time about it. One of the trappers translated Leroux's words into Mandan for the benefit of the Indians. The Mandan's turned their eyes expectantly upon Breckenridge as he stood silently regarding Leroux. They had adopted Hunter into their tribe. In their eyes he was a Mandan. He was a great warrior. Technically, the visiting Assiniboines, and through them this white man who had come in their company, were enemies. Now this man had flung an insult in the face of Breckenridge. Was it to go unavenged!

Breckenridge understood all this. If he failed to take up the challenge thus cast down by Leroux, he would lose standing in the eyes of the Mandans. It would be bad for the trade of the Rocky Mountain Company from which he drew his pay. If he went through with it and killed Leroux, it would bar him from all hope of winning Big Mack's permission for him to visit Hair-that-shines. The old man depended greatly upon this chief aide of his, and he would not look with kindness upon the one who deprived him of such an able prop just prior to his launching a new venture. But after all, Breckenridge owed his allegiance to the Rocky Mountain and this man was a henchman of the rival Northwest.

Into the silence that had become tense and almost breathless was projected Leroux's wolfish grin of derision, intended to convey to those assembled the impression that Breckenridge feared to take up his challenge.

"Get your horse," Breckenridge said evenly to Leroux.

"And what will I do with my horse?" Leroux demanded.

"I figure to shoot you off it," Breckenridge told him.

"Guns, then, is it?" Leroux inquired. "You made a bad choice. I can put your eye out from a running horse."

"I would have chosen knives," said Breckenridge, "except that I would not foul my blade with your filthy blood. The metal would rot away."

Leroux's boastfulness was sincere. Breckenridge indulged in his bravado for the purpose of further establishing himself in the eye of the Mandans. It was Indian custom to revile the enemy with whom one was about to engage in mortal combat.

"Bring my horse," Hunter instructed Haddock, and Little Bull set off promptly to find the trained war horse which Hunter had secured in trade with a Mandan chief.

"I spared your life once as a boy," Leroux asserted. "Now that you have grown up and are known as the Big Mandan, you are big enough to kill. I have waited patiently."

The name by which he had just addressed Hunter was one recently bestowed upon him. He had been formally adopted into the tribe. He stood six feet three in his moccasins and towered above the Mandan warriors as he moved among them. The trappers, almost as ready at apt nomenclature as were Indians, had bestowed upon him the name of Big Mandan.

Both General Ashley and Big Mack sought to intervene. One or the other stood to lose a valuable henchman through the encounter, and neither was willing to chance it if the combatants could be pacified.

"I'd be useless to you here if I didn't go through with it now," Breckenridge told his chief. "It might even result in the loss of most of the Mandan trade."

The entire village turned out in a state of high excitement. Many a venomous glance was directed upon the six Assiniboines. Hunter, observing this, addressed the head men of the Mandans, informing them that in case he should fall, the Assiniboines of the McKenzie party were under no circumstances to be molested.

An Assiniboine called boastfully to a Mandan that Leroux could shoot the eye from a running antelope when riding at full gallop.

A Mandan jeered back that Breckenridge could shoot into the air and bring down an eagle that soared beyond the vision of ordinary men. All manner of such extravagant claims were advanced on either side.

When Breckenridge mounted there was a gasp of dismay as it was observed that he carried only a pistol. All Indians and most white men considered the pistol inferior even to the bow and arrow. The combatants were to ride in opposite directions until the signal was given that they were a hundred yards apart. They were then to wheel their mounts and charge across the prairie, choosing their own gait and their own moment to shoot.

There was mounting excitement as the two horses neared the appointed distance, an increasing rustle of eagerness that froze to deathlike quiet as the signal was given and the two riders wheeled their horses. The ponies stretched out into a furious run. Breckenridge leaned forward on the neck of his mount, as if to present a smaller target. Leroux crouched not quite so low. As the distance narrowed to forty yards he brought his rifle to shoulder. At the instant that the muzzle covered Breckenridge, the Kentuckian dropped, Indian fashion, upon the right side of his mount, only his left hand and left moccasin remaining within view. From beneath his pony's neck, he fired point-blank at Leroux's heart at a distance of six yards, just as that worthy depressed the muzzle of his piece to fire at the head of his adversary. Leroux's left arm intervened and saved his life. The heavy pistol ball struck his elbow and shattered it, ranging into the upper arm to the shoulder. His rifle, harmlessly discharged, was knocked from his grasp and he was almost unhorsed by the shock of the blow. A great shout of joy rose from the Mandans and the ranks of the trappers as Breckenridge, rising in the saddle, rode at a trot to the door of the trading post and dismounted without according his disabled antagonist so much as a glance. His manner intimated that this was but an ordinary affair upon which he could expend no more time and the Mandans were greatly impressed.

The following morning the McKenzie party and the Assiniboines departed, riding in a northwesterly direction across the prairies.

Little Bull had first intended to travel with the brigade only to the mouth of the Platte, then to ascend that stream. Then he had decided to go on to the Niobrara and ascend that stream to its head, crossing over to the north fork of the Platte. Later he had decided to hold on to the Cheyenne River and ascend that stream instead, but the mouth of the Cheyenne had now been passed. This repeated change of plan had been occasioned by the little man's vast friendship and admiration for Hunt Breckenridge and he was disconsolate at the prospective separation. He would turn back now, and journey to the country of the Loup Pawnees. Accustomed throughout his life to traversing hostile wilderness alone, the journey held forth no terrors for Little Bull.

Breckenridge chose Little Bull and the old trapper, Brady, as his two assistants. Little Bull was overjoyed; whereas Hunter had feared that the two men might consider it a deprivation to remain behind the brigade.

"My legs ain't so spry at outrunning savages as they once was, and it's only a question of time till my scalp would dangle in some Blackfoot's lodge if I persist in trapping the creeks," Brady said. "Don't know but what I've had my fill o' that and am willing to settle down and 'tend post. All right, Son, I'll sign on."

The three of them stood and watched Ashley's contingent drop off down the Missouri while the brigade disappeared on its course up the river. Ashley was well aware of the incredible speed with which news spread throughout the tribes of the West. The Mandan boastfulness of the liberality and square dealing of their new trader and of his mighty prowess in battle would travel far. It would be an asset to the Rocky Mountain Company. Other tribes would be curious to see this character and Big Mandan might be enabled to open trade with tribes that had proved refractory. Ashley had promised Breckenridge that he would be relieved at the post in time to journey to the point of rendezvous on the Sweetwater in the spring with a view to crossing the divide and opening trade negotiations with some of the southwestern tribes.

The chance discovery of Hunter's flair for trading, coupled with the fact that his reputation as a great warrior and one whose tongue was not forked, was destined to exert its influence upon the rest of his career. But he could not know that as he watched the brigade disappear; nor would he have viewed the knowledge with unalloyed satisfaction.

CHAPTER VII

The brigade left in mid-April. During the last week in May, Breckenridge, leaving Brady and Little Bull in charge of the post, struck out alone to cross the prairies to the Saskatchewan country for the purpose of locating McKenzie's post. New spring flowers painted the green prairies. Game ranged upon them in unbelievable profusion. Buffalo and antelope appeared in vast herds in every direction upon the plains; deer and elk abounded along the streams. The waters were swarming with geese, ducks, shore birds and other wild fowl. Prairie hens, upland plovers and curlews nested in the open prairies and great white whooping cranes, sandhills and whistling swans nested in every strip of marshland. It was a land of plenty through which he rode. He took two horses, riding one and leading the other, changing mounts at frequent intervals, as was the Indian custom when making forced marches. He covered fifty miles a day for the first three days, then, to rest his mounts, traveled but a dozen miles on the fourth day out. His only equipment, aside from his weapon, consisted of a soft-tanned buffalo robe that was used as saddle blanket by day and bedding by night. He shot his food as he required it, subsisting on a diet of straight meat. Lest his scalp should prove too great a temptation to some prowling band of Assiniboines, he followed his usual custom of cooking his meat early, then putting out his fire and moving on to some other spot to sleep. In this fashion he covered three hundred miles in seven days. The creeks now drained north to the Saskatchewan. On the seventh night he made camp on a timbered stream along the course of which was a broad Indian trail that showed signs of recent and frequent travel. It would lead either to a big Assiniboine village or to a post of the Northwest Company.

It proved to be the latter. The factor, a French Canadian, greeted him cordially enough. His identity as the Big Mandan from the post on the Missouri was circulated among the Assiniboines that were present at the post. The host was geniality itself but decidedly noncommittal regarding company affairs. The McKenzies? Oh, yes—Big Mack. He couldn't say where Big Mack was. Way off to the east, though—a thousand, two thousand miles perhaps; who could say?

"East!" Hunter exclaimed. "But he was intending to open up as a free trader, or perhaps to take a post in the prairies for the Northwest Company."

"Yes," the French Canadian agreed. "But free traders cannot operate in the territory of the Northwest Company. It has been given a monopoly by the government in return for establishing its forts and advancing Canadian civilization and territorial rights across the mountains to the Pacific. Big Mack was an old-time employee of the company and was taken back by it. At least, I heard talk to that effect. He was old, unfit for the strenuous job of factor in some prairie fort. He and his daughter were to go to some eastern fort, perhaps even to Montreal in an office job—who knows?"

"And Leroux?" Hunter queried.

"He was sent northwest, perhaps to the Athabasca country," the factor informed. "Or so I heard."

Hunter headed back toward the Mandan country, his plans all gone awry. He must some day find Hair-that-shines. That much was certain. But Montreal seemed very far away. One could not travel those thickly settled eastern districts and live off the country as he journeyed, as one could in the West. And the search for her might be long.

A new significance of his present employment came to him as he rode. He would require money to facilitate his travels in searching for Nepanamo through the provinces of Eastern Canada. For the first time, he was conscious of a desire for money. Fortunately, he was also situated for the first time so that he could acquire money. He would work for two years with the Rocky Mountain Company. That would provide the necessary funds. But the time seemed long and his heart was heavy. He was half tempted to turn his horse's head to the east and begin his search at once. Strangely enough, it did not occur to him that the factor of the Northwest post had deliberately lied to him; and it would be many a moon before he was to discover that fact.

Upon his return, it was to find the Mandan village in the first throes of mourning. Two lodges, numbering some twenty-odd souls, had set out on a short expedition to trap beaver and had been annihilated by the Sioux. Every face was daubed black with a mixture of soot and bear grease. Lamentations made the night hideous. The Indians lacerated their bodies so that the blood might run in sympathy with that spilled by the departed ones. Several bereaved relatives lopped off fingers. Some squaws split their ear lobes. Others inflicted wounds in their scalps so that the blood might run down across their blackened faces. Brady and Little Bull were inured to such mourning from long experience but the continuous screeching disturbed Hunter's slumber and added to the restlessness that had come to him with the knowledge

that Hair-that-shines had gone to parts unknown. Inactivity added to his depression. The appalling volume of the wailing decreased as the days passed but at the expiration of the second week there were still sporadic outbursts of screeching that punctuated the nights. Faces were still blackened and would remain so until enemy scalps were brought in without loss of Mandan life. The lamentations had almost ceased when a party of a half dozen squaws and children, journeying from a hunting camp to the village, were waylaid and killed by a band of Assiniboines.

Wailing and self-laceration broke out afresh. In vain Hunter urged the Indians to go out and trap beaver, the squaws to dress buffalo hides. But the Mandan nation was given over to mourning. Brady and Little Bull endured it stoically, no more concerned than if the uproar had been merely the chattering of blackbirds; but Hunter, his mind seething with disappointment at the unexpected disappearance of Ann McKenzie and his uncertainty as to her whereabouts, was nearing the limit of his endurance. There was but one remedy for such mental tension known to his breed—activity! The Mandans held frequent councils and planned revenge upon their foes but talked in circles and arrived nowhere.

Then Breckenridge rose one night in council.

"Hear me, Warriors! Big Mandan, the slayer of Sioux, speaks to you. The Mandans are my brothers and I cry to hear them wail in mourning for the brave warriors and the women that were slain by cowardly foes. Give me fifty of the best warriors and Big Mandan will ride forth at their head to avenge these wrongs. We will not return until we come with many horses that we have stolen and bring fresh scalps, so that my people may wash their faces and rejoice. The village will ring with the glad cry of the scalp dance. Big Mandan pledges it. I have spoken."

Eventually, it was so arranged. The comely young squaw, who had been complimented by Breckenridge during the first days of his stay among the Mandans, presented him with a shield fashioned and decorated by her own hand. It was made of double thickness of the back hide of bull buffalo, shrunken by heat while still green. It was incredibly tough and would turn arrow or lance thrust and, if struck at the slightest angle, would even deflect a ball fired from the inferior smooth-bore trade guns of the Indians.

The war party set off in high spirits and at its head rode big Mandan and Little Bull Buffalo of the Loup Pawnees.

There was one vital weakness in the fighting tactics of all mounted Indians of the West. Every white trapper was aware of it. A war party invariably charged the enemy at a furious run, frequently advancing to within a few feet, but not one charge in a thousand was pressed home. After dashing down and firing arrows or musket shots at close range, the custom was to veer off, wheel and retreat, form and charge again. This afforded the enemy time to reload. On literally thousands of occasions a mere handful of white trappers, caught on the open prairies and with no more than a coulee bank or the bodies of their slain horses behind which to take shelter, were thus able to sell their lives at dear cost to the Indians. In such a battle, it was the custom of the whites to hold their fire until the furious charge was fairly upon them, then each pick a foe and shoot him from his horse. At that instant, with their flintlocks uncharged, they were at the mercy of the Indians, if only the latter should press the charge home, which was seldom done.

It was not lack of bravery that prevented the Indians from charging home upon inferior numbers. It was merely habit. The overwhelming charge had not appealed to the horse Indians as good tactics and it was destined to be many a year before they adopted it from the whites.

As they rode into Sioux territory, Hunter harangued the warriors on this fatal defect.

"When we charge the Sioux they will fire upon us too soon," he said. "We will hold our own fire until right upon them and shoot in their very faces. Their guns will be empty. Instead of wheeling to reload, we will hurl ourselves upon them and cut them down like blades of grass."

Almost hourly he repeated the formula, so that his words would be implanted in their minds.

On the eighth day they were apprised of the location of an encampment by a thin film of smoke. Scouts, signalling with looking-glasses, flashed the report of a Sioux hunting party of twenty-odd lodges. That would mean probably a hundred warriors. Hunter led his band into camp on another creek ten miles distant. They camped without fires. The returning scouts reported that the Sioux had made camp at the head of a shallow valley earlier in the afternoon. A few miles down its course, the valley was alive with buffalo and it was evident that the Sioux intended to stage a surround, their favorite method of hunting those animals. Five or six hundred head of horses accompanied the party.

The consensus of opinion was to the effect that the Sioux were in too great numbers to attack and that the best plan was to swoop down under cover of darkness and steal the horses, shooting into the encampment as they charged past.

"We came to give battle and to take scalps," Breckenridge declared. "If you follow me and do as I do, we will cut them down as ripe plums fall with the first frost."

They were on the march two hours before dawn, riding slowly in order that their war horses might be fresh when they went into battle. Breckenridge and Little Bull reconnoitered from the rims of the valley at sunrise. The camp was a mile above them. The buffalo herds had moved some three or four miles farther down the bottoms. Breckenridge marshalled his party in the mouth of a tributary valley that opened into the main bottoms something over a mile below the camp. A fringe of brush just within its mouth concealed the Mandan war party from the view of any who might ride down the main valley.

A lookout, peering from behind a bush on the banks above, signalled that the Sioux were leaving the village to ride down and stage the surround. He slid down from his post and mounted his horse.

"Remember!" Breckenridge said in final admonishment. "The Sioux will be startled and will shoot too soon. Their guns will be empty. Every man hold his fire until I shoot. Then every man of you fire. Do not so much as swerve from your course. Hurl yourselves upon them while their guns are empty. They go forth to hunt, not to war, and will carry no shields. They will be meat for our lances and our war axes. Let no man slacken speed until his lance or war ax drips red with the blood of a Sioux."

The Sioux hunters, ninety-odd strong, rode down the bottoms. Behind Breckenridge and Little Bull, the war horses of the Mandans stamped eagerly, quivering to be off. The Sioux, riding a hundred and fifty yards out in the open bottoms, came abreast of the Mandan ambush. The first were allowed to pass. When the center of the party drew abreast of him, Hunter raised his shield in the signal to charge and jumped his horse through the fringe of brush. His voice rang out in the high-pitched Missouri yell, and from the throat of Little Bull sounded the war whoop of the Loup Pawnees, followed by that of half a hundred Mandans.

The startled Sioux whirled to see this array of mounted warriors charging down upon their flank at a furious run. As Breckenridge had predicted, in the first confusion half of the Sioux discharged their guns at once, the others following suit raggedly. They wavered and many of them turned to flee, but a great chief among them, observing the inferior numbers of the attacking party, shouted swift orders and they rallied into battle line to face the oncoming foe.

An arrow thudded home in Hunter's bull hide shield; another zipped nastily past his ear. At a distance of twenty yards, he fired, shooting an Indian through the body and toppling him from his horse. Then he thrust his rifle into the slanting buckskin scabbard and transferred his grip to the handle of a heavy war ax that was suspended from his right wrist by a thong. He rode straight at the Sioux chief. The Indian met him with levelled lance. With his left hand, Breckenridge executed an upward sweep of his shield at the instant of contact, carrying the point of the lance aloft to glance harmlessly off the tough bull hide and pass above his head. At the same instant his right hand swept under it with a mighty swing of his war ax. Its blade caught the Sioux chief on the chin and split his head in half.

Instantly, Hunter shifted his shield to interpose it between his body and the blow of a tomahawk aimed at him by the Sioux on his left, deflected it and with an overhand cross swing, brought the blade of his own war ax down across the base of the savage's skull. Three more Sioux tilted at him. He met the central one and cut him down. Little Bull split the skull of the one on the right and a Mandan drove his lance through the body of the third. The center of the Sioux line wavered, broke and fled. Breckenridge had chosen a dozen Mandan warriors to ride on either side of himself and Little Bull, selecting those most likely to obey his instructions and press home the charge. They had hit the line to a man. Those on the flanks, however, after delivering their fire at close range, forgetting instructions in the excitement of battle, had wavered. Some of them had wheeled their horses to the rear and several, thus exposing their unprotected backs, had been transfixed by Sioux arrows. It was no lack of bravery that had occasioned this failure to press home, but merely an instinctive reversion to established tactics in the excitement of battle. The extremities of the Sioux line, appalled by the unexampled ferocity of the charge that had dispersed their center, whirled and joined the flight. No Mandan was now in doubt. They had now but to follow custom without puzzling over strange instructions. Every man knew his job, which was to overhaul and cut down as many as possible of the scattered and routed foe. The Sioux would have been killed to the last man, except for the Indian custom of dismounting to strike a fallen enemy and thus count coos. As it was, over fifty Sioux were slain, scalped and hastily despoiled of guns, war axes, knives and other treasures. The survivors were

not pursued beyond the high headlands that constituted the far rims of the valley. Scouts that Breckenridge dispatched to those heights immediately signalled the presence of a huge encampment of Sioux in another shallow valley some five miles distant. It would be but a matter of minutes until the fugitives would signal the news to the big village and hundreds of Sioux warriors would be dashing down upon the Mandans.

The squaws and children of the smaller village whose men had just suffered defeat were already in flight, some of them having mounted hastily, others departing on foot. The Mandans rallied swiftly to Breckenridge as the scouts signalled the news of the big village. They were in favor of departing at once, without taking time to run off the five bundled or more head of horses that grazed near the head of the valley. Breckenridge held up his hand.

"There is time. We must have those horses. Without them, we are lost. Our ponies are tired, those of the Sioux are fresh. We are in the heart of the Sioux country with three hundred miles to ride. Big Mandan has spoken. Follow me, Warriors."

He put his horse at the run and headed up the valley. Already a few of the hardier young spirits of the demoralized village were endeavoring to attain the far side of the horses for the purpose of heading them back across the valley toward the main Sioux encampment. They abandoned the purpose and fled when it became apparent that the racing Mandan war party would arrive in time to cut them off. Several Mandan warriors darted aside to capture fleeing young women, forcing the captives to mount behind them. Breckenridge veered aside to capture a Sioux lad in his early teens and the boy mounted behind him. The Mandans were expert horse thieves. Little Bull and half a dozen warriors had angled to reach the far edge of the grazing herd. The main body of Mandans, fanning out in a wide crescent, bore down upon the rear of the drove. The horses moved away from them and instinctively followed the little cluster of riders out ahead of them, as Little Bull and his companions led the way toward the distant Mandan village on the Missouri. The rearmost Mandans hazed the horses forward. Others rode at close intervals along either flank, to prevent sporadic attempts to cut out to the side. Within half a mile from the start, the entire outfit was flying across the prairies at a smooth run, long manes and tails streaming in the wind.

Hunter's war horse was tiring under his double load. Breckenridge urged the animal forward until he was riding among the rearmost of the herd of loose horses. He snared one with his rawhide cord and the animal halted instantly.

"Mount him," Breckenridge instructed his youthful captive. "You shall be treated well and returned to your people. If you try to escape you will be slain. Ride!"

The young Sioux leaped to the bare back of the horse and rode on. Here and there, Mandans were similarly disposing of their captive young women. The war horse, thus relieved of a part of his burden, forged gallantly on until Hunter was once more riding among the rearmost Sioux horses. He selected a big pinto that gave promise of speed and endurance, slipped a noose round the animal's neck and brought it to a halt. Dismounting, he effected a quick change of equipment. Several Mandan warriors were similarly engaged. Mounting his fresh steed, Breckenridge drove his own horse ahead of him until it joined the main band.

Looking back, he saw the first of the Sioux pursuers top out on a swell of the prairie some four or five miles behind. These foremost riders were followed by others, an ominous dark cloud sweeping down upon the audacious handful of Mandans. There were not less than five hundred warriors in that crew, Hunter estimated; probably more.

"They will never overtake us now," he shouted to the nearest warriors. The Mandans grinned acknowledgment. Turning upon the backs of their running ponies, they levelled derisive and insulting gestures at the Sioux, who were too distant to observe them. However, the gestures were no less sincere and triumphant for that.

Instead of a large band of stolen horses being a handicap to the pursued thieves, they constituted the greatest possible asset. The tough little prairie steeds could run endlessly at a smooth flowing gait if unburdened, and for considerable distances when carrying a man. The horse herd afforded frequent changes of mounts for the pursued while the pursuers must ride the same horse throughout the chase. The loose horses also could be viewed as a traveling commissary in addition to furnishing means of locomotion.

Hour after hour the Mandans held their charges at a run. Whenever a steed showed evidence of weariness the rider effected a quick change of mounts. Some few of the pursuing Sioux, up on particularly fleet and staunch horses, gained slightly at first. None drew nearer than two miles and those were but a handful. Then even these foremost ones began to lose ground; imperceptibly at first, then noticeably. The gap gradually widened. After a run of perhaps five hours, a

group of Mandans selected a fat yearling colt and shot it. It was but the work of a very few minutes to cut off the best of the meat, mount and ride on after their comrades, among whom the meat was distributed and devoured as they rode. Another two hours and the whole cavalcade was slowed to a trot, then urged on at a run after an hour's travel at the restful slower gait.

Two miles out ahead rode Little Bull and three Mandans. The danger from behind was now negligible, the chief danger consisting of the possibility that they might ride unexpectedly upon some big Sioux encampment; and it was to guard against this contingency that Little Bull and three experienced Mandan warriors rode in advance. A swift alteration of route could be effected on the instant that the peak riders should signal the direction of the danger. Smoke columns had long since apprised the Mandans of the fact that the news had been signalled far and wide, and that the whole Brule nation was on the lookout for a chance to intercept the audacious little party of Mandan raiders.

At nightfall they were still holding on, a flying cloud on the prairies, riding hard and fast toward the distant Mandan village on the Missouri. Two hours after sundown, Breckenridge called a halt. The horses were rested for an hour and given a chance to graze. Then the flight was resumed. Again, three hours before dawn, a similar stop was made. At sunup they were still traveling, splashing across streams that were fordable, swimming those that were too deep. When the sun was two hours high they forded a wide shallow stream and ascended a high prairie headland that flanked the valley through which it flowed. These heights afforded an unobstructed view for miles to the rear.

Here Breckenridge halted the outfit for some three hours. Scouts sent on ahead relayed back the message that all was clear in that direction. It was evident that the Sioux behind had abandoned the pursuit. The tired ponies grazed, rolled and kicked their heels and some bedded down.

Breckenridge summoned his young captive.

"The Brules sent a thousand warriors to raid the Mandan villages. Some of their young men crept upon four sleeping whites with intent to kill them in their beds. But among the white men was Big Mandan and Little Bull Buffalo, who sleep with their eyes open and their ears wide. Big Mandan took four Sioux scalps and Little Bull took three. The whole Sioux war party turned back without a scalp, leaving seven of their dead. But Big Mandan and Little Bull were not content with seven scalps of the dogs who sought to creep upon them in their sleep. Their rage was great."

He thumped his chest impressively. The Mandans were not too tired to listen with vast relish to this imposing and boastful oratory, so dear to the savage heart. They grunted approval, punctuating the Big Mandan's speech.

"Then the Sioux killed the women and children of the Mandans. Our rage increased. Big Mandan and Little Bull led, not a thousand warriors, but only fifty, into the heart of the Sioux country. Big Mandan counted five coos in the battle, Little Bull five more. The scalps hang at our saddles. It is thus that we repay enemies that would kill us in our sleep. Fifty Sioux scalps were taken and there will be wailing in the villages of the Burnt-thighs for months to come. More than five hundred horses we have captured. Sioux hunters will go afoot. Your captive young women are overjoyed at the prospect of being adopted into the lodges of the Mandans, who are well known to treat their women better than do the Brules. It is Big Mandan who speaks." Again he thumped his chest. "It is not good to rouse the wrath of Big Mandan, as the Sioux scalps at my saddle testify. My lodge will be black with Burnt-thigh scalps if they anger us again. You expected to be killed; but Big Mandan does not make war upon half-grown lads. Mount your pony and return to your people. Give them the message that Big Mandan has spoken."

A chorus of approving grunts testified to the admiration with which this speech had been received. Big Mandan rose even higher in the estimation of the warriors. The liberated youth would deliver the message word for word, and thus would the famous exploit of the war party spread.

The hours of rest had refreshed the horses and Breckenridge ordered a resumption of the march. Night and day, with brief and infrequent halts, the tough prairie horses and the tireless, iron-hard riders sped across the plains. On the morning of the fifth day, having camped some miles away in order to make a spectacular daylight entry, they rode full tilt up to the village. They were greeted with wild enthusiasm for their great victory and the richness of their spoils.

Nevertheless, preparations were made for a fresh outburst of wailing for the three Mandan warriors—shot in the back by arrows when they had wavered and wheeled back instead of driving home the charge—who had been brought home lashed upon the backs of ponies. Not one dead Mandan had been left upon the field of battle, not one scalp had been lost. According to any military reckoning save that of the early-day Western Indian, a loss of fifty inflicted upon the enemy

with but a loss of three men on the victorious side would have been deemed a crushing victory. Mandan reasoning, however, had upheld for centuries the conclusion that a single scalp brought in by a party with no loss of Mandan life was a more complete victory than when a thousand enemy scalps were taken and one Mandan lost. There would be no scalp dance. Not yet could the women wash their faces. Wailing was resumed.

Breckenridge fretted as the horrible screeching assailed his ears of nights. Action and adventure had operated as escape valves for bottled emotions and had left not too much time for brooding introspection. The tense excitement of the raid into Sioux territory, the battle and flight with the stolen horses, had kept Hunter's mind tolerably free from futile dwelling upon the fact that Nepanamo had gone from the Northwest and that he knew not where she was. Now that he was again following the paths of inactivity, his restlessness returned afresh and he was inclined to chafe against the necessary delay before starting out in search of her. Trade was dull and Brady, too, was tiring of inactivity, eager for at least a short trip afield.

"Hell!" Hunter exploded, as an outburst of wailing roused him three hours before dawn. "I've got to get away from this here screechin' or I'll go off my head."

He prevailed upon Little Bull to remain in charge of the Post for a brief period, while he and Brady went out in search of beaver. Haddock, having just taken a Mandan maid to wife, assented. Hunter and Brady started out with eight traps apiece and headed toward the northern edge of the Mandan range. The Mandans had done but little trapping since the previous year. Hunter located promising beaver colonies strung out for several miles along the upper courses of one of the creeks.

A beaver frequently claws up a small pile of earth when emerging from a pond. This he castorizes. Trappers refer to these little piles of mud as "sign-heaps" because, to beaver noses, these heaps identify their makers. They are by way of being calling cards when a strange beaver visits a colony. Invariably, on breaking the surface of the pond, if the wind carries to a beaver's nose the scent of a stranger, he swims directly to the sign-heap from which it emanates.

The two trappers carried beaver's castor in buffalo-gut containers. Fashioning an imitation sign-heap at the point selected for a trap-set, a few drops of the mixture were allowed to trickle from the container and the trap placed under several inches of water where the inquisitive beaver would slip in it as he came to investigate this supposed sign-heap of a visitor that was strange to the colony.

The trappers met with great success. At the end of ten days they had taken more than sixty beaver pelts. It was their intention to swing back toward the post along the courses of other creeks, but they waked one night to the tune of drumming hoofs to discover that a few Assiniboines had slipped among their six horses, cut the hobbles and made off with the animals.

Caching traps and pelts, Brady and Breckenridge took up the trail of the thieves. At the end of two days it was lost among a maze of other horse tracks and they headed back for Mandan territory, shooting an occasional beaver, otter and wolf en route. The morning of the second day of the return, as they slipped quietly along a stream on the lookout for beaver or otter, Brady, who was in the lead, held up his hand for silence. A slight splashing reached their ears from beyond a bend in the creek. The old trapper cautiously approached and peered over the bank, then lifted his rifle and fired.

"Got him right between the eyes," he grinned, turning to Hunter. "He had just waded the creek and was a-suning himself on the bank."

Hunter saw, not a dead beaver, but a dead Assiniboine warrior. Brady deprived the Indian of scalp, buffalo robe, musket and knife. Then they made haste down the course of the creek, knowing that the warrior must be one of some prowling band of Assiniboines in the vicinity.

The Mandan village was tremendously aroused by this occurrence. An enemy scalp had been taken without the loss of a Mandan life in return. The victory was celebrated throughout the night, and the women washed their faces for the first time in months.

The Indians were more observing than might be supposed upon many matters. Various comments made by the trappers, the fight between Leroux and Breckenridge, the latter's subsequent trip north to the post of the Northwest Company, his inquiries of the factor and among the Assiniboines as to the whereabouts of the McKenzies, all were pieced together

with the fact that he would take to wife no Indian woman.

"Hair-that-shines lives in the heart of Big Mandan and blinds him to the graces of all other women," they said.

Wherever on the length of the river the name of Big Mandan was mentioned, there also, in connection with his exploits as a warrior and his reputation for fair dealing, was related the legend that he was blind to all other women because he carried the face of Hair-that-shines in his heart. The Indian wives of trappers related it in the teepees of distant tribes to whose habitat they accompanied their husbands. And so the tale was spread as the fame of Big Mandan increased.

CHAPTER VIII

Hunter's relief came up the river in August, along with a message from Ashley, requesting that he cross the Continental Divide and descend to the shores of the Great Salt Lake to sound out the Indians of the region.

Accompanied by Brady, Little Bull and their two squaws, he started out at once. The twenty-odd horses that had fallen to the lot of himself and Little Bull in the raid on the Sioux were sufficient for the needs of the outfit. They ascended the Missouri to the Yellowstone, and followed that stream up to the Bighorn. When they reached the mountains through which the river flowed, they crossed them and descended to the stream on the opposite side of the range; this was no longer known as the Bighorn but as Big Wind River, it having been named originally by tribes living on either side of those mountains. The two names were retained by the whites, as they are to-day. Traveling to the head of Wind River, they crossed the divide to the Sweetwater, followed westward up its course to cross the Continental Divide at last, and cruised down its western slope to Green River and thence in a westerly direction to Great Salt Lake.

The long winter journey had furnished its full share of hardship and privation. Hunter found that the Indians of the region had traded with the Spanish settlements of California. There were Spanish mules among them, a few Spanish saddles. Such firearms, war axes, knives and other metal equipment as they possessed were of Spanish make. The Mexicans, fearful of the consequence of the steady westward penetration by the fur brigades, had warned the Indians against trading with Americans, a condition which Hunter thought might be overcome without much difficulty. He was now ready to retrace his steps as far as the Sweetwater and to make his report to Ashley at the spring rendezvous on that stream. Great American voyageurs were also to rendezvous on the Sweetwater. Quite a number of the latter, in addition to a sprinkling of Rocky Mountain adherents, had strayed across the divide to its western slopes in their search for beaver. All were now returning, collecting in little groups, and these in turn joining forces until the combined outfit formed a goodly cavalcade. There were thirty-odd men, many of them accompanied by squaws and children. Well over two hundred head of horses were required to transport the equipment and the combined catch of furs. Other trappers joined as the cavalcade passed through the region in which they had trapped.

Riding one evening down the Black Fork of Green River, it was to find some thirty men already camped there. A dozen or so white men and half-breeds were in command, the rest of the outfit being Indians. They were free traders, who had crossed the mountains several hundred miles to the north, they said.

One of the Great American voyageurs, a man who had been raised in the Great Lakes region, recognized the Indians as Iroquois. It was strange to meet here, in the semi-desert country of the far Southwest, a band of these eastern forest wolves who had inhabited the Hudson a century before, almost exterminating the Algonquins and the Hurons, harrying the French settlers of Montreal and driving many of the tribes who now dwelt west of the Mississippi from their original eastern hunting grounds. The presence of these red rogues identified the party as Canadians.

There had been rumors to the effect that the Northwest Company had been sending men to the western slope of the divide to establish posts and to work their way southward through the western valleys until they reached the Spanish colonies in the country known as California. The men operating the posts were to pose as free traders and endeavor to gain the allegiance of all the Flathead tribes, the Shoshones, Blackfeet, the Nez Perces and other Indians, when in reality the posts were those of the Northwest Company, operated by its minions.

"I've heered it said," a mountain man told Hunter, "that some time later, when they've got the Injun's allegiance solid, they aim to h'ist the British flag on every post and lay claim to every foot of country west of the Rockies, not leaving the United States with ary outlet to the Pacific."

"Then we'll blast an outlet," a voyageur declared.

"Men who've been up amongst the Flatheads and the Nez Perces say that there's been emissaries among 'em and that some of the tribes now believes that they're English Injuns, professing allegiance to the King-Across-the-Eastern-Sea instead of to the Great White Father in Washington. D'you 'spose there's aught of truth to all those rumors?"

Hunter shrugged his inability to answer. "But I wouldn't put it past them to have a try at it," he said.

Another contingent joined the Canadian camp.

"Free traders or not, they're Canadians," one trapper growled. "The Northwest Company claims fur monopoly in all West Canada and nary one of us could go into that country and trap, much less to build a post and trade. Yet here's half a hundred English trappers close to a thousand miles south of the Canadian border in American territory."

The discussion continued. It was to continue for some years, with ever-growing suspicion on the part of the American voyageurs that England was planning to take all of the country between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific and south to the borders of Mexico. It was freely threatened that when such intent was plainly evidenced, the brigades of all of the big American fur companies and all mountain men from Sante Fe and Taos to the Missouri and west to the Pacific would quit trapping for a season and combine to clean the British out. It was destined that before that day would ever come, the beaver was to be harried almost to extermination, with the consequent failure of the big American fur companies and the disbanding of the brigades. In the declining days of the fur trade that were soon to come, bands of American trappers would become accustomed to meeting and fraternizing with organized bands of Canadians, sometimes numbering as high as a hundred, cruising the Columbia, the Yellowstone and the Snake, Green River, Sweetwater, Bighorn and the Platte, probably a few parties ranging as far south as the Republican and the Smoky Hill. In the search for the last fugitive colonies of beaver, ancient enmities were to be forgotten, old suspicions dropped.

That there was at least a germ of truth in the surmises of the American trappers was borne out a quarter of a century later; for when the wagon trains of the Oregon emigrants rolled in to settle the Northwest for the Union, they found in the region that is now Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Northern California and Nevada, many posts operated by men who still hoped to see that section claimed by England.

That night round the camp fire on the Black Fork, the leaders of the rival contingents argued the matter at length but without particular enmity.

The Canadians confessed their nationality.

"But we're an association of trappers banded together for our own profit," a Canadian named Buckley explained. "We operate for no fur company—only for ourselves."

"Whether you're free trappers or not, I'd like to bet my last charge of powder that in the end the Northwest Company will get your season's catch of fur," Brady predicted.

"Perhaps. We do not care to which company we sell our catch," Buckley said. "The one who offers the best price, of course, will get it."

"I'll take you up on that remark," Hunter offered. "Bring your fur across the divide with us to the rendezvous, and let the Rocky Mountain and Great American bid for it."

"We have too little fur on hand to justify so long a trip," the Canadian leader declined. "We're just commencing operations. We traveled this far south without stopping and intend now to separate into groups and trap north toward Canada."

"They've got their fur cached out," Brady said in an undertone aside to Hunter. "They're Northwest Company men. You can bank on that."

"Even if you are free-trapping for yourselves," Hunter asked, "why do you feel you have the right to trap American territory when we are barred from doing the same in Canada?"

"Your country has not given a monopoly to any few concerns," Buckley pointed out. "There is no law that bars Canadians from trapping within your borders."

"Besides, who knows whether this is within your borders or not?" a new voice inquired insolently.

Glancing up, Hunter saw that the speaker was Leroux, who had come with the newly arrived contingent to the Canadian camp.

"The trip of Lewis and Clark in Eighteen-six settled that. I thought it was known to all," Hunter returned, not desiring a renewal of hostilities with the man. The arm that had been shattered by Hunter's bullet had healed crookedly. As it hung at Leroux's side, the palm was turned outward. The man's eyes glittered malignantly as they rested upon Breckenridge.

"Who knows it?" he demanded. "West of the mountains, there's been no boundary settled on. England claims that her territory between the Rockies and the western ocean extends down to the Spanish possessions."

"She don't claim that in a voice that reaches United States' shores or American ears," Brady asserted. "In the open she admits our right to the country on a line running due west from the head of Milk River to the Pacific, and south to the Spanish holdings. If England lays claim to that country, she's announced it to her minions private. Maybe she has to you."

"What you mean is that the Americans claimed it and England didn't think it necessary to dispute such a damned preposterous claim," Leroux snarled.

The old trapper rose. "I make the same claim myself," he announced. "And I'm ready to let any man that says it's even a mite preposterous make his choice of war hatchets, knife or gun and settle this here boundary dispute with me right now. I'm annexing that whole region for the United States so thar won't be no misunderstanding, and I'm a-doing it out loud. Speak your piece, Fellow."

There could be but one outcome to such a challenge—a mortal combat between Brady and Leroux, with whatever weapons the latter might select. Duelling was fashionable in every rank of society. Personal feuds between these wild voyageurs were settled similarly but with far less formality. Instead of the challenged party being restricted to the choice of pistols or rapier, the voyageur might, and frequently did, choose to fight it out with rifles, scalping knives, tomahawks or even Indian war clubs. Friends interfered no more than one interfered between the principals in more formally arranged duels in more formal levels of society.

"Rifles," said Leroux. "Us to be turned loose a hundred yards apart in the night to creep up and settle it the best we can. You'll be buried in the country you lay claim to for your precious flag."

"You're entitled to six foot of it, my ugly gazon," the old trapper retorted cheerfully. "I'll send you a deed to the tract, hot off the bar'l of old Meat-in-the-pot."

Leroux turned to reach for his rifle where it rested against a log. He had been sitting in the shadows but in turning, his face was thrown into sharp relief in the firelight. On the instant, a startling interruption occurred. A mountain man who sat somewhat to one side obtained his first clear view of Leroux's face. He leaped to his feet with a mighty oath.

As he thrust past Breckenridge, he uttered a name that reached only the latter's ears. His long knife flashed into his hand and with a hoarse scream of mingled rage and triumph he hurdled the fire and leaped at Leroux with uplifted blade.

Leroux, turning with his rifle at the first outcry, shot the man through the body and jumped outside the circle of firelight, the night swallowing his form.

"What the hell!" the astonished Brady exclaimed. "Who's this that took the fight off'n my hands?"

Several of the near-by trappers approached the stricken man but Hunter Breckenridge, jumping the fire and shouldering his way through them, knelt at the dying trapper's side.

"Quick, Man," he said. "What name did you give that hound? If you speak true you will be avenged. Was it Wolf-strike you called him? The renegade of the Upper Mississippi? Quick, Man! before you die!"

As he spoke, his ears caught the hoof beats of a running horse out in the night.

"No other. Wolf-strike himself—the monster," the man whispered feebly. "Don't let him escape! After him! You can't help me."

"How do you know that he is Wolf-strike?" Breckenridge insisted.

"How do I know?" the man demanded in sudden strength of voice that portrayed exasperation. "How do—" his hand was feebly lifted to his head, his fingers touching his hairless skull. "How do—Hell!"

His last utterance was one of anger at the knowledge that he had neither time nor breath to tell how he knew, and he died with his hand upon the top of his head. Breckenridge, seeing some connection between his question and the gesture, removed the hand. It was not skin but scar tissue that covered the man's skull. He had been scalped alive at some time in the past. The sudden outbreak of speculation as to the cause of the stricken man's wild attack had drowned the low-

spoken words from all ears save those of Hunt Breckenridge. He rose to his feet and held up his hand for silence.

"This man swore with his dying breath that Leroux is no other than Wolf-strike, the bloody renegade that terrorized the Upper Mississippi," he announced. "He died before he could explain how he knew; and it is said that no white man ever looked upon Wolf-strike to know him as the renegade and lived to tell of it."

A trapper pressed forward. "I know McAndrews," he testified, pointing to the dead voyageur. "He lived on the Upper Mississippi. Wolf-strike's band shot him twice, hacked him up some, scalped him and left him for dead. When he came to, it was to find his family dead and pinned to the cabin and the cabin set afire. His youngest, a three-year-old, was still alive but died as McAndrews cut him down. He's one man that knowed Wolf-strike's face and lived to look for it again. He'd never mistake that face, McAndrews wouldn't. If he said that Leroux was Wolf-strike, then that's who the miscreant is."

"Then what are we doing here?" a big voyageur demanded. "After him! We'll burn the dog, as he's burned many another."

But again Breckenridge held up his hand.

"He is gone. At the very outset, I heard the hoof beats of his running horse. This country is large and we do not know which way he goes. It would be impossible to find him in these rough breaks in the night. There is a surer way. Hundreds of mountain men know Leroux by sight. We will spread the news at the rendezvous that Leroux is Wolf-strike, the bloody monster who is responsible for the murder and torture of more than two hundred men, women and children. His life will not be worth a straw south of the Canadian line if ever a mountain man sets eyes on him."

"Nor yet north of it," Buckley, the Canadian predicted. "No Canadians sanctioned his bloody work. I'll shoot him down myself, if ever I lay an eye on him again, now that I know who he is. I take my oath on it."

The Canadians had not entertained a suspicion that Leroux was the infamous Wolf-strike. The renegade's identity had been shrouded in mystery on the Canadian side of the line as well as on the American.

"There's no doubt about that part of it," Little Bull declared to Hunter, after the Americans and Canadians had separated on Black Fork. "If half a dozen Canucks had knowed his identity it would have got to some American, and he'd have told the world. But them red Iroquois knowed it; and every Injun that trades at a post where he's stationed knows it. Savages are funny thataway. A whole tribe will know something for fifty year and talk it over amongst themselves without ever a word of it reaching a white man's ears. The Pawnees, now, never set eyes on Wolf-strike or this Leroux neither, but they'd linked the names together. The word reached them through some other tribe, likely, or from captured women. I heard a few scraps of rumor that wasn't intended for my ears, but not enough to be dead sure. It might have been some other Leroux, I thought. Recall that I was inquiring of you about it the day Dubois first brought up his name? That's what it was all about."

"One thing, my bullet that shattered his arm and twisted that hand palm out will mark him for any man. Now that he's known, his day is short."

Leroux, however, seemed to have vanished from all human ken.

CHAPTER IX

From the Snake River and the Green; from Bear River, the Laramie, the headwaters of Wind River, Powder River and the tributaries of those streams, trappers converged upon the rendezvous at the Forks of the Sweetwater. They came singly and in little bands. The encampment at the Forks swelled daily. No less than three hundred white trappers gathered there, their numbers about equally divided between the Great American and the Rocky Mountain concerns. Their furs were brought in and turned over to the company that paid them. There were combinations of free trappers too, bringing in huge assortments of peltry and bartering them to the concern that offered the best price.

Trappers greeted old acquaintances and congratulated one another upon having retained their hair for another year on the creeks.

"They'll git you another season, though, you old ferret. Good-by, Bill. I'll never set eyes on you again. You've been lucky so far—all-fired fortunate. But that red thatch of yours is too outstanding a trophy for the Injuns to let you wear it round much longer. Some day I'll run across it a-dangling in some red miscreant's teepee and I'll say, says I, 'Thar hangs old Bill.' You can't expect to put that day off much longer."

Also there was many who scanned the ranks of the trappers and failed to see the faces of those they sought. There were many vacancies. Of most of these absent ones there were no reports and never would be. Their respective ends would ever be shrouded in mystery. The fate of some few was known.

"I crossed over onto the headwaters of Pima Creek and come acrost Charteris and Bennett and their squaws and kids. The Blackfoots had downed the lot and burned their lodges, stole their fur, traps, ponies and all, lifted their ha'r and gone."

"Old Caplin and Huron Burke put up a bad fight. The Injuns wouldn't say how many they lost but my wife's a Cheyenne woman and she lets it out to me that them two old rams accounted for fourteen Cheyenne warriors before they surrendered up their scalps."

There were perhaps a dozen similar reports, but for the most part the missing were merely absent and unaccounted for and so would remain to the end of time.

Men famous throughout the West appeared at the rendezvous: Jim Bridger, James Beckworth and Sublette, the free trader, among others. A few years later, young Kit Carson, leading a fur brigade out of Sante Fe and Taos, would repair to this rendezvous and meet such of these same men as had survived the perils of their calling. Ashley arrived with his contingent and brought news from the lower Missouri. He marshalled both his own men and those of the Great American, mounted a great rock near a blazing fire and started upon what was intended for a speech.

"Trappers and mountain men—comrades of many a hard and dangerous trail, I have news for you," he shouted. The light of the flaming camp fires revealed the fact that he was smiling broadly. "Last year—the year of our Lord, Eighteen Twenty One, Missouri took her place in the Union, under the Stars and Stripes, and became a State."

What else he might have intended to say was lost to posterity. His next words were drowned in a mighty roar. Half a thousand Shoshone Indians, not knowing what it was all about, but recognizing it as a great occasion, lifted their voices in quavering yelps. High above the volume of tumult rose the wild, clear notes of the Missouri yell flung from three hundred throats. Ashley's speech had ended as abruptly as it had begun. Trappers and savages alike danced in wild and screeching carousal around the blazing fire. Thus, on the distant head reaches of the Sweetwater, was the entrance of Missouri into the Union as a full-fledged State celebrated throughout the night. No more could only that country east of the Mississippi be referred to as the United States without including the West. The Stars and Stripes had been planted west of the Father of Waters and there on the Sweetwater were gathered three hundred warriors capable of defeating an army, if ever the threat of driving that flag back to the east of the Big River should arise.

The encampment was swelled by a few new arrivals every day. All told, including the three hundred trappers and their squaws and children, the camp could muster some six hundred souls. The Indian population changed from day to day. Bands of Utahs, Shoshones, Crows and other Indians arrived to erect their lodges and trade their furs for the white man's wares. The white men had decreed that the valley of the Sweetwater was to be neutral territory during the rendezvous. Thus Indians who were hereditary enemies might journey thither to trade without fear of losing their scalps, once they

had reached the sanctuary of the Sweetwater.

However, this did not prevent several big war parties of the savage Blackfeet from penetrating somewhat farther south and east than their usual range, for the purpose of cutting off and slaying parties of any tribe whatsoever and any small contingents of whites that might come their way. All who traveled north or west from the rendezvous, whether Indian or white, would find the streams and trails hazardous to the last degree.

It was this insatiable desire of the Blackfeet to annex white men's scalps that was praying upon Hunter's mind as stragglers continued to reach the rendezvous and still there was no sign of the face he sought.

Tod Breckenridge, his younger brother, had ascended the Missouri two years before with a Great American brigade. He was long overdue at the rendezvous. It was said that he had pooled forces to trap with old Andy Hoyt. Hunter scanned anxiously the ranks of every band of Indians that arrived. A trapper or two came with each of several bands but still there was no sign of Tod.

Then one day a figure appeared on a side hill two miles from camp. A half-dozen friendly Crows, accompanied by Hunter, dashed off on their ponies to investigate, for the man reeled as he walked. It was Tod, his moccasins worn from his feet, buckskin shirt stiffened with dried blood. He grinned amiably at his brother.

"The Blackfeet jumped us up, Hunt," he said. "They downed old Andy Hoyt."

In his running fight with them, Tod had lost everything that he possessed, save that which the Blackfeet cherished most—his scalp. Severely wounded, he had traversed two hundred miles of rough country.

"Hoyt's hair will come high to those varmints in the end," Tod predicted. "I'll have me many a Blackfoot's mane before I'm done with them."

Hunter announced to the assembled mountain men that Leroux, known to many of them, had been identified as Wolf-strike. He might live among the savages, paint his face, shave his skull and otherwise alter his appearance, but that stiffened arm with the reversed hand would mark him for life unless he should cut off his arm. Many a mighty oath was sworn that night at the rendezvous as the mountain men learned the identity of the infamous Wolf-strike. They deemed him the most execrable monster, save perhaps for the renegade Simon Girty of Kentucky days, that had ever defiled the face of the earth. These were hard men. In the daily routine of their affairs they rubbed elbows with strife and bloodshed. Taking human life and the prospect of losing their own lives at any instant were but commonplace. But the very thought of the revolting atrocities perpetrated by Wolf-strike made them shudder and long for an opportunity to have a look at him over the sights of their long Kentucky rifles.

Ashley had conceived the idea of opening trade negotiations the following year with the Loup Pawnees. The five allied tribes of Pawnees ranged the Smoky Hill and the Republican rivers, the two chief tributaries of the Kansas, south to the Big Bend of the Arkansas and north to the South Platte and its tributaries, their territory overlapping somewhat that of the Cheyennes and the Sioux on the north and west, that of the Comanches, Kiowas and Apaches on the south, and extending to the borders of the Osage Nation on the southeast. The Pawnees, in their earlier dealings with the whites, were decidedly unfriendly on most occasions, also perpetually at war with their red neighbors. The whole Pawnee nation could muster some twenty-three thousand warriors.

Hunter agreed to undertake this mission in an effort to open up trade between the Rocky Mountain Company and the Loup Pawnees.

The season's collections of furs, a great fortune if landed safely in St. Louis, was to be transported under heavy guard down the Sweetwater, North Platte and Platte rivers to the Missouri, thence to St. Louis on the Mississippi. Considering the devious course of the waterways, the furs would travel more than three thousand miles before reaching their destination.

Accompanied by Tod, Brady, Little Bull and the squaws of the two latter individuals, Hunter traveled down the Sweetwater and North Platte with the returning brigade in charge of the furs, then struck out with his little cavalcade to cross to the South Platte and the streams between that river and the Republican, the fall habitat of the Loup Pawnees. Their extra horses were loaded with presents for the various chiefs and head men of the Pawnees.

In addition to his peculiar precautions about arranging himself for the night, Hunter also entertained positive notions

about traveling in hostile country. It was along the beaten highways of Indian travel, the regular Indian roads and well-known trails, that one might expect to encounter savages. As a consequence, Hunter invariably avoided beaten trails and chose his own route. He permitted no cook fires to be built until that hour just after sunset and before dark, when the smoke would be largely invisible against the darkening sky, and then only in sheltered places. He insisted upon fires that were small and wood that was dry, so that it gave off little smoke. The embers were extinguished when darkness shut down. These precautionary measures enabled the little cavalcade to cross the Cheyenne country and attain almost to the village of the Loup Pawnees before encountering an Indian.

Two days more of easy travel would see them at their destination. They broke camp and followed down the course of a creek. After two hours on the trail, a crest some hundred and fifty yards ahead and directly in their line of march was decorated suddenly by a party of sixty-odd mounted Cheyennes. The surprise was mutual and caused a delay in the ranks of the Cheyennes—slight, yet sufficient to give the trappers time to wheel their horses into a horseshoe bend of the creek, dismount and deploy themselves behind the rocks that were strewn across the narrow neck. Perhaps a third of the Cheyennes were equipped with muskets.

"Pick those with guns," Hunter advised, as the Cheyennes, raising the war whoop, lifted their ponies to the run and charged with wild fury upon the stronghold of the trappers. The foremost savages rushed to within a dozen yards to deliver their fire. Those with guns fired them with one hand from the thigh. A flight of arrows and musket balls glanced harmlessly off the rocks. Each of the four whites, steadily as if choosing the fattest deer in a herd or the largest gobbler in a flock of turkeys, selected for his target a Cheyenne with a gun. Four savages toppled from their horses. Three Cheyennes, reserving their fire, rode into the very faces of the whites. One fired at Hunter just as a ball from the Kentuckian's pistol passed through his chest. A second fired at Tod and the musket ball struck the rock in front of him. Tod, disregarding the savage who had just fired at him and missed, turned his own pistol on the third savage, who had just trained his musket on Hunter. As the Cheyenne fell from his horse at the report of Tod's pistol, that youth leaped from behind his rock, seized the loaded musket of his victim, and shot the third savage in the back as he wheeled to ride away.

The trappers hastily scalped the seven dead Cheyennes, retrieved seven captured muskets and retreated to the rocks where the two squaws were reloading rifles and pistols. The captured muskets were loaded and the mountain men waited for another charge.

Tod Breckenridge grinned across at his brother. "You'll notice, Hunter, that I don't shoot at the wrong Injun these days. Not after that rating you handed me back yonder on the home place when I dropped that Sauk."

Hunter nodded and the two brothers smiled into one another's eyes as that first lesson in Indian warfare was recalled. Ten minutes passed. Then a swarm of Cheyennes charged over the crest, their ponies racing furiously down upon the neck of the bend. On this occasion, they did not charge to such close proximity but instead delivered their fire from a distance of thirty yards. Four fell to the fire of the Kentucky rifles, each trapper picking his man unerringly. As the savages wheeled, the mountain men brought the captured muskets into play. They were far less efficient weapons. One Cheyenne fell from his horse and another, badly wounded, clung to his mount until the retreating party crossed the crest.

Brady sat on a rock and charged his pipe. "They won't try that one again, right away. They'll palaver some now; and if there's a Cheyenne village anywheres within a dozen miles, they'll signal for reinforcements."

The Cheyenne chief and three other warriors, dismounted, appeared on the top of the little ridge and advanced a few yards beyond its crest, reviling the whites in a language which none of them save Little Bull could understand.

"Get under cover, Brady," Hunter ordered. "There might be a renegade among them with a Kentucky rifle."

"Not likely," said the imperturbable Brady, "or he wouldn't let 'em stand out there in range of ours. Smooth bores ain't wuth a hoot at that range and it 'pears like these Cheyennes haven't found out about how far the rifled bar'ls of these long Kentucky guns will shoot. But they might get suspicious and duck for cover if they was to see us lining down on 'em. I'll put on a performance while you all fetch a bead on them from behind your rocks. You take the chief, Hunter, and put his eye out."

As if overcome by a sudden uncontrollable burst of rage, the old trapper leaped to his feet and ran a few paces toward the Cheyennes, brandishing his war ax in a frenzy of anger and lifting his voice in savage imprecations. Such manifestations were commonplace enough among savages and the Cheyennes shouted back their taunts.

Three Kentucky rifles punctuated Brady's flow of language. The Cheyenne chief and the warrior on his right collapsed in their tracks. A third tried to drag himself back over the ridge while the fourth, with a startled yelp, dashed out of sight. Dropping on one knee, Brady lined on the wounded Cheyenne and at the report of his gun the latter ceased crawling toward the crest, flopped over on his back and was still.

There was a hasty stamping of ramrods and priming of pans, for it was almost certain that the Indians would make a sortie in an effort to recover the bodies of the fallen.

"And they'll do it a-running, now they've discovered our guns is deadly at that range," Hunter predicted.

The mountain men kept their guns trained upon the ridge. Ten minutes passed. Then three warriors leaped without warning across the low prairie crest and bounded to the fallen Cheyennes. As one stooped to seize the body of the chief he collapsed and fell across it, as Hunter's leaden messenger struck him in the arm pit and passed through his body. Another went down to Tod's fire. The bullets of Little Bull and Brady cut down the third.

"Now we'll have to wait," Hunter predicted. Smoke was rising from some point half a mile beyond the ridge. "They're signalling and will likely hold back until they get reinforcements from some Cheyenne village. It mightn't be a bad plan to swim our horses across the creek and make a run for it while we've got only this one band to fight off. That way we'll have the creek between us, and it runs south toward Pawnee country."

This plan was decided upon and they were discussing the details when sudden commotion broke out upon the far side of the ridge. The war whoop rang out in savage, exultant volume, accompanied by startled outcries, a ragged volley of musketry and the thunder of running horses.

"Pawnees! Pawnees!" Little Bull shouted, his quick ears interpreting the sounds. "The Loups have jumped 'em up."

A mob of terror-stricken Cheyennes rode over the low crest and fled up the flat between the creek and the flanking hills. The range was long enough for moving targets, but a warrior and two ponies went down under the fire of the mountain men.

A hundred Pawnees rode furiously in pursuit. The foremost of them, discovering the dead Cheyennes on the ridge, pulled their ponies back on their haunches and flung from their backs in the frenzied effort to be first to strike the dead foes. One Pawnee chief, dismounting at a full run, rolled end over end and rose to strike the dead Cheyenne chief with his war hatchet, then triumphantly removed his scalp. A score of the pursuers had flung from their ponies at that spot. Several others charged down upon the warrior who had fallen to Hunter's fire as the Cheyennes fled past him. At least twenty whirled their horses aside after the two dismounted Cheyennes who were racing for the hill on foot.

"Ain't that the savage of it?" Hunter remarked dispassionately. "They could have wiped out the whole band if it wasn't for the p'intless value Injuns set on counting coos. A dozen of 'em will halt to try and be first to strike an enemy that's already dead instead of charging on to cut down a dozen enemies that are still alive."

The group of Pawnees on the ridge, having despoiled the six dead Cheyennes at that point of scalps and all equipment, waved the trophies aloft in savage exultation and started down toward the neck of the creek, viewing with high excitement the numerous bodies of fallen foemen strewn before the stronghold. They halted in sudden consternation. Until that moment the Pawnees, engaged in a raiding expedition in the edge of Cheyenne territory, had imagined that the beleaguered ones were an offshoot band of their own party, a dozen or more Pawnees having branches aside from the main command at dawn. Now, for the first time, they observed that the men among the rocks were whites.

Little Bull lifted his voice and proclaimed his identity. White men were not well received in Pawnee country; but these, having fought the Cheyennes, were temporarily allies and friends. The Pawnees who had been so fortunate as to count coos on the Cheyennes that had fallen victim to the mountain men's long-range shooting on the ridge were inclined to feel friendly toward those whose rifles had made it possible. The savage who had counted coos on the dead Cheyenne chief was himself the head chief of the Loup Pawnees and a warm friend of Little Bull.

It was decided to ride with all dispatch to the Pawnee village to celebrate the victory. They rode hard and at noon of the next day rode up to the Pawnee town. The clamor and uproar was indescribable as preparations were made for an all-night scalp dance. The warriors gathered round the council fires to the end that the details of the victory might be recited.

Raven Bird, the Pawnee chief, spoke first. He graphically sketched the details of having flung from his pony and struck

the dead Cheyenne chief.

"I remember!" Hunter announced at the appropriate point. "My eyes were on him. I saw the blow fall."

The assembled warriors looked with approval on a white man who knew the appropriate thing to do. So thoroughly versed in Indian nature and customs was Hunter that he did not even contemplate with irony the fact that Raven Bird was building up a reputation for having struck an enemy that had been slain by Hunter's rifle a half hour prior to Raven Bird's advent on the scene.

Little Bull then rose and pointed dramatically to Hunter.

"Every Pawnee has heard the name of Big Mandan. The Blackfeet and the Brules tremble in their lodges at his name. He has counted many coos. It came to his ears that the Loup Pawnees were the greatest of all fighting men and his heart yearned to live among the mighty. It is his wish and the wish of those who came with him to be adopted into the Pawnee tribe."

After an interminable session of such recitation from all hands, Raven Bird again took the floor.

"Little Bull has been with us for many years and we know that he is a Pawnee at heart. We have it from him that the hearts of Big Mandan and his friends are also Pawnee. Little Bull has always spoken straight words. The Pawnees have never cared for white men. It may be that they will prove unwilling to adopt our guests. There are five tribes in the Pawnee nation, of which the Loup tribe is but one. We must see what the others have to say. Meanwhile our hearts are soft toward such mighty warriors. Our hearts and our lodges are open to Big Mandan and his friends."

This pronouncement met with widespread approval. Again, through the medium of a chance affray, Hunter had made a most auspicious beginning with a new tribe. It was ever through some exploit of war or horse stealing that a white man gained the respect and admiration of the red. Other sterling virtues were held in less esteem or disregarded entirely, unless coupled with a reputation as a great fighting man and a successful horse thief, evidence that he excelled in the two most highly favored pastimes of the Indians.

There was but one objection voiced and that was more in the nature of a query than an objection. Also, the voicing of it was evidence of the way in which news was circulated among Indian tribes residing at great distances apart and concerning matters of which they had no first-hand knowledge. Doubtless this resulted largely from the practice, prevalent among all Western tribes, of capturing one another's women.

A warrior rose to his feet.

"How can Big Mandan become a Pawnee?" he demanded. "He is Man-takes-no-woman. If he is to be a Pawnee he must have Pawnee wives. But it is said that Hair-that-shines lives in his heart and that he is blind to all other women. How about this?"

"Some mighty warriors prefer not to be bothered with women and they take no wives until their old age," Raven Bird made answer. "We have seen it. What does it matter? Should we force some silly female upon Big Mandan's privacy when he wishes to meditate upon Hair-that-shines? No! But his friends may have Pawnee wives. It is settled."

He forthwith bestowed his own daughter upon Tod Breckenridge, the brother of Big Mandan. Meanwhile Hunter was amazed at the amount that was known about his private affairs in this distant Pawnee village, not one of whose inhabitants had set eyes upon him until the previous day and none of whom had ever yet laid eyes on Hair-that-shines. It was the first time that his interest in her had ever been mentioned in his presence by mountain man or savage.

CHAPTER X

The time, also, was auspicious for Hunter's undertaking. In common with the Blackfeet, Cheyennes, Comanches and to a certain extent the Sioux, the Pawnees had found it difficult to secure firearms, impossible to acquire a sufficient number of muskets to equip their twenty odd thousand warriors. Big trading concerns were apprehensive about supplying arms to tribes with vast numbers of warriors who were hostile to the whites. On the other hand the Crows, Mandans, Shoshones and other friendly tribes had been well supplied with firearms. Most of the muskets owned by the Pawnees had been captured in war or acquired by trading with other tribes. The chiefs of the five allied tribes of the Pawnee nation were well aware of the fact that muskets could be procured at much lower figures in direct trade than through the medium of other tribes, but there were dissenting opinions among them as to the advisability of such a step.

Thunder Voice, chief of the Republican Pawnees, rode over from his village with a retinue of warriors. Hunter presented him with a musket, an iron lance head, a war ax and several pieces of bright cloth. Thunder Voice was favorably impressed and made a speech before taking his departure. It was known to all Pawnees, he said, that Big Mandan's tongue was not forked and that his words were straight. His deeds had traveled ahead of him and all Pawnees admired a great brave. As to whether or not the Pawnee Nation would take kindly to the proposal to build a trade house, no man could say. They would hold a big conclave the following spring after all chiefs had deliberated upon the matter. Then it would be settled. Meanwhile, the lodges of Thunder Voice and his people were open to the guests of Raven Bird.

This cemented the support of the Loups and the Republicans, the two strongest tribes in the Pawnee Nation. Meanwhile the matter could not be hastened. The Pawnees would be sizing up the white men who had come with the proposal. It would be, so to speak, a probationary period, the merits of the proposition to be decided largely upon the personal impression made upon the Pawnees by the three emissaries of trade.

The squaws of the village constructed a huge skin-covered lodge in which the white men domiciled themselves.

Tod Breckenridge and Brady, with the mountain man's passion for trapping, grew restless with viewing the incredibly numerous beaver colonies in the streams of the Pawnee country. Securing permission from Raven Bird, they took such traps as the party had packed in and repaired to the creeks with their wives. Hunter and Little Bull remained in the village to further cement their arrangements and friendships with the Loups and to confer with such delegations as might come in from other tribes of the Pawnee nation.

It required a vast quantity of meat to ration a village of almost ten thousand souls. Small hunting parties went out daily to hunt deer, elk, bear and turkeys in the timber along the streams. Quantities of fish were caught by means of wickerwork seines. The village was swarming with thousands of dogs and these were reserved as great delicacies. All meat was food to the Indian palate. The carcasses of beaver, otter and other fur bearers taken by the trappers, the prairie hens, ducks, geese, larks, muskrats, hares, ground squirrels, prairie dogs and all such small stuff bagged by the youngsters in their archery practice were welcome titbits—as were snakes of almost any variety. But all such were titbits only, a welcome variety of fare. The one chief item of the Pawnee commissary was the buffalo, with his smaller plain's-mate, the pronghorn, a close second.

At several points within fifty miles of the village there were antelope traps. Hunter resorted to one of these affairs to engage in a big drive. The squaws had repaired the wing fences, composed of brush, dried tumble weeds and any other available material. These fences were used from year to year, repaired as antelope appeared in numbers in the vicinity. The wing fences were two miles long, slanting across the prairies and converging upon one another in the shape of a funnel, the opening some thirty yards across. This orifice was invitingly clear of obstructions. It led, however, into a cul-de-sac, a stretch some three hundred yards long by sixty wide that was flanked on either hand by sheer sandstone bluffs. Its far end was securely fenced.

More than a thousand warriors rode out to participate in this drive. Ten miles or more above the wings, they fanned out in a great crescent, the points some five miles apart. Before them, the flat prairie swarmed with antelopes. There were no buffalo herds on the flat, which fact had been reported prior to the drive. An antelope drive, if the country to be combed contained many buffaloes, was doomed to failure; for the shaggy denizens of the prairies simply charged headlong through the frail barricades of the wing fences and their smaller plain's-mates followed through the gaps thus opened. The success of these drives was rendered feasible through a peculiarity of the antelope. A child of the open

prairies, it would skim across coulees, cut-bank washes and badland cracks with the grace of a bird. But the very nature of its habitat had not been conducive to teaching the pronghorn to leap an obstruction. Any flimsy barricade four feet high would turn it.

At a given signal the long curved line swept forward, a thousand ponies of every pattern and color scheme beneath the sun flashing against the vivid green of the early autumn prairies, while ahead of them raced thousands of the little speedsters of the plains. The eager horses stretched out into a furious run as the yelps of their riders galvanized the quarry to greater bursts of speed. The pronghorn's weakness in the matter of leaping barriers was somewhat offset by another peculiarity of his kind. It was his custom to run obliquely to the course of his pursuers instead of straight before them. The riders on the points of the crescent, two miles in advance of the rearmost hunters, were so placed in order to circumvent this practice. Even so, hundreds of the antelopes flashed off at various angles and evaded the drive. Those caught within it as the riders converged upon the wing fences were lost. Not one out of a thousand would essay to leap the brush fence. They skirted it. The leading bands darted through the orifice at the tip and the others dashed after them. The yelling Pawnees charged down and blocked the opening. Then it was over, save for the exciting work of running down and slaying with lance or arrow the pronghorns that had been crowded into the cul-de-sac. This drive netted some twelve hundred antelopes.

The drive-and-trap method was the favorite means of hunting the antelope, practiced by all plains tribes from the Comanches of the Staked Plains, below what is now the Texas Panhandle, to the Assiniboines of the prairies of Saskatchewan. Such wing fences in various stages of repair were scattered by the score throughout the plains country.

Hunter rode with the Pawnees on several surrounds, the favorite mode of hunting the buffalo. Warriors would surround a herd, ride in a circle round it until the animals themselves were milling in an endless circle. Then they were slaughtered until the arrows of the circling savages had been expended and their lance arms tired. In one such surround, the assembled warriors dispatched almost three thousand head of the shaggy brutes. More than that number of squaws and children were soon at work curing the meat and dressing the robes.

Having no squaws of his own, Hunter was kept liberally supplied with equipment by the squaws of the village. The big lodge was flooded with the best of leggings, dressed and decorated in ornate style; dozens of pairs of excellent moccasins were suspended from the lodge poles. He had adopted the Pawnee style of dress—moccasins, seatless leggings and loose jacket of dressed deer hide. On cold days, when not engaged in some warming activity, he wore the regulation buffalo robe caught about him. His bed of soft grass was equipped with the most beautifully dressed robes, buffalo, elk, bear and panther hides.

The young men grew restless for want of something more exciting than the hunt and began to stray off in bands of various sizes, heading for enemy country to steal horses and to take such scalps as came their way. A party of sixty Raven soldiers, the clique with which Little Bull associated, all seasoned warriors, planned a raid into Comanche country to the southwest. They insisted that Hunter accompany them. Among their ranks were many of the most influential warriors of the Pawnee nation.

Trappers who had penetrated the Arkansas, the Cimarron, the Canadian and other streams well south in the plains had been viciously received by the Comanches and the Mescalero Apaches. It was believed that the Spaniards had incited these tribes to war upon all Americans who sought to penetrate their country. Several wagon trains and pack outfits, dispatched to establish trade with Sante Fe, had been attacked and wiped out to a man. Already, a few early emigrants from the United States, seeking to settle in Texas, had been badly treated. Many believed that the Spaniards were intending to go to war with the United States for the supremacy of the West and for that purpose were arming the Comanches.

The Pawnees expected Hunter to join this picked band in a raid. It was inconceivable that a warrior of his reputation should prefer the monotony of village life to an excursion in quest of adventure and excitement.

"We will ride south to the Comanche country," he said.

The warriors acquiesced and the little party, sixty strong, rode south across the Republican, stopping for a day at the village of Thunder Voice. They then proceeded on southward to the Smoky Hill, visiting a tremendous Pawnee town. No doubt it was this great Pawnee encampment that the Spanish explorers reported having visited round 1806. Holding on to the south, they crossed the Arkansas, the Cimarron and the Canadian.

Desirous of seeing something of the Spanish possessions and to prospect for beaver signs in these southern streams, Hunter induced the Pawnees to skirt the Llana Estacado and they proceeded southwest to the headwaters of the Pecos. A scouting party that veered aside from the main body had a brush with a small band of Mescalero Apaches and took three scalps.

After turning back on the homeward way, the party topped out on a lofty hill and the advance scouts signalled from the crest of the next high ridge beyond that they were looking down upon a big Comanche encampment. Hunter and Little Bull with three Pawnee sub-chiefs advanced to join them. Far below them, at the head of a valley, stood a hundred lodges. That meant close to five hundred warriors, far too many to be attacked by the little band of Pawnees with any prospect of success. Horses, then, must be the chief consideration.

The horse herd had been split into two droves; that near the village, numbering perhaps eight hundred head, was sufficient only for immediate requirements. A considerable number of war horses, as was customary, stood tied to the lodges in the village. The main horse herd, numbering round three thousand head, was held on good feed some five miles down the valley. In the center of the bottoms below the horses stood perhaps a dozen lodges—the habitat of the horse guards. The valley led due south. In order to head the horses toward Pawnee territory, it would be necessary to drive them up the valley through the main village and mount the high pass at its head. This would prove an impossible feat. The Pawnees decided that if they were to drive the horses south down the valley, the Comanches, knowing that they would have to swing north eventually, would simply cut across to the east, post scouts on lofty peaks to signal the direction taken by the raiders and would succeed in ambushing them.

"We shall see," Hunter said.

Horse stealing was a passion with the Pawnees and they would take desperate chances for so large a herd. The band dropped back across two lofty ridges and that night Hunter and Little Bull scouted across the hills and descended into the main valley a few miles below the camp of the horse guards. Some five or six miles below the herd there was a sag in the lofty ridge on the east side of the valley. They crossed through this, traversed choppy hills for some three miles and came out into a tremendous shallow valley that stretched away northeast to the far horizon. The two scouts then returned and held a midnight council.

"Are there any among you who speak the language of the Mescalero Apaches?" Hunter asked. Several of the Pawnee warriors could speak that tongue. "It is good. We have with us the equipment of the Apaches whose scalps you took. Just before sunrise, when the horse guards cannot see us, we will ride down to the valley between the village and the horse herd, move on quietly until right upon them, then stampede the ponies down the valley past the lodges of the horse detail. Let no man speak a word in Pawnee. Those who speak Apache shall ride near me and as we dash past the lodges shall hurl insults at the horse guards in the Mescalero tongue. Meanwhile, as we ride down the valley toward the horses, we will drop bits of Mescalero equipment, a moccasin here, a pair of leggings there, or perhaps a shield or a quiver. Also we will drop some bits as we pass the lodges. The insignia will be recognized as that of the Mescaleros. None will know us for Pawnees. In the first excitement they will believe that the Mescaleros have broken the peace and stolen their horses. The Comanches will follow instead of cutting across to the east to intercept us in the great valley. We will wheel the horses up through that low pass and cross through the hills to the big valley and swing north at top speed. If they have not headed us by then, we will have the lead, and if it be by no more than a mile, we will hold it."

It was so decided, and the following morning the Pawnees fanned out into a line that stretched across the valley and rode at a slow trot down its course. The horse guards, many of them sleeping in their lodges below the herd, paid small heed to the approaching hoof beats, believing the invisible riders to be a contingent from the village.

When almost upon the horse herd, the phantom riders loosed a frightful yell and put their ponies to the run. Buffalo robes flapped wildly in the air. The loose ponies, terrified at these gruesome, flapping specters, broke into a frenzied stampede and dashed past the lodges in the center of the valley, close-pressed by their pursuers. The startled horse guards, springing from their teepees, were greeted with scattered musket shots and a volley of insults hurled at them in the Mescalero tongue as the raiders swept past. Bits of captured Mescalero equipment were dropped here and there in the course of the run to give the impression that in the excitement of the chase the things that had lashed the articles to the raiders' ponies had come untied.

The Pawnees swept their charges down the valley at a furious pace. The shots, of course, had roused the village five miles up the bottoms. Looking back, Hunter saw a blaze spring to life near the camp of the horse guards. By shutting off

the blaze on the village side with a buffalo robe and permitting it to flash at stated intervals, the horse detail was signalling in the Comanche code. Even now, hundreds of warriors would be mounting and urging their ponies in pursuit. Some six miles down the bottoms, the Pawnees forced their charges to swerve and pressed the herd up the east flank of the valley. As they topped out in the low saddle of the divide the fiery ball of the sun greeted them. After threading some three miles of choppy hills they came out into the vast flat bottom that led northeast to the far horizon. Up this they swept at full speed.

The Comanches, as Hunter had predicted, had rushed headlong down the valley until they reached the spot where the trail of the stolen herd turned sharp to the east and crossed out through the saddle. The ruse had been discovered too late.

Riding day and night, with frequent changes of mounts and infrequent halts, the intrepid little band pressed on toward the distant Pawnee villages. When at last they rode up to Raven Bird's encampment they were greeted with tremendous enthusiasm. They had been gone two months and had been mourned as lost. Instead they returned with scalps, well over two thousand horses and without the loss of a Pawnee life.

The strategy of Big Mandan in planning the coup was extolled at great length round the council fires and the head men of the Pawnees complimented him upon his great sagacity and skill as a commander.

Brady and Tod Breckenridge had taken a great number of beaver pelts.

"I never see the beat of it," Brady declared. "There's more beaver and otter in these Pawnee streams than there was in the Upper Missouri country when I first set eyes on it some twenty-five years back."

He tried to prevail upon Hunter to join Tod and himself for a winter on the trap line; but the Pawnees had other plans. The band of picked warriors with whom Hunter had raided into Comanche country had been highly eulogized by the nation. These same braves had been fired with desire to harvest further glory and were for departing at once upon a series of raids that would last throughout the winter; and they desired that not only Big Mandan and Little Bull should accompany them but also Tod and Brady.

The fame of the little band of seasoned warriors with Big Mandan at their head was destined to spread far and wide. Some months later, at a fortified trading post in the far northwest beyond the Rocky Mountains—a post which the few American trappers who knew of its existence suspected of being an outpost of the Northwest Company—a party of Flatheads came to trade.

The head man of the Flatheads addressed the factor's daughter, a tall fair-haired woman.

"Far to the east and south, perhaps fifty sleeps, a great warrior rides at the head of a picked band of Wolf Pawnees," he said. "They swoop like darting hawks, strike and are gone. They are mighty braves, each one picked for his desperate ferocity. This great chief is known as Big Mandan. I have it from my brother's wife, who is a captured Snake woman. She had it from her people who heard it from the Utahs. They know it from a Cheyenne woman whom they captured. It is current among her people. So the news comes straight, as you can see. Also, we have it from the same source that Hair-that-shines lives in Big Mandan's heart so that he looks with favor upon no other woman. It is well that you should know this."

A flush mounted the woman's cheek as her father turned a scowling face upon her.

"What's all this twaddle?" he demanded. "I've heard all that before. The bloody renegade has bandied your name about till it's a byword in every Indian village west of the Mississippi. I'll have no more of it."

The girl bubbled suddenly to laughter.

"It's difficult to see how you can dispose of it by one of your usual edicts," she said, slipping an arm across his shoulders. "There's a half million tongues west of the Mississippi. Just because you are grouchy, Dad, you can't stop a half million Indian tongues from wagging. Besides, you know as well as I do that he isn't responsible for those reports. Probably he doesn't even know of them. You know how Indians jump to conclusions and how rumors travel."

But Big Mack was not to be appeased. His strength was failing; and as the vitality was sapped from his great body, the old man grew ever more choleric. This rumor had reached his ears upon several previous occasions and each time had added to his rage. The Flatheads departed, being ushered through the gates of the stockade that surrounded the post,

which was garrisoned by five French Canadians.

The following day a party of twenty Blackfeet approached the stockade and demanded admittance. It was the iron-clad rule that no more than ten of these wolves should be allowed to enter the premises to trade at one time. Ten were now admitted and the heavy gates closed in the faces of the remaining ten. As usual, the Blackfeet wished to trade for muskets, powder and lead and were willing to pay a big price in furs for these commodities.

As the trade proceeded, a tall savage, his face hideously painted, stood surveying Ann McKenzie from a relatively dark corner. She felt his glittering eyes upon her and shuddered slightly. Her glance suddenly came to rest upon his left hand. The arm was twisted so that the palm of the hand faced grotesquely outward as it hung at his side. Her glance traveled up the arm to the man's face. It was painted in such fashion as to conceal his identity, after the manner in which clowns accomplish the same end. But instead of lending clownish good humor to the face, it was rendered hideously savage. It was not an unusual custom among Indians—rather the reverse among those sufficiently ingenious to contrive it. But there was no mistaking the man. She said no word to her father. The old man's eyes, too, were failing but they were still sufficiently keen to detect presently that outward swinging palm. His faded blue eyes flashed with something of their ancient lightning.

"You—Leroux! What are you doing here, you bloody miscreant? Did I not tell you never to set foot in here again! Begone or I'll have you killed."

"Listen, McKenzie," Leroux returned calmly. "No use to be a fool. I'm the only white man who can go among the Blackfeet. They hate all whites, as you know."

"And the reason they don't hate you is because you hate all white men yourself," Big Mack declared. "They know you for Wolf-strike, the renegade that burned and tortured. That's why they take you in. I didn't know you till after the war and didn't know the part you played in it, or I'd never have had you within a mile of me."

"I'm not Wolf-strike," Leroux said imperturbably. "It's a damned lie started by that hound Breckenridge. I should have killed him that night on the Missouri. Besides, you fought with the British in the war. You know that Indians were used on both sides. And Indian warfare is savage."

"I was a soldier—not a murderer," the old man declared with stiff pride. "I fought men in battle, not burned women and children alive. And anyway, Wolf-strike or not, that's what is believed of you. The Indians tell me that every mountain man on the creeks has sworn to shoot you down like a mad wolf on sight."

"To hell with the mountain men," Leroux snarled. "I'll get many a one of them before one of them gets me."

"All of which is naught to me," Big Mack informed him. "I'm supposed to be a free trader, as you know. The American trappers suspect that it is a British post—and it's garrisoned. If they was to find you consorting here, they'd burn the place about our ears and shoot the lot of us. Get out!"

"Listen," Leroux urged again. "The American traders won't furnish the Blackfeet any muskets. They don't want to trade with Americans anyway—they'd rather kill them. The Blackfeet want muskets more than anything else and they'll pay high for them. There's fortunes to be made in the Blackfeet trade. I can throw it to you because they know you fought against the Americans in the war. The Iroquois with the different Northwest brigades told them that. They think you hate the Americans as they do—and you damned near do, at that. I'd planned all this out in advance. Now you're turning me out."

"I am that," Big Mack answered stoutly. "Out for good. I want none o' you, trade or no trade. Get out. If you come to this post again, I'll have you killed."

"If I come to this post again," said Leroux, "you will have changed your mind. But I will not come again. Since you're fool enough to throw away the chance to get the Blackfeet trade for the Company, there's no use in my staying in these parts. If you won't let me in, there's small use of my bringing the Blackfeet to trade. And the Blackfeet won't come without me."

"Get out!" Big Mack said steadily.

"Listen," Leroux began again.

"Get out!" The old man roared.

Leroux turned to Ann McKenzie.

"I'm going now. Some day our trails will cross again."

"Never if I can help it," she returned. "I smell the taint of scorched flesh and the torture fire about you and always have. I hope my eyes never rest on you again."

"They will; and when next they do," Leroux prophesied, "the sight of my face may be the most welcome vision that it was ever your good fortune to gaze upon."

CHAPTER XI

The Aricaras, or Rees, as they were known to the mountain men, had inhabited the Dakota prairies. Their villages were stationary, their lodges solid affairs, built half underground in dugout fashion, the sides and roofs heavily banked and covered with earth. They were an agricultural people long before the advent of the white men, raising corn, beans, squashes, various vegetables and a species of tobacco. Their only agricultural implements were crude spades and hoes, fashioned from the shoulder blades of the buffalo. The westward-moving Sioux, advancing from the Great Lake region and the Upper Mississippi, had waged a forty-year war against the Rees in their efforts to gain possession of the great buffalo ranges of the region. In this they had been largely successful, and the Rees had been crowded into a relatively small territory along the Missouri River. After accomplishing their object, the Sioux had more or less abandoned all save intermittent warring against the Rees since somewhat round 1770. Other branches of the Sioux had pressed on and harried the Kiowas from their homes in the Black Hills. The Kiowas had migrated toward the southern extremities of the Great Plains to escape these fierce and ruthless enemies.

During the War of 1812, the British, having effected a quiet penetration of much of Upper Louisiana prior to its sale to the United States by France, sought to carry out the original purpose and hold those areas on the Upper Missouri for itself. To this end, the British had sought to enlist the Sioux against the Americans. So successful were these efforts that various bands of Sioux went on the warpath under British leadership and moved eastward to attack the settlements in Ohio. Several of the Indians so distinguished themselves as to win high honors among the British.

A far-sighted Spanish trader, Manuel Lisa, very loyal to the United States and with broad experience among the Indians, suspected that such a move was on foot among the British. He hastened to General Clark, Governor of Missouri Territory (formerly Captain Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition) and laid the information before him, along with a plan of his own to out-wit the conspirators. General Clark gave him carte blanche and Lisa set out at once for the Sioux tribes that inhabited the Upper Missouri. He supplied them liberally with trade goods and trinkets dear to the savage heart. The Sioux tribes of the Upper Mississippi region were the ones that had espoused the British cause. Lisa adroitly planted in the minds of the Dakota Sioux the belief that their relatives on the Upper Mississippi were incensed at the Western Sioux because of their loyalty to the United States and intended to make war upon them at the instigation of the British. The English, he pointed out, were supplying a vast quantity of arms to the Mississippi Sioux. The Great White Father, hearing of it, Lisa said, was enraged at this scurvy trick played by the enemy upon his loyal children. He would not desert them. Instead, he wished to arm them to the end that they would not be helpless against the impending aggression. Lisa distributed many muskets and assured the Western Sioux that more arms were on the way. Had he exhorted them to go to war, they might have suspected him. On the contrary, he urged them not to go to war. The White Father did not want them to spill their blood in a white man's quarrel but was arming them merely for their own protection. Lisa advised them to go about their regular pursuits but to keep a wary eye upon the British and the Mississippi Sioux lest they should combine to surprise them. At the same time he sent secret emissaries among the Mississippi Sioux. These, posing as British agents, spread rumors to the effect that the Western Sioux were arming for war against their eastern relatives.

The last thing that the British desired was to see a split in the Sioux nation—which then could muster round thirty thousand warriors in all its different branches—since their main object in enlisting Indians on the British side was for the purpose of gaining the allegiance of the Northwestern tribes and retaining their trade and territory for England. They were now forced to use every means to prevent the Mississippi Sioux from waging war against the Western Sioux. The wily Lisa, too, had a similar object in mind and having blocked the British conspiracy, he urged his Dakota tribes to wait for the aggression that never came. Meanwhile, he urged them to trap beaver and he harvested a fortune in furs. Whatever shortcomings he may have had in his private feuds as a trader, the man who had endeavored to prevent the Astorians from establishing their trade in the West was a loyal citizen of the United States, and it was through his efforts and strategy that the bloodiest of all Indian wars was narrowly averted. Following up his advantage, immediately upon the cessation of hostilities, the authorities of the United States called a conference of all Sioux chiefs, with the result that all tribes of this nation proclaimed allegiance to the stars and stripes. The British, instead of gaining the trade of the Dakota Sioux, lost that of the Mississippi Sioux. That very satisfactory arrangement was concluded in 1815.

In the year 1821, for no apparent reason, the Rees commenced a series of depredations against American traders and voyageurs on the Missouri. Several small parties were set upon and murdered in the vicinity of the Rees villages. Larger parties, too, were attacked. There were rumors among the Sioux, who were now tepid allies of the Rees, that these

affairs resulted from the whites having attacked the Rees as the beginning of a campaign against all Indians. This would automatically align the Sioux with their Ree allies. It was said that small parties of Brule, Ogallala, Sisseton and Teton Sioux were visiting among the Rees and taking part in the killings. There was general restlessness among the Western tribes, whispers of a general uprising under British leadership. The British wished to see a great Indian nation set up west of the Mississippi and extending to the Pacific, it was said,—a nation in which no white man could set foot. A great many of the Sioux preferred to trade with the British for the reason that English traders supplied them freely with whisky, while the American authorities absolutely prohibited the trading of whisky to the Western tribes. That this edict was frequently violated by American traders in competition with the British or merely for their own personal gain, did not alter the fact that the Sioux fretted under this governmental restriction and inclined toward the more liberal liquor policy of the British. And the latter were availing themselves of this advantage.

Colonel Leavenworth, stationed with two hundred men on the Lower Missouri some seven hundred miles below the Ree villages, boldly stated that these troubles resulted from the machinations of the British. He cited the fact that some of the little bands of Sioux now reported to be consorting with the Rees were made up of the very individuals who had fought under the British flag against American settlers in the War of 1812. For well over half a century, the British had sought to control the fur trade of the whole Northwest and to take over that territory for themselves. Now, even when the two nations were at peace, British fur brigades, so large in numbers and so thoroughly armed as to constitute expeditionary forces, penetrated American territory all through the West and ranged a thousand miles south of the Canadian border, while Americans were prohibited from doing likewise in Canadian territory. While there was no governmental edict of exclusion, the trading privileges had been given as monopolies to great companies. These concerns, maintaining a series of forts, equipped with well-armed fur brigades and backed by the allegiance of the Northern savages, were well able to protect their own areas against invasion by American trappers and traders without a formal exclusion act on the part of their Government. American fur companies, however, had no such monopolies or concessions upon which to base their rights, which were violated with impunity.

Colonel Leavenworth cited these facts and denounced the British so emphatically as the instigators of the Ree depredations that, coupled with the persistent reports of the far western voyageurs to the effect that British forts were being established west of the Rockies, the United States authorities began to take notice. The mountain men, living among the Indians, were of the opinion that the British were secretly fomenting a general Indian uprising in the West and that at the psychological moment they would throw the weight of England and the British fur brigades on the side of the savages. All this was to result before many years in a military expedition aimed to settle trade boundaries and regulations as fixed as territorial boundaries presumably had been settled in the past.

Traveling by way of the Moccasin Telegraph, the news of the Ree depredations and all allied rumors spread to every Indian village in the West. The mountain men, scattered in a hundred Indian encampments, believed that a general war was imminent.

Little Bull, gathering these tales in the lodges of the Pawnees, relayed them to Breckenridge. The band of picked warriors with whom they had consorted during the raid into Comanche country was on the verge of setting forth on another expedition and insisted that the four white men should accompany them. Among the voyageurs slain by the Rees had been many old friends of Breckenridge and Brady. Hunter addressed the chosen band of Pawnee braves.

"You wish to make another raid," he said. "Very well. This time we will raid in the country of the Rees."

"But the Rees are a distant people whom we do not know and with whom we are not at war," the Pawnees objected. "It is winter and the Ree country is far to the north."

"The Rees say that there is a good reason why Pawnees never raid in Ree country," Hunter said. "They have heard it said that the Pawnees are great warriors and at this they laugh until the sound offends the ears of the Great Spirit. They say that the Pawnees have never proven themselves great enough to show a willingness to ride into their country and cross lances with the Rees."

"No more have the Rees come riding into our country to give battle to the Pawnees," a warrior pointed out.

"But there is a difference," said Hunter. "The Pawnees are known as hawks of the prairies. They move with the game. Their villages shift. The Rees are a stationary people. Their lodges are of logs and earth and are not to be moved. Their villages remain always in the same spots, while their women cultivate the crops. The Rees do not raid into other country

but merely protect their villages against those who raid in their territory. The Sioux have given battle to them, as have the Cheyennes, the Blackfeet and the Assiniboines. They rejoice to give battle to those who invade their country, for they are great warriors. But they laugh when they hear the Pawnees called the hawks of the prairies and ask why these hawks, of all Western tribes, have always feared to spread their wings in Ree country."

"Then they shall be taught a lesson," the Pawnees decided. "The Rees shall discover whether or not the Loup Pawnees are warriors. We will drive the sneers down the throats of the lying dogs!"

The same band that had invaded the Comanche country now set forth for the villages of the Rees, this time reinforced by Brady and Tod Breckenridge. As they had schooled the Mandan party, so Hunter and Little Bull now impressed upon the Pawnees the necessity of pressing home a charge. Their enemies would not be expecting such tactics and, attacked with lance and battle-ax at the moment their guns were empty, would become easy prey. Within two weeks they came to the country of the Rees. Before dawn, Hunter deployed the Pawnees in a deep ravine. Then, with Tod and Brady, he made camp within full view of a Ree village.

The sun rose to usher in a cold prairie day. The Rees discovered the three white men encamped within two miles of the village. Half a hundred of them set forth at once, followed by others as soon as they could secure their mounts. A flight of arrows and musket balls was launched at the whites, who had leaped behind the few scattered trees that graced their camp site. Previously, two loaded trade muskets had been placed behind each of the three trees selected by the whites. With these extra weapons to supplement the fire of their own rifles, they proceeded to pick off the leading Rees, who, amazed at the rapidity of the fire and the mortality among their leaders, were thrown into momentary confusion. At that instant, with a chilling war whoop, the sixty Pawnee braves charged from the ravine under the leadership of Little Bull and swept down upon the Rees.

Holding their fire until close upon their foes, as instructed by Hunter and Little Bull, the Pawnees shot down a score of the huddled Rees, then fell upon the survivors with lance and battle-ax. The flight became a rout and the Pawnees chased the terror stricken fugitives into their own village, stampeded their relatively few horses and were gone, skimming across the prairie.

The little bands of malcontent Sioux that had consorted with the Rees in their summer depredations against travelers on the Missouri had now returned to their respective tribes for the winter and the Pawnees had only the Rees with whom to contend. The Rees naturally supposed that the raiding party would rest upon its laurels and return to its distant village. It was not to be. Three days after the first strike, these hard-riding wolves flashed into the opposite edge of the Ree country and effected a bloody surprise upon a village.

For three weeks these dauntless warriors swooped from unexpected quarters like circling hawks, inflicted great damage and departed into the unknown. A sufficient number of muskets had been captured so that almost every Pawnee in the band now carried one on each side of his pony. This surplus of weapons gave them a distinct advantage. Also, under the leadership of the four mountain men, they pressed home every charge. This violation of ancient custom was taken as evidence of unexampled ferocity. At every point where they struck in Ree country and fled, they rode into the wind and fired the prairie behind them. This forced the buffalo herds and the pronghorns to migrate and the Rees faced a winter famine. The whole Ree nation was roused against this little band of invaders and planned a concerted campaign against them.

"It is enough!" Hunter proclaimed to his followers. "Our fame as mighty warriors will be written in the rocks of time when the tracks of the last Rees in the sand have been blown out by scornful winds. Our children's children shall sing of us in the villages that when we strike it is with the speed of the darting hawk but with the might of the grizzly. When we flee, our trail is as the trail of the trout in the waters, invisible to the eyes of the Rees. Yet we follow their trails as readily as we read the tracks of a bull elk in the snow. When we charge we never turn back till our axes have tasted enemy blood. All these things they will sing about us for so long as the sun shines by day and the stars by night. For so long, and no longer, shall we be known by our deeds. It is so written by Manitou. Never again will the Rees laugh at tales of Pawnee valor."

Worn and hard as tempered steel, the terrible little band rode into the Pawnee village in a driving blizzard. They were laden with scalps and plunder.

It was an exploit that fired the savage mind. The tale spread swiftly from tribe to tribe and was related round the fires.

Mountain men in distant Indian villages heard these tales with satisfaction. Hunter's strategy had been of the best. In case of a war with the Spaniards on the south, it was certain that the Comanches would take the war trail against Americans. In case of an uprising and a war with the British on the north, the Rees would war against all travelers on the Missouri, endeavoring to close it. The Pawnees, regardless of whether or not they espoused the cause of the Americans, would be committed as enemies of Comanches on the south and Rees on the north. And the Pawnees could muster more than twenty thousand warriors. Hunter's strategy impressed the mountain men as a stroke of sheer genius.

With the first warm days of spring there was a grand conclave of the Pawnee nation on the Republican for the purpose of settling the question of permitting Big Mandan to erect a trading post and open trade negotiations between the Pawnees and the whites. This gathering was held at the village of Thunder Voice of the Republican Pawnees. Raven Bird trekked to the council with a great retinue of braves, as did the chiefs of all the allied Pawnee tribes. Well over eight thousand warriors gathered there. The head men of the nation held nightly councils that lasted well toward dawn. Eventually the last detail had been settled. Three huge fires were kindled in a triangle some fifty yards apart. On the lines running from one fire to another, defining the three-cornered open space between, the chiefs and sub-chiefs of the allied Pawnee tribes sat cross-legged on the ground. Behind them, standing in ranks fifty deep and packed to the point of suffocation, the assembled warriors awaited the edict.

Raven Bird had been selected as the spokesman. He strode to the center of the lighted area and began:

"Warriors, it has been decided by your chiefs in council that Big Mandan shall open a trading post in the land of the Pawnees. Big Mandan and his friends speak straight words. They fight with the Pawnees against their enemies. We have seen it. Also, it has been decided that no other white men shall open trade lodges in our country or shall other white men trap beaver in our streams. The tribes on the Missouri allowed the white men to trap. As the leaves drop from the trees in autumn and blow into piles, so the beavers disappeared from the streams and their pelts were piled in the lodges of the white men. It shall not happen here. Big Mandan and his friends may trap and also they may trade with the Pawnees. They are to start at once to build a log trade-lodge on the Republican. It is settled."

As he turned to stride from the triangular open space lighted by the blazing fires, there was a sudden commotion and a towering savage thrust himself through the ranks of the onlookers and moved to the spot just quitted by Raven Bird.

"I am late," the newcomer stated. "I rode hard to be in time for the councils. But it is not too late for Kicking Horse to lift his voice in the Pawnee Nation. Hear me, Warriors."

He launched at once into a fiery tirade against all white men and voiced many objections against permitting them to trade in Pawnee country. His barbaric eloquence gripped the assembled multitude. Hunter, well aware of the inconsistency of the savage temperament and the ease with which audiences are swept by emotion, could foresee the possibility that this one bitter harangue might undo all the work he had so carefully put in. But in dealing with savages, one must expect such reverses. Kicking Horse was chief of a small offshoot band of Pawnees. Some years before, engaging in a violent quarrel with the head chief of his own village, he had left in a rage, followed by his relatives and a few retainers, some thirty lodges in all. In a few more years he would doubtless affiliate with some enemy tribe. Such splits were of common occurrence, often the chief contributing factors in the disintegration of once powerful Indian nations. However, while no longer cooperating with the Pawnees, Kicking Horse still pretended allegiance to that tribe.

"All white men should be killed," he thundered. "They kill Pawnees at every opportunity. All white men are bad at heart. They slip into Pawnee country in the guise of friendship and kill our braves from behind. Did you know, Warriors, that within the past moon a white man came to our country and killed three Pawnees that had not harmed him?"

His big voice boomed this query. This was a serious charge. Any oratory concerning warfare or bloodshed inflamed the savage mind and caused primitive mentalities to foam. If Kicking Horse could convince the assembled warriors that his words were straight, they might instantly declare war to the knife against all whites. Suddenly the big savage, with a dramatic gesture, produced two fresh scalps and tossed them to the ground before him.

"There is the evidence," he shouted. A murmur of anger rippled through the audience. "This man killed three Pawnees and his squaw loaded his guns as he fired them. He thought none would know—that his deed would remain undetected. But Kicking Horse discovered the crime. He followed the white man and his murdering squaw and took their scalps."

His voice rose and his face was convulsed with repressed fury. His well-simulated rage played upon the inflammable natures of the savages as a wind lashes to frenzy the surface of the sea.

Hunter's eyes were riveted on the two scalps. In one, the raven black hair was marked by an inch-wide strip of pure white, the result, probably, of a wound. There could be no mistaking it. It was the scalp of Dubois, the genial Frenchman. The other scalp, then, would be that of the young Iowa woman whom Dubois had purchased on the Missouri. Rage mounted in Hunter's heart—and sorrow for the loss of his friend. Many a mountain man was treated to similar experiences while sojourning in Indian villages.

Kicking Horse, his voice quivering with rage that inoculated his hearers with a similar virus, continued his savage harangue. The thing was dangerous. It meant not merely the loss of opportunity to trade with the Pawnees, it might mean a Pawnee declaration of war against all whites. An ominous muttering rose above the throng. The blazing fires cast their flickering light on ten thousand faces that were set in scowling masks.

"Kill all whites, is the message that Kicking Horse brings to the Pawnees!" the big savage concluded.

The muttering rose to sustained volume as he made this dramatic close. Then, suddenly, Kicking Horse was not alone in the big fire-lit triangular opening. Big Mandan had leaped from his place among the sitting chiefs and advanced into the open. He held up his hand for silence but the savage undertone increased in volume—wordless, as if merely the growling of some many-lunged monster.

Hunter began to speak. Instead of lifting his voice in an effort to make himself heard above the murmur, he lowered his tones. His expression and gestures, however, were as dramatic as had been those of Kicking Horse. His eyes had narrowed to mere slits, his whole face expressive of restrained ferocity while his words were accompanied by a savage sweep of his arm. Instantly, the murmur subsided as the assembled multitude strained to hear his words. He lowered his voice still farther until a vast hush gripped his audience.

"Our two great chiefs, Raven Bird and Thunder Voice are as brothers. They have led the Pawnees into battle and fought side by side. If one should go to the big villages of the whites and be well received, the other would rejoice. He would wish to go and join his brother chief. If Thunder Voice was among the white men and Raven Bird set forth to join him, would Raven Bird be such a fool as to kill three white men in their own country when he believed them waiting to welcome him as the brother of Thunder Voice? No. Only a fool would do that. Are we children to believe such folly?"

The throng understood his crude logic but the passions unleashed by the incendiary eloquence of Kicking Horse were not to be soothed by pacific argument. The impatience was manifested by a low muttering, as if the vast organism that constitutes a savage village were some mammoth beast that purred ominously before leaping upon its prey. Hunter pointed to the scalp that was marked by the white lock framed by the surrounding crow-black hair.

"It is the scalp of one who to me was a brother. His heart was good. He fought the Brules at the side of your chief, Little Bull, and welcomed him among the white men. He heard that the three of us were here and his heart was glad as he journeyed to the land of the Pawnees to join his brothers. He was a mighty warrior and his arm was strong. Does a great warrior slip upon his friends, whom he is hastening to join, and slay them from behind? Would even a fool take Pawnee scalps and carry them to the Pawnee villages for all to see?"

His voice rose suddenly as he half-turned and pointed an accusing finger at Kicking Horse.

"How does Kicking Horse know that the squaw loaded her husband's guns as he fired upon the Pawnees if there were none to see? Is Kicking Horse favored of Manitou, that it is given to his eyes to behold what no eyes have seen? Or does he lie with a black heart to explain why he took the life of my brother and his squaw? Kicking Horse lies! His tongue is forked and his words are crooked. The man whose scalp he took was coming with joy in his heart to join his brothers among the Pawnees. Kicking Horse and some of his rogues attacked him, and like the brave warrior he was, he defended himself and killed three of his foes before Kicking Horse took his life when his guns were empty. Big Mandan tells you this!"

Kicking Horse stood with folded arms, scornful arrogance stamped on his face, confident of his ability to fan this multitude to flame when it came his turn to speak. Hunter knew it. He knew, too, the unalterable rule. When an outsider, welcomed into the lodges of the Pawnees, took the life of a member of that tribe, even in fair combat, the penalty was death. But the situation could be no worse. Desperate situations require desperate remedies. If Kicking Horse should speak again, his flaming denunciation would be as a torch applied to powder. Doubtless some British strategist had given him many presents to incite a Pawnee declaration of war against the Americans. He turned upon the big savage and threw aside his buffalo robe, standing stripped to his waist as he slowly drew his long knife from his girdle with his

right hand as with his left he pointed accusingly at the scalp which he had just claimed as that of his brother.

"Kicking Horse comes before the Pawnees with lies on his tongue and the blood of their friends on his hands. I, Big Mandan, throw the words in the teeth of this lying dog! I will cut his heart from his body and the tongue from his mouth and hold them up so that all may see that while his voice is low and his carcass vast, his heart is small and his tongue is split!"

Again that vast organism that was a savage village rumbled with an undertone of sound, as if some many-lunged monster breathed with difficulty. Kicking Horse drew his knife and lunged furiously at his antagonist. He stood six feet six and weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, a Herculean figure as the firelight threw into relief the mighty muscles that rippled beneath his bronzed hide. Hunter avoided his rush. It would be fatal for him to come to grips where the towering savage could use his bone-crushing strength. Three times the savage rushed and Hunter eluded his desperate lunges.

As he side-stepped and feinted, Hunter taunted his powerful foe: "Kicking Horse rushes like the clumsy buffalo bull that charges with lowered head and closed eyes." Once his voice rose in the high-pitched Missouri yell, the war cry of the voyageurs, dripping with savage triumph. The next instant he laughed in the face of his foe as he nimbly avoided a charge. All this was calculated to enrage Kicking Horse into deserting his cunning, throwing caution to the winds and fighting in a blind unguarded frenzy. The ruse succeeded. The small brain of the mighty savage was inflamed to the point of insanity and he charged with the viciousness of a maddened rhinoceros.

Thrice, eluding a sweeping blow, Hunter struck as his adversary's arm passed center. Three times he drew blood but failed to disable the muscles of that huge knife-arm. Suddenly, as if his right arm had grown weary, the Kentuckian changed his knife to his left hand. The savage lunged and Hunter parried, their blades flashing in the firelight. Kicking Horse rushed and aimed a vicious overhand lunge in a downward sweep. Hunter stepped back so that the blade missed his chest by six inches. As the Indian's arm passed center, Hunter's free right arm pounced like the head of a striking snake and his grip fastened on his enemy's right wrist. With a lightning wrench, he twisted the hand outward with the palm turned up, whirled on one heel and drew the inverted arm across his shoulder, at the same instant throwing every ounce of his strength into exerting a terrific downward pressure. So swiftly had this move been executed that to those who looked on, it appeared that the white man had slipped and turned his back while Kicking Horse, in his eagerness, had overshot the mark with his knife. What they did not know was that Hunter, by means of a grip unknown to them, had exerted sufficient leverage to snap his adversary's arm at the elbow. As he wheeled again to face his foe, still retaining his grip upon the latter's wrist, it seemed to the onlookers that the white man was so strong that he slowly bent back the mighty arm of Kicking Horse, without apparent effort. Hunter's left hand had been brought across his breast toward the right, the point of his knife turned outward. As he pressed aside his antagonist's arm, the knife was thrust from him in a swift back-hand stroke that buried it to the hilt in the massive chest of Kicking Horse. Hunter struck again, then released his grip on his foeman's wrist and turned from him carelessly. The big savage swayed upon his feet for a single second, seemed to stoop forward, then pitched upon his face.

Even as the savage fell, Hunter's voice addressed the throng. The real battle had not yet been won. Ten thousand savage hearts had been fired to a dangerous pitch by fervid oratory and the sight of combat. It needed but the voice of a leader to crystallize that distilled venom and direct it where he would. If Hunter was to direct it, then it was imperative that he should constitute himself that leader on the instant.

"It is written," he said. His tones were cool and casual. The pressing necessity was to calm, not to excite, the assembled savages. "The Great Spirit has punished Kicking Horse for coming to us with lies on his tongue and the blood of our brothers on his hands. Manitou made his great arm weak so that even when I turned my back he had no strength to drive his knife beneath my skin. Big Mandan was given strength to bend the great arm of Kicking Horse as if it had been a willow twig. You saw it. Thus does Manitou frown upon those who lie to the Pawnees and try to set their feet upon false trails."

He paused and looked about him.

"Kicking Horse was no Pawnee. He deserted our tribe, leaving his own clan because he quarreled with a wise chief. A nation is not great unless it is led by great chiefs. None can say that the Pawnee nation is not great. When we no longer wish to be a mighty people, then it will be time to disobey the chiefs that have made us great and to call upon some brainless one like Kicking Horse to lead us. Our mighty chiefs in council, after much deliberation, decided upon certain things. Who is Kicking Horse, to set his cunning above the combined wisdom of all the chiefs of the Pawnee Nation and

tell us that we shall not do those things? Before us all, he insulted them. I could see it in your eyes, Warriors, that every brave among you longed to leap at his throat. But the Great Spirit had led the black-hearted one to slay my brother, thus appointing Big Mandan as the instrument to avenge this insult to our chiefs. Manitou made the mighty arm of Kicking Horse as weak as a blade of grass and gave Big Mandan strength to bend it. You saw it, Warriors."

"I remember! It is as he says; I myself saw the great arm bend as a willow twig bends," a warrior who had followed Hunter into battle against the Rees shouted suddenly. "Manitou took the strength from his arm and made it soft as that of a babe. I saw it."

The crisis had passed with that natural return to the Indian custom of corroboration. The vast organism that was a savage village breathed more naturally. With consummate adroitness, Hunter had identified himself as a Pawnee, Kicking Horse as an outsider. Therefore, the unalterable rule had not been violated. He stood as one who had fought to uphold the wisdom of the assembled chiefs of the nation against one who would have flouted it. No man save one of iron composure, coupled with the most intimate knowledge of savage nature, could have accomplished the feat. His calm assumption that he was speaking only what every brave among them knew seemed to make him the mouthpiece of each warrior's own desire. He accorded his fallen adversary a scornful glance.

"Our great chiefs have ordered that we begin upon the construction of a trade-lodge at once. We Pawnees are not like the deceitful Kicking Horse, to defy the word of our head men. Therefore, we begin to-morrow upon the work that they have ordered. It is written."

CHAPTER XII

Throughout the fall, winter and spring, Tod and Brady had trapped persistently except during the time they had spent with the expedition against the Rees. Beaver were unbelievably numerous and the score of their catch mounted steadily. Otters followed the streams in great numbers and they shot scores of those animals. Wolves, too, they shot in considerable numbers. The final tally showed over four hundred skins of beaver, more than a hundred each of otter and wolf, along with a fair assortment of mink, skunks and other small furs that had been taken at odd times.

"There's a hundred thousand beaver in the streams of the Pawnee country," Brady declared. "Two men with plenty of traps could take a thousand pelts from October to April without half trying."

Hunter nodded assent. His thoughts, of late, had been somewhat occupied with figures. Brady and Tod were working for the Rocky Mountain Company for the annual sum of three hundred dollars each. So far as they were concerned, the arrangement was eminently satisfactory. Farm hands in the settled districts drudged sixteen hours a day for a third of that sum. Thousands of youths were apprenticed to craftsmen to learn various trades, working for four years for their board and keep, forever under the orders of crabbed and particular employers. The voyageur was somewhat of a free agent, trapping when and where he wished, and his annual stipend was most munificent when compared to that received in most other lines of physical endeavor. The voyageur was contented with his lot, deeming himself the most fortunate of mortals.

Hunter had been calculating the distance that he could travel and the length of time he might expect to subsist in the crowded eastern districts on given sums of money. He was totally unfamiliar with the East but had heard that there was great wealth there; that living was very costly. These mental efforts resulted from his determination to start during the coming summer on his contemplated journey in search of Ann McKenzie. It was now two years since he had entered the employ of the Rocky Mountain Company. After the rendezvous, it was his intention to descend to St. Louis with the contingent that transported the season's catch, draw his pay and proceed upon his way. He had estimated that he would require not less than two thousand dollars to travel for a year or more in the East while he searched from place to place for Nepanamo. Now that sum was due him and he had no thought of working further for the Rocky Mountain Company or any other before accomplishing the purpose he had determined upon two years before.

Wrestling with such unfamiliar calculations, coupled with recurring periods of impatience at the necessary delay in carrying out his purpose, had turned his mind to fresh channels, opening up new avenues of thought. He now thought in terms of money instead of thinking exclusively in terms of necessities and trade. Once his mind had started wrestling with such financial themes, the trend of his thoughts had been transformed into speculations as to the possibilities for personal gain. His own salary of a thousand dollars a year might be considered princely, as salaries were then; but he could trap sufficient beaver skins in a year on the creeks to bring thrice that sum in St. Louis. And if he should engage in trade as well, there was no limit to the amount of wealth he might accumulate. Gradually, the picture of acquiring a fortune for himself in the Indian trade had crystallized into a definite purpose. Once he had accomplished his present aim of finding Ann McKenzie, he would open a trading post in some region and start out for himself.

The Rocky Mountain men were to rendezvous that year on Wind River, a tributary of the Yellowstone. There was small use to transport to that point such fur as Hunter's men had caught. When the supplies were sent up for the new post in the Pawnee country they would be transported by way of the Kansas River and the Republican, and the furs could descend by the same route. Hunter set forth with Tod, leaving Brady and Little Bull to complete the building of the post. Traveling in his usual swift but cautious fashion, Hunter reached the site of the rendezvous late in the spring. A score or more trappers had foregathered there. A hundred friendly Crows joined the encampment the day of Hunter's arrival. The trappers brought reports that the Blackfeet, if possible, were worse even, than in previous years. These miscreants had taken to scouring the beaver streams systematically, hunting the white trappers and taking their scalps as the white man would hunt the beaver and take its pelt. The Blackfeet seemed to be securing many muskets from some source. Trappers blamed this upon the British. It was stated that a few Iroquois had been sent among the Blackfeet as emissaries. If any people on earth could teach the Blackfeet new tricks of savagery it would be the Iroquois, who once had been the most ferocious people that encumbered the face of the earth and unquestionably the greatest warriors of any tribe in America. It was doubtful that their native ferocity had been subjugated by a few generations of contact with the whites.

A sub-chief of the Crows accosted Hunter. "Hair-that-shines waits for Big Mandan in her father's lodge. It may be that she is in danger from the Blackfeet," he said. "They are very bad these days, the Blackfeet."

"And where is this post?" Hunter inquired, startled from his usual calm.

"It is west of the Great Divide, then north," the Crow informed. "On a branch of the Columbia."

He procured a stick and traced in the dirt a crude map of the stream lines west of the Rockies and north of Snake River.

"From here to here," he said, indicating the route, "it is two sleeps. Follow this stream, whose name is unknown to me, down its course to a big falls. That is another sleep. Then cross north to the next stream. It runs toward the setting sun. Swim it and travel north. You will find creeks running north. Follow one to a river, also unknown to me by name, and hold down its course for three sleeps."

Step by step, he traced the route to Big Mack's trading post, estimating each lap of the journey in sleeps.

"How know you this?" Hunter demanded.

"The country itself is unknown to me," said the Crow, "but the word comes straight. A Flathead chief told his Shoshone squaw that he thought Hair-that-shines hungered for the sight of Big Mandan. The Shoshone woman told relatives among the Snake tribes. In that way it came to the ears of the Crows. The map was drawn for me as I draw it for you. It is so."

Knowing well the almost word-for-word accuracy with which news traveled from one tribe to another, passing through a half-dozen translations en route and emerging a thousand miles away in its original form, as against the swift distortion of rumors within a single village of whites, Hunter had not the least doubt of the accuracy of the Crow's statement. For an instant he knew blind rage that the factor of the Northwest Company's post in the Saskatchewan prairies had lied to him two years before. Had that worthy been on the scene, he would have died without knowing what variety of whirlwind had gathered him to the home of his fathers. That phase was transformed swiftly into one of unalloyed delight at having thus unexpectedly discovered the girl's whereabouts and at the knowledge that she was within reach of him. The journey through hostile country to this unknown tributary of the Columbia held no terrors for him, whereas he had viewed with considerable trepidation the prospect of a lengthy search through the crowded and unfamiliar East.

Hastily he gathered a handful of dried grass, a few dead twigs, sprinkled a touch of powder at the upwind edge of the tiny heap and ignited it by the simple expedient of focusing his magnifying glass upon the powder. Such fire-making apparatus was commonly carried by the voyageurs in addition to the usual flint and steel. He stripped off his buckskin shirt and upon its unmarked back he burned the outline of the map with the heated point of his knife.

Formerly somewhat annoyed at the persistence with which the savages kept trace of his affairs and commented openly upon his presumed interest in Hair-that-shines, he now rejoiced that it was so, since it had brought him news of her.

As the encampment swelled daily and he waited for Ashley to arrive, Hunter was seized with alternate spells of pure joy at the prospect of seeing the girl again and spells of black impatience at the necessity for delaying his start for Big Mack's post. The days dragged interminably. Then a messenger arrived, worn and weary from a long and arduous journey accomplished at top speed. He carried the tidings that Ashley had been held up by the Rees and forced to drop back down the Missouri; that his arrival would be delayed indefinitely but that he would press on through the hostile country as soon as possible.

General Ashley, then Lieutenant Governor of Missouri, proceeding up the river with a hundred men, had been fired upon treacherously and without warning by a large party of Rees that had approached under pretense of friendliness. The first withering fire at close range had killed twelve men and wounded eleven others, some of them mortally. Other Rees had then pressed a desperate attack, running off the horses of the party. As the men took to boats and fell back down the Missouri, fighting their way, Ashley called for a volunteer to carry news of the disaster and the delay to his partner, Major Henry, at the distant site of the rendezvous; also for a volunteer to descend the river and carry the tidings of this big outbreak to Colonel Leavenworth, some seven hundred miles down the Missouri.

History records the fact that the volunteer who carried the message to the rendezvous was an eighteen-year-old voyageur named Jedediah Smith. He not only delivered the message to the mountain men at the rendezvous but started at once on the return trip to apprise Ashley of the fact that it had been delivered. In sixty-six days he completed the round trip of more than four thousand miles, sometimes traveling by Indian canoe, sometimes by means of borrowed or stolen Indian ponies and at others by running steadily, after the fashion of Indian message bearers. Military records not only substantiate this remarkable feat but include the fact that Smith returned in time to join the battle as the combined forces

of Ashley's brigade and those of Colonel Leavenworth, who had pressed up the Missouri with all possible dispatch, went into action against the Rees. Smith was given command of a small company of men and led them in the campaign that resulted in the permanent subjugation of the Rees.

A party of Yankton Sioux and a few Teton Sioux had offered their services to the whites and joined the campaign. Though their services, as it turned out, were negligible, their participation had the effect of keeping all tribes of the Sioux nation from espousing the enemy cause. The efforts to turn that powerful people against Americans, for which purpose the Rees had been incited to declare war, had failed and the danger of a general uprising led by the Sioux was temporarily allayed. The small force under General Ashley and Colonel Leavenworth soundly thrashed the Rees and that people deserted their permanent and well-built towns and fled northward. Ashley then proceeded on up the Missouri toward the rendezvous.

Hunter, meanwhile, after the arrival of Jedediah Smith with the news of Ashley's delay, had been consumed with impatience. Leaving Tod to represent him, he struck out alone for the distant fort on the unnamed branch of the Columbia. He crossed the Rockies by his former route through the low pass between the heads of the Sweetwater and Green rivers.

On the latter stream he came upon the scene of a great battle. Hundreds of dead Indians were scattered round. At first glance he believed this carnage to have resulted from a clash between two great warlike tribes. A group of friendly Snakes informed him that it was the work of white men and that the slain braves were Punnaks. Allying themselves with the Blackfeet, the Punnaks had been engaged in slaying white trappers on the beaver streams. Over on Snake River, Sublette, the big free trader, had been gathering his men in rendezvous. The big war party of Punnaks had camped near, promising to keep the peace. Instead, they had slain two trappers and fled. Sublette's men followed the trail on forced march in two contingents, one under James Beckworth, the other captained by Jim Bridger. They had surprised the Punnaks on Green River and inflicted terrible punishment, taking four hundred and eighty-eight scalps. The same brigade had not fared so well in a subsequent battle. Twenty-five hundred Blackfeet warriors had attacked the camp and twenty-eight voyageurs had been slain before the Indians had been driven off. Many trappers believed that renegades had directed the Blackfeet attack on Sublette's brigade.

Hunter traveled northwest with the little party of Snakes. Up among the Flatheads and Nez Perces, they told him, were a number of trading posts of men who represented the King-across-the-eastern-sea. The Snakes wished to know if that region actually belonged to that monarch or to the Great White Father in Washington, as they had heretofore believed. Hunter informed them most emphatically that the country was owned and ruled by the latter potentate and that they must consider as enemies all those who informed them to the opposite effect. This, the Snakes said, was exactly as they had been told by the great white chiefs; Beckworth, Bridger and Sublette; but another brigade, among which were a number of the Iroquois Indians who dwelt more than a hundred sleeps to the north and east, had told the Snakes most positively that all land west of the Great Divide belonged to the King-across-the-eastern-sea. This the Snakes refused to believe.

The home of the Blackfeet was in the heart of the great ranges and the buffalo country east of them but they penetrated to the west to war upon the Snakes and Flatheads. At this time of the year, Blackfoot raiding parties were so numerous as to make it almost as dangerous as the Blackfoot country itself. Hunter avoided all Indian roads and well-beaten trails, holding instead to trackless country. He had brought two traps with him to enable him to procure meat without doing any shooting while traversing hostile country. In common with most voyageurs, his favorite dish was baked beaver tails or roasted saddle of beaver. During the day, he held well back from the courses of such streams wherever the nature of the country rendered such travel possible.

One morning he looked down from an eminence and saw in the bottoms below him a great war party breaking camp. There were more than a thousand braves in the band, he estimated; no doubt a Blackfoot expedition against some tribe of Snakes. He cached his horse in a depression and concealed himself in the brush for two hours. The mountain men of that day were thoroughly versed in Indian tactics. Hunter knew that the war party would have scouts and lookouts located on various commanding points for miles around, and he was not anxious to expose himself to the keen eyes of one of those concealed observers. It was such intimate knowledge that rendered the early trappers, with their inferior weapons, such formidable Indian fighters. Even a half-century later, when the Indian tribes of the West could muster less than a fifth of the number of warriors they boasted in the day of the voyageurs, the soldiers, even when equipped with modern repeating rifles and revolvers, operated against the wily savages with much less effectiveness. The soldiers traveled slowly, encumbered with commissary wagons and much baggage and equipment. The Indians traveled light and subsisted off the buffalo or upon extra horses while their scouts, signalling with buffalo robes, looking-glasses or smoke columns

by day and by means of signal fires at night, kept them apprised of the location and activities of the soldiers. Operating under such a system, the mountain men of the fur brigades would never have survived for a single season on the beaver creeks.

Hunter watched a Blackfoot scout rise to his feet on a hilltop a mile away, secure his pony from its place of concealment in the brush and lope on after the war party. From another eminence, a second scout similarly made his departure. Then Hunter resumed his way.

Four days thereafter, he cautiously approached an open flat a mile in extent. Peering from the shelter of the timber, he observed several upright figures at the far end of the open space. These bore the resemblance of human beings, but they did not move. Keeping well within the shelter of the timber and skirting the open park, Hunter held on his way. A band of elk grazed into the open near the upright figures, evidence that they were not members of an Indian camp in the edge of the timber from which the elk had just emerged. Something about the figures led Hunter to investigate.

His heart turned sick at the awful spectacle. Before him were the half-consumed remains of Snake women and children, still bound to the stakes where their prolonged agony had been effected. At that moment, there rose in Hunter's breast the terrible hatred for the Blackfeet that was felt by all of the early mountain men. On that spot he swore an oath, as hundreds of fearless trappers had sworn before him, that he would never overlook an opportunity to take a Blackfoot warrior's scalp.

The western Indians, he knew, were not much addicted to the torturing of captives, particularly of women and children. Almost invariably, such captured noncombatants were adopted into the tribes of the victors and accorded good treatment. The Indians east of the Mississippi were the real monsters at such fiendish practices. Certain aspects of the pitiful figures led Hunter to closer investigation and he was assailed by acute nausea at what he discovered. There was indisputable evidence of a ghoulish feast.

Western Indians, he also knew, were not addicted to cannibalism. The Eastern tribes, however, had been the most pronounced cannibals on the face of the earth. The Iroquois had hunted human prey as the Western Indians hunted the buffalo. Hundreds of captives had been held at all times in the Iroquois towns and tortured daily, those who succumbed to the punishment being promptly devoured. Though the Iroquois professed to have left off their evil ways, doubtless they reverted to ancient custom when opportunity afforded. Hunter was convinced that the reports that a few Iroquois, deserting from the Canadian fur brigades, had joined the Blackfeet were true. No doubt a few of them had induced some of the more ferocious among the Blackfeet to engage with them in this fiendish orgy.

Feeling sick and weak, Hunter was turning to leave when his eye caught the white gleam of fresh knife-work against the silvery green of an aspen trunk at the timber's edge. The initials W. S. had been carved upon the trunk within the past few days. A white man, some lone trapper probably, had discovered that spot before him, he decided. Not until he had ridden for some miles did another possible significance of the initials occur to him. Had the white man who had carved those initials been present at the terrible affair? Would even the fiendish Wolf-strike, who was given to such horrible business, leave evidence of his infamy by carving those initials at the scene of his crime! Why not? He was outlawed in any event and would be shot on sight by any mountain man. Perhaps this was mere boastfulness, to leave his tracks as evidence to those who sought his life that he still lived in safety among their implacable foes. There had been no word of Leroux since that night on the Black Fork of the Green, when the dying McAndrews had denounced him. Leroux had handled many an Iroquois with the fur brigade. He would know the worst among them. Why was it not a logical conclusion that he led the few Iroquois that were presumed to have joined the Blackfeet?

Three days later, with this horror still fresh in mind, Hunter looked down from a ridge that flanked a Blackfoot highway along the creek. His glance focussed upon a bell-shaped object from which rose a thin film of steam and at once he recognized it—a Blackfoot warrior who had dropped behind some traveling party to take a steam bath.

All Indians were addicted to sweat baths and, with minor variations, they were conducted in much the same manner. Willows were thrust into the ground and bent over, secured at the top save for a small orifice. Heated stones were placed in the bottom, a hide spread over the framework and the Indian, squatting therein with his head protruding, sometimes with even his head withdrawn into the enclosure, sprinkled water from some container upon the hot stones. Occasionally wet grass was piled upon the stones to produce the steam.

Deliberately, disregarding the fact that a shot would reveal his presence in the country and might rouse the Blackfeet to a

search for him, Hunter descended to the creek bottom and stalked the bather. As he pressed the trigger that sent a ball through the Blackfoot's protruding head, he thought of the pitiful figures at the timber's edge a few day's before. Thus did Hunt Breckenridge dedicate himself to his vendetta against the Blackfeet, as so many mountain men had dedicated themselves before him.

In the bark of a lone cottonwood near the sweat-wikiup, he carved an X and above it a series of notches to represent the number of Blackfoot scalps he had taken. Each great warrior had some heraldic device upon his shield and equipment. The squaws of the Loup Pawnees had devised for Hunter an uplifted arm, the hand gripping a knife. This emblem he scorched on the back of the slain warrior's buckskin jacket and beneath it he printed in English the words "Big Mandan." The X and the notches above it would apprise the Blackfeet of the fact that some white man had adopted that way of signing himself in a vendetta against their tribe. If there should be renegades among them, the savages would take the shirt to them for interpretation and would then know the identity of the man who henceforth would leave his mark and his notches as evidence of his work. Doubtless, it was from this or some kindred custom that the bad man of a later period adopted his habit of notching his gun for each victim.

Some ten days thereafter, Hunter reached the stockade that surrounded Big Mack's post. A few brush lodges had been erected some distance away by a group of Flatheads that had been there to trade. Two French Canadians opened the gates of the stockade and Hunter rode in.

No sooner had the gates clanged shut behind him than a tall young woman left the door of the log living quarters and crossed swiftly to meet him. There had been little of either physical or verbal demonstrativeness in their love making. From the outset, they had seemed to belong to each other and had accepted the fact without spoken bond. Hunter had told her that if she was anywhere in the Northwest he would find her. To her, that had seemed a declaration as definite as if accompanied by fervid protestations of undying love; and he knew she had understood it as such. The pioneer men and women of his day were so occupied with strenuous affairs that they had but small time or inclination to decorate their deep affection with fine phrases. Their love might be deep but largely inarticulate.

"Did you think I was never coming, Neapanamo?" he asked dropping from his horse.

"No, I knew you'd come," she said. Then she committed herself to the first words that smacked of tenderness that had ever passed between them. "In a way, Hunter, you've been a-making love to me at long range. Every so often some Indian appears and assures me that Hair-that-shines lives in the heart of Big Mandan and that he looks with favor upon no other woman. That helped to pass the time while I was waiting for you. Poor Hunter! After building up a reputation as a woman hater for yourself, instead of living round with squaws in every village like the other mountain men, it would have struck the savages as a startling departure from custom any time you'd change your ways; and the news would have spread like a prairie fire before the wind. You couldn't do it now without my knowing. Some Indian would come here and say 'Hair-that-shines no longer lives in the heart of Big Mandan. He has taken the daughter of Thunder Voice,' or some other revealing formula."

Hunter nodded. "Would you have turned me out if I had?" he asked.

Slowly she shook her head. "No. I'd still want you. Every mountain man does that. There's the belief that Indian women don't count. The trappers would actually be surprised that their own women back home could be jealous of their attentions to Indian squaws. No, Hunter—I'd have had you anyway. But I'm glad it's like it is."

He frowned suddenly as he spoke again. "I'd have come before if I'd known where to look for you. That dog of a factor in the Saskatchewan prairies lied to me—swore you and Big Mack had gone east to somewheres near Montreal."

"But surely you could have found out by asking the Indians," she said, surprised. "The news travels so rapidly. Almost any Pawnee, I imagine, far away as they are, could have told you where Big Mack had his post."

"That's what makes me boil when I think about it," he confessed. "It never came to me to doubt that lying hound in Saskatchewan. All this time, the Injuns could have told me but they thought I knew; and it never occurred to me to ask because I thought you were two-three thousand miles northeast, beyond the ken of Injuns in the West. I wouldn't have knowed now, Honey, except that an old Crow chief took it on himself to tell me that you was in danger from the Blackfeet. You're on the edge of their range here. Do those red wolves ever come here to trade?"

"Yes—a few," she said. "We never let more than ten inside the stockade at one time and they leave their bows and

muskets outside. Even that worried me some—a little. Our guards grow careless. Men do, after long immunity. The Blackfeet themselves are bad enough, but Leroux is with them and that makes it worse because he hates us."

"Does he now? Since when?" Hunter asked. His mind reverted swiftly to that ghastly sight he had chanced across some time past. "The bloody wretch."

"Father would not let him come here after we knew that he was Wolf-strike," she explained. "But he does come—or did until three months ago. The few Blackfeet that come here are the same ones that belong to the band he traveled with. I know the faces of most of them. Twice I've seen him among those who waited outside. He's shaved his skull except for a scalp lock and he paints his face in various ways. But that twisted arm with the hand facing the wrong way betrays his identity. The last time I saw him outside with the Blackfeet was three months ago."

"Big Mack is blind to trust the Blackfeet," Hunter said. "They are bad medicine."

"He does not trust them overmuch," she replied. "But all the same, he *is* blind—or almost. His eyes are failing and he can scarcely see. Big Mack grows old, my dear. He is over eighty. He was an elderly man when he married my mother. Now he grows crabbed and choleric like a child, when his will is crossed. He will not listen to the counsel of others as his own powers fail."

"Then you must both come with me where I will start a post of my own," Hunter asserted. "I will pick my place, open up in the Indian trade and come for you."

"He would not listen for a second to such a plan," said McKenzie's daughter.

"It is a good plan," Hunter urged. "He must be made to see it. We will go to him at once."

He turned toward the log trade house, but the woman caught his arm and detained him.

"It would be useless. Besides, I prefer that he should not know of your presence."

"What?" Hunter demanded. "Am I to come a thousand miles to see you and have him deny me admittance?"

The girl laughed softly and twined her arm through his.

"Yes," she said. "Just that. Don't let that fierce Kentucky pride of yours get roused. Big Mack goes into great rages and they are harmful to him. He childishly insists that you have bandied my name about the Indian villages. No one could convince him to the contrary. The knowledge that you are here would cause him to fume helplessly and he would order you off."

"I would not go," Hunter declared.

"Then I would send you," she said. "Such rages shake him and are bad for his health. Hunter dear, it has been so long since I've set eyes on you that I can't give you up again right away. He must not know who you are."

"But what is the end—if you cannot come with me and I cannot stay with you?" he demanded. "That gets us nowhere."

"It will," she predicted. "It won't be long now that we'll have to wait." She hesitated, as if loath to proceed. "I've sent word that he's growing too old and feeble to run this fort; and asked to have him relieved."

She observed him narrowly, as if to determine how much he had read into her words. He betrayed no surprise, however, but merely nodded.

"That's much the best," he said.

The girl breathed a sigh of relief. This lover of hers was such a fiercely loyal American. It was through that patriotism that he had first taken exception to the words of Leroux that night on the Missouri.

"Nice Hunter," she crooned, patting his arm. "Then you're not going to be mad at us?"

"I would," he said, "except that there will never be enough British posts in this country to make hoisting that flag in it possible. The mountain men wouldn't have it so. I've known from first glance that it was the post of some big English

company. It's garrisoned by French Canucks. Your trade goods must be brought down from Canada by Canadian brigades."

"Of course," she confessed. "The few mountain men who stray here know that at once. I feared you might be furious."

Slowly, he shook his head.

"It's too futile to be cause for fury," he said. "Big Mack's loyalty has been imposed upon by those who would gain the trade of these parts for as long as they can hold it. It's not fury, but fear, that I feel for you."

"Fear?" she queried.

"Blackfeet," he made answer. "The mountain men know that the posts up this way are British and they like it not. They suspect that the factors are inciting the Blackfeet to hostilities against American brigades. True or not, I know that Big Mack would have no hand in such murdering business. No man could tell me different. But if the Blackfeet should rise against these British posts and the rumors of it should reach the mountain men, they would not gather and march to your assistance. In the first place, believing as they do that the British are allied with the Blackfeet, they would not credit the rumors that those red wolves had risen against the posts. You see? You could rely for help only on such Canadian brigades as were operating here-about."

"Yes. I've known that. But it will not be long now. The Company, while it pays poorly, does give honor to its old employees. Big Mack, except for a few years, has been in Company employ for going on sixty years. They will no doubt retire him on a slight pension and send him east. If they confer on him an honorary company title, he will be content."

Two members of the little garrison lounged in the shade. The others were nowhere in sight. Their squaws and children moved in and out of the cabins that had been erected for quartering the garrison and its families. A party of fifty or more Blackfeet emerged from the timber some distance away and headed toward the stockade. Their numbers were equally divided between bucks and squaws. The two guards sauntered toward the gate. Another man appeared in the door of his cabin, stretched and yawned as he regarded the approaching savages with casual appraisal. Hunter's brow contracted with a slight frown as he surveyed the scene. The Blackfoot party halted some fifty yards from the fort and the greater number made themselves comfortable on the ground while a dozen or so advanced to the stockade.

Hunter strolled toward the gate. The savages had deposited their bows and muskets with the main party. The guards opened the gates.

"Are you letting them in wearing buffalo robes, and without looking underneath?" Hunter demanded sharply.

The guards looked up in surprise at this abrupt query, one of them in sullen anger, the other with an amiable flash of teeth as he laughed.

"But surely," he said. "Why not? These fellows have traded here often. They're friendly and harmless."

"I have my doubts about any Blackfoot being either," Hunter declared flatly.

"What affair is it of yours?" the sullen man demanded.

"He is my friend and a very wise trader who knows Indians, east and west," Ann McKenzie said. "He inquires by my orders. Answer him."

"Well, but certainly they enter with robes on," the man stated surlily. "Is it not enough to insist that they leave their weapons behind? Should we make them disrobe to trade? One cannot treat friendly Indians as enemies and hold their trade."

Hunter nodded. The Blackfeet began to file through the gate. Hunter suddenly caught the robe of the foremost savage and pulled it off, as if to examine its workmanship. A strip of buckskin round the Indian's waist secured a war hatchet and a scalping knife. The butt of a pistol protruded from his right legging. The savage whirled upon him with a grunt of anger, his hand falling to the tomahawk, which he extracted from its resting place and brandished threateningly. Hunter's rifle, resting easily in the crook of one arm, was trained upon his middle.

"Ask him," instructed Hunter, who knew little of the Blackfeet language, "just why he enters the stockade armed when

told to leave his arms outside."

The amiable one of the guards, fearing trouble, closed the gate behind the Indians. Three men appeared in the doors of their cabins, having been roused by the sudden commotion at the gate. The savages glanced about them, their glances lowering and ugly at first, then assuming blank stares as if they could not comprehend the situation.

"Says he forgot to leave them with his musket," the guard interpreted, after questioning the Indian whose robe Hunter had removed.

"Have the others throw back their robes," Hunter ordered.

Several of the savages objected and made as if to leave.

"Off with your robes!" Hunter said sharply. They did not understand his words but the order had been conveyed to them and his meaning was clear. Hunter fixed one savage with his eyes and the Indian did not like the look in them as the white man jerked an imperative thumb. Slowly, as if against his will, the Indian drew back his buffalo robe. A similar set of weapons was revealed. One after another, the savages threw back their robes. All were armed in some fashion. Hunter pointed to the gate.

"Out you go," he said. "Off with you! None of you come here again until the Short Blue Moon. Next time one of you comes inside with so much as a knife he will be shot. Leave your robes with your muskets hereafter, before coming to the gate."

The girl interpreted his remarks and the savages protested that they came to trade.

"You come to palaver," Hunter said. "Where are your furs?"

They intended to bring the furs after seeing the trade-goods, they asserted.

"Go!" Hunter ordered; and they left.

"Not one Indian in a hundred carries a pistol," Hunter said to the guards. "How do you account for the fact that out of the ten who entered, five had pistols beneath their robes and every varmint of them had war-hatchets and knives?"

"We only let in ten at a time," one man answered in extenuation.

"Ten's enough, if they catch you off guard," Hunter said. "I like not the look of the thing. I'd keep a sharp eye on those beggars."

"We'll make them leave their robes behind, fast enough, after this," the amiable guard promised. "Maybe we have grown a bit careless. Nepanamo, she thinks so."

"That is why she asked me to see what the miscreants carried beneath their robes," Hunter said. "She doesn't trust them as far as you do. It seems that she was right. Hereafter, you'd best do as she suggests in that particular matter."

His words made it appear that he had acted at her instigation, not merely through some high-handed impulse of his own. Coming from her, it would not make them resentful and would, temporarily at least, cause them to exercise a measure of precaution. They could not but recognize the sinister possibilities of that array of weapons concealed beneath the robes of the late visitors. Even the surly guard elected to take Hunter's act as an order from the well-beloved mistress of the post and not as a piece of unwarranted interference.

A squaw reported the details of the occurrence to McKenzie. Presently Hunter and the girl heard his wrathful voice berating the members of the garrison.

"And a good thing some man with brains in his head saw it and warned ye!" he declared testily. "Let no more Blackfoot devils enter the stockade with robes on! Do ye hear? It is orders!"

His voice rose querulously, commanding his daughter to bring the stranger to him. The man's once mighty frame was gaunt and he shambled a bit as he walked.

"Who is he?" he inquired of Nepanamo. "Chauvenant said you proclaimed him an old friend of ours."

"One of the men of the brigade on the Missouri, Father," the girl answered. "His name is Hunter."

"Hunter, is it? I don't seem to recall him." The old man laid his great hands on Hunter's shoulder and drew him nearer as the fading eyes scanned the newcomer's face. Then suddenly he straightened. "Nepanamo! Ye tell an untruth to your father! His name is not Hunter. It is Breckenridge!"

"Yes, Dad. Hunter Breckenridge," the girl agreed.

"He's the one who made your name a byword in every Indian camp for two thousand miles, boasting of his conquest over ye!" the old man snapped. "How is it ye have not had him thrown out?"

"Because you've always been mistaken in what you think of him," the girl answered gently; "and I wish him to stay."

"Is it fitting that a chit of a girl should question her parent's judgment?" he demanded fiercely. "I'll not have him here!" Even in his anger the voice had a querulous, shaken note.

"Very well, Father. I shall send him away," the girl said. "Wait for me at the wikiups outside the stockade," she whispered to Hunter. Then she stepped over and slipped her arm round the old man's waist. "He is going now, Dad. He only stopped over to renew old acquaintance." After a space she said, "He is riding out of the gate now."

The old man was mollified at thus having enforced his will when he had expected opposition.

"You're a dutiful girl, Nepanamo," he praised fondly as she led him back inside. "Big Mack knows what's best."

"Yes. Of course," she assented. She patted his shoulder affectionately as he settled down in a great easy-chair of elkskin.

Hunter waited among the brush wikiups that had been erected by Snake Indians who had camped outside the stockade. A squaw brought food to him at sundown. An hour after nightfall, Nepanamo came to him. He clasped her to him with fierce tenderness and she repaid him in kind, as if she thirsted for him. It was near dawn when they parted.

For three days, he camped in the best of the wikiups. One or another of the men of the garrison came for extended chats on occasion. They were a friendly lot, on the whole. Despite the differing policies of their governments, there was little of individual enmity between the American and Canadian voyageurs. Should their respective nations go to war, they would be aligned against each other. Meanwhile, wherever rival fur brigades met on the streams, the men fraternized, respecting one another as individuals, each recognizing the good qualities of the other. After all, in the main, they were one breed.

The girl came to him at night and he held her in his arms as they made tentative plans for their future.

"We'll not leave my finding you to chance another time, Nepanamo," he said in parting. "One lesson of that sort is enough. When you are settled with Big Mack in the East, send word where you are. You will find some one who is going to St. Louis. The town grows and many are coming there from the East. Instruct your messenger to give the tidings of your whereabouts to both the Rocky Mountain Company and the Great American in St. Louis. The first brigade to start upriver will leave the word at the posts on the Missouri and with the mountain men at the rendezvous. It will reach me. Then I will come for you."

CHAPTER XIII

The first lap of the journey across the great desert flats south of Snake River had been accomplished at night, so that hostile eyes might not observe him riding out on to that inhospitable expanse. Halfway between midnight and dawn, he had made camp at a tiny spring in the bottom of a coulee. On the off chance that there might prove to be savages about at dawn, he had confined his horse to a wide stretch where feed was available in the coulee bottom. When the sun was two hours high, Hunter waked, refreshed himself with a drink at the spring and ate sparingly of cold roast-beaver saddle; sparingly, not because he was not hungry, but for the reason that the meat, roasted during the night over a sagebrush fire concealed in the depths of the coulee, had absorbed the bitter taste of the fuel and was decidedly unpalatable.

"I'll be ravenous as a wolf before I've crossed these flats unless I can shoot a hare or an antelope en route," he mused aloud. He was debating the advisability of resuming his travel by day across these exposed plains and decided that he would. He peered over the banks of the coulee in every direction. There was sagebrush on one side, an expanse of open prairie on the other. He discovered that his horse, hobbled though it was, had managed to find a break in the cut-bank sides of the wash and had moved out on to the prairie. Beyond the animal, there was the least wave of ground, a gentle prairie crest. Hunter received a sudden shock. Five tiny sage plants grew upon that crest and he was morally certain that the little rise had supported not so much as a single bush; that it had been bare prairie when he had last looked that way. If that were true, it could mean but one thing—savages who had crept up to ambush him when he should go out to retrieve his horse. Silently, he cursed the animal for having found means to climb out of the wash and expose itself in the open. He turned away to survey the sage-clad flat on the far side of the coulee. If there were savages on that side also, they would be well concealed in the sage. There was not a stir in that direction. Again his eyes sought the prairie side. Two additional sage now grew there. The horse faced in that direction, its ears pricked alertly forward. There was not a vestige of doubt that seven pairs of savage eyes peered through the plants that had sprouted in such miraculous fashion. If there were only seven, he could fight it out. If they were but part of a larger party, Hunter's one hope was to strike out down the coulee before the patient stalkers were aware that he suspected their presence, gain such distance as he could, and trust to his wits and his feet. It was clear that the savages had been working out his trail and had attempted to follow it in the night as it led out into the desert flats. In the early morning, they had spotted his horse. Knowing that they could not ride upon him unobserved, they had left their own horses and had stalked him on foot. These actions precluded any possibility that the Indians behind the sage plants beyond his horse were members of any tribe friendly to the whites. Hunter secured his pistol, powder horn and bullet pouch from his saddle and attached them to his waistband, then mounted to a bench just below the upper rim of the coulee. Peering cautiously, he lined his rifle upon one of the sage plants on the prairie, intending to place a ball between the eyes of the savage who, without question, was peering through it. Before his finger could press the trigger, a terrific war whoop sounded in his rear. The sage literally swarmed with Blackfoot warriors that sprang suddenly from their places of concealment and advanced to the opposite rim of the coulee, some thirty yards in his rear. The seven savages on the prairie leaped from behind their sage plants and gathered round his horse. It would prove useless to put up a fight and, as it was the evident intention to take him alive, he might later argue them out of the notion of killing him. The savages were all shouting at once as the foremost of them dropped to the bed of the coulee. Suddenly a voice shouted in English:

"So Big Mandan declares war against the Blackfeet, my fine cockerel."

If Hunter could have picked Leroux from among the swarm of painted savages across the coulee he would have shot him dead on the instant; but it was impossible. He could expect no mercy from Leroux's band of fiends. Far better that he should be killed on the spot than taken alive. He leaped suddenly to the open prairie and levelled his rifle upon the seven savages who were grouped round his horse. They scattered like flushed partridges. But his rifle was trained upon the horse and the animal went down in a floundering heap as his rifle crashed. No savage could now make use of Hunter's own mount to pursue him. The horse and the seven savages were off to the right at an angle. At the instant of firing, Hunter bounded ahead and to the left, streaking across the prairies like a startled hare. The Blackfeet boiled across the coulee and started in pursuit, the seven on the prairie side angling to join the chase.

Behind Hunter sounded the amazed and angry cries of the Blackfeet. He had a start of fifty yards upon the foremost and maintained his lead for two hundred yards. No savage as yet had considered the possibility of his ultimate escape. From far behind sounded Leroux's voice, countermanding the original orders to take the Kentuckian alive and now exhorting the foremost Blackfeet to shoot down the fugitive. A few scattered musket shots were fired at Hunter, the balls singing past him. One plowed up the turf a dozen feet to one side. An arrow or two zipped past, one disagreeably close to his

ear. Each of the foremost savages who halted to fire a musket or to launch an arrow lost some two or three seconds, and seconds were precious in this desperate race for life. By the time all of the leading savages had made brief halts to fire their muskets or to loose an arrow or two, Hunter had increased his lead to eighty yards. There was no more shooting. The affair settled down to a grim contest of speed and endurance—one man against a hundred.

The sprinting fugitive surveyed the country ahead. It was flat and desolate for as far as the eye could reach; some few small rolling hills in the middle distance. On the distant horizon a low line of blue that was deeper than the sky revealed a far-off range of mountains. Closer than that, apparently, there was no cover that would afford opportunity for concealment while he endeavored to throw his pursuers off the trail. His heart sank. There seemed not a chance for him to escape with such country ahead and with a hundred savages at his heels. Well, he would not be taken alive by Leroux's band of fiends. His pistol would be reserved for himself at the last moment.

His gasping lungs eased suddenly as he caught his second wind and he leaped on with fresh determination.

"I don't have to outrun a hundred Injuns," he told himself. "I've only got to outrun one—the fleetest one among them. And Hunt Breckenridge can outrace any savage that ever breathed."

Over and over again he recited to himself this assurance as his legs drove him on and on across the plains. At the end of the second mile, he still maintained a lead but the gap between himself and the foremost of his pursuers had lessened almost imperceptibly; but nevertheless it was certain that some of the leading savages had reduced his lead by a few yards. Perhaps a dozen of them had forged ahead of the others and now ran nearly abreast in the lead. Minute after minute, the great marathon for life swept on.

Hunter had retained his empty rifle for a definite purpose. Savages had come to realize that the long Kentucky rifles of the whites were vastly superior, both in range, and accuracy, than the smooth-bore muskets that were traded to the Indians. All savages nourished the desire to possess one of these superior weapons.

Two Blackfeet drew ahead of all others until they ran some twenty yards in the lead of their fellows and had cut the distance between themselves and the fugitive down to sixty yards. Even the remaining ten or more leading Blackfeet could not gain a foot on these two mighty runners. Instead, foot by foot, the others lost ground.

Once he was satisfied that the two leading savages were by a wide margin the fleetest of all his pursuers, Hunter, as if by accident or from sheer weariness, dropped his empty rifle. A race for the weapon was the immediate result. The one who possessed himself of such a coveted prize would never relinquish it. Of that, Hunter was positive. The rifle weighed fourteen pounds. It lessened Hunter's own handicap by that much while adding it to that of one of his two fleetest enemies. In the struggle for the weapon, the two Blackfeet lost some seconds and Hunter gained twenty yards. Then one wrested it from his companion and the pair of them darted on after Hunter.

The fugitive entered an extended flat well covered with sage and for a considerable period of time could not so much as remove his eyes from the immediate foreground. It was imperative that he should keep eyes to the front and pick his going. To stumble over a sagebrush now and wrench a knee, to step into a depression and sprain ankle joint or tendon to the slightest degree, would be fatal. The sage seemed interminable. The soft powdery soil, composed of floury volcanic ash, rose to stifle him and to irritate lungs and nostrils. His lips were dry and parched.

At last he gained to the open prairie and leaped ahead with the speed of a fleeing wolf. Glancing back, it was to find that the savage who had retrieved the rifle had fallen some ten or fifteen yards behind his unburdened companion. The latter, however, had held grimly on. Hunter had not widened the distance between them by a foot.

The expanse of prairie, sloping gently, was some two miles across. Whenever the fugitive faltered in his stride or seemed to weaken, the fiendish whoops of a hundred pursuers rang in his ears and infused his muscles with fresh strength. Grimly, relentlessly, the foremost savage, a great runner, pressed ahead. Strive as he would, the Kentuckian could not widen the gap between them by so much as a foot. Instead, almost imperceptibly, the distance narrowed. The Blackfoot runner threw every ounce of energy into a great burst of speed. A swift glance revealed to Hunter that the savage was but little over forty yards behind him. On he sped for half a mile and glanced again. The distance was but thirty yards. A savage whoop of triumph galvanized Hunter to fresh efforts and he held on without so much as a backward glance, trusting that his pursuer would be first to weaken.

Suddenly a tomahawk whizzed past his ear and bounced crazily on the prairie sod before him. The pursuing savage, a

bare fifteen yards behind, stooped and retrieved the weapon as he ran, losing a bare two yards in the operation. He would not miss often. Savages were experts at throwing the war hatchet. Hunter experienced the curious sensation that his spine was a sentient intelligence, waiting fearfully for the blow that would soon descend upon it. Apparently, the end could be deferred but a matter of minutes.

The Kentuckian's hand sought the butt of his pistol. He would not be taken alive by Wolf-strike's fiends. Better a ball through his brain at once than prolonged agony for days. Many a man had so decided in the past, as would many a brave adventurer of the future. As he drew the pistol, a backward glance revealed the fact that the savage who carried Hunter's rifle, although maintaining a lead upon the others, had fallen back sixty yards or more behind the runner who pressed so closely upon Hunter's heels. Observing this, instead of turning the pistol upon himself, Hunter slowed and turned, levelled it at his pursuer and shot the savage through the chest. Cries of vindictive fury rose from the savages behind, as the quarry turned and resumed his flight. After all, in the end, his knife would serve his purpose. By inserting its point between his ribs and falling forward upon the haft, the same end would be accomplished and it was a satisfaction to know that the pistol had accounted for the fleetest of his pursuers. He held on and on. The rolling hills that had seemed so far away became an immediate reality. He found himself laboring up grades and dashing down opposite slopes. All track of time and distance was lost and his legs seemed to move automatically. His mouth was dry as dust, lips were cracked and tongue was dry as a file. The mountains ahead had now taken on definite outline, ragged dark-blue effects against the lighter blue of the sky. His legs seemed about to fail him and he realized suddenly that his stride was wabbling. This nerved him to further effort and he steadied his pace.

"I don't have to outrun a hundred Injuns," he told himself again and again. "It's only a foot-race between me and the fastest miscreant in the lot. If I can beat that one, I can beat them all."

His next backward glance revealed the fact that the leading savage, apparently having decided that he could recover the highly-prized weapon from whoever might acquire it, had discarded Hunter's heavy rifle. Freed of its weight, he was gaining. The distance between them was but fifty yards. This knowledge galvanized Hunter's flagging legs to further effort but the spurt was of brief duration. The distance had been cut down to thirty yards when next he glanced back. In glancing, he stumbled, fell to his knees and recovered his feet with an effort. With a savage whoop, the Blackfoot spurred for him. A war hatchet whizzed within a foot of Hunter's ear and struck the earth a dozen paces in advance and somewhat to the right. Instantly, Hunter veered to the left to miss the weapon by thirty feet. To recover it, the savage must describe an angle and lose ground. Instead he leaped after the fugitive without turning from his course. The gap narrowed to five yards. Hunter's stride faltered and he seemed to lurch from exhaustion. Then, swift as a cat, he whirled and leaped at the oncoming savage, his knife-arm describing an arc. A second later he was running again on his former course. The savage had been taken so completely by surprise that the knife had found its mark before he could halt his forward leap and defend himself. Hunter had not even tarried to determine the result of his knife thrust. The point had found flesh, which, for the moment, was sufficient knowledge. Any sort of bad gash such as his vicious thrust must have opened would let sufficient blood to put the savage out of the race eventually.

Cries of rage greeted this exploit. A glance to the rear apprised him of the fact that his lunge had been even more effective than he had hoped. His recent nemesis was sprawled in a groping posture on the prairie. Already the foremost runners, the nearest now a hundred yards behind, were passing the stricken one.

This sight sent a thrill of fresh hope and strength coursing through Hunter's burning veins. His lead was now greater than at any time since the start.

"I've beat 'em," he kept assuring himself by way of encouragement. "There's only turtles left for the hare to outrun."

The turtles, however, clung persistently to his rear. A cluster of a half dozen, with scarcely twice that many yards between them, held their distance at a hundred yards; but someway, having accounted for the two fleetest, he did not feel quite so desperately pressed. He ran mechanically, apparently without conscious volition. Emerging from the rolling hills, he sped out across another seemingly interminable flat, bounding like a hunted rabbit ahead of the hounds. A glance to the rear revealed savages pouring out of the hills in pursuit. Behind that foremost group at least a score still hung grimly on, scattered out for a mile. That flat seemed endless. It stretched on and on before him. At times it seemed that he had run a distance sufficient to have left behind all pursuers. Then a backward glance proved that they still clung implacably to the trail. The mountains, at first vague shadows, were now clear and distinct, their ragged crests sharply outlined against the sky. After an interminable interval, he lifted his eyes to them again. He could make out the black patches that marked timbered expanses on their slopes, the deep creases of the valleys. Another rearward glance told

him that things had not been changed. So far as gaining any advantage, the runners might as well have remained stationary. Positions of hunters and hunted were precisely the same. Hunter had lost all track of time. His entire energies were centered in maintaining that ceaseless drive of his legs. Presently he observed that the sun was low. It had but two hours yet to shine. If he could hold out until nightfall, he could lose his foes in the mountain ranges just ahead. Their every detail was now sharp and distinct. He estimated the distance to the first roll of the foothills as six miles.

Presently he found himself laboring up a brush-clad slope. A shallow valley spread before him and he crossed the narrow bottoms and began the ascent of its farther slope. The brush dragged at him as if to hold him back. At last he attained the crest, pressed through the brush, and without the slightest warning, staggered into a cluster of crouching savages. Three sets of powerful arms seized him and pressed him down. All along the crest of the ridge, savages crouched behind the brush. A few terse words were hissed in Hunter's ear in the Shoshone tongue.

"Quiet! Shoshone friends of Big Mandan. Don't speak." Vaguely he recognized the face above his own as that of a Shoshone chief whom he had met at the rendezvous on the Sweetwater the year before. His ears were suddenly assailed by a mighty war whoop and the crash of musketry as the Shoshones shot down the six leading Blackfeet at the instant they attained the crest. Then there came the sound of swift pursuit as the Shoshones leaped down the hill after the remaining Blackfeet that had clung to Hunter's trail to this point. Presently a waterskin was held to Hunter's parched lips and he gulped a few precious mouthfuls before it was removed. His legs still seemed to be running on and on, even though he knew that he reclined motionless upon the ground. He was given more water at intervals. Presently he slept. When he waked, the sun was high.

The Shoshones, hunting on the flank of the mountains, had observed the chase from afar. Not knowing the nature of it, they had suspected that the pursuers were their implacable foes, the Blackfeet, and they had hastened down the mountain and out into the foothills with all dispatch.

"You make big run," the Shoshone chief told Hunter admiringly. "Big run!"

Hunter had made a big run indeed. From the moment of firing the shot that had killed his horse until he had stumbled over the friendly Shoshones, Hunter had raced ahead of the Blackfeet for more than eighty miles.

Within the year, Jim Beckworth had been "jumped up" by two hundred Blackfeet and had kept ahead of them for ninety-five miles until overtaking Sublette's brigade. In 1807 John Colter, stripped naked and about to be tortured, had made a sudden dash and taken the lead of his astonished captors. He had held that lead throughout the day and had eluded the fleetest. Naked, he had crossed snow-clad mountain ranges and was the first man to view the geysers of the Yellowstone. He had made his way clear to the Missouri, where his tales of the Yellowstone were greeted with derision by those who believed that his hardships had clouded his mind; and that region had been referred to for years under the facetious title of Colter's Hell. It was not unusual for Indian runners to cover more than a hundred miles in a day, but by choosing their own gait and not running under pressure with life as the prize. On his famous trip from Ashley's Brigade to the rendezvous and return, Jedediah Smith had averaged more than sixty miles a day for sixty-six consecutive days, some of the distance, however, having been covered by pony and canoe. Hunter Breckenridge's great race for life, while not so famous, perhaps, as some others, was nevertheless destined to take its place among the noted exploits in the annals of the mountain men. It would be recited round their camp fires, retold at the rendezvous and related in Indian villages throughout the West.

CHAPTER XIV

Fur, of course, was the only medium of exchange. All barter of any variety whatsoever was conducted in terms of "beavers" as one would now calculate in terms of dollars. There at the rendezvous, one of the largest of all "beaver" transactions known to history was consummated. The brigades of the big free trader, Sublette, came in laden with furs that they had trapped on the creeks. His agents brought in the results of their trading operations with distant Indian villages.

General Ashley's force, fresh from the campaign against the Rees, arrived from St. Louis with a vast assortment of trade goods transported with great difficulty to this far spot. With his family ties and his duties as lieutenant governor of Missouri calling, Ashley was anxious to retire from the rough and perilous pursuit of fortune in this hostile wilderness. Sublette, facing the necessity of transporting a fortune in furs to St. Louis under heavy guard and a tedious return trip with trade goods, found himself wishing that he might follow the dictates of his heart and remain in this wild region to which his spirit was attuned. It would require at least a year to complete the round-trip of over six thousand miles of wilderness by the route which he must follow before he could expect to see his new stock of trade goods landed safely at various points on Green River, Great Salt Lake, Snake River and other branches of the Columbia.

The great trade was effected on the spot between General Ashley and Sublette. The latter's vast harvest of furs was turned over to Ashley, in return for his controlling interest in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He thus acquired the trade goods recently arrived at the rendezvous from St. Louis and also the remaining stocks in the Rocky Mountain posts scattered from the mouth of Kansas River on the Missouri to the head of the Sweetwater.

The two trade chiefs settled up with their men, paying them in trade goods or giving them credit in St. Louis against one or another of the principals in the great transaction. The pay due to such of Sublette's men as wished to return with the fur guard to St. Louis was assumed by Ashley, who agreed to pay them off upon arrival. To an equal amount, Sublette assumed the obligations due to such as Ashley's men who wished to join the Sublette fur brigades on the creeks. With the customary free-and-easy practices of the day, all such details were arranged in a matter highly satisfactory to all concerned.

Ashley prepared to start back with an amount of fur which, if it could be landed safely in St. Louis, would permit him to retire with a fortune considered truly impressive in its day. He was retiring for all time from the fur trade. Sublette, on the contrary, had just embarked upon a venture that strained his resources and credit to the limit. Under the circumstances, it was impossible for him to engage in stocking new posts so far to the south and east as the Republican and the Smoky Hill when the greater part of his interests were in the far Northwest. It would tax his resources and ingenuity to hold together his own former interests and those which he had just acquired.

Ashley, on the eve of retiring for all time from the fur trade, had no wish to reëngage in it by sending a brigade from St. Louis with trade goods to stock the new post that stood empty in the Pawnee country. Hunter Breckenridge, who had made possible the opening of the post, had severed his connection with the Rocky Mountain Company and had declined to engage under Sublette's banner on salary. He was intending to open up for himself as a free trader, he informed them.

"Why not open up among the Pawnees, then?" Ashley inquired of Hunter. "You're established among them as it is."

"But the post and the work that I have done for the Rocky Mountain Company is due to Sublette under the terms of your trade," Hunter objected.

"I can't handle it, Hunter," Sublette said regretfully. "I'll have my route mapped out for me to hold all my brigades and posts and those of the Rocky Mountain Company together. It would be costly to send a brigade to Pawnee country to stock that post—way too costly, unless the men could remain there and trap the Pawnee streams. You say the Pawnees won't permit that."

"It means war and plenty of it any time a brigade moves into their country to trap the creeks," Hunter informed them.

"Well, the way I'm situated, Son, I can't send a military expedition into Pawnee territory," Sublette declared.

"Then open up there yourself, Hunter," Ashley advised. "No use to throw away the opportunity. How much fur have you on hand there that is coming to me? Not much, I imagine. Most of your time and that of your men must have been spent in

perfecting arrangements with the Pawnees and in building the post instead of trapping the creeks."

"Tod and Little Bull were out on the creeks considerable," Hunter said. "There's right smart over five thousand dollars' worth of fur there. Likely it would stretch to six when landed in St. Louis."

"According to our trade, the furs in all posts belong to me, the trade goods to Sublette," Ashley said. "There's no trade goods there. I owe you for some months over two year's salary and the same time at their figure to Little Bull and Brady—Tod's salary for a year at three hundred; close to four thousand in all. I'd have to hire yours or some other party to transport those furs from the Republican to St. Louis. Small chance of profit and a good chance for loss, as I see it."

General Ashley was, as usual, very formal in his speech and of dignified address; in sharp contrast to the careless speech of the voyageurs, interlarded with a jargon of Indian idioms and words drawn from a score of savage dialects, a smattering of Spanish terms and many a word adopted from the French of St. Louis and the Canadian voyageurs. In a sense, it was a polyglot language of its own, destined to pass and to leave its mark only in the mixed Spanish, French, English and Indian nomenclature of mountains, streams, deserts, prairies and trading posts throughout almost a million square miles of country—names the significance of which have been lost long since.

"Hunter," Ashley resumed, after pondering the matter at some length. "I am transferring my obligations to others as rapidly as possible and hope to arrive in St. Louis with every connection with the fur trade settled and disposed of. If you are willing to accept the fur on hand among the Pawnees as settlement in full for the pay due to you and your men and agree to settle off with them, it is done."

"She's a swap," Hunter accepted. A handclasp closed the transaction without further formality. It was an arrangement eminently satisfactory to all; more than satisfactory to Hunter. It opened up vistas of the future—prospects of acquiring for himself in the Pawnee trade a competence of considerable proportions. Nevertheless, with his small resources, he would have to strain every point to be able to stock the new post with an amount of goods sufficient to impress the Pawnees as worthy of the only trading post in the heart of their nation. Thousands among them had visited trading posts and well-stocked forts maintained on the Missouri, the lower portions of the Kansas and the Platte and at other points beyond the fringe of Pawnee country. There was savage pride to consider. Would not the Pawnees, from the consideration of pride alone and exclusive of possible disadvantages in selection of trade goods, resent the fact that the one post in the heart of their country was less impressively stocked than those in surrounding country among tribes whom the Pawnees considered vastly inferior to their own? It was with such details and speculations that Hunter's mind was occupied as he and Tod made all haste in returning from the places of rendezvous to the Pawnee country.

He called Raven Bird and the principal men of the Loup Pawnees into counsel immediately upon his return and addressed them.

"The great white chiefs among the traders will not open a post in Pawnee country without the privilege of sending their brigades to trap the creeks. Big Mandan explained that we Pawnees would not permit such trapping. Both the chiefs of the Pawnee and the chiefs of the trappers are right. Big Mandan knows these things. Also, he has promised the Pawnees a trading post and his words are always straight. Among some of the chiefs there was a doubt about the advisability of permitting a trade lodge to be opened. It is Big Mandan's wish that all be satisfied. At first, he will stock the post with a good assortment, but the quantity will not be great. Then, if the Pawnee chiefs decide that they have been mistaken in opening the post, it can be closed at once and Big Mandan will not lose all his wealth by having transported here too many goods. On the other hand, if the Pawnees are satisfied, other goods can always be secured. It is written."

Again, his intimate knowledge of Indian nature had enabled him to handle a delicate situation so adroitly that his suggestions met with the solid approval of the Pawnees. They considered him a great chief among the whites; and without belittling himself in their eyes, according to the literal understanding of savages, under no circumstances could he confess that he was poor in white man's goods. This solution was satisfactory all round and those who still felt doubtful of the advisability of any post whatsoever in Pawnee country were vastly comforted by this assurance, coming unsolicited from Big Mandan himself, that he would close the post at once when it was so decided by the Pawnee council. Under such an arrangement, it was but natural that he would not stock the post too heavily, which would matter but little since none doubted the ability of Big Mandan to secure all of the white man's wares in any quantity that might later be required.

It was so arranged and Hunter started at once upon the construction of two boats of considerable capacity but of shallow

draft. Boards were hewn from green wood and exposed to permit of a measure of seasoning during the few days available for the purpose.

Meanwhile, Hunter was busily engaged in securing by all possible means such additional fur as his resources would permit. In addition to the twenty-odd head of horses brought in on the original trip, his share of the horses captured during the great raid on the Comanches and subsequent expedition among the Rees had mounted to respectable proportions. He now had over sixty head of horses ranging among those of the Loups. Little Bull owned an equal number, while Tod Breckenridge and Brady could boast a dozen each. A village of Republican Pawnees had suffered a considerable loss of horses in recent months through the depredations of raiding parties of Comanches from the southwest and Cheyennes from the northwest. The same proverb anent the poker chips of a later era in the West was equally applicable to the pony herds of the early-day Indians of the plains—that they had no home. The number of ponies boasted by an Indian village from the Assiniboines to the Comanches was a matter of the moment, dependent upon the varying success of raids and counter-raids among the neighboring tribes in the immediate past.

Hunter offered to trade one pony for four beaver skins to such of the Republican Pawnees as were temporarily short of horseflesh. Little Bull and the others were quite willing that Hunter should dispose of their horses with the understanding that he would replace them after the trip to St. Louis and return. This, in fact, struck them as much the most satisfactory arrangement. There was no guarantee that such ponies as they might leave with the Pawnees during their absence would not have changed ownership by way of Cheyenne or Comanche raiding parties before their return.

The Republican Pawnees availed themselves of this opportunity to replenish their mounts, and Hunter traded a hundred ponies for four times that number of beaver skins.

Raven Bird had been astonished on many occasions by Hunter's ability with a rifle. The ranges at which the Kentuckian killed deer, elk, turkeys, antelopes, wolves and buffaloes seemed to him to border on the miraculous. But he shrewdly suspected that these facts, while undoubtedly demonstrating the superior marksmanship of the white men, were in part attributable to superiority of weapons. He was earnestly desirous of possessing one of those long Kentucky rifles. Hunter declined to part with his own, declaring that he would have need of it during the trip to St. Louis.

There would be no need of it for purposes of defense, the wily chief pointed out, since the route lay entirely through Pawnee territory until Hunter should reach the tribe of Potawatami who dwelt in the Silver Lake country of the Kansas River valley some seventy-five miles above the confluence of that stream with the Missouri; beyond that village the country was settled by the Kansas Indians, an agricultural tribe. Trade muskets, good enough for the Pawnee to use in war, certainly were good enough for the white men to use in securing meat during the trip.

Hunter knew that there was almost an element of command in the insistence of the sagacious old chief of the Loups. He was also confident that there would be small use for firearms during the trip, since the only dangerous part of it lay in Pawnee country and he had nothing to fear from the Pawnees. He was anxious to retain the good will of the chief of the Loups. Against all this he weighed the mountain man's aversion to parting with his weapon. It was a good rifle, having been presented to him by General Ashley to replace the one discarded during Hunter's great flight from the Blackfeet. At last Raven Bird offered twenty beaver skins for the weapon. Hunter, now certain that the old war chief was determined to own it and that he would be greatly offended if his offer were refused, promptly presented the rifle to him, declaring that it was not the price that entered into calculation between such close friends; that his hesitancy had been occasioned by a warrior's fondness for favorite weapons that had served him well and the disinclination to lay them down. All such considerations, however, stood for naught against his friendship for Raven Bird. The rifle was his for the asking. The chief was well pleased and, not to be outdone in generosity, sent twenty-five beaver pelts to Hunter as a present.

The dozen or more trade muskets that had been captured by Hunter's party were traded for ten beaver skins apiece. Such "trade beavers" did not necessarily consist of the skins of the animal from whose name the term had been coined but merely represented the equivalent in any form to the value of so many beaver skins. As the coonskin was considered almost legal tender in Kentucky, so the beaver skin was the basis of all commercial reckoning in the day of the voyageur in the West.

Surplus war hatchets, knives, lance heads, the greater portion of the considerable quantity of powder and ball that the four mountain men had transported thither from the rendezvous the previous year—all were traded off until Hunter found himself stripped bare of everything save immediate necessities and wealthier by far in furs.

The hewn lumber had seasoned but little, but it had dried sufficiently to render it buoyant. The boats were constructed and the seams caulked with fibrous bark that had been soaked in pitch. But the green lumber would be apt to warp in spots, to shrink or check, so an added precaution was necessary. The hair was partially cropped from buffalo skins, leaving only a mat of hair a quarter of an inch in depth. The hair side was thoroughly soaked in pitch and the hides spread, pitch side down, against the wooden boats. The hides overlapped some six inches at the seams, double-laced with thongs and sealed with hot pitch.

Heavily laden with furs, the two boats were launched in the headwaters of the Republican, Hunter and Little Bull manning one craft, Tod and Brady the other. It was in early autumn—that season known to the white men as Indian Summer, to the Indians themselves as the season of the Short Blue Moon. Again was the aptness of Indian nomenclature and descriptive designation demonstrated by these two terms as applied to the same season.

A delicate touch of blue seemed to pervade all nature. The outlines of distant mountain ranges showed dark blue against the lighter blue of the sky. A blue haze hung in the hills. The streams had passed the roily flood stage of summer and their waters were now crystal blue. The mule-deer bucks, having shed their faded, long-haired coats of the season past, now stepped forth to conquest, garbed in the new coat of short blue hair that ushered in the rutting moon of their clan. The white man's name for this glorious season of the year meant nothing. The name given it by the Western tribes meant everything. It was, in fact as well as in name, the season of the Short Blue Moon—blue in color, short in duration, too lovely to last for long.

The four voyageurs chanted the songs of the mountain men as the current swept their crafts downstream. They passed Pawnee villages, parties of squaws gathering sandhill plums in the thickets, on down to the confluence of the Republican and the Kaw, on past the village of the Potawatamies and the cornfields of the Kansas Indians, on past Ely's Fort at the mouth of the Kansas and down the Missouri.

Settler's cabins now dotted the shores of that river. Small villages had replaced the log blockhouses to which the settlers, not many years before, had fled during uprisings among the Indians. The boats were tied up at Breckenridge Creek and the two brothers paid a visit to the family homestead. Some of the girls had married young settlers. The youthful Thomas, himself now married, had taken the adjoining piece of land. After a day and a night at home, the journey was resumed and at last the two boats reached the thriving town of St. Louis on the Mississippi.

Voyageurs were no novelty in St. Louis. Far from it. Instead, the prosperity of the growing town was based upon the business of the voyageurs. Trappers and their cargoes, therefore, were ever welcome. Many a female eye was turned admiringly upon the stalwart form of the tall Kentuckian as Hunt Breckenridge cruised the streets of St. Louis in his buckskins. A necklace of elk teeth, presented to him by a Mandan chief, reposed about his neck. His moccasins and buckskin jacket were decorated in intricate design with highly colored porcupine-quill beadwork. His fringed buckskin trousers were of the best Pawnee make, his cap of otter-skin decorated by a band of the delicately colored breast-feathers of wild duck, cunningly blended, its crown ornamented by the tail of a kit fox, that tiny speedster of the sagebrush plains.

His companions were similarly attired. Little Bull, in addition, dragged from the heel of each moccasin the black-and-white skin of a prairie skunk after the fashion of the more foppish Pawnee braves when in full dress regalia. There were many old acquaintances from the brigades, and the quartet from the Pawnee country caroused with these friends in the liquor halls of the river town.

Hunter inquired of his companions as to the manner in which they wished to participate in his enterprise. He suggested that each take a small share as partners, according to the respective amounts of pay and property due them. With the customary attitude of the typical fur brigadier, all declined this proffer. The old trapper, Brady, had taken two Pawnee wives in addition to the one whom he had brought from the Mandan nation. Little Bull could boast double that number of wives. Both were well content with the care-free life of the Indian villages and were bored with the thought of engaging in business for themselves. If Hunter would supply their wants and pay their liquor scores while in St. Louis, then credit each of them with what was due him when the new trading post was stocked, they would be well content. They could then procure from Hunter such weapons and supplies as were needed and such cloths and trinkets as might be fancied by their squaws. It was doubtful that either would ever utilize the full measure of the credit thus opened to them. Supplemented annually, as it would be, by each season's catch of fur and their squaws' output of dressed buffalo robes, it was more probable that the original credits would increase rather than diminish.

Tod Breckenridge was not certain just what he would do. Adventure called and he was of no mind to bind himself for any considerable period. However, his affection for his elder brother was strong, even if not expressed demonstratively. It was likely, he said, that he would join out with Hunter.

"Just let her ride awhile," he suggested. "It'll all work out."

Competition was growing keener among the fur merchants of St. Louis. The merchants were heavily stocked in anticipation of an increasing flow of furs from the great Northwest. Instead, the catch along the regular routes of the fur brigades was growing less. It was known that Hunter was opening up an almost virgin trade territory and all were desirous of securing his future trade. He was willing to trade his sizable cargo of furs for merchandise, requiring no cash. Concessions were offered him.

Still another factor was working to advantage for Hunt Breckenridge. During the rise of the human race each individual's life has been largely shaped by the past and present works of many another man of whom he has never heard. That is inevitable and no human can escape it. He is a part of that progression, whether he will or not. When Robert Fulton, some twenty years before, had started experiments in France upon a boat propelled by steam, his efforts were destined to revolutionize the transportation methods and practically all activities of the human race. His works, therefore, would exert their influence upon practically every individual on the face of the earth. That this invention would have any but the most general influence upon the fortunes of the infant, Hunter Breckenridge, in an isolated log cabin on the Missouri, could not have been predicted when Fulton launched his steamboat on the Hudson in 1807. Thus is every human mite the helpless pawn of fate. Now, not twenty years later, Fulton's invention had a most direct bearing upon the fortunes of that same Hunter Breckenridge. The steamboat had proved feasible and was coming into general use on the lakes and rivers. The United States Government had launched a steam-driven warship. Several years before, the first steamboat had snorted its way to a landing at St. Louis. They were coming into general use in the Mississippi. Merchandise could be freighted there much more cheaply than formerly. And now there was much talk of the feasibility of navigating the course of the Missouri River to its headwaters by means of steamboats of shallow draft. Various groups of capitalists who had made fortunes in the fur trade and retired, discussed the vast possibilities of opening the whole Northwest by means of steamboat travel and transportation on the Missouri. Many tentative plans were formed for the first such venture. It was pointed out that trading posts could be supplied with merchandise at little above its cost in St. Louis, eliminating the costly process of transporting supplies by means of heavily manned small craft guarded by fur brigades. A steamship, armed with light cannon and its crew equipped with small arms, could steam defiantly up the Missouri and fight off any hostile attacks without much effort.

At the present time such a move was under way and it was reported that outside capitalists were preparing to engage in such a venture at once, in case the local men failed to avail themselves of the opportunity. The fur merchants of the town were heavily stocked with merchandise. Then suddenly the demand had slackened most perceptibly. Traders from far up the Missouri and its larger tributaries were disinclined to purchase their trade goods and transport them in the old expensive fashion when there seemed immediate prospect that a steamboat would start up the Missouri and deliver merchandise at their very posts for little more than the St. Louis cost. Many of them were demanding cash for their cargoes of fur. The merchants found themselves long of merchandise and short of cash. They were ardently desirous of converting that merchandise into fur which in turn could be converted into cash. As a consequence, fur was at a premium and merchandise was cheap.

Thus the efforts of Robert Fulton had reacted directly to Hunter's benefit, although it was to be a number of years before the talk which temporarily had depressed the price of merchandise was to crystallize into actuality and send Pierre Chouteau, with an armed steamboat loaded with trade goods, clear up to the forks of the Missouri in 1831, thus opening the great Northwest to steamboat travel. Also, this innovation was to render shipment of men and munitions so simple a matter as to end for all time the British encroachment upon American trade and territorial boundaries east of the Rockies, as the Oregon emigrants were destined to settle those same questions to the west of the range in the Forties.

Hunter exchanged his furs for a quantity of trade goods far exceeding in amount his greatest anticipation. He purchased a large boat of shallow draft, employed two extra men to assist in maneuvering it up the course of the streams and set forth for the land of the Loup Pawnees.

CHAPTER XV

Western traders tried to induce the traders with which they consorted to keep the peace with their neighbors and engage in the more profitable pursuits of trapping beavers and trading with the whites. All such sage counsel was sheer waste of breath. The savage lived but to make war. A picture of life without warfare was inconceivable. If Manitou had not created the warrior to make war, why had He not peopled the prairies and the hills with squaws? All argument glanced harmlessly off this unshakable logic.

The beaver was disappearing from the streams. More and more voyageurs ascended the Missouri to spread out through the great Northwest every year and the greater number secured fewer beaver pelts than a smaller number of men had harvested in former years. None realized that the big day of the fur trade was passing. The traders urged the Indians to go forth and trap to make up for the shortage of pelts brought in by the mountain men.

Hunter, however, had no need to urge the Pawnees to trap in order to keep his post supplied. They had vast quantities of furs and robes on hand and any who experienced a shortage had but to repair for a few days to the creeks which were virtually virgin trapping territory. In Hunter's opening two weeks of trade there was some semblance of the first palmy days of the fur trade on the Upper Missouri. There was no question of fur shortage but rather a question of how long the generous stock of goods would last. The muskets, of which Hunter had brought three hundred from St. Louis, faded as snow melts before the hot breath of the chinook. Lance heads, knives, hatchets, red blankets, bright cloth, powder, shot, sugar, tobacco and other supplies disappeared as if by magic and still the furs and robes continued to roll in.

To the combination of having received a high price for his furs and having obtained his merchandise at the lowest figure, there was the added advantage of cheap transportation in Hunter's case. The distance by water between St. Louis and his post on the Republican was but twelve hundred miles. The route was through friendly country, eliminating the necessity of employing a brigade to convoy his outfit. It was sufficiently far south so that ice conditions had held him up but a few times during the trip. All told, his merchandise, laid down at his post on the Republican, had cost scarcely more than half the price usually figured as the basis of trade schedules in far western posts. He had kept his prices low and the Pawnees, well aware of the schedules charged at other forts, were well pleased.

Late in February, leaving Tod to tend post, Hunter set forth to try out an experiment. He had brought a quantity of poison with him from St. Louis. Some ten miles from the village, he shot a buffalo, sliced deeply into the back, leg and neck muscles while the animal was still warm, and inserted the poison in these gashes. The hot meat was thus thoroughly impregnated. Five miles farther on, he duplicated the performance. He put out five such poison baits in a half-circle, the nearest ten miles from the village in order that it should be beyond the straying range of Indian dogs.

Thousands of buffaloes and antelopes were wounded annually by Pawnee arrows or musket balls and escaped to die by themselves. Thousands died of old age and others were winter-killed each year. All such offerings from Manitou were promptly cleaned up by the wolves. The big buffalo wolves were incredibly numerous. They were to be seen round the flanks of every big herd. Buffaloes were seldom in sight without their quota of these attendant killers.

Two days later, Hunter, Raven Bird and half a dozen warriors made the circuit of his baits. The first carcass had been devoured almost to the last morsel. Three big wolves lay dead within fifty yards of the spot. The warriors fanned out and rode in ever-increasing circles round the bait, finding five more victims within a mile in various directions. The five baits resulted in a haul of more than thirty poisoned wolves.

As the beaver decreased in numbers, more attention was paid to the trapping of mink and other small fur bearers. Trappers were just beginning to poison wolves to supplement the decreasing supply of beaver pelts. Within a few years there would be tens of thousands of buffalo wolves poisoned annually. Even half a century later, in the Seventies, the wolf-poisoning campaign was destined to be still in progress, meanwhile having lapsed somewhat during the collapse of the fur trade in the Thirties and the Forties.

The wolves were unaccustomed to poison baits and fell easy victims to this practice. In the early day of poisoning there was nothing simpler than to slay the plains killers in wholesale fashion by its use. At a later day, the few remaining buffalo wolves were to grow so wary that they would seldom touch dead meat, but it was to require more than a half century of bitter education to accomplish that result.

During the next two weeks, Hunter put out three such strings of poison baits and bagged many a big gray killer. The stock

in his post had diminished to odds and ends. The most of this he presented to Raven Bird and some of the sub-chiefs of the village for their squaws, then prepared to depart for St. Louis for another stock.

Occasional word of Leroux reached the Pawnees, though the man's operations were more than a thousand miles away. Trappers had chanced upon such ghastly scenes as that which Hunter had viewed on his way to the Columbia. Near the scenes of these atrocities had been found some sinister W. S. carved upon some tree or scratched on the surface of the rocks. No less than half a score of trappers had been cut off and had died a lingering death at the hands of Leroux's fiendish band. Trappers often carved their names in the trunks of trees along the beaver streams. When others encountered such marks in the course of the years it was like meeting old friends to find the names of former comrades of the fur brigades in some isolated pocket of the hills or upon the face of a sandrock bluff rising from the prairies. That sinister symbol left by Wolf-strike at the scene of his atrocities, however, gave rise to less gentle emotions. Every mountain man longed for an opportunity to put an end to the monster.

"The news come straight that the dog-faced one is still among the Blackfeet," Raven Bird said to Hunter, as the latter was giving the boat a final overhauling before his departure down river. "The Blackfeet are bad Indians."

"Then Leroux is in the correct kind of company," Hunter testified, "because he's a heap worse white man than any Blackfoot is a bad Injun, which is saying considerable, as the Blackfeet are by big odds the worst there is."

"It is said that many mountain men have sworn to kill him," said Raven Bird. "Is it known to you if this report is true?"

"True as the sayings of Manitou," Hunter assured him. "Wolf-strike will be romping toward the Happy Hunting Ground in less'n ten seconds after any mountain man on the creeks gets a glimpse of him along the barrel of a rifle. You can bet your last pony on that."

Hunter put forth for St. Louis before the leaves were full blown in the spring. The eagerness of the Pawnees to trade had resulted in the disposal of his entire stock of trade goods within six weeks of the date of their landing on the Republican. He exchanged his furs for a great quantity of merchandise and purchased a second boat, hiring a crew of six men to work it to the Pawnee village. The shores of the Kansas River were dotted with the villages of friendly Indians, and there were many long stretches where Indian ponies or squaws could be used on towlines to aid the upstream progress of the boats. The two boats arrived at the Pawnee town during the Short Blue Moon, Hunter having completed two round trips in the space of a year. Despite the relatively short distance when compared with far-western posts, his crew had been on the march for some nine months out of the twelve.

The trapping season was just beginning but there were still great quantities of last years' furs in the lodges of the Pawnees and they had on hand many thousands of finely dressed buffalo robes. So great had become the demand for all hides in St. Louis that there was an active market there for Indian-tanned bear, elk, antelope and mule-deer robes. Trade opened with a rush and the storage quarters of the post began to fill swiftly with robes and pelts of every variety. The big log fur press in the yard was brought into play several times each day, as the number of any particular skin required to make a bale was collected. Not less than a bale of beaver skins and three bales of buffalo robes were taken on each of the first ten days of trade. Two bales of otter pelts, two each of elk, mule-deer and antelope robes, three of wolf pelts and a bale of small mixed furs were collected during that period.

The Pawnees were of no mind to permit the extra men in Hunter's employ to remain for any extended periods in the Loup village. Contingents from the other Pawnee tribes, coming to Raven Bird's village to trade, eyed these intruders with small favor. The buffalo, elk and deer robes were exceedingly bulky. At the rate these and other pelts were being sent to the fur press, it was evident to Hunter that a full cargo of furs for one boat would be secured before the expiration of the third week and he planned to send Tod and Brady down river with one boatload of furs and the crews of both boats. This would serve the triple purpose of appeasing the Pawnee demand that the surplus white men leave their country, eliminate more than half the extra men from the payroll and permit the rest of them to return with a cargo of trade goods before spring. Deciding upon this plan he began to make out his lists to be filled by the fur merchants of St. Louis.

Furs of every conceivable variety turned up in small lots, not only those native to the Pawnee country but skins that had been taken in raids or by trade from other tribes.

There were prairie skunks and little spotted skunks, badgers and the yellow prairie wolves, skins of the tiny kit fox or swift fox of the plains, to supplement the staple furs such as mink, otter, beaver and wolf. There were pelts of bobcats, panthers, black and grizzly bears from the cedar brakes and foothills of the mountains. From the Utes residing in the

mountains of that country soon to become known as Colorado, had come a few pelts of red and cross foxes, martens, Canada lynxes and the white winter skins of the weasel. Raiding parties in the Comanche country had brought back a few skins of the little gray fox of the Southwest and a pair of pelts of a variety unknown to Hunter. He later discovered that they were the skins of the southwestern ring-tailed cat.

Some of these odd pelts were responsible for several altercations. The owner of the two skins of the ring-tailed cat, since those animals were unknown in the Pawnee country, decided that they were very rare and valuable. He set a price of ten trade beavers each upon them and when Hunter declined to accept that valuation, the savage left the post in a towering rage. For a period of two weeks he returned daily for the purpose of pressing his point and became such a pest that Hunter was thoroughly exasperated whenever he reappeared for another palaver. So far as Hunter knew, the ring-tailed animals might be as plentiful in the Comanche country as were prairie dogs in the land of the Pawnees. To take these skins at any figure would be to establish that price for the future and he might be flooded with them another season. To eliminate the nuisance, Hunter announced that he was very anxious to secure a great quantity of the skins but would take them only in lots of one hundred pelts, paying one trade beaver for each hundred skins.

The savage left in a frenzy of indignation, stamping his moccasin-shod feet on the ground before the post and committing other indignities upon the immediate landscape. The following day he returned with three buffalo robes and half a dozen beaver pelts. Hunter heard no more of the two ring-tailed cats. The incident was closed.

Several who owned marten pelts were less proud of their possessions. They knew from the Utes that these animals were plentiful in the high mountains. Hunter, too, was on familiar ground here. Marten pelts were a staple commodity on the fur markets. The Indians decided the matter among themselves. One of them said to Hunter:

"This animal does not live in Pawnee country; but the mink lives here and this looks very much like a mink. We have it from the Utes that this animal lives in the trees and can outrun the squirrels in the branches. The mink can outswim the fish in the water. Perhaps these animals are mink that have left the streams for the forests. No doubt they have learned to outrun squirrels in the trees as they used to outswim fish in the water. Do you think that this is so?"

"There can be little doubt of it," said Hunter, "since you point it out to me."

"Then the price should be the same for these minks of the trees as for those of the streams," said the spokesman.

"It is written," Hunter agreed.

The owner of the little gray foxes of the Southwest also solved his own problem. The pelts were about half again the size of the swift fox of the plains and the animals seemed to be very similar. In point of size, he thought, his two gray foxes should be worth the price of three prairie swifts, which would equal one beaver.

"It is written," said Hunter.

It was the pelt of a wolverine that had been obtained from the Utes that repaid Hunter for many such trying palavers about odd skins for which he had no particular use. The owner, a sub-chief of another village, was very proud of this wolverine skin, the only one of the kind among the Pawnees. Eventually, he offered it to Hunter for fifty trade beavers. Hunter declined. He said that he did not particularly care for it but would give half the price of one beaver.

"Do you know what animal this is?" the Pawnee demanded.

"I know him well," Hunter assured him. "It is a wolverine—the glutton of the mountain man, the skunk bear of the Indian and the carcajou of the French voyageur."

"It is the great devil of the Utes—a real devil. It is the most savage creature in the hills. It can slay any other; so its pelt, naturally, is more valuable than that of any other."

"The wolf slays the beaver, but his pelt is worth but a third the price of the skin of his victim," said Hunter.

For the moment the savage seemed at a loss, so he fell back upon injured dignity and stalked from the post. However, he returned very shortly and picked up the argument where it had been dropped upon his exit.

"But wolves are very plentiful," he pointed out. "This animal is very rare, so its pelt is worth much."

"The white swan is more rare than the eagle," said Hunter. "Yet every Pawnee chief covets the tail feathers and the claws of the eagle. Who covets the feathers of the swan or longs to possess its flat webbed feet?"

Again the savage stalked out. When next he returned, it was with what he considered a clinching argument.

"What you have said is true," he graciously conceded. "The wolf slays the beaver yet his pelt is worth less. The swan is more rare than the eagle yet we do not prize his feet and his feathers. Nevertheless, this skin has great value." He pointed to a dozen or more Pawnee bucks who had entered with him. "I have offered each of these braves twenty beavers for each skin of the skunk bear that they will furnish me. Not one would part with a single skin like this for twenty beavers. So you see its value."

The Indian was now on safe ground. He could make any extravagant offer, well knowing that there was no other skin among the Pawnees.

"It is all true. Nevertheless, the white men do not value the skin of the carcajou greatly," Hunter explained.

"I value them highly," the Pawnee declared. "I would like to buy many more for twenty beavers apiece."

"Do you want them so badly?" Hunter inquired.

"I long for ten of them but cannot purchase them," the savage returned. "I have tried very hard. They are not to be found."

Hunter strode to and fro as if in deep calculation. The savage waited eagerly. This affair, too, had been going on since the first day that the new cargoes had been landed, and Hunter was heartily sick of it. He seemed to arrive at a conclusion and turned to the Indian.

"You shall have them," he said. "Big Mandan is here to see that his Pawnee brothers get the things that their hearts most desire. Why else should he keep post for the Pawnees? Your heart longs for ten skins of the skunk bear for which you long have offered twenty beavers apiece. You shall have them, even though Big Mandan has to send to the great village of the white men to secure them."

Before the savage could remonstrate, Hunter spoke in a loud voice to Brady and Tod.

"It must be done," he stated impressively as the throng of Indians in the post listened. "Antelope Two Eyes longs for ten skins of the skunk bear for which he has vainly offered twenty beavers apiece. So great is his desire that he no longer sleeps well at night. He is our friend and we would see that his great wish is granted. Start at once for the big village of the white men on the Great River. Travel with all speed. When you arrive, search high and low until you have secured from the white men the ten pelts for which the heart of our friend cries out. Start at once! There must be no delay."

Seizing a bale of fur, he strode to the boats, followed by his men, each one similarly laden. As if striving to lose not so much as a second, he rushed the work of loading the boat. The savage, torn between conflicting emotions, looked on. He was filled with rage that he must pay two hundred beavers in staple furs and robes in return for ten skins for which he had small use. On the other hand, he experienced considerable gratification at the thought that a special expedition had been launched in his behalf, being unaware of the fact that it had been planned long since. Having been caught in a bad bargain, he could but put on a good face; so he stood with folded arms on the banks of the river and surveyed the loading operations with great dignity as if he himself had arranged the thing.

"Hurry," he implored occasionally. "The heart of Antelope Two Eyes is weak with longing for the skins of the skunk bear. Hurry! Be not long on the way."

Hunter could not but admire the fortitude with which the savage accepted the small end of what was perhaps the worst bargain ever struck in the annals of the fur trade. Wolverine pelts were procurable in St. Louis at the price of a dollar or so apiece, and the Indian was destined to pay out the value of two hundred beaver skins for ten such pelts upon the return of the boat.

"If there are others here who have special skins of any animals for which their hearts yearn," Hunter announced, "come forward now. Declare your own price and Big Mandan will secure them for you in the fur lofts of the white men."

Those who had various odd skins with which they had made trouble for Hunter decided that they did not care to go in for them wholesale. Not one stepped forward. Hunter waved grandly to the boatmen.

"Go," he said. "We will make the trip for Antelope Two Eyes alone. It is written."

The crew shoved off in the current of the Republican. Hunter strolled with the savage to the post, presented him with a musket, a red blanket and a scalping knife along with assurances of his friendship. The question of who should determine the value of odd skins had been settled quite definitely.

CHAPTER XVI

Hunter discovered that the sudden commotion at the far end of the village had been occasioned by the entry of a party of Pawnee braves with six captured white men. He hastened to the spot and found that he had met two of them at the rendezvous. They had endeavored to slip into Pawnee country to trap and had been captured by a war party returning from a raid into Cheyenne territory. The Pawnees were highly incensed; likewise the trappers. Hunter acted as interpreter.

"Ask them," Raven Bird instructed, "why they come to Pawnee country to trap our beavers and kill our buffaloes when we have forbidden it."

"Beavers and bufflers is free to all, as any game is and always has been," the spokesman for the trappers returned, when Hunter conveyed the substance of the chief's query.

"Can the Pawnee go to the country of the white man and shoot his cattle and his sheep?" Raven Bird demanded.

That, the trapper insisted, was an entirely different matter. The white men owned such cattle outright. Raven Bird asserted that the Indians exercised a similar ownership over the creatures in their country; and so the argument went on. It was the eternal conflict between the opposing viewpoints of the red man and the white in respect to property rights. The Indian was firmly grounded in the belief that the Great Spirit had peopled the plains with bison and pronghorns for his benefit. They were his, he claimed, and it was stupid to insist that he could not establish ownership until he had caught and confined the creatures which he claimed. Why go through such bother in order to say, "This buffalo is mine and these three are my brother's," as the white men did with their cattle, when it was much simpler to own all animals jointly and take toll of them as required?

"The Osages tell us," said Raven Bird, "that the hog animals of the white settlers on the far edge of the Osage country run wild in the forest. When the white man first came, they said that because the deer were wild the Osages did not own them; so the white men shot the deer. Yet the Osages owned the country and all in it. Now the hog animals are wilder than the deer. But if an Osage shoots a wild pig, the white men brand him a thief because some settler once owned the great grandmother of the slain animal. And yet the white men do not own the country in which the hogs run wild. How do you explain these things?"

One of the trappers was about to render an explanation when Hunter interrupted.

"Of what use is all this argument?" he demanded in English. "Haven't you learned enough of redskin nature to know that you cannot convince him that he has no property right over the animals that Manitou put in his country and that the white man does have property rights over the animals which he brings to Indian country? It is futile. The only thing that matters is that you will be ordered from Pawnee territory."

"And what if we don't go?" a trapper demanded.

"Then your scalps will hang in the lodges of the Pawnees," Hunter prophesied. "They will kill you. They will permit no white men to trap their beaver streams."

"Wherever there's beaver, mountain men will go," the trapper asserted. "You know them well enough for that."

"No doubt they'll come," Hunter agreed. "And when they do, the Pawnees will go to war."

"Injuns has gone to war before but it never has kept mountain men from stringing out their traps," the man answered philosophically. "And I don't reckon it ever will."

"Likely not," Hunter said. "But in your particular case, what are you going to do?"

"It appears as if that's up to you," the man declared. "That bevy of savages that jumped us up said all white men were to be taken before Big Mandan for judgment. Is that so you can order all whites out?"

Hunter looked the man over coldly.

"Yes. So I could order you out while still wearing your hair. Without that order, they would have filled you full of

arrows and left you to rot on the creeks. Had you rather no such order had been given?"

"I wouldn't go quite that far," the man qualified. "But it does appear that you'd maybe urged the Pawnees to keep trappers out so you could control the whole of their trade."

"And if I had, what is there in the annals of the fur trade to condemn it?" Hunter demanded. "The history of the trade is the history of men who have sought to control the trade of their vicinity, even to the point of inciting the savages to massacre all rivals. But there is no need for me to urge the Pawnees to keep others out. Nothing I could say would induce them to let others come in. It was so before I came. My own men, employed to transport my trade goods from St. Louis, cannot remain to trap. These streams are virgin territory, swarming with beaver, and a brigade could harvest a vast fortune in furs in a single season on the creeks. If I could get permission from the Pawnee council, do you think I'd not have out a brigade of my own? My purpose, however, in requesting that all captured white men should be brought before me, was not to the end of ordering trappers for rival concerns out of the country, but to endeavor to see that they left the country alive instead of by way of the Happy Hunting Ground."

"I ain't a-holding it agin you, Hunter," the trapper declared. "Undoubted, that order saved our scalps. There was upwards of two hundred Pawnee bucks in the band that jumped us up and likely they could have wiped us out. I'm merely p'inting out that the mountain men will figure that you're aiming to keep all trappers out and control the Pawnee trade yourself."

"Those that know me will not think it," Hunter said. "And the others can think what they damn well please." He turned to Raven Bird and said in Pawnee, "These men made a mistake, believing they were in the edge of the Cheyenne country, not in the land of the Pawnees. They regret that they violated the commands of the great chiefs of the Pawnee council, even though they did so by accident. If their lives are spared, they will leave and come no more to trap our streams. I suggest that they be received as honored guests for two days and nights and then escorted beyond the boundaries of the Pawnee nation."

"It is settled," said Raven Bird.

Hunter was well on his way to make a great fortune in the Indian trade, as many another had done before him. The fur of the Pawnee country was untouched, plentiful as when the Great Spirit had given the land and all creatures in it to the red man and before the devastating invasion of the whites. Great quantities of furs and robes accumulated in Hunter's wareroom. The demand for his wares exceeded even the great supply that the two boats had transported up the river. The first desire of every Pawnee warrior was to possess a musket and ammunition; each successive supply of these weapons had disappeared with astonishing rapidity and the demand remained far in excess of the supply. The Pawnees also developed a passion for red blankets and red shirts and the demand for those articles seemed insatiable. Fortunes were made or lost swiftly in the fur trade. The loss of a full season's supply of trade goods while enroute to some post or rendezvous frequently proved sufficient to wreck the fortunes of individual traders or companies whose prospects of reaping a fortune had seemed excellent. Hunter had friendly country along his entire route and, unless hostilities should break out, there seemed no obstacle that would hinder him in acquiring great wealth through his control of the Pawnee trade.

A year and half another had passed since Hunter's visit to Black Mack's post. Something over six months before, he had heard the report that a new factor had been put in charge of the fort. Undoubtedly, McKenzie and his daughter had started for the East immediately after the arrival of Big Mack's successor. When Tod returned from St. Louis he might bring the tidings that Nepanamo was settled somewhere in the East and waiting for Hunter. He would start the day that such word arrived. He would bring her to St. Louis, then up the course of the singing river on whose shores they had met, settling her eventually in the post on the Republican.

The Pawnee frequently expressed to Hunter with utmost frankness the wish that he would soon bring Nepanamo to the Republican. Not an Indian of Raven Bird's village had ever seen a white woman. Squaws brought gifts of various articles of feminine attire, finely dressed and decorated, and presented them with the words, "For Nepanamo when she comes to reside in the lodge of Big Mandan."

Reason assured Hunter that Ann McKenzie could not have made the trip East, settled her father and returned word of her whereabouts to the fur companies of St. Louis by means of some traveler, all in so short a span of time. Hope, in eternal conflict with reason, whispered that she might have accomplished it. If the McKenzies had returned by way of the Missouri, Tod would have word of them; and any day now, Tod's boat might appear at the village. Hunter awaited the

arrival with considerable impatience.

This suspense was ended before Tod's arrival. Two trappers, thinking to slip into Pawnee territory for the late winter and early spring trapping, had been captured and brought to Raven Bird's village. Hunter learned from them that Big Mack had not yet left the post on the branch of the Columbia. Upon the arrival of his successor, McKenzie had been too feeble to undertake so strenuous a journey. He had elected to wait until his powers had recuperated. Instead, he had grown steadily weaker until at last he could no longer rise from his bunk except for perhaps an hour a day. The news had come through the Indians, having traveled from tribe to tribe in its usual fashion, and the Indians prophesied that he would never leave the post; that the mark of the Great Spirit was upon him and that Big Mack's days were numbered. His daughter, Hair-that-shines, sat beside him and waited the end. The last word that the trappers had heard of the matter had come to them some three months before while among the Crows.

Tod Breckenridge arrived the following day with a cargo of trade goods. Hunter remained with Tod throughout the day, issuing instructions as to the operation of the business. He was to trade until the stock was almost depleted, by which time there would be a tremendous quantity of fur on hand—more, even, than could be transported in the two large boats. Larger craft could not be used on the Republican, only those of very shallow draft being feasible. A number of Pawnees had expressed a desire to visit the big village of the white men to view the great lodges in which the latter race dwelt. Hunter had agreed to permit a delegation of twoscore Pawnees to accompany him down river to St. Louis in the fall. This expedition could be turned to advantage. Hunter instructed Tod to construct such smaller boats of wood and buffalo hide as would be needed to transport the surplus furs. These, manned by members of the Pawnee delegation, could accompany the two trade boats on the journey to St. Louis. Hunter called Raven Bird and a number of the sub-chiefs and warriors of the Loups into council. He outlined his plan for the construction of boats for the accommodation of the delegation and the surplus furs.

"Big Mandan starts at once for the land of the setting sun. He will travel many sleeps. At the beginning of the Short Blue Moon my boats will start. Raven Bird and his fellow members of the delegation will accompany the boats to St. Louis, the big village of the white men. They will be well received. The white men are ready to welcome with glad hearts the friends of Big Mandan. Raven Bird and his warriors are known to them as great braves. Big Mandan may not have returned by then to the Republican, but if is late he will make all haste across the mountains toward the rising sun and return by the headwaters of the Missouri. If he is not waiting at the mouth of the Kansas River, he will join his Pawnee brothers in St. Louis. It is written."

An hour before dawn he left the village on the Republican and rode with his back to the rising sun on the first lap of his long journey to the west of the Great Divide and north beyond the Salmon and the Snake to the northern tributaries of the Columbia. He traveled hard and fast, changing from one to another of his two horses at two-hour intervals. On the tenth night out he had covered well over four hundred miles of his journey. A few swirling flakes of snow stung his face and waked him round midnight. He paid little heed at first, believing it to be but a flurry, but within the first minute after opening his eyes the ominous quiet of the night gave him food for thought. Those who live much alone in the open and sleep upon the ground seem endowed with the perceptive faculties of the beasts. Someway, Hunter knew that the storm was to be a severe one—a post-season blizzard. He must see to his horses at once lest they should drift ahead of the storm and leave him afoot. Even as he threw off his robes, his ears caught the dull rumble and vibration of thousands and thousands of hooves off through the night, and he knew that the vast herds of buffalo that he had observed while making camp were now under way, moving slowly but steadily, somehow aware of the coming storm. His horses were nowhere about. They had sensed the approach of the storm and, hobbled as they were, had started drifting instinctively ahead of it. The night was velvet black, every star blotted out, and one could not see for a dozen yards in any direction across the plains. There was a sudden puff of wind, brief and fierce. As it subsided there was a thin rising note in the night, replacing the former dead quiet. A second fierce puff and a third struck the man, as if gleeful imps of battle, the scouts of the advance guard, pranced out ahead of the advancing storm battalions and jostled at the wayfarer to warn him that the shock troops followed close behind. There was small use to look farther for his truant mounts in this increasing smother of flakes. The rising sound had become a low moan with an occasional hysterical note. By the time he had returned to his robes, it had risen in volume to a sustained screech and the snow particles seemed driven with the velocity of bird-shot.

With the first gray of morning he was astir. His pistols, bullet pouch and powderhorn were slung at his belt, together with an extra pair of moccasins. The inner, and consequently the dryer, of his two buffalo robes, he caught round him. The lock of the new double-barrelled rifle with which he had equipped himself in St. Louis was carefully wrapped in buckskin to keep the priming dry. This done, he started out to search for his truant horses. He found himself moving in a

course parallel to that traveled by a band of antelopes that drifted with the storm. From out of the white smother ahead, ghostly white forms appeared and moved to meet him, a small herd of buffaloes breasting the gale, their fronts plastered with snow.

Hunter knew well the habits of all the denizens of the hills and plains. Most of them drifted with a storm. The buffalo, the hair of his foreparts the heaviest, naturally turned his most invulnerable parts to the elements and so, alone of all prairie dwellers, almost invariably fronted a storm and drifted slowly against the wind. Time and again, Hunter encountered these snow-plastered apparitions as they advanced in the teeth of the storm. His horses, he knew, would drift with the storm, not against it, so his own route became a series of tacks to the right and left, as he held a general down-wind course. At the end of six hours he had failed to find so much as a horse track in the shifting snow. He would need all his energy when the blizzard had blown over. The wise mountain man never sapped his strength in fighting a storm unless for some specific purpose. Instead, he sought whatever cover might be available and "holed up" during its progress. Hunter adopted this method. He might be forced to cover wide circles to recover his horses when the snow had ceased driving. He might encounter Cheyennes and need every ounce of his strength to elude them.

There seemed not so much as a coulee or cut bank to afford even a measure of shelter. He shot one of a band of drifting buffaloes, slit the animal's hide from neck to rump and laid it back, scooped the snow from the down-wind side, rolled up in his own robe after changing to his dry moccasins, and pulled the loose flap of hide across him. Save for eddying currents at either end of his shelter, no wind could reach him. The fury of the storm broke above him and drifted the snow on the down-wind side of the carcass. He did not suffer greatly from the cold. Prairie blizzards were no novelty in the lives of the voyageurs and he had little concern for his safety, his chief emotion being one of irritation at the delay occasioned by the storm.

Just at nightfall there was a lull, a let-up in the drive of the gale and a lightening of the smother of flakes, He knew it for a false lull, a mere breathing space to afford the winds opportunity to gather force. Nevertheless, he availed himself of the opportunity to take a brief look at his surroundings. Changing again to his wet moccasins and leaving his dry pair beneath the shelter of the flap of hide, he emerged from his lair. The country seemed to dip away on the west and he moved in that direction. If there was anything in the nature of a windbreak, he might find his horses there. At the very edge of a dip, he drew back abruptly. A shallow valley opened out below him and a lessening of the driven flakes revealed a big Indian encampment. A hundred or more lodges graced the bottoms below him.

Throughout the day, he had been reposing in the open plains within a mile of a Cheyenne village. If any had heard his shot above the storm, they had attributed it to some member of the encampment. Hunter beat a hasty retreat to his shelter. The horse herd of the Indians would be either up or down the valley from the village. He had no way of determining its direction. In any event, the horses would be heavily guarded to prevent them from drifting away in the storm. His own hobbled horses, undoubtedly had joined those of the Cheyennes for company or soon would join them. Their appearance might cause the Cheyennes to institute a search for the owner. Knowing the action of horses in a storm, the Cheyennes would search upwind, certain that the horses would have drifted down-wind to their camp ahead of the blizzard. That being the case, Hunter's only course of safety was to travel down-wind and put all possible distance of safety between himself and the village. If he should wait here in his shelter until the cessation of the storm, his tracks would remain clear for all to read, and he would be speedily overhauled by mounted Cheyennes. If he should leave now, his tracks would be blotted out within a very few minutes, but it meant a night's travel through the blizzard and the certain prospect of being left horseless on the plains. The wind increased in violence as night shut down.

Hunter made his decision. It would not do to be left afoot on the plains in the heart of the Cheyenne country after a snowstorm. Some party of mounted warriors would be most certain to cut his trail. He emerged from his shelter and moved toward the village. If he was to have a mount, it must be from the village itself, since the horseguards on duty with the herd would be doubly alert during a storm to prevent their charges from drifting. Scores of horses would be tied to the lodges in the village.

Indian dogs barked as he entered the edge of the Cheyenne town but that was of such common occurrence that no Indian so much as peered forth from a teepee to investigate the cause of the clamor. Hunter was dressed Indian fashion and of the few savages abroad among the lodges, none accorded more than a glance at the tall figure, its buffalo robe drawn closely about it, that moved so purposefully through the village, dimly visible through the driving smother of flakes. He passed up the first tied horse for the reason that a Cheyenne buck appeared between the lodges as Hunter neared the animal.

Thirty yards beyond, two horses drooped on the down-wind side of a lodge. He approached them boldly and untied both animals, mounted one and took the lead-rope of the other. Ten seconds would have put him in the clear without a soul in the village having suspected the presence of an enemy; but a squaw stepped from the lodge, saw a stranger mounted on her husband's horse and raised a shrill outcry. Hunter urged the horses into motion, riding back the way he had come, as there were fewer lodges to pass. The flaps of several teepees were thrust aside as their occupants peered curiously forth into the night to determine the cause of the disturbance. They could see but a few feet into the inky night and the swirling clouds of snow; but the squaw's inopportune appearance had rendered discovery inevitable.

Hunter, hoping to confuse the villagers, shouted in Pawnee at a savage who peered from a teepee, then lifted his voice in a war whoop as he cleared the edge of the village at a run and rode east toward Pawnee country. The few peering braves ducked back inside, seized their weapons and sallied forth, not knowing whether the Pawnees were launching an attack upon the village or just what had occurred. The result, as Hunter had hoped, was uproar and confusion. Some shouted that the Pawnees were attacking the town, others that the pony herd had been stampeded, this latter belief originating from the cries of one warrior to the effect that his horses had been stolen. None could see twenty yards through the stormy night and those in one part of the village believed the uproar at other spots indicated the source of danger. Armed warriors dashed about, seeking the center of trouble.

Meanwhile, Hunter was riding east toward Pawnee country as fast as his stolen mounts could run. If any Cheyennes had taken his trail at once, they could work it out but slowly in the night and would inevitably lose it within a few miles as the storm covered his tracks. The best they could do was to ride on toward Pawnee country in the hope of overtaking the fugitive.

After an interval, Hunter veered gradually to the north and eventually a bit more to the west, doubling back on his course. Throughout the night he forged on through the storm, changing from one Cheyenne horse to the other at frequent intervals. By dawn he had covered fifty miles and there was not so much as a film of smoke anywhere within sight when the sun rose over a white world to announce that the blizzard had ended.

Hunter's bull-hide shield, bearing his heraldic device of uplifted arm and knife, was unearthed by Indian dogs a few days later, as a party of Cheyennes rode past the spot where he had camped on the night that his horses had deserted; and from this they knew that their daring visitor had been Big Mandan, which was in accord with what they had heard of him.

Spring was breaking and the flowers were pushing through at the foot of the snowdrifts as he rode northwest after crossing the divide between the Sweetwater and the Green. It was from three mountain men, whose trail he crossed when almost at his destination, that Hunter heard the devastating news. They were discussing it among themselves, believing that he, too, already knew of it. A party of Flatheads had visited Big Mack's post only to find that it had been sacked and burned by the Blackfeet, its occupants slaughtered to the last one. The remains in the ruins had left no doubt of that, though the bodies had been charred beyond recognition. It had occurred four or five days before.

Hunter listened as Shoshone visitors recited the details. The post was but three sleeps away and some of the Shoshones were intending to make the trip to the spot to see for themselves what the Flatheads had seen a few days before. Hunter made no comment but rode away from the camp at sundown.

"His tongue uttered no words but his eyes spoke," the head man of the Shoshones stated. He tapped his forehead with a forefinger. "It was madness that shone from his eyes. Do you think that he is touched by the Great Spirit?"

"Likely," one of the mountain men assented. "Anyway, thar's hell in his soul; and it was staring out through his eyes."

The Shoshones departed at dawn but on the evening of the third day they returned, stating that other Indians had reported the presence of a band of Blackfeet in the neighborhood. Undoubtedly, this was the same crew that had sacked the post, as there was little likelihood that two war parties of Blackfeet had crossed the ranges to invade Shoshone country so early in the spring. The returning Indians also reported having found two dead Blackfeet. The victims had been following a well-beaten trail and had been shot down from ambush. A tree near at hand had been freshly inscribed with an X and a series of notches.

"It was the work of Big Mandan," the head man of the Shoshone party declared. The Shoshones had a vast admiration for the prowess of Big Mandan. Also, they cordially despised all Blackfeet, and the Shoshone's next utterance, taking the shape of a prophesy, was fathered by the wish. "Big Mandan is the greatest of all warriors. Whoever is touched by Manitou becomes gifted with cunning beyond that of a human. Before Big Mandan has done with this, he will have taken

a Blackfoot scalp for every yellow hair that grew from the head of Hair-that-shines. That is a great many. It may even be that he will kill all of the Blackfeet and free the earth of their scourge. Who can tell?"

CHAPTER XVII

The first hint that Ann McKenzie had of impending trouble was when two Blackfoot warriors appeared in the open doorway and stepped into the cabin where she sat beside the bed of her father. Big Mack had grown steadily weaker and the greater part of his time was now spent in a sleep so deep and childlike as to resemble the stillness of death. His daughter knew that the end could not be far away.

She motioned the two Blackfeet to silence by placing a finger upon her lips. It was unlikely that their voices would wake her father from his deep slumber, but she did not care to risk it, preferring that he should sleep until later in the day. The two savages shook their heads in token of sympathy. It had not been unusual for Flatheads and Snake Indians to step into Big Mack's room to express condolence upon his weakness. They had liked Big Mack, the Snakes and Flatheads had, but this was the first time that Blackfeet had entered. So engrossed had she been with her father that their appearance in the doorway brought the first realization that Blackfeet had come that morning to the post to trade. She had not observed events outside the McKenzie cabin. The two warriors wore their buffalo robes, she noticed, as they stood looking down at the slumberer.

The new factor of the post had abolished the custom of insisting that Blackfeet shed their robes before entering the stockade to trade. The big English fur companies were much more constructive than the average American trader in their relations with the Indians. The American idea, from the very nature of the trade—with numerous rival concerns and a host of free traders competing in the fur traffic—was to harvest all possible fur each season, regardless of consequences or the future relations with the various tribes. Each free trader conducted his business as he saw fit and it was inevitable that in the course of such haphazard methods many instances of real or fancied ill treatment of various savage tribes at the hands of the traders should arise. The big English companies, looking upon their business as one of permanence, could see that the future prosperity of their concerns was dependent upon continued friendly relations with the Indians among whom they traded. They were adepts at avoiding hostilities and there was less than a tenth the clashes between their traders and Canadian tribes than between American traders and the Western Indians.

The new factor at Big Mack's post, true to the traditions of his company, insisted that to treat the Blackfeet with suspicion was to breed treachery. Former precautions had been abolished. Ann McKenzie had pointed out in vain the fact that Blackfeet, having remained at war with all white men from the beginning, had but little conception of the difference between English and Americans; that a white man was a white man and consequently considered an enemy regardless of governmental affiliations; that treachery was the Blackfeet's idea of clever strategy. The factor had insisted upon following the usual policy of treatment that had been the rule of his company.

It was no surprise, therefore, when the girl noticed that the Blackfeet wore their robes. Her thoughts were upon her sleeping father. Some day soon, he would fall into a heavy slumber such as claimed him now and would fail to wake.

The blow fell without warning. There were three shots, the muffled roar indicating that they had been fired from within some one of the buildings. On the instant, one of the Blackfeet drew a pistol and put a ball through the brain of the sleeping man. Big Mack did not even open his eyes and witness the seizing of his much-beloved daughter by two stalwart savages.

The girl fought desperately but her hands were pinioned by the two powerful Blackfeet. She sank her teeth in one's forearm in an effort to loosen his hold so that she might leap to the rifle that reposed above the door on deer-horn pegs; but the savage merely freed one hand and struck her a stunning blow on the temple. All on the outside was in uproar, shots mingling with cries of the stricken and the vengeful whoops of the victors. The girl's wrists were pinioned behind her, lashed fast with rawhide thongs, and she was dragged from the cabin into the scene of carnage within the stockade. A squaw, the wife of one of the guards, was struck down by a Blackfoot warrior as she fled from her cabin. She was the last to fall, so quickly had the massacre been accomplished.

The coup had been carefully planned and perfectly executed. Some forty Blackfeet had entered the stockade, most of them strolling about casually while a few entered the main building to trade. A dozen had squatted on their heels to converse with the two men on duty at the gates. Several had entered the various cabins after the fashion in which the two had invaded the McKenzies' premises. The three shots that had slain the factor and his two helpers within the main building had been the signal for a concerted onslaught. Savages had been strategically stationed within arm's reach of every occupant of the stockade when the signal was given. In an incredibly short space of time, every soul had been slain

save Big Mack's daughter. And she knew it would have been far better if she had been struck down. If possessed of a weapon and one hand free to use it, she would have taken her own life instantly; but a powerful hand gripped her bound wrists from behind and she was helpless as an infant.

The Blackfeet were busily engaged in looting the post and the cabins of every article of value. Among a group that guarded the open gates of the stockade stood a tall savage who had not thrown aside his robe. Evidently he had directed the affair without taking an active part in it. The face of every warrior was painted beyond recognition even at close range and the identity of those out by the gate, naturally, could not be determined at that distance. A gust of wind blew aside the robe of the savage who seemed to be in command. In that brief flash the captive saw, hanging at the man's left side, a twisted arm and the palm of a hand that faced outward. Leroux, then, had planned this deed.

As her captors propelled the girl toward the gate, the man caught his robe closer about him and left the group, striding toward the ponies a hundred yards or so from the stockade. Mounting, he rode into the timber and disappeared, believing that he had not been recognized.

The captive was forced to accompany the savages until they reached a small Blackfoot village that had been erected within the past few days a mile or more from the sacked trading post. She was secured to a small tree, her hands lashed behind it. The Blackfeet were aware of the suicidal tendencies of white captives. Many a one had been known to seize knife or gun from one of his captors and put an end to his own life. Some had thrown themselves from canoes, bound as they were, and had drowned themselves. Others had made sudden rushes and dived over declivities to light head-first upon the rocks. No longer was a white captive permitted the least freedom of movement.

Vindictive squaws tore the prisoner's clothing from her and made passes before her eyes with knives and war hatchets, missing her narrowly in their efforts to make her flinch. A half-grown child lashed her bare flesh with a willow switch until cuffed aside by a squaw. Her captors discussed her fate. Having learned something of their language, she understood the most of the conversation. Her lot would be first degradation, then prolonged agony at the stake.

Among them, she now recognized many of those who had been wont to come to the post with Leroux. That they hated her savagely as the instigator of the restrictions that had been enforced prior to the advent of the new factor, she was well aware. Also, word of the atrocities perpetrated by this band had come to her ears from the Flatheads and the Snakes. Her very soul shrank from the thought of the awful ordeal that awaited her. She had no hope of mercy at the hands of this crew, her only prayer being that she might not live too long under their fiendish ministrations.

Ann McKenzie came of stern pioneer stock. All of her life she had faced without fear all manner of hardship and the prospect of sudden death. But no mortal lived who was so brave as to contemplate such an ordeal as that before her without knowing stark horror. So drawn with terror was her whole being that she was scarcely conscious of her exposure to the eyes of the assembled savages. All minor or acquired refinements of emotion had been obliterated by that greatest of the three basic emotions to which all flesh is heir—stark fear.

She hoped with all her heart that one of the tormenting squaws would misgauge her distance in one of the blows aimed to miss the head of the captive—that in the excitement some arm might overreach and drive a war hatchet into her brains. The squaws soon desisted from this pastime of trying to add to their captive's terror. The hours passed and no hand had dealt harm to her. Children bent upon inflicting hurt upon her helpless person were ordered away by the guarding squaws.

When night came, the girl was bound hand and foot and permitted to sleep upon a robe spread on the floor of a lodge. Even then, she was carefully guarded. At intervals during the next two days her hands were freed so that she might partake of food and water. Great care was exercised, however, to see that no solid article that might serve as a weapon was within her reach. She drank to quench her burning thirst but refused all food. Each day of starvation would reduce by a fraction her powers of resistance, she hoped, so that she might not last so long when the hour of her ordeal arrived.

On the morning of the third day of her captivity, a voice spoke to her in English and Leroux stood looking down upon her.

"Cover her," he instructed a squaw, and the Indian woman threw a robe across the bound white woman.

"I have been gone for many months, Nepanamo, building a new post in the north," Leroux said. "Only last night, having returned to a Blackfoot village for some of my equipment, I heard the news. I traveled all night to reach you and it seems

that I was none too soon. To-day was to have been set aside as your last one for the entertainment of your captors. They hate you, as you well know, and I may not be able to dissuade them from their purpose."

"Can you induce them to kill me at once, quickly, instead of slowly at the stake? It is all I ask."

"Will you come to the new post as my wife if I save you from these fiends?" he demanded.

"No," she said.

"You know what's in store for you," he stated. "You have heard. In the hour before your torture you will become the property of a dozen Blackfeet who will accomplish your degradation before they accomplish your death. Is it not better to belong to one white man, even though you have no love for him, and live, than to belong to a swarm of savages that you despise, and die?"

She recalled Leroux's prophesy at the time of their last meeting more than a year before. It had been to the effect that the next time her eyes should rest upon him, she would consider him a welcome vision. Even then, he had been planning to do this thing and gain possession of her by force, if his end could be accomplished in no other way. Instantly, it was clear to her why every other soul at the post had been slain on the spot while she alone had been taken alive. She had supposed that her fate would be the same that had been dealt to thousands of pioneer women who had been captured by savages east of the Mississippi in the past. Now she knew that she had not been reserved as a sacrifice to savage cruelty but as Leroux's own victim. Big Mack's daughter was driven by no Puritan conscience that would scourge her for such hair-splitting as allying herself to a falsehood by means of equivocation no matter how laudable the purpose. This monster was a blot on the face of the earth. By his last deed he was directly responsible for the massacre of her well-beloved father and her friends at the post. If by temporizing, she could gain opportunity to put an end to this fiend and rid the earth of him, then she would devote every fiber of her being to that end.

"Only by declaring that I wish to take you as my squaw will the Blackfeet be made to understand why I would save you," Leroux explained.

"It is true, what you say," she returned. "One man, and life, is to be preferred to many men—and death."

"Then you agree?" Leroux demanded.

"Not yet," she denied. "I'm thinking." Relieved of the immediate pressure of terror at the prospect of being sacrificed at the stake, her mind swiftly reverted to its normal activity. Any pretense of a sudden change in her feeling of aversion for Leroux would but serve to convince him of her deceit. "I have no liking for you, as you know."

"That will change when you come to realize that I have saved you from a most terrible end," he urged.

Was it possible, she wondered, that Leroux—with the fatuousness with which all human kind trusts that the object of affection will come to reciprocate the feeling despite all obstacles—imagined that her desperate loathing for him could be converted into even the semblance of toleration? Leroux was no fool. He knew the mettle of his prisoner. He could, of course, take her by force, but only as a bound and closely guarded captive. Under such circumstances, the first second of opportunity would be devoted to desperate effort to take both his life and her own. Only by winning her consent, however gained and no matter how unwillingly given, could he hope to make his relations with her of any considerable duration. This knowledge flashed through her mind as the reason why he chose to bargain instead of command when she was already captive to him. In the final analysis, he would command, but it was to his advantage to bargain.

"The thought appalls me," she said. "Yet the other alternative is worse. If I agree, you must give me time. My father has just been slain. If you promise to give me two months to recover from my grief, it may be that my dislike for you will grow less. If you agree not to touch me before then, I will go with you to the new post and will agree to do as you say at the end of that time, if we both live."

In her heart she took oath that neither of them would be alive at the expiration of that time. Leroux had nothing to lose and everything to gain by agreeing to her proposal. As a bound captive, taken by force, she would be a fighting, dangerous proposition and every moment would be spent in watching her chance to end it.

"It is done," he agreed. "But meanwhile you will be guarded."

With a dozen of his followers, he started out with her for the new post in the north. Not for so much as a second was she permitted to be within reach of a weapon or to walk or ride alone near the edge of a declivity over which she might throw herself. At night, a watchful savage sat by her robes, alert to her slightest move. Her loathing for the monstrous Wolf-strike became an obsession, as tales of his atrocities recurred to her; of women and children taken into captivity during his reign on the Upper Mississippi and dealt the fate which she had been spared. She prayed only for the opportunity to rid the earth of his presence and to end her own existence in the same second, thus thwarting his savage henchmen. If only she might push him from the brink of a cliff and leap after him herself; if she could but grapple with him in a canoe and sink with him, her grip, she felt, would not relax even in death. But as her fertile mind devised such plans, his own cunning brain conceived their possibility and not an instant of opportunity was afforded her throughout the journey. At the end of a month of steady travel, they reached the new post and, closely guarded within the stockade by day, guarded within her cabin by night, the opportunity that she sought seemed even more remote. Leroux lived up to his agreement to take no advantage of her helplessness until the expiration of the two months, when, it was clear to her, he would insist that she make good her promise. Her hope that his vigilance would be relaxed by so much as a second seemed ill-founded. If anything, his watchfulness increased.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Canadian brigade, captained by Buckley, camped near the sacked trading post. Buckley's blood boiled with helpless rage at the thought of Big Mack and his daughter being buried there among the charred ruins. Had there been the slightest hope of overtaking the marauders before they could reach the heart of the Blackfeet country in and beyond the ranges to the east, the Canadian would have dropped all other business on the instant and led his brigade on the war trail. There was indisputable evidence that the Blackfeet were guilty of this outrage. An encampment numbering perhaps fifteen lodges of those miscreants had been removed from the timber a mile or so from the post at about the time of the massacre, which Buckley estimated as having occurred about two weeks before; and the trail of the marauders led east into the great ranges. They were now safe in the heart of their own country. Any brigade that followed that trail to the end would be pounced upon by thousands of Blackfoot warriors; and Buckley had fewer than fifty men.

While heartsick and raging at the massacre, Buckley attached no special significance to it, accepting it merely as fresh evidence that the Blackfeet would keep the peace with no whites, regardless of nationality. The post had been an isolated one, which seemed sufficient reason for its having been the object of the attack at a time when no Canadian brigades were in the vicinity. There seemed no sound reason for believing that this particular post had been singled out for any deeper motive than the bare fact that it had been an easy one to attack.

The Canadians gave the remains of the victims, charred beyond all identification, a Christian burial. Buckley formed the brigade in two ranks and gave the order for a final salute. As the forty-odd guns roared as one, a tall figure emerged from the edge of the timber and strode toward the brigade. The lone traveler was at first mistaken for a savage. A pistol butt protruded from the top of one legging, a scalping knife and war hatchet were thrust through his belt and he carried the latest make of double-barreled rifle. A cluster of fresh scalps hung at his belt. Buckley recognized the man as he drew near.

"It is Breckenridge—Big Mandan," he said.

Breckenridge nodded to Buckley as he surveyed the scene, grasping the significance of that fresh mound of earth and the firing of the recent volley. A small English flag, no larger than a pocket handkerchief, such a one as was distributed among the Indians by the Canadian voyageurs, marked the grave. Hunter drew forth an even smaller edition of the American flag, attached it to a willow and planted it beside the other. Thus, in the obscure grave, did the victims repose beneath the two flags that for half a century past had floated above opposing forces but were destined henceforth to be significant of brotherhood wherever in the world they should be unfurled.

"You have done what I was on my way to do," Hunter said to Buckley.

"And you," said the Canadian, eyeing the fresh scalps, "have done what we were too late to do."

"I was too late myself," said Hunter. "When I heard of it, it seemed certain that the Blackfeet, fearing reprisals by some Canadian brigade, would retreat to their own country, so instead of coming here, I struck straight north, hoping to be ahead of them. I found the trail, two days old, but managed, by following it for five days, to cut off a few laggards who had dropped behind. It would be useless for you to take up the trail. They have crossed the mountains."

"That is what I knew," Buckley said.

Hunter had little more to say, eating the evening meal with the Canadian brigade and preparing to camp overnight with Buckley's men. He took a seat beside him at the fire after the meal.

"I believe that Leroux was at the bottom of this massacre," he declared. "He is with the Blackfeet and used to bring a small party here to trade. He hated Big Mack and every one at the post."

"I doubt that he had anything to do with it," Buckley said. "I will tell you why. It was in my mind to tell you in any event. One of my Indians belongs to one of the numerous small tribes of the Flathead salmon-eaters that dwell far to the north of here along the tributaries of the Upper Columbia and the Frazer River. He has been with the brigades on and off for years. While on a visit to his people and their relative tribes, he heard that a new post was being opened in their country in the interests of the company. The name of the white man in charge of operations, he could not recall; but it was not Leroux. He swears, however, that the man is none other than Leroux, whom he had once seen with my brigade. If he is

right, then Leroux could not be down here among the Blackfeet. And if you recall, there has been no word of him being among them for some six or eight months. If that is true, then what my Indian says may check out."

Hunter nodded.

"But I've heard it said that the company blacklisted him," he said. "It was your own report that he was denounced as Wolf-strike the night he killed McAndrews—that and the fact that Big Mack kicked him out of this very post—that caused the company to blacklist him. How, then, could he go back into its employ? Even though under another name, he would be known."

"Leroux's operations were all far to the east, near Lake Winnipeg. His only trip west of the great ranges was the one with my brigade. Only the men of my brigade knew him. My men have affiliated with the tribes on the Salmon and the Snake, taking wives among them, as the company has always encouraged them to do. Naturally, these same men of mine are sent always among the tribes with which they have friendly relations that far south, never among strange tribes to the north. This is the company way. Those far northern Flatheads are the poorest of all brigaders. They are of small use for anything save salmon catching. It is mere chance that probably the only one of them with a brigade should chance to have been with mine, the one which Leroux accompanied to the Black Fork of the Green. None other of my men would have gone so far north. It was sheer chance that he was recognized. No doubt, he approached some western official of the company to whom he was unknown, giving another name and offering to open a post in that isolated region. You see?"

"But eventually he would be recognized," Hunter objected.

"There is that chance, certainly," Buckley conceded. "But very few white men would be apt to go there. Even so, he is running fewer chances of being recognized there as against the certainty of being recognized on the American side. All of you American voyageurs come up the Missouri and spread widely. The Canadian fur business is one of more permanence. The employees of the company shift about far less, being kept in the region where they have affiliated with the local Indians. You Americans travel everywhere. On this side, he had but one chance to survive—by living indefinitely among the Blackfeet. He would accept the lesser chance."

"Probably," Hunter agreed. His heart was dead within him as he thought of the golden-haired woman whose charred body, vibrant with life so short a time before, now reposed with the others beneath that fresh mound. He could not shake the matter from his thoughts for a single second and his words were almost automatic. "Yes; he might do that."

"I had intended to go there myself on my return north in the fall," Buckley said; "and if it proved to be Leroux, to shoot him down myself and report the matter to the company. You could go now. Why don't you?"

That sort of activity, he thought, might serve at least as a partial outlet for the rage and grief bottled in the breast of the man before him and showing only in his eyes.

"I will," Hunter agreed. "If Leroux, he will have Blackfeet with him. I shall take their scalps as well as his."

"Be careful on that score," Buckley cautioned. "The company keeps peace with its Indians. Friendly relations with all tribes, not war, is the keynote of its policy—and a good one. The company loses no consignments of trade goods or returning cargoes of fur through hostilities with the natives, as you Americans do. This is the first British post that has been attacked in many a moon—and that was done by American Indians. It would be one thing to kill the monster, Leroux; quite another for an American to go far into Canadian territory and slay Indians that are in company employ, regardless of the tribe to which they belong. You might find yourself outlawed if you should go in for that. I'm advising you to confine your campaign to Leroux and to let the Indians in his employ alone."

Hunter nodded agreement. He knew that Buckley contributed this wise counsel in the friendliest spirit; but he was in no mood to care particularly. He had no plans beyond his determination to hunt Blackfeet as another might hunt the beaver. He was not yet able, by so much as a fraction, to adjust himself to his recent loss and to contemplate the future. Since hearing the news of the massacre, he had practically forgotten the existence of the post in the Pawnee country. The doors of fortune, opened so invitingly to him, had no further allure. What would a fortune benefit him now, without Hair-that-shines to share it with him? He still believed that in some way Leroux had instigated this massacre through his hatred for Big Mack. And where Leroux was to be found, there also would be found a little band of Blackfeet. Hunter would journey to that new post to determine if what the Indian said were true. If so, he would kill Leroux and such Blackfeet as were with him. Then he would return through the edge of the Blackfeet country, avoiding large parties and cutting off

stragglers and little groups. Beyond that, he made no plans.

"If it is Leroux," he said to Buckley. "Rest assured that I shall kill him."

He could not sleep so near that fresh mound beneath which reposed all that was left of the woman he had cherished above all else on earth. He sat throughout the night, staring into the dying embers of the fire, and the superstitious ones among the men of the brigade shuddered at what they saw in his eyes. At dawn, Hunter started north, following the directions given him by Buckley's Indian. It was not long before he discovered that a small band of Indians had preceded him by some two weeks. At first, he thought that the trail was that of Snakes or Flatheads; then, from bits of discarded equipment, he knew it for the trail of a dozen or so prowling Blackfeet. He followed naturally the line of least resistance, choosing the lowest passes at the heads of the valleys as unerringly as a wild thing. And that common faculty rendered his way easier, for the game, converging at difficult spots, had left well-worn game trails for him to follow. It was not until the fourth day that he attached any significance to the trail of the little party of Blackfeet. But on that day, he encountered it again on a game trail that traversed a lofty saddle and it occurred to him that the party also had been following the line of least resistance, as he had himself, and that it held persistently to the route that had been described to him by Buckley's Indian as the most feasible. Was it possible, he wondered, that this was the trail of some of the miscreants who had engaged in the massacre? Had they been dispatched for the purpose by Leroux and were they now returning to him to report? The trail was about two weeks old and he had first seen it within a dozen miles of the looted post. Prior to that, he had paid but little heed to it. Now, he followed it for a distance. Round noon, he came to a spot where the party had made an overnight stop. He gave the vicinity a searching examination. And suddenly, quite by accident, he made a discovery that chilled his blood, then sent it boiling hotly through his veins. Rising from a minute inspection of the ground where one of the savages seemed to have slept, what felt like a cobweb suspended from a low-hanging limb swung against his face. He lifted a hand to brush it off, still stooping to avoid the branch, then stared at the thing in his hand. It was a long golden hair almost a yard in length. An inspection of the branch revealed two others snarled among the twigs. Undoubtedly the scalp of Hair-that-shines had been suspended from that branch on the night the miscreants had camped there. They were on their way to the arch fiend with evidence to prove that they had carried out his orders. He could find little else round the spot, the signs having been almost obliterated during the two weeks that had passed.

His rage and grief knew no bounds. He came now to a country of many streams, on each of which some tribe or another of the salmon-eaters, grouped generally as Flatheads, was engaged in harvesting the first spring run of salmon. The big runs would not come up the streams from the Pacific until later. He could not speak any of the numerous dialects of the salmon-eating peoples of these parts but had no difficulty in following the route mapped out for him by Buckley's Indian. He turned off to the east up a stream whose course was obstructed by a falls beyond which the salmon could not ascend. The valley that led back into the mountains, being salmonless, was not the site of any permanent village of the salmon-eaters. It was just such a retreat as Leroux might seek. His Indians could trap the higher mountain valleys. The company, knowing it to be his range, would send no brigade there to trap the same country. It was too efficiently managed to engage in such duplication of effort. And leading up the course of this valley, Hunter found again, for the first time in ten days, the trail of that miscreant band. Any lingering trace of doubt was washed from his mind. He turned his horses out to shift for themselves, knowing they would take the track back, cached his saddle and extra equipment and proceeded on foot. One day above the falls he sighted the new post.

It was located in a spot where it was most difficult to approach it unseen, situated on the shores of a lake a mile across. On the land side it was flanked for half a mile by open grassy meadows in which the horses of its occupants were grazing. Hunter kept within the timber on the edge of the valley until he reached the lake. From behind the trees that flanked that shore of it, he surveyed the post on its meadow side. The small stockade, not over fifty yards in extent, had been built of light poles, since among the salmon-eaters of the north was little spirit of hostility and the occupants of the post were most unlikely to be forced to withstand a siege. There were but two small dirt-roofed log cabins within the enclosure. Evidently the Indians lived in teepees, the tips of several, smoke curling lazily from their smoke tents, appearing above the walls of the stockade. The gate on the lake side opened and a figure advanced to the shore to secure water in a skin or birch-bark pail.

Far up the timbered slope of the valley, removed from all game trails and probable routes of travel, Hunter prepared his lair, a brush-and-bark wickiup in which he could roll up in his single buffalo robe and secure a measure of shelter from the elements.

With the coming of night he descended and skirted the lake, keeping well back from it so that his moccasins might leave no tracks on the sod of the meadow. There was little likelihood that there would be night guards on the gates in this friendly country. Nevertheless, he approached the stockade with the stealth of a night-prowling cat, keeping to the downwind side, lest his scent should be carried to the noses of any possible Indian dogs that might reside there. The party whose trail he had seen from time to time during his journey had been unaccompanied by dogs. He hoped that those of the outfit who had remained here instead of joining the raid, if there were any such, would prove to be likewise without dogs.

The last thing that would occur to Leroux was that his men had been followed to this distant spot. It was now some five weeks since the massacre. Hunter had traveled fast and had been three weeks on the trail. The marauders had started some two weeks before him but could not have reached this spot very many days in advance of him. The spacing of their night camps had revealed the fact that they had not made long forced marches between camps.

Hunter had no particular plan. His bottled rage demanded action. He thought some of swinging himself over the stockade, striking down the first man he encountered in the night, shooting down the next three with his pistol and the double-barreled rifle, then fading again into the night before the other occupants realized what it was all about. Later, he would conduct a one-man siege, shooting down all who ventured forth from the stockade. He breathed easier as he reached the log fence without a dog having barked. As he peered between two of the uprights, he could make out the vague shapes of several teepees and two cabins. The fires were all within the teepees, none being kindled in the open. Hunter heard voices conversing in Blackfoot. Presently the door of one of the cabins opened, revealing a dim light within. The man outlined in the doorway spoke in English. The voice was Leroux's. Hunter's spine prickled, as if the long dormant cells of hairs that once grew along the spines of his ancestors now sought to bristle into a fighting roach.

Then, quite without warning, his whole being was flooded with a wild mixture of conflicting emotions. A voice, the words themselves being indistinct, reached his ears in answer to the man. The tones were the same throaty, slightly husky notes to which he had listened round the fires on the shores of the distant Missouri and again in the brush wickiups outside the stockade of Big Mack's fort. No other voice could so affect him. Yet he had for so long believed her to be dead that his mind could not instantly grasp the fact that she still lived, could not so quickly readjust itself to this amazing comprehension. A wave of great thankfulness surged through him, accompanied by a vicious current of rage that she should be held captive by Leroux. So shaken was he that, crafty warrior though he was, he had grasped the top of the stockade in the first act of throwing himself over it and going to her at once, striking Leroux down where he stood. Such an incautious move would have been fatal but he was almost committed to the deed by his emotions before reason could reassert itself. The one thing that held him back was the fact that her voice reached his ears again and he stood motionless, straining to catch her words. This he failed to do, but in that instant reason crept through the seething furnace of his emotions and stayed his hand. He could not defeat all who were inside that stockade and escape with her. His former plan, to strike down all that he could and escape to strike again another day, was now untenable.

Swiftly, since his discovery would now mean a hundredfold more than it would have meant one minute past, he moved silently from the stockade and returned to his secret wickiup in the depths of the forested slopes. Throughout the night he sat there, staring sightlessly out into the black shadows of the forest as he mapped out his campaign. One after another, he discarded half-formed plans. At last he knew what he must do.

There were no less than a dozen Blackfeet in that stockade—possibly more. He would not enter it until some night when there were but four men present. Then he could strike down the first, account for the remaining ones with three quick shots from his pistol and the double-barreled gun and have the field to himself. A greater chance than that he must not permit himself to take. Meanwhile none who should leave that stockade to wander any distance would ever return to it again.

From that moment on, the occupants of the stockade, without being in the least aware of it, were marked for death. From within the edge of the forest, keen eyes were trained constantly upon those log walls to observe any among the dwellers who might venture forth to hunt upon the mountain trails.

On the first day, two Blackfeet crossed the lake by canoe and struck out through the forest to hunt for deer. That night a silent figure haunted the walls of the stockade to determine if the failure of these two hunters to return had given rise to more than casual conjecture.

"Deer are moving up into the higher hills. No doubt they have followed," an Indian observed to his fellows. "They will

return in a day or two."

Satisfied, the shadow moved away from the stockade. Two days thereafter, three Blackfeet mounted their ponies and started down country, each leading an extra horse. It was certain that they were headed down to the country below the falls to procure three packs of fresh and dried salmon from the fishing Indians. This was most fortunate. They would not be expected to return for several days. When they were far down the valley, well beyond any distance from which the sound of a gunshot might reach the ears of those in the post, a figure, well back among the trees, was running on a parallel course. It was destined that the three Blackfeet should never reach the salmon fisheries of the lower country, so naturally they would not return.

At night the timber wolves lifted their voices in savage refrain as if in rejoicing over some fresh kill. And from his brush wikiup in the depths of the forest, listening to this devils' chorus, a hunter far more deadly than these midnight serenaders stole forth at dawn on hunting business of his own. For every soul that emerged from that stockade, the mountain trails were fraught with deadly peril. But none suspected that certain death lurked in those peaceful ranges until their own second struck, and then it was too late.

CHAPTER XIX

It was known, of course, that the foundation of the Breckenridge fortune had been laid in the Indian trade; but, as in the case of so many other fortunes that had been founded in fur, many of the intimate details were lacking.

Prospectors, soldiers and farmers, cattlemen, gamblers, business men and land seekers poured into the still-new West. There were many curious legends among the Western tribes and it was given to some of the westward-moving pioneers to hear fragments of ancient tales. Gold-seekers, penetrating the lofty mountain ranges of the region that had become known as British Columbia, found the natives of the locality loath to venture into a certain remote valley. It was not good to go there, they insisted. Pressed for their reasons for this superstition, an ancient Indian explained. More than half a century before, a dozen very bad Indians, led by a ferocious white man known as Wolf-strike, had come to that valley and constructed a post for one of the big trading companies. But the Great Spirit had marked these men for their iniquities. Some secret menace, relentless as death itself, had haunted the hills and stalked the ill-fated ones. At first all the men were in the stockade. Then some left to hunt and were never seen again. Every man who left the stockade disappeared in some mysterious fashion, never to return. At last but four men were left and they stayed within the stockade. But the stalking death had entered, it would seem. An Indian from the lower fisheries, straying there, had found the four men dead, three of them from gun shots, the infamous Wolf-strike with a knife in his throat. It was said that this stalking menace left no tracks, its trail as invisible as the trail of the trout in the streams and the birds in the air. Others had claimed that it was no stalking death sent by Manitou at all, but instead had believed it to be the deadly work of Big Mandan.

"And who," a white prospector inquired, "was this Big Mandan?"

The old native shrugged.

Big Mandan, he declared, was Big Mandan; which was to the point, if not enlightening.

Settlers on the Upper Missouri heard from the Indians that way back during the youth of the oldest among them, a white man and a white woman had journeyed across the Great Divide to the headwaters of the Missouri, coming from the direction of the setting sun, and had traveled down the length of that stream by canoe. Inquiry elicited the information that the man could have been no other than Big Mandan, the woman Hair-that-shines.

Members of a wagon train that was camped on a creek that flowed to the Columbia found evidence that log buildings and a stockade had been partially burned on that spot many years before. On the face of a sandrock bluff a mile away, certain strange marks were observed. The likeness of an uplifted arm, the hand gripping a knife, had been carved in the rock. There was an X; and from the point of the knife, as if to represent drops of blood, were carved a considerable number of deep nicks. Inquiry was made of local Snake Indians.

"It is said among my people," a native stated, "that it was the work of Big Mandan in his war against the Blackfeet. The nicks are not drops of blood. They are the number of coos he had counted upon his foes at the time of signing."

Some of the oldest residents of St. Louis recalled the arrival of a flotilla of boats containing a fortune in furs, commanded by a few white men and accompanied by forty Pawnee warriors, not one of whom had ever before set eyes on a white man's town; and there had been a wedding, attended by scores of voyageurs and the forty Pawnee bucks in full regalia.

Blue-coated cavalymen campaigning against the few remaining hostiles of the plains, and Texas cattlemen moving northward across the prairies in search of new range for their cows, found evidence of a former great Indian encampment on the Republican. Also, there was evidence that log structures of some sort, long since destroyed, had stood in the center of the great Indian village. Numerous persons made inquiry as to the nature of that ancient log house.

A great many years before, the Indians informed them, a great white chief named Big Mandan had come to live among the Pawnees. He had taken to wife a beautiful, yellow-haired woman—Hair-that-shines. The log house had been their home. The Great Spirit had blessed them with several children and they had resided among the Pawnees for some years. But eventually they had departed toward the land of the rising sun, returning to the country of the white men.

Some who heard fragments of such tales were accorded brief visions of a day long past. They could picture a lone white

man surrounded by thousands of swarthy faces, his voice booming forth as he harangued a horde of savages at the council fires; of raiders sweeping across the prairies with a flying cloud of stolen horses; of mighty battles unrecorded and of many another scene of the vanished past. But there was none to piece together these fragments, or even seriously to connect them. It seemed beyond all reason to credit the man who led Pawnee braves to the Staked Plains and Pecos country to steal horses from the Comanches and Mescalero Apaches with being the same party who had appointed himself the stalking death and left his knife in the throat of the monstrous Wolf-strike among the mountain gorges of British Columbia. It seemed unlikely that the character who was reputed to have led the Mandans in successful forays against the Burnt-thighs and the Assiniboines had also led the Loup Pawnees against the Rees; still more unlikely that the man who had vanquished the mighty Kicking Horse in combat with scalping knives before the eyes of ten thousand assembled savages had declared a single-handed war of his own against the Blackfeet; and so on.

Those who gave the matter any thought believed that Big Mandan and his famous bride, Hair-that-shines, were but two more of the legendary characters prevalent among so many Western tribes. But, as has been said, the Breckenridge fortune was founded in the Indian trade at a very early date. It is written.

THE END

By Hal G. Evarts

THE CROSS PULL

THE PASSING OF THE OLD WEST

THE BALD FACE: AND OTHER ANIMAL STORIES

THE SETTLING OF THE SAGE

FUR SIGN

TUMBLEWEEDS

SPANISH ACRES

THE PAINTED STALLION

THE MOCCASIN TELEGRAPH

FUR BRIGADE

[The end of *Fur Brigade* by Hal G. Evarts]