

Stoddard William Osborn

Two Arrows: A Story of Red and White



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Chapter I

THE HUNGRY CAMP

The mountain countries of all the earth have always been wonder-lands. The oldest and best known of them are to this day full of things that nobody has found out. That is the reason why people are always exploring them, but they keep their secrets remarkably well, particularly the great secret of how they happened to get there in that shape.

The great western mountain country of the United States is made up of range after range of wonderful peaks and ridges, and men have peered in among them here and there, but for all the peering and searching nothing of the wonder to speak of has been rubbed away.

Right in the eastern, edge of one of these mountain ridges, one warm September morning, not long ago, a band of Nez Percé Indians were encamped. It was in what is commonly called "the Far West," because always when you get there the West is as far away as ever. The camp was in a sort of nook, and it was not easy to say whether a spur of the mountain jugged out into the plain, or whether a spur of the plain made a dent in the ragged line of the mountains. More than a dozen "lodges," made of skins upheld by poles, were scattered around on the smoother spots, not far from a bubbling spring of water. There were some trees and bushes and patches of grass near the spring, but the little brook which trickled away from it did not travel a great way into the world, from the place where it was born, before it was soaked up and disappeared among the sand and gravel. Up and beyond the spring, the farther one chose to look, the rockier and the ruggered everything seemed to be.

Take it all together, it was a forlorn looking, hot, dried-up, and uncomfortable sort of place. The very lodges themselves, and the human beings around them, made it appear pitifully desolate. The spring was the only visible thing that seemed to be alive and cheerful and at work.

There were Indians and squaws to be seen, a number of them, and boys and girls of all sizes, and some of the squaws carried papposes, but they all looked as if they had given up entirely and did not expect to live any longer. Even some of the largest men had an air of not caring much, really, whether they lived or not; but that was the only regular and dignified way for a Nez Percé or any other Indian warrior to take a thing he can't help or is too lazy to fight with. The women showed more signs of life than the men, for some of them were moving about among the children, and one poor, old, withered, ragged squaw sat in the door of her lodge, with her gray hair all down over her face, rocking backward and forward, and singing a sort of droning chant.

There was not one quadruped of any kind to be seen in or about that camp. Behind this fact was the secret of the whole matter. Those Indians were starving! Days and days before that they had been away out upon the plains to the eastward, hunting for buffalo. They had not found any, but they had found all the grass dry and parched by a long drought, so that no buffalo in his senses was likely to be there, and so that their own ponies could hardly make a living by picking all night. Then one afternoon a great swarm of locusts found where they were and alighted upon them just as a westerly wind died out. The locusts remained long enough to eat up whatever grass there was left. All through the evening the Nez Percés had heard the harsh, tingling hum of those devourers, as they argued among themselves whether or not it were best to stay and dig for the roots of the grass. The wind came up suddenly and strongly about midnight, and the locusts decided to take advantage

of it and sail away after better grass, but they did not leave any behind them. They set out for the nearest white settlements in hope of getting corn and apple-tree leaves, and all that sort of thing.

The band of Nez Percés would have moved away the next morning under any circumstances, but when morning came they were in a terribly bad predicament. Not one of them carried a watch, or he might have known that it was about three o'clock, and very dark, when a worse disaster than the visit of the locusts took place. By five or six minutes past three it was all done completely, and it was the work of a wicked old mule.

All but a half a dozen of the ponies and mules of the band had been gathered and tethered in what is called a "corral," only that it had no fence, at a short distance from the lodges. Nobody dreamed of any danger to that corral, and there was none from the outside, even after the boys who were set to watch it had curled down and gone to sleep. All the danger was inside, and it was also inside of that mule. He was hungry and vicious. He had lived in the white "settlements," and knew something. He was fastened by a long hide lariat to a peg driven into the ground, as were all the others, and he knew that the best place to gnaw in two that lariat was close to the peg, where he could get a good pull upon it. As soon as he had freed himself he tried the lariat of another mule, and found that the peg had been driven into loose earth and came right up. That was a scientific discovery, and he tried several other pegs. Some came up with more or less hard tugging, and as fast as they came up a pony or a mule was free. Then he came to a peg he could not pull, and he lost his temper. He squealed, and turned around and kicked the pony that belonged to that peg. Then he stood still and brayed, as if he were frightened to find himself loose, and that was all that was needed.

It was after three o'clock, and in one minute the whole corral was kicking and squealing, braying, biting, and getting free, and joining in the general opinion that it was time to run away.

That is what the western men call a "stampede," and whenever one occurs there is pretty surely a mule or a thief at the bottom of it; but sometimes a hail-storm will do as well, or nearly so. By five or six minutes past three all of that herd were racing westward, with boys and men getting out of breath behind it, and all the squaws in the camp were holding hard upon the lariats of the ponies tethered among the lodges. When morning came there were hardly ponies enough to "pack" the lodges and other baggage and every soul of the band had to carry something as they all set off, bright and early, upon the trail of the stampeded drove of ponies. Some of the warriors had followed it without any stopping for breakfast, and they might have caught up with it, perhaps, but for the good generalship of that old mule. He had decided in his own mind to trot right along until he came to something to eat and drink, and the idea was a persuasive one. All the rest determined to have something to eat and drink, and they followed their leader. It was not easy for men on foot to catch up with them, and before noon the warriors sat down and took a smoke, and held a council as to what it was best to do. Before they finished that council the ponies had gained several miles more the start of them. The next council the warriors held contained but three men, for all the rest had gone back as messengers to tell the band that the ponies had not been recovered. By nightfall the remaining three had faithfully carried back the same news, and were ready for a fresh start.

After that there had been day after day of weary plodding and continual disappointment, with the weather growing hotter and the grass drier, until the trail they were following brought them to the spring in the edge of the mountain range without bringing them to the wicked old mule and his followers.

That had not been the whole of the sad history. On the evening before the stampede that band of Nez Percés had been well supplied with riding ponies and pack-mules, and had also been rich in dogs. No other band of their size had more, although their failure to find buffaloes had already begun to have its effect upon the number of their barking stock. Not a dog had been wasted by feeding him to the other dogs, but the human beings had not been allowed to starve, and after the march began towards the mountains there was less and less noise in that camp night after night.

There was no help for it; the ponies ate the grass up at the spring, and then one of them had to be eaten, while the warriors rode all around the neighborhood vainly hunting for something better and not so expensive. They did secure a few rabbits and sage-hens and one small antelope, but all the signs of the times grew blacker and blacker, and it was about as well to kill and eat the remaining ponies as to let them die of starvation. A sort of apathy seemed to fall upon everybody, old and young, and the warriors hardly felt like doing any more hunting. Now at last they sat down to starve, without a dog or pony left, and with no prospect that game of any kind would come into camp to be killed. It is a curious fact, but whole bands of Indians, and sometimes whole tribes, get into precisely that sort of scrape almost every year. Now it is one band, and now it is another, and there would be vastly more of it if it were not for the United States Government.

There was nothing droll, nothing funny, nothing that was not savagely sad, about the Nez Percés' camp that September morning. Every member of the band, except two, was loafing around the lodges hopelessly and helplessly doing nothing, and miserably giving the matter up.

Chapter II

A YOUNG HERO

Away from the camp a long mile, and down in the edge of the dry, hot, desolate plain, there was a wide spread of sage-bushes. They were larger than usual, because of having ordinarily a better supply of water sent them from the mountains than if they had settled further out. In among such growths are apt to be found sage-hens and rabbits, and sometimes antelopes, but the warriors had decided that they had hunted out all of the game that had been there, and had given the bushes up. Two of the members of the band who were not warriors had not arrived at the same conclusion, and both of these were among the "sage-brush" that morning. The first had been greatly missed among the lodges, and had been much hunted for and shouted after, for he was the largest and most intelligent dog ever owned by that band. He was also about the ugliest ever owned by anybody, and his misfortunes had earned for him the name of One-eye. He could see more with the eye he had left – and it was his right – than any other animal they had ever had, or than most of the warriors. He saw what became of the other dogs, for instance, and at once acquired a habit of not coming when an Indian called for him. He kept his eye about him all day, and was careful as to where he lay down. Just about the time when the ponies began to go into the camp-kettles he was a dog hard to find, although he managed to steal pony-bones and carry them away into the sage-brush. Perhaps it was for this reason that he was in even better condition than common that morning. He had no signs of famine about him, and he lay beside what was left of a jackass-rabbit, which he had managed to add to his stock of plunder. One-eye was a dog of uncommon sagacity; he had taken a look at the camp just before sunrise, and had confirmed his convictions that it was a bad place for him. He had been to the spring for water, drinking enough to last him a good while, and then he had made a race against time for the nearest bushes. He lay now with his sharp-pointed, wolfish ears pricked forward, listening to the tokens of another presence besides his own.

Somebody else was there, but not in bodily condition to have made much of a race after One-eye. It was a well-grown boy of about fifteen years, and One-eye at once recognized him as his own particular master, but he was a very forlorn-looking boy. He wore no clothing, except the deer-skin "clout" that covered him from above his hips to the middle of his thighs. He carried a light lance in one hand and a bow in the other, and there were arrows in the quiver slung over his shoulder. A good butcher-knife hung in its case by the thong around his waist, and he was evidently out on a hunting expedition. He was the one being, except One-eye, remaining in that band of Nez Percés, with life and energy enough to try and do something. He did not look as if he could do much. He was the son of the old chief in command of the band, but it was two whole days since he had eaten anything, and he had a faded, worn, drawn, hungry appearance, until you came to his black, brilliant eyes. These had an unusual fire in them, and glanced quickly, restlessly, piercingly in all directions. He might have been even good-looking if he had been well fed and well dressed, and he was tall and strongly built. Just such Indian boys grow up into the chiefs and leaders who make themselves famous, and get their exploits into the newspapers, but as yet this particular boy had not managed to earn for himself any name at all. Every Indian has to do something notable or have something memorable occur to him before his tribe gives him the honor of a distinguishing name. One-eye knew him, and knew that he was hungry and in trouble, but had no name for him except that he suggested a danger of the camp-kettle.

There could be no doubt about that boy's pluck and ambition, and he was a master for any dog to have been proud of as he resolutely and stealthily searched the sage-bushes. He found nothing, up to the moment when he came out into a small bit of open space, and then he suddenly stopped, for there was something facing him under the opposite bushes.

"Ugh! One-eye."

A low whine replied to him, and a wag of a dog's tail was added, but a watch was kept upon any motion he might make with his bow or lance.

"Ugh! no. Not kill him," remarked the boy, after almost a minute of profound thinking. "Eat him? No dog then. All old fools. No dog hunt with. No pony. Starve. Keep One-eye. Try for rabbits."

He called repeatedly, but his old acquaintance refused to come near him, whining a little but receding as the boy advanced.

"Ugh! knows too much."

It was a matter to lessen the value of One-eye that he understood his own interests, and his master ceased, wearily, his efforts to entice him. He pushed on through the bushes, but now he was instantly aware that One-eye was searching them with him, keeping at a safe distance, but performing regular hunter's duty. He even scared up a solitary sage-hen, but she did not fly within range of bow and arrow. She was an encouragement, however, and so were the remains of the rabbit to which One-eye managed to pilot the way. They seemed like a promise of better things to come, and One-eye stood over them for a moment wagging his tail, as much as to say,

"There; take that and let me up!"

The boy picked up the rabbit and said several things to the dog in a clear, musical voice. He spoke the guttural, Nez Percé dialect, which is one of the most difficult in the world, and One-eye seemed almost to understand him – and yet there are white boys of fifteen who stumble dreadfully over such easy tongues as Greek and Latin.

The boy and dog seemed to be on better terms after that, and went on through the sage-brush towards where a straggling line of mesquite scrubs marked the plain. The dog was ranging the bushes right and left, while the boy slowly followed the narrow lane of an old, hard-beaten "buffalo path," with an arrow on the string, ready for anything that might turn up. They were nearly out of the mesquites when One-eye uttered a quick, sharp, low-voiced whine, which his master seemed to understand. It is not every dog that can whine in the Nez Percé dialect, but the boy at once dropped upon his hands and knees and crept silently forward. He had been warned that something was the matter, and his natural instinct was to hide until he should discover what it might be. Again the dog whimpered, and the boy knew that he was hidden ahead and beyond him. He crawled out of the trail and made his way under and through the bushes. He made no more sound or disturbance than a snake would have caused in doing the same thing, and in half a minute more he was peering out into the open country.

"Ugh! buffalo!"

His brilliant eyes served him well. Only an Indian or a dog would have rightly read the meaning of some very minute variations in the brown crest of a roll of the prairie, far away to the eastward. Only the keenest vision could have detected the fact that there was a movement in the low, dull line of desolation. Back shrank the boy, under the bushes at the side of the trail, and One-eye now had enough of restored confidence to come and crouch beside him. In a few minutes more the spots were noticeably larger, and it was plain that the buffalo were approaching and not receding. At another time and under different circumstances, even an Indian might have been unwise, and have tried to creep out and meet them, but the weakness of semistarvation brought with it a most prudent suggestion. It was manifestly better to lie still and let them come, so long as they were coming. There was no sort of fatigue in such a style of hunting, but there was a vast deal of excitement. It was a strain on any nerves, especially hungry ones, to lie still while those two great shaggy shapes came slowly out upon the ridge. They did not pause for an instant, and there was no grass around them to give them an excuse for lingering. They were on their way after some, and some water, undoubtedly, and perhaps they knew a reason why there should be an ancient buffalo-trail in that direction, trodden by generation after generation of their grass-eating race. The boy was a born hunter, and knew that he was lurking in the right place, and he drew back farther and under deeper

and more perfect cover, hardly seeming to breathe. One-eye did the same, had almost looked as if he wanted to put his paw over his mouth as he panted. On came the two bisons, and it was apparent soon that no more were following them.

"Bull – cow," muttered the boy. "Get both. Laugh at old men then. Have name!"

His black eyes flashed as he put his best arrow on the string and flattened himself upon the dry, hot earth. Nearer and nearer drew the gigantic game, and with steady, lumbering pace they followed the old trail. It was a breathless piece of business, but it was over at last. The bull was in front, and he was a splendid-looking old fellow, although somewhat thin in flesh. Neither he nor his companion seemed to have smelled or dreamed of danger, and they walked straight into it. The moment for action had come, and the boy's body rose a little, with a swift, pliant, graceful motion. With all the strength starvation had left in him he drew his arrow to the head. In another second it was buried to its very feathers in the broad breast of the buffalo bull, and the great animal stumbled forward upon his knees, pierced through the heart. The young hunter had known well the precise spot to aim at, and he had made a perfect shot. The cow halted for a moment, as if in amazement, and then charged forward along the trail. That moment had given the boy enough time to put another arrow on the string, and as she passed him he drove it into her just behind the shoulder, well and vigorously. Once more he had given a deadly wound, and now he caught up his lance. There was little need of it, but he could not be sure of that, and so, as the bull staggered to his feet in his death-struggle, he received a terrific thrust in the side and went down again. It was a complete victory, so far as the bull was concerned, and One-eye had darted away upon the path of the wounded cow.

"Ugh! got both!" exclaimed the boy. "Have name now."

Chapter III

A BRAVE NAME

One-eye followed the arrow-stricken cow, and he ran well. So did the cow, and she did not turn to the right or left from the old buffalo trail. There was but one road for either the trail or the cow or the dog, for the very formation of the land led them all into the mountains through the nook by the spring, and so by and by through the camp of the starving Nez Percés. On she went until, right in the middle of the camp and among the lodges, she stumbled and fell, and One-eye had her by the throat.

It was time for somebody to wake up and do something, and a wiry-looking, undersized, lean-ribbed old warrior, with an immense head, whose bow and arrows had been hanging near him, at once rushed forward and began to make a sort of pin-cushion of that cow. He twanged arrow after arrow into her, yelling ferociously, and was just turning away to get his lance when a robust squaw, who had not been made very thin even by starvation, caught him by the arm, screeching,

"Dead five times! What for kill any more?"

She held up a plump hand as she spoke, and spread her brown fingers almost against his nose. There was no denying it, but the victorious hunter at once struck an attitude and exclaimed,

"No starve now, Big Tongue!"

He had saved the whole band from ruin and he went on to say as much, while the warriors and squaws and smaller Indians crowded around the game so wonderfully brought within a few yards of their kettles. It was a grand occasion, and the Big Tongue was entitled to the everlasting gratitude of his nation quite as much as are a great many white statesmen and kings and generals who claim and in a manner get it. All went well with him until a gray-headed old warrior, who was examining the several arrows projecting from the side of the dead bison, came to one over which he paused thoughtfully. Then he raised his head, put his hand to his mouth, and sent forth a wild whoop of delight. He drew out the arrow with one sharp tug and held it up to the gaze of all.

"Not Big Tongue. Boy!" For he was the father of the young hero who had faithfully stood up against hunger and despair and had gone for game to the very last. He was a proud old chief and father that day, and all that was left for the Big Tongue was to recover his own arrows as fast as he could for future use, while the squaws cut up the cow. They did it with a haste and skill quite remarkable, considering how nearly dead they all were. The prospect of a good dinner seemed to put new life into them, and they plied their knives in half a dozen places at the same time.

One-eye sat down and howled for a moment, and then started off upon the trail by which he had come.

"Boy!" shouted the old chief. "All come. See what."

Several braves and nearly all the other boys, one squaw and four half-grown girls at once followed him as he pursued the retreating form of One-eye. It was quite a procession, but some of its members staggered a little in their walk, and there was no running. Even the excitement of the moment could get no more than a rapid stride out of the old chief himself. He was well in advance of all others, and at the edge of the expanse of sage-brush in which One-eye disappeared he was compelled to pause for breath. Before it had fully come to him he needed it for another whoop of delight.

Along the path in front of him, erect and proud, but using the shaft of his lance as a walking-stick, came his own triumphant boy hunter. Not one word did the youngster utter, but he silently turned in his tracks, beckoning his father to follow.

It was but a few minutes after that and they stood together in front of the dead bull bison. The boy pointed at the arrow almost buried in the shaggy chest, and then he sat down; hunger

and fatigue and excitement had done their work upon him, and he could keep his feet no longer. He even permitted One-eye to lick his hands and face in a way no Indian dog is in the habit of doing. Other warriors came crowding around the great trophy, and the old chief waited while they examined all and made their remarks. They were needed as witnesses of the exact state of affairs, and they all testified that this arrow, like the other, had been wonderfully well driven. The old chief sat down before the bull and slowly pulled out the weapon. He looked at it, held it up, streaming with the blood of the animal it had brought down, and said:

"Long Bear is a great chief. Great brave. Tell all people the young chief Two ARROWS. Boy got a name. Whoop!"

The youngster was on his feet in a moment, and One-eye gave a sharp, fierce bark, as if he also was aware that something great had happened and that he had a share in it. It was glory enough for one day, and the next duty on hand was to repair the damages of their long fasting. Two Arrows and his dog walked proudly at the side of the Long Bear as he led the way back to the camp. No longer a nameless boy, he was still only in his apprenticeship; he was not yet a warrior, although almost to be counted as a "brave," as his title indicated. It would yet be a long time before he could be permitted to go upon any war-path, however he might be assured of a good pony when there should be hunting to be done.

There had been all along an abundance of firewood, of fallen trees and dead mesquite-bushes, in the neighborhood of the camp, and there were fires burning in front of several lodges before the remainder of the good news came in. The cow had been thoroughly cut up, but the stern requirements of Indian law in such cases called for the presence of the chief and the leading warriors to divide and give out for use. Anything like theft or overreaching would have been visited with the sharp wrath of some very hungry men. The Big Tongue had seated himself in front of the "hump" and some other choice morsels, waiting the expected decision that they belonged to him. He also explained to all who could not help hearing him how surely that cow could have broken through the camp and escaped into the mountains if it had not been for him, until the same plump squaw pointed at the hump and ribs before him, remarking, cheerfully,

"Go get arrow. Kill him again. Need some more. Boy kill him when he stood up."

There was not strength left in the camp for a laugh, but the Big Tongue seemed to have wearied of the conversation. He looked wearier afterwards when the hump was unanimously assigned to the old chief's own lodge, that Two Arrows might eat his share of it. Indian justice is a pretty fair article when it can be had at home, not interfered with by any kind of white man. The division was made to the entire satisfaction of everybody, after all, for the Big Tongue deserved and was awarded due credit and pay for his promptness. If the buffalo had not already been killed by somebody else, perhaps he might have killed it, and there was a good deal in that. He and his family had a very much encouraged and cheerful set of brown faces as they gathered around their fire and began to broil bits of meat over it.

One fashion was absolutely without an exception, leaving out of the question the smaller papposes: not one man, woman, or child but was diligently working away at a slice of raw meat, whatever else they were doing or trying to do. It was no time to wait for cookery, and it was wonderful what an enlivening effect the raw meat seemed to have.

Indian etiquette required that Two Arrows should sit down before his father's lodge and patiently wait until his "token" should be given him. His first slice of meat was duly broiled by his mother, and handed him by his father, and he ate it in dignified silence. It was the proudest hour of his whole life thus far, and he well knew that the story would spread through the Nez Percé nation and lead the old men of it to expect great things of him: it was a beginning of fame, and it kindled in him a tremendous fever for more. His ambition grew and grew as his appetite went down, and his strength began to come back to him.

It was a grand feast, and it was not long before there were braves and squaws ready to go and cut up the bull and bring every ounce of him to camp. Starvation had been defeated, and all that happiness had been earned by "Two Arrows."

Chapter IV

THE MINING EXPEDITION

The place away out upon the rolling plain, at which the unlucky hunting-camp of the Nez Percé band had been pitched when the locusts visited them, was occupied again a few days after they left it. The new-comers were not Indians of any tribe but genuine white men, with an uncommonly good outfit for a small one. They were one of the hundreds of mining and exploring expeditions which every year set out for one range of mountains or another to try and find what there is in them. They are all sure to find a good deal of hard work, privation and danger, and some of them discover mines of gold and silver.

This expedition consisted of two very strongly built but not heavy wagons, with canvas-covered tilts, and each drawn by four large mules. What was in the wagons except the drivers could only be guessed at, but riding at the side or ahead or behind them as they came towards the camping-place were six men and a boy. There were several spare horses and mules, and the whole affair looked as if it had cost a good deal of money. It costs a great deal to bring up eight men and a boy so that these may be fairly included, but there were wide variations in the external garnishing of the riders and drivers.

They had all been guided to that spot, partly by the general aim of their undertaking, partly by the trail they were following, and a good deal by a tall old fellow with a Roman nose and a long, muddy yellow beard, who rode in front upon a raw-boned, Roman-nosed sorrel mare, with an uncommon allowance of tail. When they reached that camping-ground it was not late in the afternoon, but it was not well to go on past a deep pool of water, surrounded by willows and cottonwood-trees, however little grass there was to be had in the neighborhood. They had found water and grass getting scarcer and scarcer for two or three days, and there was quite enough in the look of things to make men thoughtful. They knew nothing about the Nez Percés and the grasshoppers and the wicked old mule, but the tall man in front only looked around for one moment before he exclaimed,

"I'd call it – Been some kind of Injins here lately. No game, I reckon, or they'd ha' stayed."

"No kind of game'd stay long in such a burned-up country as this is," added a squarely made, gray-headed man who rode up alongside of him. "We've nothing to do but to push on. We must get out of this or we'll lose our whole outfit."

"Sure as shootin'! I move we just unhitch long enough for a feed and a good drink, and lay in what water we can carry, and go on all night. There's a good moon to travel by, and it'll be cooler work for the critters."

"It's our best hold. Sile, don't you gallop that horse of yours one rod. There's work enough before him. Save him up."

"All right, father. But isn't this the camp? He can rest now."

"No he can't, nor you either. It's an all-night job."

Sile was not gray-headed. He was very nearly red-headed. Still, he looked enough like his father in several ways. He was broadly and heavily built, strong and hearty, with something in his merry, freckled face which seemed to indicate a very good opinion of himself. Boys of fourteen, or thereabout, who can ride and shoot, and who have travelled a little, are apt to get that kind of expression, and it never tells lies about them.

Sile's horse was a roan, and looked like a fast one under a light weight like his. Just large enough not to be called "ponyish," and with signs of high spirit. The moment the youngster sprang from the saddle and began to remove it it became manifest that there was a good understanding

between horse and boy. Any intelligent animal is inclined to make a pet of its master if it has a fair chance.

"Now, Hip, there isn't any grass, but you can make believe. I'll bring a nose-bag as soon as you've cooled off and have had a drink of water."

He was as good as his word, and there were oats in the nose-bag when he brought it, and Hip shortly left it empty, but in less than two hours from that time the two tilted wagons were once more moving steadily onward towards the West and the mountains.

There had been a hearty supper cooked and eaten, and there was not a human being in the party who seemed much the worse for fatigue. The spare horses and mules had taken the places of the first lot in harness, and it was plain that there was plenty of working power remaining, but there was a sort of serious air about the whole matter. The sun set after a while, and still, with occasional brief rests, the expedition pushed forward. It was a point to be noted that it travelled about twice as fast as the band of Nez Percés had been able to do after they had lost their ponies. It was not hampered by any heavily burdened foot-passengers. The moon arose, and now Sile was riding on in front with the muddy-bearded veteran.

"Pine," said he, "s'pose we don't come to grass and water?"

"Most likely we will before mornin', or before noon anyhow. If we don't, we must go on till we do."

"Kill all the mules?"

"They'll all die if we don't, sure's my name's Pine – Yellow Pine."

"They can't stand it –"

"They can stand anything but starvation. Did you ever try giving up water?"

"No; did you?"

"Well, I did. I was glad to give up giving it up after a few days. It's the queerest feeling you ever had."

"How'd it happen?"

"I don't feel like tellin' about it jest now. There's too good a chance for tryin' it again to suit me."

"Is that so? Pine, do you know, I wish you'd tell me how they came to call you Yellow Pine."

The fear of either thirst or hunger had plainly not yet fallen upon Sile, or he would not have asked that question just then. It sounded so much like fourteen years old and recklessness that the great, gaunt man turned in his saddle and looked at him.

"I'd call it – Well, now, you're a customer. Some reckon it's my complexion, and I am turned kind o' yaller, but it ain't. It's my own name."

"How'd you get it, anyway?"

"How? Well, my father was just like me; he was a wise man. He named me after his brother, my uncle Ogden, and after Colonel Yell, that was killed in the Mexican war. So I'm Yell O. Pine, and nobody but you ever cared how it kem so."

Sile was satisfied as to that one point, but there did not seem to be anything else on that prairie about which he was satisfied, and at last his companion remarked to him,

"Now look here, Sile Parks, you go back and tell the judge, if I've got to answer questions for you all night, he'll hev to raise my wages. I'm thirsty with it now, and there's no water to spare."

Sile was in no wise disconcerted, but rode back to the main body in excellent spirits. It was the first real danger of any sort that the expedition had encountered, and there was a keen excitement in it. He had read of such things, and now he was in one without the least idea in the world but what everything would come out all right, just as it does in a novel. Before midnight he had asked every other human being around him all the questions he could think of, and had dismounted four times to examine the grass at the wayside and see if it were of any better quality. Each time he was compelled to mount again and ride on to his father, "Chips."

When bunch-grass gets to be so dry that it will crumble in the fingers it ceases to be of any use except to carry a prairie-fire in a great hurry. It will do that wonderfully, but it will not do to feed animals on, and it was needful to have something better.

When a halt was called, at about twelve o'clock, and a rest of two hours was decided on, the barrels of water in the wagons were drawn upon for only a moderate ration all around, and the animals plainly testified their eagerness for more. They were not at all distressed as yet, but they would have been if they had done that amount of work under sunshine. When the moment for again setting out arrived and the word was given, Judge Parks inquired,

"Pine, where is Sile?"

"Where? I'd call it – There he is on his blanket, sound asleep. I'll shake him up."

"Do, while I put the saddle on his horse. Guess he's tired a little."

A sharp shake of Sile's shoulder had to be followed by another, and then a sleepy voice responded,

"Water? Why, Pine, there's a whole lake of it. Was you ever at sea?"

"Sea be hanged! Git up; it's time to travel."

"Ah, halloo! I'm ready. I dreamed we'd got there. Riding so much makes me sleepy."

He was quickly in the saddle again, and they went forward; but there were long faces among them at about breakfast-time that morning. They were halted by some clumps of sickly willows, and Yellow Pine said, mournfully,

"Yer's where the redskins made their next camp. They and their critters trod the pool down to nothin' and let the sun in onto it, and it's as dry as a bone. We're in for a hard time and no mistake."

Chapter V

A VERY OLD TRAIL

During all that was left of that happy day in the Nez Percé camp there was an immense amount of broiling and boiling done. Whoever left the great business of eating enough and went and sat down or lay down got up again after a while and did some more remarkable eating. All the life of an Indian trains him for that kind of thing, for he goes on in a sort of continual vibration from feast to famine.

All the other boys in camp were as hungry as Two Arrows, and as their hunger went down their envy of him went up; he had suddenly stepped ahead of them and had become an older boy in a moment. It was very much as if a boy of his age in the "settlements" had waked up, some fine morning, with a pair of mustaches and a military title, uniform and all.

Two Arrows was entitled to strut a little, and so was One-eye, but for some reason neither of them was inclined to anything but eating and lying down. One-eye may have felt lonely, for he found himself the only dog in all that camp, and he knew very well what had become of the dogs he used to know: they had gone to the famine, and there had been no sort of funeral ceremonies, and now there could be no kind of neighborly quarrel over bones any more. There was a reason, why One-eye should attach himself more closely than ever to his master and follow his every movement. They had killed two buffaloes in company, and there was no telling what they might or might not yet do if they kept together.

Two Arrows found the effects of his long fasting rapidly passing away, but he was like everybody else and needed a big sleep. One-eye had the only eye that did any watching all that night, and nobody but the fat squaw was up very early next morning. Her next company was the Big Tongue, and he at once began to talk about the game he intended to kill, now he had had something to eat. Two Arrows might not have been the next riser if it had not been for a friendly tug from One-eye, but the moment he was awake he knew that he was hungry again. He was hungry, but he was silent, and it was plain that he was thinking about something uncommonly interesting. He stood in front of his father's lodge, waiting for the breakfast that was now sure to come, when a light hand was laid upon his arm and a soft musical voice exclaimed, triumphantly,

"Two Arrows! Name!"

"Ugh," said he. "Na-tee-kah."

He hardly looked around, but the pleasantest face in all that band was smiling upon him. It bore a strong resemblance to his own, and belonged to an Indian girl a year or so younger than himself. She was well grown, slender, and graceful, and had a pair of eyes as brilliant as his, but a great deal more gentle and kindly in their expression. They lacked the restless, searching, eager look, and his, indeed were quieter than they had been the day before.

"Got plenty to eat now," she said. "Not starve to death any more."

"Eat all up," replied he. "Fool! Starve again, pretty soon."

"No, Long Bear and old men say, keep all there is left. Work to-day. Dry meat. Go hunting somewhere else. Not stay here."

There was a little more talk that indicated a very fair degree of affection between the brother and sister, and then Two Arrows said to her,

"Keep tongue very still. Come."

She followed him to the lower edge of the camp, and he silently pointed her to the place where the old buffalo trail came in.

"Great many make that. Long time. All know why."

"The cow came in there."

"Ugh! now come."

She followed him now to the upper end of the camp, and he pointed again to the trail, deeply and plainly made, going on into the gorges of the mountains.

"Buffalo go that way; Two Arrows follow. Say no word. Not find him pretty soon."

That was the meaning of all his thoughtfulness. He meant to set off on a hunt of his own planning, without asking permission of anybody. Two days earlier he would not have dreamed of such a piece of insubordination. Now he had won his right to do that very thing, and he meant to take advantage of it instantly. All the young ambition in him had been stirred to the boiling point, and his only remaining anxiety was to get a good supply of provisions and get out of the camp without being seen by anybody. He could look out for his weapons, including several of his father's best arrows, and Na-tee-kah at once promised to steal for him all the meat he wanted. She went right into his plan with the most sisterly devotion, and her eyes looked more and more like his when she next joined her mother and the other squaws at their camp-fire. There was no doubt but what her brother would have his marching rations supplied well, and of the best that was to be had.

There was no need for Two Arrows to steal from Long Bear. What between pride and buffalo meat the old chief was ready to give or rather lend him anything, and he deemed it his heroic son's day to parade and show off. He was entitled to do so with the best weapons in his father's collection. The day would surely come when he would be allowed to paint himself and do a great many other things belonging to full-grown braves and warriors. It was even lawful for him to wear a patch or two of paint now, and Na-tee-kah helped him to put it on. If he had been a white boy with his first standing-collar, he could not have been more particular, and every other boy in camp had something to say to the others about the fit of that vermilion.

It was a day of drying and smoking meat, and of eating as much as the older men permitted, and everybody wore an aspect of extreme good-humor except One-eye and his master. The dog and the boy alike kept away from the camp-fires and from all grown-up Indians. Towards the middle of the afternoon, Na-tee-kah slipped quietly out at the upper end of the camp, carrying her own buckskin sack nearly full of something, and nobody thought of asking her what there might be in it. She had not been gone many minutes before anybody loafing at that end of the camp might have seen her brother was following her. He had been standing near the spring for some time, in full rig, for the other boys to admire him, and now he walked dignifiedly away as if he were weary of being looked at. Half a mile farther up the rugged valley he caught up with Na-tee-kah, and she returned to camp without her bead-worked sack. There was nothing at all noticeable in the whole affair, unless some suspicious person had been closely watching them. It was after sunset before there was any special inquiry for Two Arrows, and it was dark before Na-tee-kah expressed her belief that he had "gone hunt." She replied freely to every question asked her, well knowing that there would be no pursuit, but she was more than a little relieved when the old chief, instead of getting angry about it, swelled up proudly and remarked,

"Two Arrows! young brave. All like father, some day. Kill more buffalo."

Then Na-tee-kah felt courage to speak about the trail and her brother's reasoning as to where it might lead to. She had her ears boxed for that, as it had a sound of giving advice to her elders, but it was not long before her father gravely informed a circle of the warriors and braves that the path pointed out by the buffalo cow was the one by which they must seek for more like her. It was very easy to convince them that they could do nothing upon the dry, sunburnt plains, or by staying to starve again in that camp. The objection made by Big Tongue that nobody knew where that old trail might carry them was met by Long Bear conclusively. He picked up a dry pony-bone that lay on the ground and held it out to Big Tongue.

"All other trail go this way. Know all about it. Been there."

It was enough. It was better to follow an unknown trail than to starve, and it was not long before it leaked out that Two Arrows was believed to have gone ahead of them on that very road.

Precisely how far he had gone nobody had any idea. They would hardly have believed if he had sent back word, for he had travelled most diligently. There were no longer any traces of starvation about him, except that he carried no superfluous weight of flesh. He had load enough, what with his provisions and his weapons, but he did not seem to mind it. He tramped right along, with a steady, springy step, which told a good deal of his desire to get as far away from camp as he could before his absence should be discovered.

For a little distance he had found the trail rising gently with the land. Then it turned to the left and went up and over a rocky hill, and then it turned to the right again, and just about sunset it looked for all the world as if it were running right into the side of a great precipice of the mountain range. The light of the sinking sun fell clearly and brightly upon the grand masses of quartz and granite rocks, and showed him the very point where the pathway seemed to end. It looked so, but Two Arrows knew that you cannot cut off the end of a buffalo path in that way, and he pushed on, every moment finding the way steeper and more winding. He could not make any "short cuts" over such ground as that, and every Indian boy knows a fact which the white engineers of the Pacific Railway found out for themselves – that is, that a herd of buffaloes will always find the best passes through mountain ranges, and then they will go over them by the best and easiest grades. Only by bridging a chasm, or blasting rocks, or by much digging, did the railway men ever improve upon the paths pointed out by the bisons.

Two Arrows had carefully marked his point, and just as the last rays of daylight were leaving him he sat down to rest in the mouth of what was little better than a wide "notch" in the side of the vast barrier.

"Ugh! pass," he said.

Chapter VI

A THIRSTY MARCH

That was a hard day's toil for the mining expedition. It was the second day of feasting by the Nez Percés upon the game won by Two Arrows, but there was no feasting done by Judge Parks and his men. Even Sile had no more questions to ask, and at nightfall their scanty supply of water was nearly gone. Every old watercourse and even "tow-heads" of dying bushes that they came to did but each give them another disappointment. The animals were holding out well, with frequent rests, for they had been taken care of even at the expense of the human beings.

Just before sunset, as they were plodding wearily along, Yellow Pine drew his rein, turned in his saddle, and pointed away across the plain in advance and to the right of them, exclaiming,

"Redskins!"

There was no mistake about it. In a few minutes more a pretty long line of pony-riders could be seen travelling steadily southward.

"Will they attack us, father?"

"I guess not. We are too strong, even if they were hostile."

"They won't make any muss," said Pine, confidently, as he again rode forward. "There's only some two dozen on 'em, and it isn't a good time for a fight."

It was evident that the two lines of travel, crossing each other at right angles, would bring the white and red men pretty near each other, and the latter even went out of their way to have it so. Sile all but forgot how thirsty he was when the train approached the straggling array of lances, and a bare-headed warrior rode out to meet Yellow Pine. The Roman-nosed sorrel mare sniffed at the pony as if she would have preferred a bucket of water, and the two riders held out their hands.

"How?" said Pine.

"Ugh! bad. No water. How?"

A significant motion of his hand towards his mouth accompanied the response, and Pine made one like it. Then he pointed at the wagons, and again towards the west, and made motions as if he were digging. The Indian understood, and nodded and pointed at himself:

"Ugh! Kiowa."

He made a motion as if pulling a bow, pointed southward and pretended to drink something, but when he turned his finger towards the west he shook his head.

"How?" said Pine again, and the two shook hands and all the Kiowas rode on as if they were in a hurry.

"That's a pretty bad report," said Pine to Judge Parks, and Sile muttered to himself:

"Why, he hardly uttered a word."

"What does he say?" asked his father.

"Worst kind," said Pine. "He says they have been hunting northerly for several weeks. Little game, and the drought driving it all away. He doubts if we find any water between here and the mountains. Hopes to reach it by to-morrow night in the direction he's taking. The rest of his band are down there now."

"Did he say all that?" exclaimed Sile in amazement.

"You wasn't a-watchin' of him. I told him what I thought about it and what we meant to do. Tell you what, my boy, if you're to meet many redskins you've got to learn sign language. It beats words all holler."

"Well, I did see his hands and yours a-going."

"Yes, and his face and mine too, and elbows and legs. It's as easy as fallin' off a log when you once get the hang of it."

"What do you think we had better do after that?" asked Judge Parks.

"Read our own signs. Push on for water till we get some. It can't be more'n one day, now. I know just about where I am. Risk my life on it."

So they went forward, but that night had to be taken for rest and the morning found men and horses in a terrible plight. Not one drop of water had they left, and all they had been able to do for the horses and mules had been to sponge their parched mouths. They had camped near some trees and bushes, as usual, and it was just about daylight that Yellow Pine came to wake up his employer.

"Look a' here, jedge. I was too much played out to find it last night, but here it is. Come."

"Well, what is it?" asked the judge, a moment later.

Yellow Pine was pointing at a broad, deeply trodden, flinty looking rut in the surface of the prairie.

"That's the old bufler path I follered last year, when I went into the mountains, or I'm the worst sold man you ever saw. It led me jest to where we all want to go, 'zackly as I told you."

"We'd better hitch up and follow it now, then."

"We had. It'll take us west on a bee-line, and it'll go to all the chances for water there are."

The buffaloes could safely be trusted for that, and before the sun was up the mining party was following the very path which had led the big game within reach of Two Arrows and One-eye. It was less than two hours afterwards, without anybody to carry a report of it to anybody else, that the whole Nez Percé camp disappeared, and all its human occupants also took the advice of the buffaloes. It was necessary to carry all the meat they had, and all the papposes, and a number of other things, and so it had not been possible to take all the lodges with their lodge-poles. Two of the smaller and lighter found bearers, but there were not squaws enough for the rest, and a sort of hiding-place was made for them among the rocks until they could be sent for. Indians on a journey load their ponies first, then their squaws, then the boys, but never a "brave" unless it is a matter of life and death. A warrior would as soon work for a living as carry a burden. It never takes long to break up an Indian hunting-camp, for there are no carpets or stoves or beds or pianos, and the band of Long Bear was on its way after Two Arrows and his dog in remarkably short order.

Judge Parks and his men and all his outfit would have travelled better and more cheerfully if they could have set out from beside a good spring of water. As it was, the best they could do was to dream of finding one before they should try to sleep again.

"Father," said Sile, at about twelve o'clock, "are we to stop anywhere for dinner? I'm getting husky."

"So is everybody. Imitate old Pine; he's chewing something."

"All the men have stopped chewing tobacco; they say it makes 'em thirstier."

"Of course it does. Try a chip or a piece of leather or a bit of meat – not salt meat."

"There isn't anything else."

"The less we eat the better, till we get something to drink."

"We'll all die, at this rate."

"Stand it through, my boy. I hope Pine is right about his trail and where it leads to."

He seemed confident enough about it, at any rate, and he and his Roman-nosed mare kept their place steadily at the head of the little column. So he was always the first to examine a hole or a hollow and look back and shake his head to let the rest know that it contained no water.

The sun seemed to shine hotter and hotter, and not a living creature made its appearance upon the dry and desolate plain. Away in the western horizon, at last, some dim and cloud-like irregularities began to show themselves, and Sile urged his weary horse to the side of his father, pointing at them.

"Will there be some rain?" he asked, in a dry and husky whisper.

"My poor boy! are you so thirsty as that? Those are the mountains."

Sile's mind distinctly connected the idea of mountains with that of water, and he took off his hat and swung it, vainly trying to hurrah.

"They're a long way off yet, but we can get there. Old Pine is right."

It was wonderfully good news, but every man had been allowed to gather it for himself. Nobody cared to say an unnecessary word to anybody else. It was impossible to tell the horses, and the poor brutes were suffering painfully.

"I reckon they'll hold out," said Pine; "but they'll only jest do it. We're making the tightest kind of a squeeze."

So they were, and it grew tighter and tighter as they went on. Sile managed finally to get up to Yellow Pine in the advance, and whisper,

"Were you ever any thirstier than this in all your life?"

"Yes, sir! This isn't much. Wait till you know yer tongue's a-turnin' to a dry sponge and there's coals of fire on the back of yer neck. Keep your courage up, my boy."

Sile had done so. His father had said a good deal to him about the pluck with which young Indians endured that sort of thing, and he had determined to show "Indian blood," as if he had some in him. It was the hardest kind of hard work, and it kept him all the while thinking of rivers and lakes and ice and even lemonade. At last he saw a sage-hen, and he said to Pine,

"Isn't that a sign of water?"

"Them things never drink," said Pine "When you come to eat 'em they need to be b'iled twice. They're jest the driest bird there is. There's the mountains, though."

"Oh dear me!" groaned Sile. "But they're getting bigger, and perhaps we'll reach 'em some time."

Chapter VII

THE GREAT CAÑON

It was not yet dark when Two Arrows and One-eye halted at the mouth of the pass. One-eye looked forward and whined, but his master looked back and thought the matter over. He had travelled well and over some pretty rough ground, but the trail had been wide and well marked. It was almost like a road, so far as room went, but Two Arrows knew nothing of wheels, neither did that trail. He was considering the curious fact that not a man of his band knew that such a path existed or where it led to. It was something to set his ambition on fire only to have discovered and followed anything so new and remarkable. It was a deed for an old brave rather than for a boy of fifteen. He needed rest, but when he again turned and looked into the pass he at once arose and walked on.

"Dark soon. Maybe can't walk then. Do some more before that," said Two Arrows.

He was in a spot worth looking at. Some old-time convulsion of nature had cleft the mountain barrier at that place so that giant walls of rock arose on either side of him for hundreds of feet, almost perpendicularly. For some distance ahead the cleft was nearly straight, and its gravelly bottom was from ten to thirty yards wide. There were not many rocky fragments or boulders, but it was evident that at some seasons of the year torrents of water came pouring through that gorge to keep it clean.

"When snow melts," muttered Two Arrows, "pretty bad place."

No doubt, or after any great storm or "cloud-burst" among the peaks beyond; but all was dry as a bone now. It was sure to become dark early in such a chasm as that, and there was no telling how much need there might be for seeing the way. On went the young explorer until he came to a point where the chasm suddenly widened. It was a gloomy sort of hollow and littered with fragments of trees, drift-wood of old torrents.

"Camp," said Two Arrows to One-eye. "Make fire."

If a dog could use flint and steel, no doubt One-eye would have obeyed; as it was, Two Arrows had to attend to that business for himself, and it was not long before a great blazing fire of mountain pine was throwing flashes of magnificent light upon the mighty precipices in all directions. The gray granite stood out like shadows, and the white quartz glittered marvellously, but the Nez Percé boy had no time to admire them. He had his supper to cook and eat, and he had found some water in a hollow of the rocks; no sunshine hot enough to dry it up had ever found its way down there. Then drift-wood was gathered to keep some sort of a blaze burning all night. There was no danger from human enemies in that utter solitude, but there were wild beasts among the mountains; night would be their prowling-time, and not one among them would venture too near a fire.

Two Arrows was well entitled to a sound sleep, and he had one; when he awoke, in the earliest gray of the next morning, the world was in fair daylight everywhere outside of that deep crack in the mountains. He ate heartily and at once pushed on, determined to have some fresh game before night if possible. Such thoughts as he sent back to the Nez Percé camp did not include the idea that it was already breaking up to follow him; still less did he have any imagination of thirsty white people toiling across a waterless plain along that buffalo trail.

He was in no danger of losing the way, for his path was walled in for him. Towards midday it ceased to go up, up, up, and the chasm widened into a great rocky cañon of wonderful ruggedness and beauty. Two Arrows had been among the mountains before, in other ranges, and this seemed to him very much like what he might have expected. Now, however, the trail turned to the right and picked its way along the steep side of the varying slopes. Here it was wider and there it was narrower, until it came to a reach of natural roadway that even a bison must have hunted for before he found it. Away up it went in zigzags, seeming to take skilful advantage of every natural help

it came to, and then it shot along the mountain-side for a thousand feet, traversing a mere ledge, where one formation of rock projected out below another and made a shelf for it to go upon. If a man had fallen from that shelf he would have gone down a tremendous depth upon jagged rocks at the bottom of the cañon.

Two Arrows wasted no time in useless observations or admiration. Where herd after herd of wild cattle had tramped before him he could surely follow, and at the end of that ledge the road began to descend. The descent was gradual, and uncommonly free from breakages. It led, before a great while, once more to the bottom of the gorge. Several times Two Arrows saw "big-horn" or Rocky Mountain sheep among the rocks above him, far out of the reach of his arrows. He felt a longing for antelope venison, but there was no use in trying to catch one of those fellows. Hotter than anything else he felt the fever and fire of his ambition, stirring him to push on and do more than he had ever heard of as done by any other boy of his age among all the bands of his nation. It made him walk fast and firmly in the bracing mountain air, and he drew his breath somewhat quickly at times, when he thought of the wonderful things which might be before him. He had no watch, but just as the sun stood nearly over his head, or, rather, over the middle of the great gorge, he could see that this was beginning to grow broader and not so steep. It was promising to lead out into something, and One-eye dashed on ahead as if to ascertain what it might be. Two Arrows stood still for a moment and watched him, and then he started as if something had pricked him. The dog was crouching and creeping as if he had his remaining eye upon game of some sort or on danger. His master also crouched and crept, slipping forward rapidly from rock to rock. In three minutes more he lay beside One-eye, and they both had something worth while to look at. Not more than three hundred yards beyond them, on the crest of a rocky ledge that came out from the mountain-side like an abutment, stood a big-horn antelope. He had seen One-eye and was looking at him. He may have been studying whether or not it could be needful for an antelope away up where he was to spring away any farther from a dog and an Indian boy. He had better have been looking behind him and above him, for his real danger was not in the quiver of Two Arrows; it was crouching upon a higher fragment of the very ledge which held him, and it was preparing for immediate action. It was a cougar, or American panther, of full size, on the watch for antelopes, and now had crept almost within springing distance. Two Arrows laid his hand upon the head of One-eye to keep him silent, and watched breathlessly to see the end of that hunting. Nearer and nearer crept the cougar, and still the big-horn was absorbed in his study of matters down below. He stepped forward to the very edge, and below him the rock came down with a perpendicular face of a hundred feet. There was no danger that he would grow dizzy, but even the cougar would have done wisely to have ascertained beforehand the precise nature of the trap set for him. As it was, he gathered his lithe and graceful form for his leap, every muscle quivering with eagerness, and he put all his strength into one great, splendid bound. It was as sure as a rifle-shot, and it landed him upon the shoulders of the big-horn. He had seized his prize, but he had done too much: he had fallen with a weight and force which sent him and his antelope irresistibly over the rocky edge, and down, down, down they came together with a great thud upon the granite below.

"Whoop!" The voice of Two Arrows ringing through the gorge was joined by the fierce bark of One-eye as they sprang forward. An older warrior might have waited to know the effect of that fall before he interfered between a cougar and his game, but Two Arrows did not think of hesitation. It was just as well. What between the blow of the cougar and the force of the fall, the big-horn was dead. He had somewhat broken the effect of the terrible shock upon his enemy by falling under him, but even the tough body of the great "cat o' mountain" had not been made for such plunges, and he lay on the rock stunned and temporarily disabled. Whether it would, after all, have killed him, he was never to know, for, just as he was staggering to his feet, a Nez Percé Indian boy charged upon him with a long lance, while a large and ambitious dog rushed in and seized him by the throat. He was taken at an advantage.

Thrust, thrust, thrust, in fiercely rapid succession, came the keen blade of the lance, and One-eye bore down and throttled a brute that could have killed four such dogs in anything like a fair fight.

It was tremendous hunting for a boy of fifteen. A cougar to bring down his antelope for him, and a precipice to help him kill his cougar, and only just enough work for his lance and dog to entitle him to the honor of closing, single-handed, with one of the most dangerous of wild animals. He had done that very thing, nevertheless, and was entitled to all the credit of it. If he had waited to consider the matter, he might have had a much harder fight for it. What was more, his energy and enterprise and endurance had resulted in bringing him to the right place at the right time, instead of somewhere else.

Chapter VIII

WATER! WATER!

By the time the band of Nez Percés was well on its way, the Big Tongue had persuaded himself that the movement was in large part a following of his own advice. He felt very free to say as much in the presence of several squaws. He even ruffled up and looked large when Na-tee-kah laughed and turned away her head. She was too young to say anything in reply to a grown-up brave, but just behind her was the fat squaw, and her tongue was habitually more at liberty.

"Kill cow same way," said she. "Two Arrows kill him first; then Big Tongue. Great brave!"

Big Tongue turned upon her almost fiercely, exclaiming.

"Squaw no talk!"

"Big Tongue keep still. Squaw-boy beat him. Big Tongue shoot arrows into dead cow. Ha-ha-pah-no not afraid of squaw-brave."

Ha-ha-pah-no had a tongue and a reputation for it, and the Big Tongue did not threaten her any more. Too many squaws and girls joined in the laugh against him. Perhaps the fact that Ha-ha-pah-no had a husband over six feet high had something to do with it, and that Na-tee-kah was the only daughter of Long Bear. It was not safe to quarrel overmuch with either of them. They were almost as safe as a large dog is if he is known to be quick-tempered. Nobody kicks him.

There was an attempt made at pretty fast travelling, for all the wise warriors knew that the tramp across the mountains must be a hard one, however good the trail might be, and there were a good many very sober faces among them. They had lost their horses and their dogs, and now they were leaving behind them a great many other things, and they felt as if hard times had come. Starvation is a very severe school-master.

So, for that matter, is thirst, even if provisions are plentiful, and Sile Parks learned a great lesson of endurance that day. His father had not uttered a word of complaint. Yellow Pine had not murmured, and when Sile said to him,

"All the men seem to stand it the very best kind," he had all but contemptuously replied,

"Them? Why, every soul on 'em's an old mountain man. Not a greenhorn or a tenderfoot among 'em. You won't catch one on 'em a whimperin', not if they die for it."

So there were other men besides red Indians who were able to suffer and be silent, and Sile tried hard to be that kind of man; but long before sunset he felt as if he were choking.

The mountains to the westward loomed up larger and less cloudily as the worn-out teams were urged forward. The trail pointed steadily towards them, and Yellow Pine unhesitatingly asserted that they were on the right track.

"No mistake about it, jedge. It ain't no common cross-prairie trail. It's one of their old migration tracks. They've been a treadin' of it sence the year one."

The "year one" was a good while ago, but a good deal of hard tramping, by many bisons, year after year, had been required to make that ancient cattle-path. No grass had grown upon it for nobody could guess how many generations, and it was likely to be in the way of ploughing whenever that plain should be turned into farming-land.

The greatest care was taken of the animals, those in the traces being taken out and changed frequently, and at last all the riders dismounted and led their horses. Yellow Pine every now and then went around and examined to see how things were looking, and Sile went with him.

"They'll stan' it, every critter of 'em," he said, repeatedly. "They're all good stock; good condition. I picked 'em out."

"Your mare is the ugliest in the lot," said Sile, recklessly.

"Best though. Out-walk, out-run, and out-starve any critter in the outfit, 'cepting me."

"Can you out-travel a horse?"

"Course I can – most horses. I don't know 'bout the old mare. She can out-travel anything. She's good tempered, too; knows just when it's the right time to kick and break things. Oh but can't she tear, though!"

He looked at her affectionately, as if her very temper were one of her virtues, and she glanced back at him, showing the whites of her eyes in a way that indicated anything but a placid mind.

"She's always riley when she doesn't get plenty to drink," said Pine, "but she hasn't kicked once in all this. Knows it isn't any fault of mine. We'll git there, old lady. Don't you go off the handle."

Another hour and the mountains were very tall, and looked cool, and seemed to promise all sorts of things.

"The mines we are after are in among 'em," said Judge Parks to his son. "Our trip across the plains has been a quick one; all the quicker for this push."

"Hope there'll be a good spring of water right in the edge of them," said Sile, but his voice was huskier than ever and he was struggling against a feeling of faintness.

"Poor fellow!" said the judge to himself. "I mustn't say too much to him. It's an awful time for me."

So it was, for every now and then the thought would come to him,

"What if, after all, we should not find water when we get there?"

The sun sank lower and lower, and now at last Yellow Pine stood still and leaned against his mare, pointing forward.

"Jedge! Jedge – there they are!"

"What is it, Pine?"

The judge could hardly speak, and Sile had such a ringing in his ears that he could hardly hear, but Yellow Pine gasped out,

"Them there mesquite scrubs. I was just a beginning to say to myself, what if I'd mistook the lay of the land, and there they are. I went through 'em last spring was a year ago. It's all right!"

The men tried hard to cheer, but it was of no manner of use. All they could do was to plod on and drag their horses after them. The teams in the wagons halted again and again, panting and laboring, and every slight roll of the plain was a tremendous obstacle, but all was overcome, inch by inch.

Yellow Pine had evidently felt his responsibility as guide more deeply than he had been willing to confess. He led on now with his mouth open and panting, for he had given his own last ration of water to Sile Parks and was thirstier than the rest of them. So, for that matter, had Sile's father, but some men suffer more from thirst than others and the judge had held out remarkably. Just inside the range of mesquites Yellow Pine stopped short.

"Bufler been killed here inside of two days," he exclaimed. "Must be Indians nigh, somewhere. Keep an eye out, boys."

It was no time for any caution that included delay, and he walked on like a man who knew exactly where he was, and all followed him, the men cutting away the bushes here and there to let the wagons pass more easily. On, on, until at last Yellow Pine reached the spring.

"Here it is," he said faintly, and then he lay down by it and began to drink slowly, using his hand for a cup.

"Boys," said Judge Parks, "be careful how you drink too much at first. Take it easy. Sponge the mouths of the horses and then let them have a little at a time. Sile, my poor boy, come with me."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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