

One

Joe Blade may never have taken a crumb from the needy, but, by God, he certainly took the whole damn biscuit when it came to gall.

I'm warning you right here and now this is a pretty harrowing story and I'm not at all sure that I am going to enjoy putting it down on paper. I never did get a lot of fun out of human misery or plain injustice, but this is a story that should be told, so I shall go ahead and tell it.

There was this small band of Indians, no more than a dozen or so of them, camped on the north bank of the Arkansas River. They were Southern Cheyenne, a people who were allied to the Arapaho and one time with the Comanches and Kiowas, while their northern brethren tied in with the western nations of the Sioux. Through the summer, they had hunted with fair success on the plains of southern Kansas and northern Texas. Now they were making their way into Colorado where they would subsist meagerly on what was left of the summer hunt and what they could gain from the more difficult winter hunt. Their food stock consisted mainly of pemmican and jerky. They had some flour, sugar and tobacco for which they had traded with a white man for buffalo hides. They were, on that fall evening, not discontented with their lot. Their bellies were full and their ponies, while not still in their full summer strength, were still strong enough to carry them and their effects.

The Indians composed two united families; in fact, the families of two brothers and could therefore be regarded as one. These brothers had as wives two sisters who, as yet, had borne them no children, for there had been no time for them to be fruitful. The rest of the joint family was made up of mother, aunts, an ancient uncle and younger brothers and sisters.

They were, you will note, not in a position to act aggressively nor, one imagines, did they have any wish to be so. All they had on their minds was the wish to reach safely a sheltered spot where they might stay for the winter protected against that harsh and terrible time, the time of lean bellies and aching bones.

These were the people who were attacked by a small band of white men and killed. Though not entirely killed, as you shall see. Let it suffice to say that something like half-a-dozen men fell

upon them and, hacking at them as though they were beasts cornered or injured in the hunt, they murdered them there. They then took the horses, packing the Indians' supplies on some and mounting others, and rode away. It is said that this brutal victory so pleased the victors that they departed from the scene laughing and singing.

Or, at least, so said the only eye-witness.

She was a young Cheyenne girl whose name, so far as I have been able to ascertain, has not been recorded. Certainly, when she was asked she gave no reply and one can only surmise that the murder of her people so affected her brain that she lost all memory of it.

She was singing on a rock with her feet in the river when she was found by the man, Joe Blade. He was heading west at the time on foot, hoping either to reach shelter or to come on a horse more by luck than judgment. He had been robbed of his horse, his pack-mule, gear and weapons by thieves down near the New Mexico border. While not yet at the end of his strength, he was in no enviable physical condition. He had kept, he said later, to the banks of the Arkansas because there at least he would not die of thirst.

When he heard the girl, he thought at first that her voice was the cry of some night creature carried to him on the wind, but, as he drew nearer, the humanity of the sound impressed itself on him. As he drew yet nearer, he recognized the tongue as Cheyenne, though he knew no more than a few words of the language.

It was now near midnight and the moon was riding high in a clear sky. Blade approached close to the river bank and, looking down, saw the girl on the boulder. The sight of any Indian in the wilderness created unease in a white man, so Blade at once grew wary. Where there was a girl, there were most likely men and where there were Indian men there could be danger. Blade, being a man whose life seemed to be dedicated to danger, perpetually and habitually did his best to avoid it.

On the other hand, he told himself, a woman could signify food, shelter, even a horse, all of which were attractive to a man set afoot. He compromised by keeping the singing woman within earshot and carefully scouting the area to check on the number of painted braves with a penchant for collecting white scalps who might be within striking distance.

It was now that he stumbled on the carnage of the Indian camp.

If you have not read previously of the exploits of Joseph Blade, you will be unaware that the sight of blood was not new to him. Since he had entered on the career of lawman, investigator

and professional adventurer (or privately financed peace officer as he preferred to call himself), he had become inured to the sight of men done to death by fire-arms, stabbed by steel, deprived of their scalps, and the physical mutilation sometimes resorted to by men moved to violence whether in the wilderness or in cities. Spilled human blood he accepted as one of the less pleasant facts of his life. Even so, the sight that now met his eyes was the result of a savagery of a degree that he had not met before.

His experience in such things had hardened him against any outward sign of disgust and horror, but that did not prevent his mind recoiling from the grotesque and macabre sight of the ruin of that small Indian camp and its inhabitants. It was as though for a short while a party of madmen had been let loose, their tortured minds allowing them to express their utter hatred of mankind only in the destruction of the last part of human flesh. Men, women and children had been hacked and battered beyond recognition. All the pitiful possessions of a wandering band of primitive people that could not be carried away in pockets, on human or animal backs, had been destroyed.

Blade wandered amongst this scene of carnage and destruction, stricken and horrified by it as an expression of insane hatred. The horror was increased with ghastly drama by the cold unearthly light of the moon that shone down on it, glistening here on the unseeing eye and showing there the dark stain which so short a while before had been life blood in human veins.

When he could take no more, he walked to a distance where he was no longer reached by the nauseating sweet smell of death and sat down on a rock, telling himself that he now knew for sure that he stood in no danger from the Indians. The only survivor was there at the edge of the Arkansas singing her song of mourning, driven into madness by the insanity of the attackers.

When he had recovered himself, he realized that he must do something for this poor wretch and climbed down to her. At first, she showed terrible fear of him and would have fled had he not caught her and held her. She fought to escape him with violence and desperation as would a trapped animal, but he managed to retain his hold on her. No doubt she thought him one of her attackers. Gradually and after a commendable show of patience, he managed to soothe her and to impress on her that he meant her no harm. Holding her fast by the wrist, he led her through the shallows of the river past the ruined camp and finally brought her to a place sheltered from the wind, where he built a fire. By this she sat crouched and wild-eyed staring into the flames and picturing to herself heaven knows what in her disturbed mind.

They stayed together thus, hungry and growing weaker by the day, for several days, walking in the daylight and stopping at night to sleep by the warmth of a fire. She grew accustomed to him and made no attempt to escape from him, walking obediently and without complaint a pace to his rear and to one side of him. Hunger and the state of her mind showed on her face and her eyes grew large in it, but her body was strong and Blade thought that she withstood the rigors of that journey better than he did.

She was, he could see, a fine girl physically in any man's language, beautifully proportioned in her body and delicate in her features. Her eyes, when not as wild as they were now, must have been luminous and gentle. Together, then, they walked along the Arkansas until they came on the camp of George McMasters, a Cheyenne half-breed trapper and hunter. By this time Blade was ready to drop. His boots had been discarded and hunger had started to impair his senses. He behaved, as McMasters described the incident later, like a half-wit until his hunger had been satisfied. He and the girl slept the rest of the day and the following night through. Then, over breakfast and almost fully recovered, Blade told McMasters what had happened to the girl's people.

McMasters was an interesting man, something of a rarity among his kind. The son of a wealthy trader, a business associate of the mighty Bent brothers, he was a literate, widely-read man who had walked the white man's path until his middle twenties. His mother being a Cheyenne, he had spent some time with her people and while with them had witnessed a massacre of one of their bands by the army. This had turned him bitterly against his father's people and he had consciously rejected them. Now he lived whenever possible in the wilds, subsisting on trapping and hunting, leading a wandering and rootless life, unable to be an Indian thoroughly, unwilling to live with whites.

His skill in the wilds was unequalled and he possessed a fund of lore concerning the Indians and the lives of animals. Blade knew him of old and found him a mild companionable fellow who loved to talk, which Blade always found surprising, remembering his liking for the lonely places of the West.

McMasters treated the Indian girl with great kindness and spoke to her in her own tongue.

He told Blade: 'We have to go carefully, Joe. This girl will act rationally enough from here on, but she has lost all memory of the past for sure. Whether her memory will ever come back to her, I couldn't say. One thing is certain—she don't have any folks and she's on her lonesome. What

we do with her, I have no idea. Find some Cheyenne and leave her with them?’

McMasters’ father, whom Blade had also known, was a tall man of great dignity. The trapper was a man of a very different kind—small, quick in movement, full of sparkle and vivacity. Yet, under the happy exterior, as Blade knew, was a bitter and injured human being, marked by an inborn sadness that would never leave him. He was dark and bearded, with clear and pale blue eyes. His nose was all Cheyenne and stood out from his face like a noble beacon of pride. This gave him a look of thrust and power. God help the fool who treated this fellow like a half-breed, it announced.

‘What do you aim to do, Joe?’ he asked.

Blade turned the chunks of meat he was toasting over the fire.

‘Find the men who did this?’ he said.

‘Is the question meant for me?’ McMasters asked, his bright eyes mocking Blade. ‘Me—I don’t much care for men who kill Indians. But you—I never heard you were a great Indian-lover.’

Blade looked a little mad at this. His eyes were mean when he turned them on McMasters. ‘I don’t see what in hell this has to do with being an Indian-lover. Just take the woman off my hands, George, and loan me a horse.’

McMasters filled his hand-carved pipe thoughtfully. He was a great whittler and carver. When he had fired it with a brand from the fire, he relaxed on one elbow and smiled across the flames at Blade.

‘I don’t have a notion to do either,’ he said. ‘Not that she ain’t pretty. Nicest looking gal I set eyes on in a coon’s age and that’s a fact.’

Blade looked at him coldly.

‘Is there any place I can raise a horse around here?’ he demanded.

McMasters nodded across the fire at the girl and said: ‘She’s going to need folks, Joe. Maybe she ain’t anything more than an Indian to you. But I’m more Indian than white and she’s a real live person to me.’

‘I didn’t say—’ said Blade.

‘You don’t have to say,’ McMasters said. Tell me what you aim to do when you catch up with these fellers.’

‘I didn’t think that far ahead,’ Blade replied.

‘But you think the same sons-of-bitches killed the Cheyenne as robbed you. Right?’

‘Right,’ said Blade.

‘It sounds to me,’ said the trapper, ‘that you have a mind to kill ’em.’

‘Maybe I do.’

McMasters puffed at his pipe for five minutes before he rose to his feet, knocked it out on the palm of his hand into the fire and put it away.

‘Seems to me,’ he said, ‘you’re going to need some help. I’ll go along with you.’

Blade looked up at him and said: ‘Good.’

‘Just keep it in mind, Joe—when we meet up with ’em, I’ll do what I think fit. If I work my stint on the trail, I earn the right to do like I think best. Hear?’

Blade eyed him soberly for a moment and said: ‘All right.’

McMasters jerked his chin Indian-fashion in the direction of the grazing horses. ‘You take the dun. The little lady can use the mule.’ He had kept the neat little strawberry mare for himself. The animal was renowned for its speed and stamina and McMasters had wagered her on many occasions both against Indians and whites.

Blade said without a glimmer of a smile: ‘When we get my grullo back, I’ll make that old mare of yours look like she’s standing still.’

‘Hundred dollars?’ said McMasters.

Blade swallowed hard on that, but he said: ‘You’re on.’

The Indian girl started to weep silently. McMasters moved over to her and placed a hand on her head, speaking to her softly in her own tongue. She looked up at him, took his hand in both hers and laid her face against it.

Blade said: ‘Now you started something.’

‘Maybe I could do worse,’ said McMasters. He went and caught up the horses. The girl would use the pack-saddle on the mule. For Blade McMasters rigged up a kind of aparaho as best he could with the use of pelts, blankets and rawhide. He even fashioned a crude pair of stirrups from rawhide and promised that, while they were on the trail, he would carve a pair from wood for Blade. He grinned when he added: ‘If we have to follow these fellers long enough, I’ll cut you a saddle-tree and have you riding in style.’

When they were mounted, Blade found the makeshift saddle extraordinarily comfortable. The girl obediently perched herself on the packs on the mule. As they headed back along the edge of

the river, Blade said to McMasters: 'You should have seen what those animals did, George. But the varmints will have cleaned them up by now.'

McMasters said: 'I saw the same thing once. A man only has to see it once.'

Blade nodded: 'Sure.'