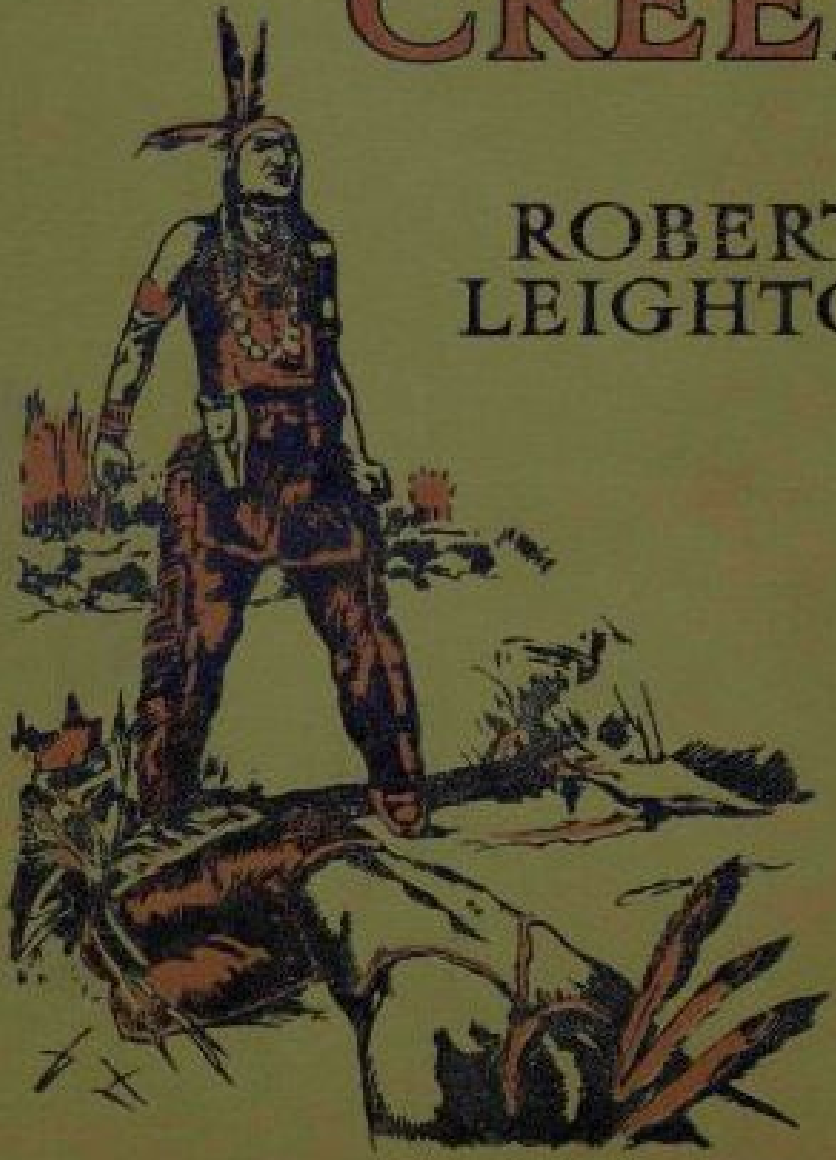
SOFTFOOT OF SILVER CREEK

ROBERT LEIGHTON



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SOFTFOOT OF SILVER CREEK

BY

ROBERT LEIGHTON

Author of "Woolly of the Wild," "Sea Scout and Savage," "The White Man's Trail," etc.

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Softfoot of Silver Creek

CHAPTER I

A PLAYMATE'S PERIL

SOFTFOOT heard the girl's stealthy approach through the long grass behind him. Above the laughing voice of the near waterfall, above the prolonged roar of the far-off buffalo herds that crowded the prairie, and above the oily rasping of his knife on the sharpening stone on his knee, his keen hearing knew the sound of her light tread as she crept out from among the pine trees into the sunlit clearing on the bluff.

He did not turn, but only dropped the stone, swept back the straying thick locks of his long, black hair, and then, with his thumb, meditatively tested the razor edge of his blade. Sitting very still, he lifted his dreamy eyes to glance forward across the glistening creek and the billowing prairie to the dark sky beyond the purple mountain peaks that were spanned by a magnificent rainbow.

A moving shadow crossed the brown tan of his fringed leggings; a ripe crimson berry dropped upon his bare arm, and on the turf at his side he saw a very small moccasin of pure white doeskin, encrusted with blue and white beads and edged with ermine.

"Wenonah has wandered far from the lodges to gather her berries," he said, "and she has no blanket to shelter her if there is rain."

"Softfoot did not look round," the girl laughed. "How did he know that Wenonah was near?"

"He did not need to look round," Softfoot explained. "He heard her walking in the forest. The birds told him that Wenonah was gathering odahmin berries."

"Softfoot hears all things," Wenonah responded. "I think he can hear the grass growing. He can hear the white clouds sailing across the sky."

She propped her heavy parfleche of berries against a mossy boulder and seated herself at her playmate's side.

"Oh, nushka—look, look!" she cried, now seeing the rainbow. "The sky god has brought out his bow! He is going on the buffalo trail. I like his bow. It is a very strong and beautiful bow—stronger than yours, Softfoot, and even more beautiful."

"It is beautiful," Softfoot agreed, gazing at the arched splendour. "Yes, it is beautiful."

"Tell me, Softfoot, where does the rainbow find all his many colours?" Wenonah asked. "I want very much to know."

Softfoot thrust his knife into the case at his belt.

"It is that when the wild flowers of the prairie die, they all go up there to live again in the rainbow," he told her simply.

"If the sky god is not quick, the petzekee will all be gone," said Wenonah, turning her eyes to the prairie.

On both sides of Silver Creek the plains were black with the moving shaggy monsters, all drifting westward. Great bulls were cropping the grass on the outskirts of the herd; yellow calves ran about their mothers or impatiently butted at them. The young cows and bulls were scattered all over the plain, steadily grazing, always moving in the same direction, sometimes in long, continuous lines, racing quickly down the slopes and climbing laboriously where the ground was steep. In crossing the river they swam in single file, like threaded black beads.

"They will not all be gone," said Softfoot. "They are countless as the flowers of the prairie. For many days the herds have been crossing to their new feeding-grounds, as you see them now, moving, moving along and eating up the grass as they go. They are as a river that never stops running."

"Why do not the Pawnees ride out and kill them?" asked Wenonah. "Every day they could kill more and more."

"Our village is already red with meat," Softfoot reminded her. "Our women have more buffalo robes than they can clean and dress—more beef and fat than they can make into pemmican. Why should more be killed when our buffalo runners are tired of killing?"

"Our medicine men should make the young braves and boys ride out on the buffalo hunt," urged Wenonah. "Softfoot has never killed a buffalo."

"No." Softfoot shook his head sadly and drew a deep breath.

"I think the petzekee is a very stupid animal," reflected Wenonah. "It should be easy to kill one. If I were a buffalo, I should not be so stupid as those that are crowded under the cut-bank there. Why does their medicine not tell them that it is too steep for them to climb? Why do they not swim to another place?"

She was watching a vast, writhing, bellowing mass of the hairy giants of the prairie. They had crossed the creek to a steep red wall of cliff which blocked their way. Instead of swimming back into the stream to find a good landing, they pressed all together in a panic bunch, to be trampled or gored to death by their companions, or to sink under their own weight into the silt. Many fell back and were drowned. Carcases could be seen floating down the current towards the cataract of Rising

Mist.

"The fishes will eat them," cried Wenonah. "But I am sorry that so many good buffalo robes should be spoilt."

"We could do nothing with them," said Softfoot.

"The Pawnees could sell them to the paleface people," Wenonah argued. "They buy many robes and buffalo tongues."

Softfoot shook his head.

"The paleface people would buy them, yes," he acknowledged. "But what does the paleface give to the Indian in return for the buffalo robes and dried tongues and pemmican? We have our bows and arrows for the hunting. We do not need the white man's guns, which only cause war. We can make our own clothing, build our own wigwams, and be happy. We have good drink from the streams. We do not need the firewater of the paleface. Why should we kill the buffalo to get things that we do not want—that only do us harm? Our fathers lived in peace; they were happy before the white man came into the land of the redskin. Eagle Speaker has said so, and he is wise."

Wenonah displayed her two moccasined feet.

"It is from the paleface that we get our beautiful beads, our silk thread, our steel needles," she stated. "Your knife, Softfoot, was made by the paleface. You would be proud to own a white man's gun. And do not the Pawnees get from him the tea, the sugar, the pain-killer, and all the pretty and useful things that our braves bring home from Fort Benton in exchange for their furs and pemmican? In all our lodges, we have cooking pots that were made in the land of the paleface. We have too many buffaloes. Our braves should all have guns to kill them."

As she spoke she bent forward, reached forth her left hand very quickly and seized a large, lustrous blue dragonfly that had alighted upon a flower beside her. She held the insect a prisoner, while with the fingers of her other hand she caught at one of the filmy wings, watching the creature's struggle to get free.

"Stop," cried Softfoot. "You are hurting the poor kwone-she. Let it fly away!"

Wenonah swiftly tore the wing from its socket and flung the injured insect into Softfoot's face. The dragonfly fell into the grass and tried to take flight with awkward, lop-sided jumps.

"You make me very cross," declared Softfoot angrily. "You are cruel, Wenonah. The beautiful kwone-she was happy drinking honey from the flower. It was doing no harm."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed Wenonah, rising to her feet. "You call me cruel for hurting a useless fly? It is because Softfoot thinks it cruel that he will not go out on the

buffalo trail? Poor buffalo! It would hurt so very much to be killed!"

Softfoot had risen also. The girl's ridicule pained him. But he smiled.

"When Softfoot is no longer a boy he will go to the buffalo hunt," he told her. "But the animals are his brothers. He loves them. He does not want to take life."

"No," retorted Wenonah, standing confronting him with her back towards the boulder, "that is why he is not as the other Pawnee boys, who set their traps and bring home many beaver tails, many ermine furs and fox skins. Softfoot is afraid to kill. When my father, the big chief Three Stars, gave him a good bow and a sheaf of arrows and told him to go hunting in the forest, he came back to the wigwams with empty hands. He had killed nothing."

Softfoot glanced aside searchingly. He had heard something which seemed to fill him with alarm, coming from the rear of the boulder.

"He did not want to kill the pretty squirrels," Wenonah went on, "or the rabbits at play among the leaves; the beavers at work in the pools, or the fawns with their soft eyes. He talked to them. He called them all his brothers. Pah! He is as his father before him. He is a coward! And a coward can never be a true Indian. I will tell the Pawnee warriors and squaws that Softfoot is a coward."

She looked at him with contempt. She did not hear the ominous rattling sound at her feet, like the rustling of dry leaves in the rank grass. Softfoot leapt forward and flung the girl aside out of danger. He had seen the long brown rattlesnake sliding out from beneath the boulder, giving its harsh warning and coiling as it raised its head ready to strike at Wenonah's bare hand as she stooped to pick up her parfleche of berries. And now as Wenonah turned to rebuke him for so roughly pushing her aside, she saw him draw his knife.

He had crouched, resting both his hands on his thighs. His moccasined feet were not two paces away from the venomous reptile's brown, uplifted head; and again the crackling noise sounded.

The Indian boy's knife flashed in the sun. His left hand darted forward and seized the snake in a tight grip of the thin neck behind the repulsive head. He held it pressed against the mossy surface of the boulder, and with one quick, determined slash of his blade he severed the head from the body that coiled itself, like the lash of a whip, around his bare left arm.

The severed head dropped at his feet. He drew back from it, flung the coiled snake from his arm, and then went down on his knees and with his knife dug a hole in the ground into which he thrust the still gaping head, burying it deep and stamping it down with his heel.

When he turned round from his work to pick up the parfleche of berries,

Wenonah stood watching him with astonished eyes. But Wenonah was not alone. Beside her was the tall, majestic figure of Three Stars, wearing his red blanket and his medicine bonnet of many eagle plumes, ermine tails, and scalp locks.

Softfoot had known that the chief had come out from his lodge to watch the buffalo herds from the vantage-point of the high bluff; but he was not aware that Three Stars had dismounted and was walking back through the forest. Believing now that the chief must have heard Wenonah's accusation of cowardice, he bent his head in shame as he moved to go away.

"Softfoot will carry the berries to Wenonah's teepee," he said in passing.

But the chief detained him.

"No!" he commanded, signing to his daughter to take the parfleche. "Wenonah will carry her own berries." He waited, thinking deeply. Then to Softfoot he said: "Three Stars heard Wenonah call Softfoot a coward. He heard the kenabeek's rattle in the grass. But because he did not kill the kenabeek and save his daughter from its bite, he must lose one of his feathers."

He drew a wing of his flowing headdress over his arm and with dexterous fingers plucked out one of the white eagle plumes which he smoothed and straightened on the palm of his hand.

"The feather is for Softfoot," he announced, holding it by the quill, where it was looped with a thong of doeskin bound with red silk threads. "Softfoot will wear it, for my medicine tells me he is not a coward. A coward flies in fear from the deadly rattlesnake; but Softfoot has slain one with his naked hands. He was not afraid."

Softfoot obeyed the chief's sign and went nearer to him, and, watched by Wenonah, Three Stars fastened the badge of honour in the front of the boy's beaded head-band.

CHAPTER II

THE SHOOTING CONTEST

MISHE-MOKWA—Great Bear—was the name of the head war-chief who ruled over the tribe of Pawnees encamped under the shadows of the Porcupine Range. His village consisted of two hundred lodges, ranged in a wide circle on the open plain between Silver Creek and Grey Wolf Forest. Each teepee could accommodate a household of eighteen persons. It was a big village. There was need for much buffalo flesh to feed so great a population.

Softfoot had said that the village was red with meat, and that the squaws had more buffalo robes than they could possibly clean and dress. To him, as to most of the young Pawnees who had watched the great loads of meat and hides being brought in by the endless train of pack-horses and dogs after each day's hunt, it seemed that it would be waste to kill any more.

There were hundreds and hundreds of buffalo tongues hanging up to dry on the scaffolds. Around the wigwams were great red stacks of choice tenderloins, ribs, and back fat, to be preserved and pounded into pemmican. The rolled-up hides, packed shoulder high, stretched in wide, level walls like a stockade round the circle of lodges. There was blood everywhere; on the horses, along the trails, on the clothing and on the hands and arms and faces of the men and women who worked at cutting up a store of meat that seemed too abundant ever to be exhausted.

But Great Bear and his mystery men knew well that the buffalo herds would soon have wandered upon distant trails beyond the Big Horn Mountains. They thought of the coming winter. They were not yet satisfied, and were already planning another hunt.

Softfoot saw the medicine chiefs seated in council round their mosquito smudge in front of Mishe-mokwa's lodge, as he ran across the grassy plain to where the boys and girls were at play. He ran, because he had lingered at the kennel in the rear of his home teepee to give food to the wolf cubs, the kit fox, and the baby owl which he kept as pets, and he was late. He carried his bow and a quiver of new, carefully chosen arrows. For he was pitted against Weasel Moccasin in a final competition of skill in quick shooting, for on that day various contests were to be decided.

All the Pawnee boys of his own age in Great Bear's village had dropped out of the contest, and he and Weasel Moccasin remained to decide possession of the prize —an eagle plume, to be worn for all time as a badge of skill.

As Softfoot approached the eager crowd, Weasel Moccasin saw the conspicuous white feather fluttering from his head-band, and he frowned.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "Softfoot is wearing the feather! He has not yet earned it; nor have I failed to earn it. Why should this be allowed? I will make him put it away!"

When Softfoot came abreast of him, he flung out his hand to snatch at the feather. But Softfoot's strong left arm came like a bar of iron in the way. Weasel Moccasin staggered back, and Wenonah stepped in front of him, while the youths clamoured to know where the plume had come from.

"It is but the tail feather of a wa-wa goose that he has been chasing," declared Red Crow, making a grab at Softfoot's head. But Wenonah thrust him aside and turned to face the discontented throng.

"Are you all blind that you do not see it is a true eagle plume that Softfoot is wearing?" she cried. "If you would know how he earned it, go and talk to the chief Three Stars. Very soon there will be a second feather by its side. My medicine tells me that Softfoot will win in this arrow game."

Weasel Moccasin had thrown off his buckskins and taken up his bow. There was a sheaf of arrows strapped across his naked brown back. The arrowheads were above the level of his right shoulder, within quick reach of his hand. The contest between him and Softfoot was to prove which of them could shoot the greater number of arrows from the bowstring while the first was still in the air.

Two important warriors—Long Hair and Talks-with-the-Buffalo—stood near, to act as umpires. There was great excitement among the onlookers, who were watching the two boys with appraising eyes, judging them by the movements of their clean-muscled bodies and hard-knit limbs. It was such a match as the Indians delighted to watch.

Weasel Moccasin was to shoot first. He took his stand with his left foot well forward, his right leg slightly bent at the knee, and his lithe brown body swaying back as he gripped his bow and held his right hand poised above his muscular shoulder ready to pull out an arrow.

When Long Hair gave the signal, he nipped the first arrow from his quiver, fixed it on the bowstring and, aiming straight upward, gave a firm strong pull that drew the arrow point almost to his hand. The released shaft flashed upward into the blue air and the string trembled still when a second arrow took its place. With sure and unfaltering regularity the boy's deft fingers went to and fro between the string and the quiver; and the arrows followed in quick succession. The first one had not turned in its vertical flight when two were mounting behind it.

As the first curved over for the fall, a fourth left the bow, and as the former sped downward, a fifth was drawn, and the bow again twanged. There were now five

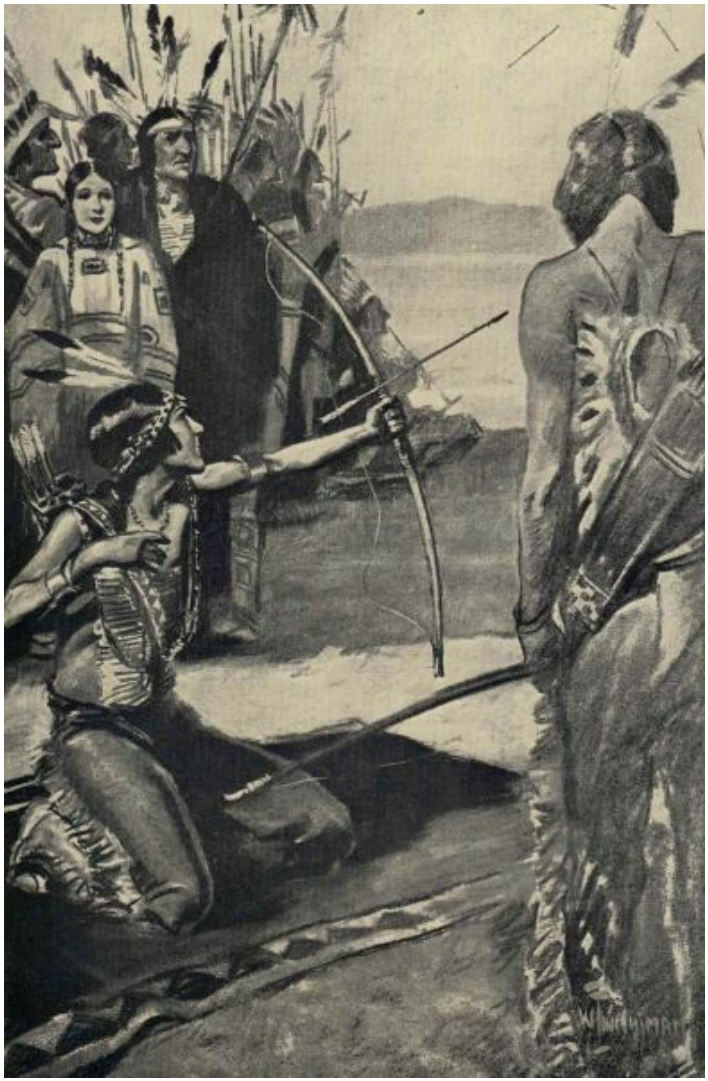
arrows in the air; but as Weasel Moccasin reached for a sixth, the first one plunged its point into the turf. A great shout burst from the watching crowd.

It was then Softfoot's turn. Instead of standing, he went down on one knee, bunching himself together, and some of the warriors clapped their hands. His first arrow soared as high, but not so directly upward as his opponent's. He gave it a curving flight which would take it farther away in its descent. His second and third flew on the same course; his fourth and fifth went straight upward, and his sixth was barely notched on the bowstring when the first alighted. The competitors were equal, although Softfoot gained on points. But there was a second turn for each. This time Weasel Moccasin imitated Softfoot by kneeling, and he finished, just as Softfoot had done, with his sixth arrow in the grip, but the bow not drawn.

It seemed impossible that so many as six arrows could be in flight all at the same time. But in his second round Softfoot gave extra impetus to his leading arrow, and with such effect that he succeeded in getting his sixth away an instant before the first one touched the ground. He was therefore acclaimed the victor and the winner of the coveted feather.

The excitement had not subsided when Mishe-mokwa and his mounted medicine chiefs rode across the plain to make the awards in the various games of skill.

Great Bear announced that he had decided to hold a buffalo hunt on the following morning and that the six boys who had been foremost in the shooting match were to join with their elders and ride out to take part in the surround, choosing their own buffalo ponies and taking marked arrows.



“It was then Softfoot’s turn. Instead of standing, he went down on one knee, bunching himself together.”

CHAPTER III

THE GIFT OF COURAGE

AT sundown, when Softfoot strode towards his smoke-grimed teepee on the north side of the village, Morning Bird, his mother, stood by the open door-flap cleaning her hands with a bunch of clover grass. She had been on her knees the whole day scraping buffalo robes, and she was very weary. But she smiled in approval at sight of the two eagle plumes in Softfoot's ruffled hair.

"Softfoot's medicine has been good to him," she said, following him into the twilight of the lodge. "He has made a beginning. Morning Bird is happy in her son's success."

He hung up his bow and quiver against one of the poles and seated himself on a roll of blankets away from the smoke and warmth of the newly kindled fire. Morning Bird brought him a large steak of cooked buffalo meat sprinkled over with dried bull-berries.

"Eat," she said, "and we will talk."

"It would be better if you would sleep," he advised her.

She stood facing him.

"Softfoot is no longer a child," she began. "It is time he should do more than waste his days in the games of children. He must try to be a man. He has skill in the arrow game, in the stick-and-wheel game. He can ride, he can swim, and run. He knows the secrets of the woods. But all this is of no value to the Pawnees. It is like the beads we sew on our moccasins to please the eye. The beads do not keep our feet warm or give us food. The warriors and braves are saying that Softfoot will never be a man fit to go on the war-path, because he is afraid to kill."

"It is true," Softfoot admitted. "It is true that he does not want to take life. He is a coward, like his father."

Morning Bird's dark eyes flashed.

"Fast Buffalo Horse was not a coward," she denied.

"But the Pawnees say that I am the son of a coward who was afraid to go on the war-trail," Softfoot rejoined.

"Fast Buffalo Horse did not refuse to fight the Sioux or the Crees, who are our enemies," Morning Bird declared. "He was a great war-chief who took many scalps in many battles. But he would not go on the war-path when there was no quarrel. He was wise; he was not afraid when he would not fight the Mandans, who were our friends. If the Pawnees had listened to him there would have been peace. Our tribe had plenty of buffalo meat. They were rich in robes and horses. They only wanted to

take more and more scalps to hang on their crowded lodge poles."

"A scalp war is not a true war," Softfoot agreed. "Eagle Speaker has said that the Mandans were weak. They could not defend themselves. They were poor. The buffalo had deserted them."

"They owned nothing that the Pawnees wanted," pursued Morning Bird. "They were not our enemies. They had smoked tobacco with the Pawnees."

"If Fast Buffalo Horse were a coward because he loved peace," reflected Softfoot, "then I, too, am a coward. I do not want to take life when there is no quarrel. I would kill the rattlesnake, the koshinee wolf, the lynx, and the mountain lion, but I would not kill the sing-bird that fills the forest with music, or the butterfly that drinks honey from the flowers."

"Yet there is need to kill," argued his mother. "If you are to be a brave, a warrior, you must go on the war-path against the enemies of your people. You must not be afraid to do battle in a just cause, or to kill when there is need for food and clothing. If the Pawnee boys were all like you, we should have no beaver tails to eat, no buffalo meat; no warm soft fox skins to wear or buffalo robes to cover our wigwams."

Softfoot stood up. He was nearly as tall as Morning Bird.

"To-morrow I go on the buffalo hunt with the men," he told her proudly. "Mishemokwa has said so."

Morning Bird clapped her hand to her mouth in astonishment. She walked to and fro in the wide space of the wigwam.

"Softfoot will be afraid," she declared, after a long silence. "He will ride away from the buffalo bulls. The Pawnees will laugh at him. They will call him a coward." Then she halted in front of him. "You cannot refuse to go on this hunt," she said very seriously. "You must pray to the Great Spirit to give you strength and courage. You must burn sweet-grass and sweet-pine to purify yourself, comb your hair, and paint your face with vermilion. Morning Bird will now go out to the corral and rope the best petzekee pony. She will talk to the pony and tell him to be swift and not fall."

"It will be Snow-white," he told her. "Snow-white is the best buffalo pony of all that ever were foaled."

The sounds of dancing and beating drums on the plain outside died down into a profound silence as the shadows deepened into darkness. Softfoot slept heavily on his couch of bear skins near the closed entrance of the teepee. But even in his sleep his mind dwelt upon the coming buffalo hunt and its hidden dangers. In the middle of the night he awoke to find a thin beam of moonlight streaming in upon him through a gap in the door-flap of deerskin.

He raised himself on an elbow and drew the flap aside. From where he lay he could see the indigo peaks of the Big Horn Mountains against the moonlit sky, and, nearer, the dark prairie was cut by the glistening sheen of Silver Creek. From far away there came to him the long-drawn plaintive howl of a wolf and the subdued bellow of a buffalo. He shivered under the cold of the night air.

"The warriors say that I am afraid," he meditated. "But I will not be afraid. Eagle Speaker's gift will give me courage. I will carry it with me always. It will shield me from harm. It will give me strength and bravery. I shall kill many buffaloes. I will go on the war-path. Eagle Speaker knows the secret of this medicine gift. He told Softfoot to trust in its power to make him brave. It came to me in my sleep that I must do this thing."

He rose very silently from his bear skins, and in the black darkness crept with cautious tread across the earthen floor to the place where he had hung his sacred bundle. Very reverently he took the bundle down and thrust his hand into its wrappings of soft doeskin until his fingers closed upon the thing he sought.

"It is very strange that it should have such power," he whispered in superstitious awe. "What can be its secret?"

CHAPTER IV

THE BUFFALO HUNT

ALMOST before the stars grew dim and the eastern sky was beginning to show light above the pine trees, Fire Steel, the camp crier, was out on the plain beating his drum to awaken the Pawnees and tell them to make ready for the buffalo hunt.

From the surrounding lodges, men and youths swarmed out, like bees from their hives, and ran through the woodland glades down to the creek for their morning swim; and many squaws carried or dragged their children, to bathe them in the quiet pools below the willows.

Softfoot was one of the first to return from the creek. He had dived from a high rock above the rapids and allowed himself to be carried by the icy current over the curving ledge of smooth, green water to plunge like an arrow down into the turbulent, swirling cauldron of foam and spray at the foot of the cascade.

There in the whirling pool among the startled salmon he had splashed and rolled for some joyous minutes before climbing out to shake himself and throw his sheet of tanned elkskin over his wet shoulders and run home through the dim forest trail, where even the birds were not awakened by the soft pad of his moccasined feet.

Suddenly he stopped and turned back a few paces. In the moist ground at the side of a narrow stream he had seen the impression of hoofs. They were not the hoofs of an Indian pony, for they showed the clear marks of forged iron shoes, such as were not used by the Pawnees. They pointed in the direction of Great Bear's village.

"Why should a paleface be riding through Grey Wolf Forest?" he asked himself as he ran on. "He is not a stranger. He knows his way to our lodges."

When he reached the camp, blue wisps of fire-smoke were rising into the cool air from the smoke-vents of the teepees. There was busy movement everywhere. The whole village was awake while yet the grass was wet with dew and the sun's light had not touched the mountain-tops.

Moving forms, clad in bright colours, passed to and fro. Tied near each wigwam there were two or three horses; dogs were barking and people were singing under the painted skin-covers of their lodges.

Everybody was glad that there was to be yet another buffalo hunt. The pack-horses and draught dogs had been kept in camp, close to the teepees. The travois frames were emptied ready to carry in new loads; nothing had been stowed away since the harvest of the last chase had been brought in from the prairie; but the

women were sharpening their knives to cut up the expected meat, and they were coiling their ropes of shaganappy with which to pack the red loads and the heavy hides.

The men were looking over their weapons of the chase to see that the bowstrings were right, the arrows straight and strong, with the points not blunted; while those who had guns were cleaning them and providing themselves with powder, bullets and percussion caps.

The boys who were now to make their first hunt were excited. They had imitated their experienced elders in going through the various ceremonies of preparation, praying for good luck, purifying themselves by breathing the scented fumes of burning sweet-grass, combing their long hair and painting their faces.

Morning Bird was very anxious that her son should look his best on so important an occasion. She combed and braided his hair and painted the parting with vermilion. With practised art she had mixed many colours from the juices of herbs and berries, yellow and blue clay and charcoal, and she painted his face and body with great care in lines and curves and rings.

For the hunt he wore no clothing but a breech-clout and his moccasins, and armlets and a necklace of bears' claws, porcupine quills and brilliant beads.

"What is this?" Morning Bird asked, taking in her fingers a small bag of delicate white ermine skin that hung from his necklace.

"It is my sacred medicine," he answered her, covering it with his hand. "It came to me in my sleep. You must not see it."

Enclosed in the ermine skin was the thing that he had taken from his mystery bundle during the night—the thing which was to give him strength and bravery and shield him from harm.

Morning Bird did not question him further but accompanied him out of the lodge to where his buffalo pony, Snow-white, waited. It was not shod and had never been saddled or bridled. He led it away by its long trail-rope of rawhide, one end of which was knotted about the animal's lower jaw, while the other end dragged loose along the ground, where it might be seized if the rider should be thrown and not too much hurt to snatch at it.

"Ha!" cried Weasel Moccasin as he joined the group of favoured boys who were now for the first time to do the serious work of men in the buffalo surround. "My medicine tells me that to-day I shall have great luck. Softfoot shall not get the better of me this time. I shall pick out the finest bulls in the herd and bring many of them to the ground."

"It may be that none of us will get near enough to kill," said Softfoot, caressing

his pony's muzzle. "Mishe-mokwa has said that we are not to put ourselves in danger; but only to watch the men, and learn from them how to manage our ponies. It is bad hunting if our ponies are hurt."

"That is true," nodded Red Crow, "and I for one will keep out of danger. I will pick out a swift cow or a bull calf and drive it well away from the herd, so that I may not be too close to the ferocious bulls."

Before they mounted they were told to lay their quivers on the ground. Heavy Head, a veteran buffalo runner, was to examine their arrows and see that they were well feathered, well pointed and duly marked.

Weasel Moccasin and Softfoot had placed their quivers side by side on the grass when Little Antelope, one of the younger boys, saw the chief coming out of his council lodge, attended by many warriors and mystery men. With the chief walked a tall, bearded stranger, dressed in buckskins and wearing a wide, felt hat.

"It is a white man!" exclaimed Little Antelope in surprise. "Come, let us go and look at him! Never before have I seen a paleface. See, he has a gun! He is showing it to Mishe-mokwa. He is perhaps coming on the buffalo hunt."

"His gun is broken," said Softfoot, who knew nothing of the mechanism of a breech-loading rifle. "And he is putting the bullets in at the wrong end!"

"Where does he come from—this white man?" questioned Red Crow. "I think he is an enemy."

"He rode into our camp when the Pawnees were still asleep," explained Softfoot. "He is alone. He would not come alone if he were an enemy. That is his horse—Long Hair is leading it. It is a beautiful horse—taller than any of ours. I want to see how he mounts. Aye! look! look!"

The stranger had raised a spurred foot to his stirrup and was quickly seated in his saddle with the bridle in his hand and his gun in the crook of his arm. To the Indian boys he looked very tall and splendid with his broad shoulders and upright figure. Even from a distance they could see that his eyes were not so dark as the eyes of the Pawnees, and, with quick recognition of this peculiarity, Softfoot said:

"Let us name him Blue Eye, for his eyes are like the moonlit sky."

Great Bear, Three Stars, Talks-with-the-Buffalo, and other warriors, had also mounted. They all carried muzzle-loading guns, and wore their bright-coloured blankets and medicine bonnets. The chief and Blue Eye rode side by side, talking like friends. The others formed in Indian file, following across the plain, each leading a second pony that would be used in the hunt. The six boys ran back, snatched up their bows and quivers, and leapt excitedly to their ponies' backs, taking places where they could find them in the long procession of riders.

As they rode out from the wide circle of lodges to enter the prairie trail, they turned and waved their hands to the watching crowds of women and children. Then they strung their bows to be ready for action. It was not until afterwards, when he was in the midst of the buffaloes, that Softfoot discovered that the arrows in his quiver were not his own, that they bore Weasel Moccasin's marks. They had been changed. But by whom? And why?

The warriors rode slowly through the woodland, and when they came into the open some turned to the eastward and others to the west, forming two separate companies along the ridge of the hill to encircle the hunting-ground.

By this time the sun was rising, flooding the prairie with yellow light. The grass sparkled with dew, and thin shreds of grey mist drifted and melted. The sweet, wild whistle of the meadow lark rang out from the knolls, and the skylark and the white-winged blackbird filled the air with their rich notes. Now and then a jack-rabbit or a kit fox was startled from its bed in the grama grass, or a family of antelopes, alarmed by the horsemen, would race to the safety of the hill-tops.

Through the rising mist the brown, hairy shapes of many buffaloes could be seen scattered over the level land like cattle in a pasture. The great shaggy bulls were cropping the grass on the outskirts of the herd, as if guarding the cows and calves that were still at rest, unconscious of the dark line that was slowly creeping round them.

Neither bulls nor cows took any notice of the prowling scavenger wolves that were the usual attendants upon every buffalo herd, following them in their migrations to pick off the weak or injured stragglers or to feast upon the stripped carcases discarded by the Indians. But as the tightening ring of horsemen began to close in, the alert sentinel bulls lifted their shaggy heads, sniffed with suspicion at the tainted air, caught sight of the mysterious enemy and sounded the alarm in a long-drawn bellow.

The younger bulls and the cows with their yellow calves began to rush about in aimless panic, gathering at first in detached groups and then crowding together in a compact mass until the veteran bulls took leadership and started them off in a headlong stampede with heads lowered and tails lifted high. Their roaring was like the roll of thunder. The earth trembled under the heavy tread of their hoofs.

The Pawnees rode round and round in their unbroken circle. Three Stars, who was the captain of the hunt, saw that he could not successfully deal with so large a herd, and he allowed many to escape before he gave the signal which released all restraint.

Yelling their wild hunting cries, the Indians dashed forward to the assault, each

intent upon being the first to come within striking range of their huge victims. It was a desperately dangerous game. No hunting has ever been so perilous and exciting; for the buffalo is a terrible antagonist, swift of foot, resistless in attack, vicious in defence, and backed by a strength which could only be avoided by that cunning which has always given man the mastery over the brute.

CHAPTER V

THE WHITE MAN'S MEDICINE

SOFTFOOT remembered the chief's caution to the boys against running into danger. His medicine told him not to be reckless, and he held back, watching for his chance.

The Pawnee bowmen were exceedingly clever in opening their attack. As their weapons were silent, they could kill one after another of the buffaloes without causing a general alarm. Their plan was to head off the stampeding herd and keep it compact and well surrounded.

Long Hair had singled out the leading bull, the king of the herd. He galloped nearer and nearer and came abreast of the onward plunging monster. Then he drew his bow, aiming at the exposed side behind the shoulder. When the buffalo stumbled and rolled over, the two or three bulls closely following stopped and sniffed at it stupidly, until one of them in its turn assumed the post of leader and the stampede was continued.

Long Hair and his companions now gave chase and crossed in front of the leading bulls, turning them back upon the crowded mass while the hunters rode round and round. But the great animals, already mad with fear, did not long remain close together. Soon all was confusion, horses and buffaloes racing side by side, turning up the dust with their clattering hoofs and sending forth a deafening noise of bellowing and coughing to mingle with the shrill whoops and yells of the Indians. Above the rough brown backs and woolly humps of the buffaloes, the naked shoulders and flashing arms of the men showed red and glistening as they drew their arrows to the head and drove them into the flesh.

It was not easy for Softfoot to understand how the Pawnees, riding in the thick of the furiously battling giants, could escape injury from the tossing horns and the enormously powerful frames of the angry animals they were attacking. But the ponies were watchful, nimble, sure-footed, and quick to avoid the frontal charges of the angry beasts, while at the same time dodging the badger-holes in the ground that offered traps for unwary feet.

"Why do we wait?" cried Weasel Moccasin, impatient to join in the fray.

He was riding a borrowed piebald pony that had not been too willing to obey the guidance of a strange rider. But now that the conflict was at its height, the piebald suddenly changed its demeanour. It reared up under the restraint of the taut trail-rope, pranced sideways with arched neck and twitching ears, and then, getting the rawhide bit firmly in its teeth, sprang out into the fray, plunging among the buffaloes

as madly as any others of the trained runners.

Softfoot saw Weasel Moccasin being carried helplessly into the turbulent sea of shaggy-backed, gleaming-eyed monsters. He shouted to him to turn back. Instead of pulling the pony round, Weasel Moccasin began to belabour it with his quirt, which made matters worse. The pony careered onward, forcing its way into the writhing throng. Then its rider dropped his trail-rope and began to work desperately with his bow and arrows, wounding a buffalo each time, but disabling none. He was too reckless to take aim, and his silent shafts only made the bewildered animals more furious.

"It is now time for my medicine to help me," muttered Softfoot, touching the ermine bag that hung from his necklace. "Weasel Moccasin is in great danger. I must help him or he will be killed!"

He urged Snow-white forward into the confused conflict, entering by the narrow gap that his companion had made. As he started he fixed an arrow on his bowstring, and it was then that he discovered that the arrows were not his own; but he continued shooting, always aiming at a vital part, always pulling his bow strongly.

A young bull ran into his path and stopped, barring his way. Softfoot passed his bow over his right arm, and gripped the pony between his knees. She lifted him with a splendid leap, clearing the bull and alighting easily on the farther side. He saw Weasel Moccasin close in advance of him now, hard-pressed by many hairy giants whose humps were much higher than his pony's ears.

A monstrous long-horned bull stood at bay in front of him. Its big, bloodshot eyes glared threateningly; there was foam about its jaws and the breath came noisily from its fiery, trembling nostrils. The swelling muscles about its immense shoulders were tensed ready for a desperate forward rush at the piebald pony. There was no escape for Weasel Moccasin.

"Jump!" cried Softfoot. "Jump!"

At this moment of peril some of the warriors had opened fire with their guns. There was a sudden startled movement among the buffaloes. The great bull swerved to get at the piebald's flank. Its own broad palpitating side was exposed for an instant. In that instant Softfoot pulled his bowstring and shot an arrow deep into the brown expanse behind the animal's shoulder.

"Jump!" he called again.

But even though fatally wounded, the bull had already made a fierce battering charge at the piebald, flinging the pony with its rider high into the air, and then staggering backward.

Weasel Moccasin turned a somersault and dropped with a dull thud upon the

buffalo just as the mighty animal was rolling over. He fell on his back, partly on the bull's soft flank and partly on its deep, woolly mane. But his head struck against the hard bone of its bent elbow, and he was stunned. He did not move.

Softfoot believed that he was not seriously hurt. He forced his way up to him, leant over, and seizing one of his hands, drew him upward until he got an arm round him and could hoist him securely across Snow-white's withers and hold him there as he glanced anxiously round for a means of escape.

But the danger was not yet over. The warriors were pressing the buffaloes closer behind him, firing at them. Softfoot was crushed helplessly in the frantic, jostling crowd, and his hands were not free to use his bow.

He had difficulty in keeping his seat. Had he been thrown, he would quickly have been trampled to death. Snow-white was but a feeble animal to battle her way out from such a dense, grinding crush. Yet she kept her feet and avoided the tossing heads and menacing horns.

The pressure seemed to be getting worse. Softfoot was beginning to lose hope when suddenly the cows in front of him scattered in many directions, driven from side to side by a rider who dashed into their midst, firing shot after shot with such astonishing speed that even in his situation of peril Softfoot wondered how the man could have time to reload his gun after each discharge.

He looked forward over the sea of tossing humps and saw the man riding directly towards him through an open lane in the wildly scattering herd. He was not a Pawnee; nor was his tall, rangy mount an Indian buffalo pony. Softfoot quickly recognized him as the paleface stranger whom he had named Blue Eye.

With prodding spur and coaxing words, Blue Eye forced his great horse forward into the tight throng. He had slung his rifle over the pommel of his stock saddle and was firing now with his revolver, taking quick, sure aim at each buffalo that came in his way. His trained mount swerved or leapt to avoid the stumbling, panic-stricken cows and madly careering bulls. And at last he reached Softfoot's side.

"Is your friend badly hurt?" he inquired, speaking in the Pawnee tongue. "I see his pony is done for. I saw what happened. I watched you riding after him. Wait! Let me help you."

He dismounted and lifted Weasel Moccasin to get him astride in a comfortable position with his back resting against Softfoot's chest. Then he turned and looked down at the injured pony, which he saw was very far gone. Blue Eye mercifully fired a bullet into the white star on its forehead.

"A good prairie pony lost by bad management," he said. "You are both too young to be allowed out on a buffalo hunt," he added, and seizing Snow-white's

halter rope, he mounted his own animal and slowly led the way out to open ground. Here, clear of the buffaloes, he again dismounted and gave Weasel Moccasin a drink from his water bottle.

"He is not dead," said Softfoot. "But I think his head is very sore."

"Likely," nodded Blue Eye, speaking now in the white man's tongue, which Softfoot did not understand. "Concussion of the brain, I guess. But you stopped that big bull from trampling him. If he'd jumped, he wouldn't have been hurt."

As he got again into his saddle, he glanced at the two feathers in Softfoot's head-band. They told him that the boy had won distinction in his tribe, while the injured boy, as he noticed, wore no such badges.

"What made him ride into the middle of the stampeding herd?" he asked. "He ought to have known better."

"It was his pony's fault," Softfoot explained. "We were told to keep out of danger. But his pony carried him in. He could not stop her. He could not turn her back."

"Then why in thunder did you follow him?" questioned Blue Eye. "Did you want to get killed? What made you go after him as you did? Weren't you afraid?"

"I was afraid," admitted Softfoot. "I was like the grass in the wind. But I wanted to do the thing I was afraid of doing. That is why I followed Weasel Moccasin. He was in danger."

The blue eyes of the bearded frontiersman were fixed upon Softfoot with something of admiration in their expression. They noted the Pawnee boy's regular features under the paint that was already smeared with prairie dust and perspiration. They noted the well-developed muscles of his arms and thighs, and the healthy smoothness of his bronzed skin. They noted also that the boy's hand went more than once to the little white bag hanging from his necklace.

"You wanted to do the thing you were afraid of doing?" Blue Eye repeated thoughtfully to himself. "Why, that's just about as good a definition of courage as ever I've heard." Aloud, he said: "What is your name, kid? I want to remember you by it."

"It is Softfoot," he was told.

"Is that your medicine that you're so careful of?" The white man smiled when Softfoot again drew his necklet away from Weasel Moccasin's head.

"It is my medicine," answered Softfoot. "And you too, Blue Eye—you also are wearing a sacred medicine."

The frontiersman's flannel shirt was open at the throat. Round his sun-tanned neck was a fine chain of gold and glistening beads.

The thought of the necklace so accidentally revealed brought a curious flash to the white man's blue eyes.

CHAPTER VI

THE MARKED ARROWS

THE Pawnee women and children were out on the prairie with their pack-horses and travois dogs. There was not a live bison to be seen on the wide expanse of sandy hillocks and far-stretching levels of grass and blossoming flowers. The stampeding herd had disappeared beyond the hills to more peaceful grazing grounds.

But the plain was dotted over with carcases which the Indian men were flaying; and round each was a group of industrious squaws, girls and boys, busy at the work of securing the hides and cutting up the meat.

Three Stars and his attendant warriors had ridden the round of the kill superintending the gathering of the marked arrows that would show which of the hunters, whether man or boy, had been most successful in the chase. If more than one arrow was found in any particular bull or cow, the medicine chief's word decided which of them had been fatal.

When the arrows had been collected and laid out for their various owners to claim according to the totem mark on the smooth shaft, those that had been used by the six tenderfoot boys were kept apart, so that he who had done better than his companions should be decorated with an eagle's plume. Every one in Great Bear's circle of lodges was interested in the prowess of the youths of the tribe.

Softfoot, now wearing his fringed buckskins, and followed by his tame wolf-cub, strode towards the warriors to claim his arrows. He halted on the outskirts of the crowd.

"It is strange," Three Stars was saying, "but I have counted seven great buffaloes that were killed by the well-aimed arrows of Weasel Moccasin before he was hurt. Each one of them was buried deep in the heart. Mosquito Child killed an old stub-horned bull. Little Antelope brought down two cows. Red Crow killed two good bull calves. Prairie Owl fell and broke his bow. These have done well. But not one bison have I found killed by Softfoot's arrows."

Softfoot had hold of his wolf-cub's ear, and his fingers tightened their hold in his astonishment at this verdict.

"Yet Softfoot was in the hunt," pursued Three Stars. "He came home with an empty quiver. All his arrows left his bowstring; but not one of them struck a vital part. Many of them fell out of the wounds that gave hurt, but did not kill. That is not good hunting. My medicine tells me that Softfoot has failed as a buffalo hunter. His arm is weak. Let him spend his days among the wigwams, making moccasins, cutting wood, carrying water, milking the cows, and playing as a child among children."

Softfoot made a step forward, but drew back and stood silently listening.

"Yet it was Softfoot who won in the arrow game," Long Hair reminded the chief. "He had six arrows in the air. Weasel Moccasin lost his pony in the chase. It was gored by a savage bull."

"Softfoot carried Weasel Moccasin out from the surround," added Talks-with-the-Buffalo.

"No," Three Stars assured him. "It was our paleface friend over there who brought them out, or they would both have been killed under the stampeding hoofs. Softfoot did nothing to gain praise. The buffalo hunt is not for him."

"Listen!" urged Big Elk. "The great bull that tossed Weasel Moccasin and his pony was killed with an arrow—not by the white man's bullet. Weasel Moccasin could not have shot that arrow after his head was hurt. A bull with an arrow in its heart could not have tossed a pony and its rider high in the air."

Three Stars shook his head in dissent.

"The great bull was killed by Weasel Moccasin, whose marked arrow I myself found buried in its heart," he said decisively. "My spirit is heavy because Softfoot has failed. But in this matter we must be just. The marked arrows have told their own story."

His daughter Wenonah caught a fold of the chief's blanket. She had seen Softfoot join the throng with his vicious-looking wolf-dog.

"Let Softfoot talk," she interposed. "His tongue is not forked, even if his arm is weak. He will speak the truth. Let him talk."

Three Stars frowned as he looked down at the girl's shabby overall that was smeared with wet blood and buffalo fat. All the morning she had been occupied in hanging up great slabs of freshly cut meat on the drying scaffolds. Her hands were red with buffalo blood. She drew apart from the warriors now and went towards the black-bearded frontiersman who stood near with an elbow resting on his saddle. He removed his pipe from his mouth and smiled at her as she paused to look at the shining cartridges in his belt and at the guns in their holsters on his hips.

"Is this boy Softfoot a good Indian?" he asked her idly.

"The Pawnees are all good Indians," she answered him proudly.

"I see he wears two feathers," Blue Eye nodded. "How did he gain them?"

"One for his skill in the arrow game," Wenonah told him, "and one because he caught a kenabeek in his hand and cut off its head when it would have bitten me."

"Then he is brave," nodded Blue Eye, "and you naturally stick up for him since he saved you from that rattlesnake?"

Wenonah shook her head in doubt.

"He was weak in the buffalo hunt," she said. "I think he was afraid. The Pawnees say that his father, Fast Buffalo Horse, was a coward, and that Softfoot is like his father. But Softfoot is a good Indian. He is very wise."

The blue-eyed frontiersman looked at her curiously.

"Fast Buffalo Horse was a very great warrior," he declared. "He was one of the bravest men, red or white, that I have ever known. I am glad that Softfoot is his son. Yes, I am sure he is a good Indian."

He knocked the ash from his pipe on the heel of his spurred boot, and was preparing to mount when he heard the medicine chief again speaking.

"Softfoot knows his own arrows by their marks," said Three Stars. "Let him take them away."

Softfoot, still followed by his wolf-cub, stepped forward and looked upon the separate bundles of arrows that lay on the grass. He was perplexed, but at length he collected and counted those that had been used in the chase by Weasel Moccasin.

"These are mine," he announced, gathering them under his arm. Then he glanced at others bearing Weasel Moccasin's own mark. He knew that these others were the arrows that he had himself taken one by one from his quiver and used in the buffalo hunt. He saw that the credit of having killed as many as seven buffaloes was now going to Weasel Moccasin, instead of to himself. Had Weasel Moccasin been present here he would have demanded an explanation. But Weasel Moccasin was now lying unconscious in his teepee. Softfoot made no protest, but quietly carried his inglorious arrows away.

The man whom he had called Blue Eye followed him, leading his horse by its bridle rein.

"I heard what the warriors were saying about you, Softfoot," he began as he overtook him. "Why do you not tell them that it was you who killed the great bull—who brought six others to the ground?"

Softfoot looked very straight into the man's blue eyes.

"It is because I did not kill them with my own arrows," he explained. "It is because while he is not here to listen to me I will not say that I think it was Weasel Moccasin who changed our arrows before we started. When he is well and can remember why he changed them, he will tell the truth."

"Come with me and we will talk to Mishe-mokwa about this thing," Blue Eye advised. "Mishe-mokwa will straighten it out."

"No," Softfoot protested. "I do not want the warriors to know that Weasel Moccasin did badly. Weasel Moccasin is my friend. I will not speak a word against my friend."

Blue Eye smiled and held out his hand. He was leaving Great Bear's camp.

"Softfoot," he said in his own tongue, "I admire your loyalty. I've had proof of your pluck. When I want the help of a good scout whose honour I can trust, whose bravery I can depend on, I guess I just know where to find him."

Softfoot watched him mounting to his saddle, saw him ride away in the direction of the lodges, and wondered, with a curious, expectant yearning, when and in what circumstances he might possibly meet him again. For his medicine told him that he and Blue Eye were destined to tread the same trail.

CHAPTER VII

RED SQUAW CAÑON

SOFTFOOT had gone through many of the contests and exercises imposed by custom upon the Indian boy in order to test his ability and prove his physical fitness to endure hardship and live by his unaided wits.

He was naturally healthy, pure-blooded and perfect in constitution. His inborn senses were sharp; but his faculties of eyesight, hearing, smell, touch, and memory were made additionally acute by practice in the scoutcraft and woodcraft which were the essential parts of the redskin's education.

He was hardly more than an infant when he learnt to ride, to swim, to wrestle, and to follow a trail; and as he grew in strength he gained skill in the use of his limbs in foot-races, jumping contests, riding, scouting, and games in which the lariat and the bow and arrow were necessary implements.

He had no knowledge of the great world of civilization. He was a savage, living in savage surroundings. His books were the picture-writings on the skin-covers of the tribal wigwams; his limited language was helped by the use of signs. He could communicate with a stranger without uttering a word.

Living an outdoor life close to nature, he had no need for what we call scholarship. But he was not ignorant. His wits were sharpened by conflict with the wits of the beasts and birds. Constantly watching the animals in their native haunts and trying to learn how they would act in particular circumstances, he knew their habits better than he knew anything else, and so became an expert naturalist.

It was his work in following on the trail of the wild creatures he pursued that made him so astonishingly alert as a tracker, so clever in taking cover and hiding his own tracks, so quick in noticing signs and finding his way unerringly through the uncharted forest and across the pathless prairie.

When Softfoot was still a young boy, he was guilty of an act of disobedience. It was in the season of leaf-falling. He was told by Morning Bird to go out on the prairie with the squaws and their pack-horses to gather buffalo chips for fuel; but he escaped from the task and wandered into the forest glades to play with a family of kit foxes. Disobedience was as grave an offence as telling a lie. His punishment was severe, but it was not an unusual one, and Softfoot only regarded it as a glorious opportunity for the enjoyment of his full liberty.

He was taken out at night to the prairie and there stripped of all clothing—stripped of everything but his knife—and told to go away and fend for himself, alone and unhelped, until someone should come and find him. Naked, and with no weapon

but his knife, he was abandoned to his own resources, forbidden to return to the lodges!

Two or three weeks passed. Morning Bird, becoming very anxious lest some misfortune had happened to him, had a search party of young scouts sent out to look for him beyond the prairie. The scouts were not surprised when they discovered Softfoot living in a comfortable wicky-up teepee on one of the distant reaches of Silver Creek. He was wearing rough doeskin breeches and moccasins, eating cooked food, while he pointed the shafts of his newly made arrows in front of his camp-fire.

No one had been near him in the interval. He had done everything for himself, having nothing to start with but his knife, his knowledge of woodcraft, and his resourceful skill as a scout who was compelled by necessity to depend upon his own ingenuity for food and shelter.

Every able-bodied Pawnee boy in Great Bear's village was expected to be capable of doing as much. They were encouraged to go out into the wilds on scouting expeditions which often lasted many days, during which the young redskins exercised their skill in tracking one another over the mountains, across wide stretches of rolling prairie or through mysterious forest and gloomy cañon where actual dangers lurked. And always they hunted their own food and built their own shelter.

It had been planned before the occasion of the buffalo hunt that Softfoot and three of his companions should make a camping trip down Silver Creek. Weasel Moccasin was to have been their leader. But he was now disabled by his accident. No bones had been broken; but he had lost remembrance of everything. His brain was a blank.

"He will be very sorry," said Softfoot. "But he would not wish us to lose our scouting game. We will go without him. Little Antelope will come."

"Why not Wenonah?" suggested Prairie Owl, who was her younger brother. "Wenonah is a good scout. She knows the secrets of Silver Creek. She can use the canoe paddle as well as she can ride a wild pony."

"She could cook our meat," added Mosquito Child. "She could mend our moccasins."

"Wenonah goes out with the other Pawnee women to gather berries and camas roots for the winter," Softfoot objected. "Little Antelope will come. I have spoken."

During the warm days of yellow-grass, the boys had built for themselves a stout birch-bark canoe, and Softfoot had painted a big red eye on either side of its tall prow, so that it might find its way through the unfamiliar creeks and keep guard

against mischievous water-sprites.

It was a good canoe. Everything about it had been ready before the coming of the buffalo, and now that the herd had disappeared and the camp was crowded with meat and robes, there was no need for any beaver trapping or antelope hunting for the supply of food.

They launched the canoe below the cataract of Rising Mist and loaded it with a small teepee and its poles, some dried buffalo meat and pemmican, their traps and snares, and cooking pots. Each boy took his bow and a good supply of hunting arrows, his knife, tomahawk and blanket; and each had his own fire-stick. Softfoot had wanted to take his wolf-cub, but he decided to leave it for Morning Bird to care for with his other pets.

They did not intend to go beyond the wilds of the Great Bear Reservation, which was their only world, but to pitch their camp in some sheltered woodland glade beside Silver Creek, where they would get fishing, trapping, and hunting to their heart's content while living a simple, healthy life and pretending that they were an independent tribe of Indians.

Such a pitch was found in the evening of their first day's absence. They erected their skin-covered wigwam on the high, grassy ground above the laughing water, in the midst of giant pines and grey-boled cottonwood trees.

They gathered soft balsam branches for their beds and kindled a fire of fir-cones and sweet-smelling spruce-wood, over which they cooked their buffalo meat. Softfoot was the responsible chief, and he kept strict order according to the usages and customs of their tribe. He raised his totem pole, made a wakam pit for refuse, and issued laws for keeping the camp clean and wholesome, each of his braves having special duties.

Their outfit contained nothing that was unnecessary. Even their store of food was limited. They were to hunt their own food. But there was a rich abundance. Ripe meenahga and odahmin berries grew in plenty near their lodge. In a hollow fir tree they found a hive of bees with great combs of honey; and the water of the creek was pure and cool for drink. They had everything they needed, everything they could desire. They were happy, and they sang songs, and danced around their fire.

Before nightfall they laid their snares and traps and kindled their mosquito smudge, and as the shadows deepened, they crept into their teepee and were lulled to sleep by the chirping of insects and the loud, clear notes of the whip-poor-will.

After their bathe in the morning, while Softfoot was cooking a salmon caught in the creek, his companions having gone round the line of traps, Little Antelope came running back to the lodge.

"We have caught nothing!" he announced in dismay. "Our traps are empty!"

"Ugh! You did not set them well," said Softfoot. "Or perhaps it is that the animals get so much food that your bait does not tempt them. The forest is crowded with animals. Their tracks and runways are everywhere. I heard many animals moving and talking in the night."

"Our traps have been sprung," said Little Antelope. "But the animals and bait have been stolen. Prairie Owl thinks that some Indian has stolen them."

"My medicine tells me that we are alone in this forest," said Softfoot, turning the heavy fish with the tongs he had made of a supple cane of willow. "Let the Pawnees come into camp and eat of this good fish. To-night they will bait only one trap, and set no snares. Softfoot will discover the thief."

When night came, after a long day's prowling in the woodland, he bade his braves go to sleep. But he sat with his arm about his knees thinking deeply, watching and waiting until the moon's light pierced the dark trees.

Then leaving the wigwam he went out alone with his bow and a sheaf of arrows, and crept with silent tread into the solemn loneliness of the moonlit groves until he came near to the baited trap. He did not touch it, lest his hand should leave its betraying man-scent. But he sniffed the air and knew that the tempting bait of buffalo meat had not been disturbed.

He drew back into the deep gloom a bow-shot's distance from the trap. There he crouched with his bow and an arrow in his left hand, watching, listening, smelling. From afar he heard the short, sharp bark of a fox, the high-keyed howl of a prowling coyote, the pained squeak of some captured creature of the wild. Above his head a night-hawk flew past on noiseless wing. Many a tragedy was being enacted in that primeval forest. Softfoot realized as never before that, like his own human kind, the wild animals must kill to live.

For hours he crouched, never stirring, never making a sound, always patiently watching the trap. Once he saw a black fox stealing across the dividing space. It paused only an instant beside the trap, and as it turned into a shaft of moonlight, Softfoot saw that it carried a sage-hen in its jaws. Soon afterwards a young lynx passed like a stealthy shadow. He saw it lift its tufted ears and stalk softly to the trap. Then as the trap was sprung there was a screech, a spitting snarl, and the violent scratching of clawed feet.

Softfoot waited. He knew that the raider of the traps was not a lynx. A porcupine darted past with bristling quills. A chipmunk peeped out of its burrow under a tree-root.

After another long wait there came a quite different animal—a furry, bear-

shaped beast with a short, hairy tail. Softfoot knew now that his first surmise was correct. This was the gluttonous raider of the traps. He saw it now tugging at the lynx and at the same time gnawing and eating. He fixed his arrow, took aim and pulled his bowstring. The arrow flashed silently through a gleam of moonlight. There was a harsh cry, half scream, half roar, a mad kicking and grunting, and then all was still.

Gripping his bow and arrows in one hand and his knife in the other, Softfoot strode forward. But he had no need to use his knife. The marauder was quite dead when he hoisted its heavy weight over his shoulder.

Little Antelope drew back the skin-flap of the teepee and saw Softfoot throw down his heavy burden.

"What is it, that animal?" he asked.

"It is a wolverine," Softfoot told him. "It is the thief who robbed our traps. While he lived we could never have caught anything."

For a week or more thereafter they set their traps and snares every evening, and in the mornings they had always a big catch. They soon had too much food, and their bale of pelts grew high.

"After one more sleep," said Softfoot one evening, "we will take Little Antelope to see the Red Squaw. He has never seen her."

They packed their peltry in the teepee and closed the flap so that no prowling animals should intrude. Taking only some berries and a small parfleche of pemmican, they launched their canoe and paddled down the swift current of the creek. By midday they were at the mouth of Red Squaw Cañon, where the creek narrowed into a deep, gloomy gorge.

"We can climb the mountain and look down into the cañon," said Softfoot.

"Why not go through in the canoe?" questioned Prairie Owl.

"We cannot come back against the rapids," said Softfoot. "We should lose our canoe. We should have to go back to the lodges on foot. And it is not safe, without men to help us to get past the Red Squaw Rock."

"Is Softfoot afraid?" asked Mosquito Child.

Softfoot fingered his medicine bag and shook his head. Whereupon they decided to make the adventure.

They trimmed the canoe for the encounter, Softfoot taking the steering paddle. The strong current raced through the gorge, like a giant tongue licking its way between steep walls of red rock that rose thousands of feet high on either side.

There was only a narrow ribbon of blue sky far above, and its light was not strong enough to break the deep gloom. Very soon the glassy, smooth water became ruffled, splashing into ominous waves and sending up a mist of spray. The canoe

swayed menacingly.

"Turn back!" cried Little Antelope. "I am afraid."

"Do not look up," said Mosquito Child. "Count the beads on your moccasins."

Rearing and plunging like a maddened horse, the canoe swept suddenly round a projecting bend. In advance of it the quickened current boiled and swirled in angry, seething foam, and like a warning sentinel in midstream stood the Red Squaw Rock. Softfoot was bending over, grimly determined, clutching his paddle, with all his thoughts and energies fixed upon getting past that peril. Everything depended upon his skill.

Little Antelope raised his terrified eyes and saw what was in front of them.

"Turn back!" he cried. "Softfoot, turn back!"

And the echoing cañon flung out his desperate appeal, repeating it many times.

"Turn back! Softfoot, turn back, turn back!"

CHAPTER VIII

GHOST PINE GULCH

"TURN back, Softfoot! Turn back, turn back!"

The echo was repeated in weird reverberation from the sheer rock walls of the cañon; at first loud and clear, and then dying down to a whisper.

It came to Softfoot's ears like the voice of some mysterious spirit of the sinister desolation, warning him of his great danger. He heard it above the deep-throated roar of the angry current that was sweeping him and his three companions helplessly onward to calamity.

There was no chance to turn back, no chance for even a moment's pause in which to rest his aching wrists and the tensely strained muscles of his arms and body. He could only trust to the protection of his "medicine" and hold grimly to his steering paddle, forcing the frail canoe to right or to left as it went on its mad career into the dark gorge.

"I want to do this thing, because I am afraid to do it," he told himself. "My medicine will help me. We shall come to no harm."

The stream was narrowing. The air grew dark and chill. On each side of him, so close that it seemed that he could almost touch them with his paddle, were black, moist walls towering up to dizzy heights.

The rushing water seemed to leap and bound like a living monster, its middle arching two or three feet higher than its sides. It surged on in great billows, green, hillocky, and terribly swift, dividing into two separate streams where, close in advance of the canoe, it was flung to either side by the intervening obstacle of Red Squaw Rock. And the canoe raced forward buoyantly, held aloft on the water's convex surface while the black, mossy walls swept past half hidden in a mist of flying spray.

Little Antelope lay trembling in the bilge, closing his eyes and waiting for the final crash that meant inevitable destruction.

"I am afraid!" he wailed piteously. "Afraid!" And the cañon repeated the word: "Afraid, afraid!" while the surging waters laughed mockingly.

Crouched on his bare knees behind Softfoot, Mosquito Child caught at the stout shaft of the steering paddle, adding the strength of his two hands to keep the canoe under control. They were now plunging headlong onward as if drawn by some magnetic force into the gnarled face of the Red Squaw.

If the side of the bark canoe should but graze against that rock, the whole frail fabric would be torn to splinters, and no swimmer could live in the turbulent swirl of

angry waves that circled round.

The muscles of Softfoot's back and arms stood out in heaving convolutions as he held the paddle blade desperately against the fierce pressure of the stream. Prairie Owl gripped the gunwale and swayed his weight from side to side to preserve the balance so that they might not be swamped.

At the critical moment the paddle was lifted. The prow swerved obediently. Then the canoe was caught with a violent jerk that swept it into the right-hand current, and it was carried like a floating arrow through the narrow channel of curving green water, past the pinnacle, but again to plunge into a swirling eddy of leaping foam, where the divided streams were rejoined beyond the rock.

"My medicine is good," murmured Softfoot. It was his Indian way of expressing his fervent thanks to Providence that the peril was safely past.

Mosquito Child relinquished his hold of the paddle and devoted himself to keeping the canoe steady, while Softfoot continued to ward it off from the cliffs by keeping in midstream.

Once more they were whirled off in the main current with its fearsome dips and rises and its downward-sloping rapids. The steep enclosing walls of the cañon, dripping with moisture, scarred into dimly fantastic shapes, still shut out the sky and filled the deep gorge with the gloom of eternal twilight.

For two or more miles this gloom continued. Then gradually the rocky walls grew wider apart and enough light penetrated the depths to show the green fronds of ferns and the red fringes of moss.

The waters ceased to roar and to lash the canoe with spray; and the leaping torrent subsided into a ripple of frothy waves. Suddenly the light grew strong again.

"We are through!" cried Prairie Owl. "Sit up, Little Antelope, and look!"

Little Antelope scrambled to his knees and saw that the canoe was no longer in Red Squaw Cañon, but sweeping smoothly through an open green valley brilliant with sunlit prairie flowers.

All four of the Pawnee boys now seized their paddles.

"Stop!" commanded Softfoot when they had drifted some distance. "We cannot go back to our teepee in the woods by way of the cañon. Our canoe is of no use. We must get out of it. We must walk. It is a long trail. We will make camp and rest for awhile. There is a small creek in the pine wood beyond the next hill where there is good ground and good hunting. Men call it Ghost Pine Creek."

He paused, crouching, with his dripping paddle across his naked brown thighs. He was sniffing the warm air like a wild creature of the prairie scenting a possible enemy from afar; his sensitive nostrils were twitching. He held up a finger, enjoining

silence. Then again he sniffed.

"Softfoot smells the good scent of the roses among the sage grass," said Prairie Owl. "He hears the whisper of the wind in the pine trees."

Softfoot dipped his paddle, but his gaze was fixed upon the fringe of fir trees on the ridge of the nearest hill.

"No Indians but our own Pawnees would make camp on the Mishe-mokwa Reserve," he said to his companions. "Yet there is a camp-fire burning in Ghost Pine Valley. I smell the wood smoke. I hear the tread of feet, the voices of men. They are perhaps our enemies. Put away your paddle, Mosquito Child. Be ready with your bow and arrows. And you, too, Little Antelope. Go softly. We will land on the farther bank, where these strangers cannot reach us. We shall see them as we pass the mouth of the creek."

Prairie Owl and he plied their paddles swiftly but cautiously, making no sound, while the other two crouched with only their heads and shoulders above the level of the gunwale, each with an arrow fixed on his bowstring.

The canoe glided smoothly in the current, moving like a shadow under the farther cliff. It passed beyond the wooded hill, which now sloped down into a grassy vale, broken by rough boulders and rocky bluffs, and intersected by the bed of a narrow watercourse.

On the higher ground two or three hobbled horses and some mules could be seen grazing. Softfoot quickly made out the shapes of white canvas tents under the sheltering trees, where camp-fires were sending up a thin blue mist of smoke. Near them was a covered prairie wagon such as he had never before seen. Its wheels were strange to him. Among the boulders in the watercourse he saw the figures of men wearing wide hats, red shirts, and heavy boots that reached high above their knees. He thought of his friend, Blue Eye.

"They are paleface men," declared Little Antelope. "Why are they here? What are they doing?"

CHAPTER IX

KIDDIE OF BIRKENSHAW'S

"DO not be afraid," said Softfoot. "The paleface people are our best friends."

"But one of them has a gun," urged Little Antelope, raising himself on his knees. "He has seen us! Paddle quickly! He is going to shoot at us. See! He is under the birch trees on the high bluff!"

Softfoot could see the man, standing hardly a bow-shot's distance away, taking aim at the canoe with his rifle. He seemed to have been posted on the bluff on sentry duty. Little Antelope lifted his bow and gripped the arrow on its string.

"Wait!" commanded Softfoot. "Take care!"

But even as he spoke there was a puff of powder-smoke from the gun. A bullet hummed like a bee over his head and struck the red cliff beyond him.

The report of the rifle-shot alarmed the men working in the gulch. They threw down their picks and shovels and ran to the side of Silver Creek, drawing their revolvers as they ran; and the quiet air was soon filled with the crackle of gunfire.

Softfoot flung his paddle over to the off side, and he and Prairie Owl forced the canoe along at high speed. They were both at the same side now. Their weight bore the canoe down so that its other side, rising well above their shoulders, formed a shield against the rain of bullets, while Antelope and Mosquito Child shot their well-aimed arrows over the higher rim, shooting only when they felt sure of hitting their mark.

Little Antelope, who had been afraid of the unknown dangers of Red Squaw Cañon, saw no peril in exposing himself to the deliberate aim of these strange men with their repeating rifles and revolvers. All his Indian joy in fighting a visible foe was alert. With his moccasined feet well planted, he kept his balance in the swiftly moving canoe, and as he leaned with his hip supported against the elevated gunwale and his arms and shoulders free, he sent his arrows flashing in quick succession across the dividing water, as if he were engaged in some boyish game instead of a life-and-death encounter.

He saw two of the men draw back wounded. Most of them had now abandoned their revolvers for Winchester rifles, and some were scrambling up the bluffs to get better aim at the quickly passing canoe.

"More arrows!" cried Antelope. He turned and reached out his right arm, red from a bullet wound.

At this moment, as the canoe swayed yet more perilously over, a rifle bullet tore its way through the thin bark shell below the waterline, and when, having seized two

new arrows, Little Antelope moved back to his former position to renew his shooting, the canoe swayed with him and a strong jet of water spurted in through the bullet-hole.

Softfoot realized that here was a new danger. He tried to plug the leak with a corner of his blanket, twisted round an arrow shaft. But the water still streamed in.

"Quick!" he cried. "All of you paddle hard! When we get to the bank, seize your blankets, our meat, and everything you can save. Take cover in the bushes."

Already they were past the opening of Ghost Pine Gulch, and the rise of the next hill hid them from the white men. They made for a gap in the opposite bank and were in time to fling their outfit ashore before the canoe settled down.

Softfoot slipped off his moccasins, waded in, and pushed the craft back into deeper water, where it sank out of sight. Then with dry-shod feet, which would leave no betraying tracks on the sun-baked rocks, he crept to the cover of the nearest boulder and waited.

His three companions had vanished like startled gophers. After awhile, he cautiously raised his head and looked searchingly across the creek. Two of the white men with guns in hand were moving among the trees on the opposite bluff, peering down at the creek, evidently perplexed at the sudden complete disappearance of the canoe and its occupants.

One of them looked straight across to the boulder where Softfoot crouched watching him. Softfoot did not move even an eyelash, and the two of them turned away.

Taking up a stone, Softfoot lightly tapped it three times on the face of the boulder. From among the aspen and birch bushes far behind him came three answering stone-taps.

His eyes darted a quick glance in the direction from which the sound had come, and he saw a twig trembling as if a bird had just left its perch. He gathered his blanket and weapons, and snaked his way up the slope, always being careful not to stir the long reeds of sage grass and to keep his coloured blanket out of sight, lest the enemy should still be searching.

When he joined his three companions he caught up Little Antelope's wounded arm. Little Antelope had been a wise Indian. He had wrapped his blanket round the wound so that the blood should leave no tracks on the ground which could be followed.

It was a clean flesh wound. The bullet had torn through the muscles of the lower arm, not touching the bone.

"I am sorry because I cannot get the scalp of the paleface who shot me, even

when my arrow trembled in his shoulder," Little Antelope regretted. "But I shall be very proud to show the Pawnees that I have been wounded in a real fight. It is great medicine!"

Softfoot took a spare bowstring of plaited sinew from his pack and tied it very tightly round the upper arm above the elbow. In the pure clean air the wound would soon be clogged with congealed blood, and the string would then be removed.

From their place of ambush they could not see into Ghost Pine Gulch or learn if their enemies were still searching for them.

"We are safe," said Softfoot. "They cannot cross the creek without canoes. My medicine tells me that they think we have been wiped out. We will let them think so. But I want to know what secret thing it is that has brought these paleface men into the Mishe-mokwa Reserve. I will find out. Go, my brothers. I walk alone. We will sleep to-night in Black Panther Forest." He pointed in its direction. "It is a far trail. I shall see your scouting signs. I shall see your fire-smoke and know where to find you."

Prairie Owl gave him a piece of dried buffalo meat and a handful of sarvis berries, and he ate as he walked off under cover of the high bank that hid him from the creek.

He made his way stealthily to the top of the wooded bluff which faced the opening of Ghost Pine Gulch. Its far side dropped steeply into Silver Creek, forming a bare red cliff. He glided silently amid the warm-scented fir trees, treading softly on the carpet of pine needles, until he came into the sunlight, when he went down on hands and knees and crept like a snake to the edge of the cliff where he could look down into the gulch. There he lay at his full length, silent and motionless, as if he were a part of the cliff itself, watching the strange men.

They were not hunting; they were not catching fish or setting beaver traps. Yet they were laboriously at work about the watercourse and among the boulders. Some were using picks and shovels. They seemed to be gathering the dirt from the bed of the shrunken stream—it was a tiny rivulet rather than a flowing creek. Some were shovelling this dirt into great dumps and into long, flat frames, or troughs, through which water trickled. Others stood with bent backs, shaking wooden trays between their knees.

Softfoot could not understand. He only knew that these strange white men were trespassing on the Pawnees' territory which was forbidden to them. They were doing something unlawful and in secret. That was why they had opened fire upon the canoe, fearing that they had been discovered by the Pawnee scouts. But what did they want? Why had they left their own land, taking a weary trail over mountain and

prairie to make camp in a desolate gulch where there were no buffaloes to hunt, no bushes of ripe berries, and where even their horses could find little to eat but grass that was parched by the hot sun?

No; he could not understand. However long he might lie watching them, he could learn no more.

He crept back to the rear of the bluff and threaded his way through the larches down to the level ground, where he broke into a steady run. There was no trail for him to follow, no sign to tell him his way. The landmarks were strange to him; he might easily have been lost, as often he had been. But he knew as by instinct that he was going in the right direction for Black Panther Forest, and he aimed at taking a nearer way than the one that Prairie Owl would be leading.

After climbing many hills, passing through a maze of woodland and across a wide stretch of prairie, he came suddenly upon a beaten trail, where the grass was worn down and the dry dust turned up by the hoofs of horses that had been galloping both east and west at different times.

The hoofs were shod. One set of them was not many hours old, and another was even more recent. These latter led in his own direction, and he followed them, thinking the while of the man Blue Eye. But the marks were smaller than those made by Blue Eye's great horse.

The trail curved round a bluff of cottonwood trees. Suddenly Softfoot slackened his pace. His hand went to his knife, but was quickly withdrawn and held up, palm outward, in sign of peace.

"How!" he called aloud.

A saddled pony with its reins dropped over its feet stood at the side of the trail twitching its ears and swishing its long tail while the flies buzzed noisily. Near the pony a young plainsman sat hunched on a tree-root. He was smoking, with his elbows on his knees. Between his dusty, spurred boots there was a small wicker basket covered with a white cloth on which a wasp had alighted. He was blowing smoke at the wasp. He looked up casually as Softfoot halted in front of him.

"Scoutin' around?" he inquired idly. "What's doin'? I seen three other guys same's yourself back along the trail couple of hours since. One had a lame arm. Looked like as he'd bin havin' gun-play. Couldn't make 'em savvy my talk. Seemed they was some scared seein' a white man. What?"

Softfoot shook his head, not understanding a word. While he stood admiring the waiting pony, wondering why its coat was so clean and dry and why its rider was not in the saddle, he was aware of the sound of swiftly galloping hoofs approaching along the trail. In a few moments a hard-ridden pony rounded the bend and came

into sight, breathing heavily, white with alkali dust and clammy with sweat.

Softfoot noticed that its rider was hardly more than a boy, dark almost as an Indian, wearing moccasins, fringed leggings, and a brace of revolvers. He pulled up abruptly, dismounted, took off his wide hat and wiped his perspiring good-looking face.

"How goes, Tex?" he said cheerfully; and glancing aside at Softfoot, he added: "Who's your visitor, Tex? Looks like a Pawnee. One of Great Bear's lot, I guess. Say, I got a thirst. Anything to drink?"

Tex had stood up.

"Same as usual, Kiddie," he answered, opening the basket. "Cold tea, hard-boiled eggs, already stripped, ham flappers, an' a heap of ripe plums. You're inside of schedule time. Take things easy. Have a good eat."

"Empty the plums in my Stetson," said Kiddie. "I'll eat 'em as I ride along on the next section."

He dropped his wide-brimmed hat, quickly transferred the two little mail-bags from the saddle of his exhausted mount to the saddle of the fresh relay pony. Then taking an egg and a sandwich and beginning to eat, he again bent his large eyes upon Softfoot.

"Are there no ponies handy that an Indian must cross the prairie trails in his moccasins?" he inquired, speaking in good Pawnee.

Softfoot answered: "My brothers and I took our canoe through Red Squaw Cañon. In Ghost Pine Gulch there were many paleface men. They fired upon us with their guns. They broke our canoe. That is why I walk. Softfoot is my name."

"Mine is Little Cayuse," said the express rider, holding the basket invitingly forward. "Softfoot will perhaps eat with Little Cayuse, and tell him what these white men were doing in the Pawnee country. Speak quickly, friend Softfoot. My time is precious. No, take more."

Softfoot told him what he had seen. Kiddie then took a long drink of the cold tea, strode up to the relay pony and hung the bridle rein over the pommel.

"Say, Tex," he said quietly, speaking now in the language of the plains, "thar's a gang of fool prospectors trespassin' on the Silver Creek Reserve. They've struck gold in Ghost Pine Gulch. They're breakin' the law. Understand? If they don't quit, there'll sure be a heap of trouble. We shall have the redskins out on the war-path. If you happen on Buckskin Jack, let him know about this, will you?"

"Kiddie, I seen Buckskin Jack a couple of days back," responded Tex. "He'd just been along to Great Bear's village doin' a trick turn at buffalo huntin'. He never said nothin' about gold-diggers."

Kiddie had his foot in the stirrup. He turned to Softfoot.

"I hear the Pawnees have been out on the buffalo trail," he said. "There was a white man hunting with them. Did you see him?"

"It is true," returned Softfoot. "He killed many buffaloes. His medicine is great. We named him Blue Eye."

"Blue Eye?" repeated Kiddie, leaping lightly to his saddle and reaching for his hat, now heavy with gorgeous plums. "Well, yes, I allow Buck's eyes are real forget-me-not blue."

He waved his free hand as he galloped off along the trail on the fresh pony, and soon he was hidden in a cloud of prairie dust.

Tex slung the empty basket on his arm and led the tired pony away.

"Wish I c'd pow-wow with that Injun the same as Birkenshaw's Kiddie," he said to himself. "But Kiddie's top-notch every time."

About a mile farther along the trail, Softfoot came upon a scout sign of three white stones and a pointer. But already in the blue distance he could make out the dark patch of timber that indicated the fringe of Black Panther Forest. He crossed a stretch of rolling prairie, forded a narrow creek, and climbed over the shoulder of a rugged mountain into the valley beyond. Even as he was descending he discovered that the lower ground was heavily marked by the tracks of many horses. He hastened his steps. The tracks were quite new. He was perplexed.

He went to and fro, exercising his scoutcraft, learning many things. Many of the horses had gone in single file; others had been loosely driven, like cattle. At one place the ground was kicked up as if there had been trouble. The hoof-marks were mingled with the prints of moccasined feet. He studied these intently. They were not Pawnee-made moccasins, which are rigid in the sole; but soft and pliable, showing the impressions of the separate toes.

But among them there was one pair, very small and flat. He followed them a few paces to where there had evidently been a struggle. Here he saw that the right foot of the pair was now naked. It was a small, neat foot, the foot of a woman or girl who had seemingly been trying to escape.

He searched about eagerly. Was the girl a captive? He felt assured that the Indians were of the Cree nation, not Pawnees. What had happened? Then, as he searched, his eyes were arrested by something shaped like a foot lying half buried in the sand. He seized it, turned it over. It was a girl's moccasin of white doeskin trimmed with blue and white beads, and edged with ermine. One glance was enough. Softfoot knew that moccasin. It was Wenonah's.

And now Wenonah was a captive, forcibly carried off by the enemy Crees!

CHAPTER X

IN THE TOILS

THE buffalo hunt had come as an unexpected interruption to the ordinary life of Great Bear's village. Everything—even the crop of standing corn—was abandoned for the business of bringing in the heavy loads from the prairie, cutting up and storing the rich harvest of tongues, red meat and back-fat, securing the marrow from the big bones, drying the hides, and disposing of vast quantities of refuse to make the ground again clean and wholesome.

Soon after the hunt, the Pawnees turned most of their war-horses and buffalo ponies free to roam over the wide-stretching ranges, only those required for daily use being kept in the camp corrals. The work of scraping and tanning the buffalo robes and of pounding the dried meat into pemmican would occupy the women during many moons. None would be idle.

But in the midst of these activities the season of ripe fruit added its claims. Berries, nuts and camas roots had to be gathered promptly and preserved for winter food; and now, too, there were buffalo chips and fir-cones to be brought in for fuel. It was a busy time for the Pawnees.

Softfoot and his three companions were still absent from the encampment when, on a certain morning while the grass was yet wet with dew, a large company of the women and girls brought out their ponies to ride over the bluffs and gather berries.

Morning Bird was their leader. She was mounted on Softfoot's pony, Snow-white, and she had asked that one or two of the young braves should accompany them, to keep watch from the hill-tops and give warning if any lurking enemy or prowling grizzly bear should come out upon them from the bushes.

Wenonah was early on the plain within the circle of lodges, seated astride her piebald pinto as easily and securely as any boy, although the pony wore no saddle but a folded blanket, and its only bridle was a hackamore of shaganappy looped over its lower jaw.

She led a second pony by its long trail-rope. It was a broncho that had not yet been broken-in and was not accustomed to carrying long travois poles over its back. When it began to prance about and buck to get rid of the poles, one of boys who rode near laughed.

"You do not try to help me, Weasel Moccasin," Wenonah objected, shortening the rope and gripping her quirt. "I do not know why you are here."

"I am coming to take care of the women," declared Weasel Moccasin, slapping his expanded chest as he moved his pony nearer to her.

"Well, it will be very pleasant for you to lie on your back among the prairie flowers while we are working," said Wenonah. "If a wolf or a poison-snake should creep up and frighten me, I will call you to my help. What would do you, I wonder, if a rattlesnake should be near enough to bite my hand when I am gathering berries?"

"I should tell you to run away from it," he answered.

She smiled, thinking of what Softfoot had done in such circumstances. She glanced at the tall white feather fluttering in Weasel Moccasin's head-band.

"Tell me," she said, "how did you kill the big buffalo bull after it had thrown you high in the air and hurt your head?"

"I cannot tell you," he answered confusedly, "my head is still sore. I have forgotten many things."

"You have perhaps forgotten that Softfoot rode behind you among the buffaloes," pursued Wenonah. "My medicine tells me that it was not you, but Softfoot, who killed the great bull and the six other buffaloes, for which you are now wearing the feather. You did not earn the feather."

"Your medicine is weak, then," returned Weasel Moccasin, "for the seven were all killed by my marked arrows, and that is why I am wearing the feather."

"When your head is well again," rejoined Wenonah, "perhaps you will not forget how you changed your arrows into Softfoot's quiver, and his into yours. I think your tongue is crooked, Weasel Moccasin. It is not good that a Pawnee should have a crooked tongue."

He laughed at her mockingly.

Morning Bird led the way through the forest trail, down the slope of the hill to the prairie and to where the current of Silver Creek swept with a sharp bend round the bluffs.

In a secluded, grassy vale, beyond sight of the now distant lodges, the women dismounted and hobbled their ponies so that they might not stray and get mixed with the war-horses that were grazing on the neighbouring ranges.

Then, taking their empty sacks, they trooped off in a merry crowd to the bushes where they began to gather the plenteous crop of ripe berries, laughing and singing over their work.

Weasel Moccasin and a tenderfoot brave named Fleet Wing climbed one of the high wooded hills, where they posted themselves to keep watch that the women on the lower levels were safe from harm.

"To me it seems very stupid that we should waste a fine morning in idleness up here," said Weasel Moccasin. "There is no danger."

Fleet Wing was binding threaded beads round a new knife-case. He looked

down into the peaceful vale, where the women were at work. "No. There is no danger that we can see," he agreed. "But the prairie grass is dry. If the sun were to set it on fire, there would then be danger. You should have brought some work with you, or you could have stopped at home among the lodges. There is no need for you to be idle."

"I was thinking of Softfoot and the others who are with him in the canoe," said Weasel Moccasin. "They will have good hunting; they will make camp in the forest and see many wonderful things. If I had not been hurt by the buffalo I should have gone with them. They ought to have waited. They knew that I wanted to go in the canoe, that I had set my thoughts deeply upon looking down into the terrors of Red Squaw Cañon. Softfoot would be afraid to go near the cañon; but I should have had no fear. There is nothing that has power to make me afraid."

He lay back in the scented sage grass with his hands clasped behind his head, his gaze fixed dreamily upon the drifting clouds. From the valley below came the voices of the women. Once he heard Wenonah's clear, far-reaching voice calling to him mischievously:

"Weasel Moccasin! There is a big bull-frog looking at me. Come and send him away!"

It was very soon after this that Fleet Wing suddenly dropped his beadwork and crept cautiously to the farther edge of the flat hill-top, where he lay peering down searchingly into the green valley beyond. He returned hurriedly.

"Quick!" he cried, touching his companion's shoulder. "Make no sound. Listen! There are people down there—strangers—enemies—among our horses! Creep down and see who they are, see what they are doing, while I go and tell Morning Bird. Go and bunch the women's ponies together so that they may ride home as soon as I bring them to you. Quick! Quick!"

He himself ran at great speed down the slope on the nearer side, waving his hands aloft to the women for a sign that something was wrong, sounding the Pawnee call of alarm as he ran.

Wenonah was the first that he came to at the foot of the hill.

"Run to your ponies, all of you!" he called as he raced on. "Ride home to the lodges. Do not wait. Tell the warriors that there is a big village of the Crees driving off our horses!"

Wenonah understood in an instant what this meant. She spread the alarm among the women who were near her, told them to leave their berries and get back to their ponies. Fleet Wing went onward to urge the others to escape. There was confusion at first; but Morning Bird overruled all panic and gathered her charges together,

hurrying them back to the place where they had left their mounts.

Seeing that all was in good order, Wenonah now ran at her quickest speed round the foot of the bluff into the farther valley. She saw the ponies racing about in panic. She saw Weasel Moccasin seize one of them and vault upon its back. It was Softfoot's buffalo horse, Snow-white. He had not waited to find his own.

"Drive them this way!" Wenonah called, and trusted to him to obey her.

Her own piebald pinto was not far from where she had left it. She ran to it, and catching at its long trail-rope, drew it to her and leapt astride. When she looked round for Weasel Moccasin she saw him riding off in the wrong direction, away from the ponies.

"Come back!" she called aloud. She called him, not because she thought he was meanly abandoning her to her difficulties, but because from the greater height of her pony's back she had seen that he was riding into danger towards a band of the Crees, who were sweeping round from the ambush of a hidden gulch, and were bearing down upon him.

Weasel Moccasin also saw them when it was almost too late. But he turned and galloped back, while Wenonah boldly rode to meet him.

"Drive them down to the women!" she cried. "You should have done so at first. Come! Let us drive them quick!"

"There is no time," he told her in consternation. "Look! We are surrounded!"

A second troop of the mounted Crees had crept out from the other side of the valley to cut off the escape of the ponies they intended to capture. Beyond them, Fleet Wing and Morning Bird, seeing this new danger, were now urging the women to escape on foot.

Even at this moment, had Weasel Moccasin done as Wenonah told him, many of the ponies could have been driven past in safety and out to the open prairie. But instead, thinking only of his own safety, he turned Snow-white's nose to the hillside and lashed at her with his quirt to force her up the difficult slope and so escape over the shoulder of the hill.

Wenonah, left alone to manage some half-hundred frightened ponies, raced from side to side to keep them in a compact bunch and stampede them across the course of the swiftly advancing Crees. Some did indeed get past by scattering over the lower slopes of the hill. But the Crees, marking the girl's intention, extended their line in a new direction to head her off.

She realized then that she could do no more for her companions, and that she was herself in great danger. Driving the herd yet a little farther, she at length pulled round the piebald and raced him back to follow Weasel Moccasin.

Looking to the hillside, she saw the white pony climbing upward. Weasel Moccasin was still using his quirt. But already two or three of the enemy were close behind him, whirling their lariats. Wenonah kept to the level ground. She made for a narrow wooded gap on the opposite side of the valley, believing that in this way she could gallop round unseen behind the bluffs and reach the open prairie in safety and in time to help the women.

She had not counted upon there being any more of the Crees in the background. But when she entered the narrow defile, she saw in front of her a great herd of the Pawnee war-horses, all gathered together and encircled by mounted Crees. And, nearer still, a pair of horsemen blocked her passage. At sight of them she turned once more and raced back, hoping to find cover among the trees and boulders. But she had hardly got the piebald to the full gallop before she heard the beating of hoofs close behind her.

Something darted forward between her and the sunlight. The open loop of a lariat dropped over her shoulders and her pony's outstretched head and neck. There was a sudden violent jerk that brought the pony to its knees. The loop tightened and Wenonah was a prisoner!

CHAPTER XI

THE CRY FROM THE CLIFFS

THE girl was not hurt. She was still firmly astride when the pony regained its feet. But she was helpless, with her two arms pinioned against her sides. She tried to get free; but the lariat tightened more and more, pulling her down with her face against the pony's mane, and her struggles were useless.

The brave who had thrown the lariat dismounted. With her own trail-rope he carefully bound her moccasined feet one to the other under the pony's girth and lashed her arms together behind her back. She could sit upright now and look about her as she was being led back through the defile to where the captured Pawnee horses were gathered.

It seemed to her that all of Mishe-mokwa's great herd had been collected from the ranges. She knew that the raiders were of the Cree nation—the hereditary enemies of the Pawnees—who had their encampment on the far side of the Big Horn Mountains.

For the time being she resigned herself calmly to her misfortune, wondering only if the berry-gatherers had all escaped; knowing that as she was not a war prisoner but only an innocent captive, she would not be ill-used; knowing, too, that her own people would hasten to her rescue and the recovery of their stolen horses. It was a cause for a tribal quarrel. The Pawnees would now go out on the war-path against the Crees, and many scalps would be taken on both sides.

When her captor halted, he looked at the roping which bound her and made some changes that relieved the strain on her arms. He was tying the last knot when many of the women's captured mounts were driven up. They were riderless, and Wenonah was satisfied that none of her companions had been seized. She recognized each pony as it came in sight. Some, at all events, had escaped and not been followed. She watched them, counting them and then when it seemed that there were no more, two of the Crees brought up the rear, leading between them Softfoot's buffalo pony, Snow-white. Weasel Moccasin was still astride, bound with ropes as she herself was bound.

His head was bent, his chin on his chest. He did not see Wenonah. He was not brought near to her, and she could not catch his attention.

"It is his own fault," Wenonah told herself. "If he had thought more of the helpless women and less of his own safety, we should neither of us be here."

Already the Crees were moving off. It was clear to Wenonah that they had been secretly at work on the ranges from earliest dawn, and perhaps during the night,

rounding up the wandering war-horses, and that they were now hurrying away with the spoils of their raid, lest they should be pursued by the Pawnees while they were still on Mishe-mokwa's territory.

They drove the captive herd like cattle, guarding them well so that none should escape, some of the warriors riding in front, others on the flanks, and many braves at the rear. Throughout the whole of that day they trailed without halting for food or rest; swimming the animals across the creeks, stampeding them up the slopes, avoiding the level stretches of prairie where they might be discovered, and keeping stealthily to the secluded ways through narrow valleys that twined and twisted among the mountains.

Wenonah had never before been so far away from her native encampment by Silver Creek, and all the landmarks were strange to her. Yet she stored them up in her memory, always looking back at them when they were past, so that she might know them again if by some happy chance she should regain her liberty.

Once when she glanced backward she saw Weasel Moccasin looking in her direction; but he betrayed no sign of having recognized her or her piebald pinto. She wondered how he would help her to escape if presently when the Crees relaxed their watchfulness there should be a possible chance. She knew as by instinct that their opportunities surely would come, if at all, before they reached the Crees' distant encampment, and she trusted Weasel Moccasin to devise his own plans and give her some sign when the moment should come for them to escape together.

She was well enough skilled in scoutcraft to know that although the general landmarks were strange to her, yet the direction in which the Crees were trailing favoured the possibility that sooner or later they would come again within easy distance of Silver Creek.

Their village, she knew, lay beyond the mountains on the far side of the creek, and in order to reach it they would most likely find a fording-place somewhere above the rapids that flowed through Red Squaw Cañon.

In this case they would be bound to pass very near to where Prairie Owl and Softfoot had planned to go on their trip in the canoe. She took comfort in this thought, but determined to leave everything to Weasel Moccasin.

The trail was continued during the hours of high noon. Wenonah began to feel very hungry and thirsty; yet there was no sign of food. The Crees had brought none with them. One of them, a young brave, rode past her, eating berries from his full hand. He glanced at her in passing and then turned back, leant over and held his hand to her lips so that she might take some of the berries.

He spoke as she ate, but she did not understand him. She imagined that he was

telling her that Weasel Moccasin had asked him to give her the berries. It was not until later in the afternoon, when there was a halt at the side of a small creek, that Weasel Moccasin chanced to be near her, and then she saw by the astonishment in his face that he had not known she had fallen into the hands of the Crees.

"Wenonah!" he exclaimed.

"Ugh!—yes," she nodded. "You see I am here. It is bad medicine. My heart is very heavy. But we will escape. I am ready when you give me the sign."

He shook his head.

"The Pawnees will come for us," he said. "If we try to run away, the Crees will kill us. I do not want to be killed."

Wenonah breathed deeply.

"You came out from the lodges to take care of the women," she reminded him. "The Pawnees will call you a coward if you do not help me to escape."

A warrior, followed by many braves, rode in between them and they did not come together again. The horses were all driven across the creek and into a grassy gulch where there were several small lodges with camp-fires, around which some young squaws and men were busy cooking.

It was here that the Crees were to make camp for the night. Wenonah understood now why they had not carried food with them. They had left some of their band here with their camp equipment to be in readiness for their return after the horse raid.

Wenonah was released from the ropes and handed over to the charge of the women, who treated her kindly, but kept close guard over her even at night while she slept. They could not speak in the Pawnee tongue; but she quickly understood their sign language and gathered from it that no harm would come to her if she did not try to run away and tell her people what had become of their horses.

Very early in the morning, long before sunrise, the Crees broke camp to continue their journey. While the squaws were taking down and packing the teepees and distributing food, and the men were occupied among the horses, Wenonah made pretence of grooming her pony, talking to it while she brushed the dust from its coat with wisps of grass.

This gave her an opportunity of searching for Weasel Moccasin. No one was watching her. She led the pony down to the creek to drink and to wash her own hands and face. Then it occurred to her that, unnoticed by her captors, she could let the pony wander farther and farther away from her, following it as if she wanted to catch it.

When it was far enough, a word from her would make it stop, and then she

could leap upon its back and gallop off, not afraid of any Cree overtaking her, for she was a very good rider. Her pulses were beating quickly as she thought of doing this. But she remembered Weasel Moccasin.

"No," she said to herself, "I will not escape without him. A Pawnee does not desert one of his own race. My medicine tells me that we must escape together, or not at all."

So with this self-sacrificing resolve, she led her piebald pony back into the camp and offered to help the squaws tie up their bundles.

It was then that, for the first time that morning, she saw Weasel Moccasin. Had he been watchful, he might have followed her to the creek. They could have escaped, even at the risk of being pursued. The Crees, however, were far more anxious that the stolen horses should not stray. If their two human captives had attempted to escape, the risk would not have been great.

They no longer sought to bind the two prisoners with ropes. They allowed Wenonah to ride her own pony immediately behind Weasel Moccasin. Instead of being led, both could use their bridle lines, and they were even expected to help in keeping the loose horses in a compact drove.

"Keep near me," Wenonah whispered as Weasel Moccasin took his place in front of her in the long procession. "Keep near me. When the chance comes, we will take it together."

No possible chance came until late in the afternoon. The drove passed within sight of a vast forest. It was the forest of Black Panther; but Wenonah, not knowing its name, thought only of how well a pair of fugitives might hide in its pathless depths. She tried to make Weasel Moccasin share her thoughts, but he shook his head sullenly.

Shortly afterwards, one of the loose ponies took fright and ran off. Wenonah borrowed a lariat, gave chase and cleverly caught the runaway. As she tightened the rope, she looked down, and was thrilled in every vein at seeing on the ground beside her a scout sign of three white stones and a pointer. It was a familiar Pawnee sign which told her unmistakably that three persons had lately gone by in the direction of the forest.

It had been left as a guide for someone who was expected to follow. As in a flash, she divined that she had hit the trail of her brother, Prairie Owl, and his three companions, Softfoot, Little Antelope, and Mosquito Child!

But the Crees were now watching her. Weasel Moccasin was not with her. She must lead back the pony, and pretend that she had not seen the sign which had brought so much hope into her heart.

"Be ready," she said to Weasel Moccasin as they slowly entered a narrow glen between high crags—crags too steep and rugged for horses, but not too steep for an agile, surefooted Pawnee girl to climb.

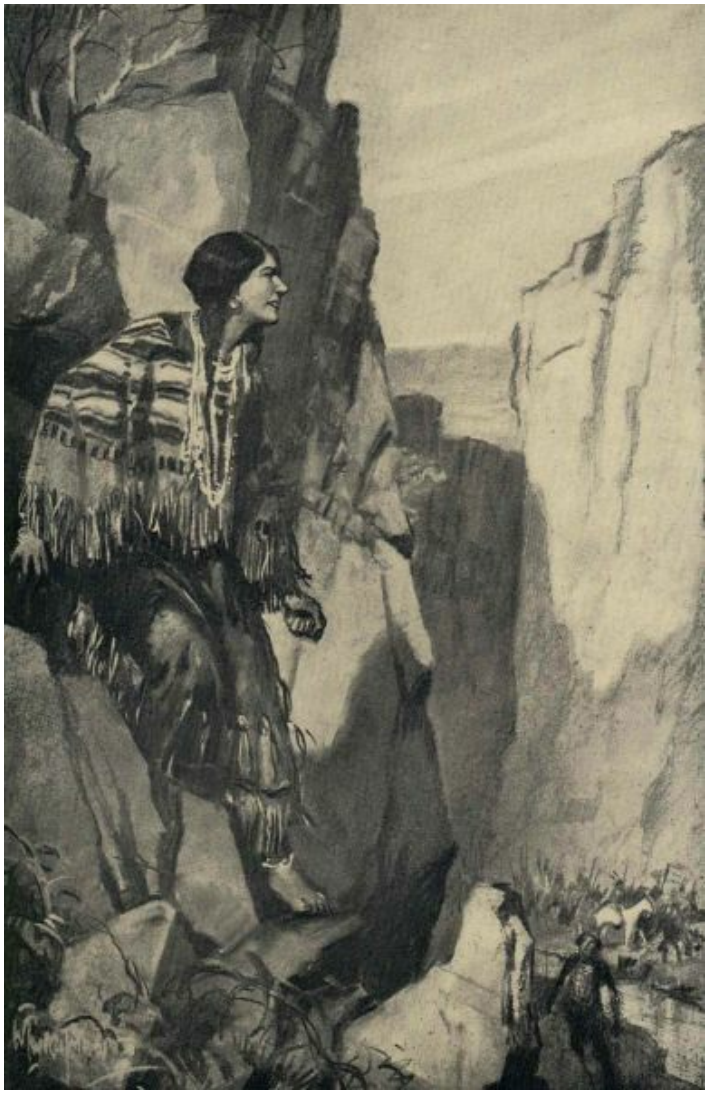
A clear, cool stream trickled through the glen. Many of the riders dismounted to drink. There was confusion among the horses. Wenonah saw her chance. She brushed against Weasel Moccasin and looked straight into his eyes.

"Quick!" she urged. "Follow me. Do what I do—now. *Now!*"

She slipped lightly to the ground and threaded her way through the throng of Indians and horses. One of the squaws called to her. She paid no heed, but only glanced over her shoulder to see if Weasel Moccasin were following her to the crags. Then she stopped abruptly—amazed. He was still seated on the white pony. And he was pointing at her, telling the Crees that she was making her escape!

Some of them ran after her. One of them—he who had given her the berries—caught her; but she struggled and broke free, leaving one of her blue-beaded moccasins lying upturned on the sand. Then with desperate speed she ran for the cliff and began to climb up and up with astonishing skill. For a moment she paused in her rapid, difficult ascent; and above the clamour of wild yells and shouts that sent their echoes through the glen, sounded the girl's clear cry of accusation and contempt as she looked back at Weasel Moccasin:

"*Coward!*" she cried aloud, "*coward!*"



“‘ *Coward!*’ she cried aloud, ‘*coward!*’”

CHAPTER XII

ON THE TRACK

SOFTFOOT was not easily agitated. He had all the patient stoicism of his ancient race, and did not habitually express his emotions in outward excitement. Had you been there to watch him when he discovered the blue-beaded moccasin lying half buried in the sand in Crooked Pass, you might have supposed by his calmness that he did not greatly concern himself as to its ownership or as to the circumstances which had led to his finding it in so remote and desolate a place.

What did the incident amount to after all? Some Indians had gone by with their horses. A girl, travelling with them, had dropped her moccasin.

But Softfoot was an experienced scout. The discovery told him far more than it could have told anyone not trained by long habit to observe little signs and interpret their meaning.

To begin with, it had not been enough for him to notice in passing that the hoof-prints of many horses were marked on the ground. He wanted further to assure himself what manner of horses they had been; in what way they had been ridden, or driven; how many there had been, and exactly why and when they had passed through this wild glen, so far from human habitation.

The confused hoof-prints could not themselves have told him whether the horses belonged to his own Pawnee people or to some other Indian tribe. At first sight he could only be sure that there was a very large number of them, that some had been ridden and others driven loose. There were no marks of travois poles or footprints of dogs, however, and from this circumstance he quickly concluded that it had not been a village of migratory Indians trailing to a new camping ground and perhaps making a short cut across the Mishe-mokwa Reserve. Neither was it a war-party. Indians going on the war-path travel in single file, to leave a narrow track which will not betray their strength.

Softfoot did not need to look at the sun's position in the sky to discover the direction in which these strangers were moving. They had been coming from the neighbourhood of Great Bear's encampment, and they were going towards the Big Horn Mountains—the country of the Crees. Instantly when he realized this he leapt to the belief that the Crees had been out on a horse raid on the Pawnee ranges, and that they had succeeded in driving off Mishe-mokwa's herd.

It was clear that they had passed through this mountain defile very recently. The horse droppings and the footprints were not many hours old. He saw that there had been a halt here. Some of the men had dismounted and gone down to the stream to

drink. He examined their footmarks then, and assured himself by the peculiar impressions of their soft moccasins that they were in fact Crees.

Not until he came upon those other smaller footmarks did he become seriously alarmed. They were a woman's footmarks, and Indians going on a horse raid do not take their women with them. Moreover, the soles of the little moccasins were flat and hard, and this seemed to show that the wearer was a Pawnee. It was impossible to doubt that one or more of the Pawnee girls had been taken captive—perhaps while they were gathering berries.

At this point, Softfoot exercised a new eagerness. He searched the ground, quartering it like a pointer, and as he went to and fro he drew his deductions from every sign. He found the place where the girl had dismounted. The fact that she had been able to dismount without help proved to him that she had not been bound with ropes; her hands were free.

She had alighted at the side farthest from the water. She had not gone down to the stream to get a drink. He followed her tracks where they had not been crushed out. They led him towards the steep cliff. But soon they were joined and partly wiped out by larger, heavier feet, as if one of her captors had been pursuing her.

The man had caught her. There were signs on the ground of a fierce struggle. Beyond them, one of the small feet was now bare, and the naked toes were deeply impressed, showing that the fugitive had been running quickly. It was near to where the struggle had occurred that Softfoot found the upturned moccasin almost hidden, under loose sand and tufts of grass.

At the moment when he picked it up, he knew beyond question that it was Wenonah's moccasin. He recognized it by its pretty design, worked in blue and white beads, on the soft doeskin, and by the now ragged trimming of ermine. Near the toe, clogging the beads, there was the purple stain of a crushed sarvis berry.

"It is Wenonah's," Softfoot told himself with certainty. "And Wenonah has been carried off by the Crees! She tried to escape. But how could she hope to escape in this narrow mountain pass, crowded with watchful enemies?"

He glanced up at the steep, rocky precipice and shook his head.

"There was no one to help her," he reflected sadly. "My medicine tells me that she was quite alone. If there had been others, they would have gone with her. No Pawnee would have escaped alone, leaving others behind. If one of our braves had been captured, he would have helped Wenonah, even if he gave up his life so that she might be free."

Thinking over these things, Softfoot did not forget that his three companions whom he was following up on their way to Black Panther Forest must necessarily

have passed very near to this spot. They were but two or three hours in advance of him. Had Wenonah seen them from afar? Had she seen their tracks, or any of the secret scout signs which they would surely have left? If this were so, then she might very well have attempted to escape and follow on their trail in the hope of joining them.

Softfoot came to the conclusion, however, that the three boys must have been well beyond this place before the Crees and their horses came along. Wenonah could not have seen them, and, unless she had gone apart from the line of march, she could not have discovered any trail signs for which she had not been searching. Besides, she had no reason to believe that the four Pawnee boys were not still in their canoe on Silver Creek.

He argued, therefore, that it was because the Crees had come to a temporary halt beside the stream that Wenonah had seized her opportunity to dismount and make a run for the refuge of the near cliff. No horseman could follow her. Softfoot even doubted that she herself could scale that rugged mountain-side. From where he stood it seemed impossible for anyone to climb with safety.

Then came the one all-important question: Had Wenonah succeeded in escaping up the cliff, or had she been recaptured?

Until this was determined, Softfoot could do nothing. Yet for not an instant did he allow himself to forget that his first duty was to find her and rescue her. There were two courses open to him—either to start off at once, alone and on foot, on the trail of the Crees, or else to make immediate search of the mountain crags in the faint hope that Wenonah had escaped.

He consulted his medicine. It told him that even if he should follow the Crees to their encampment beyond the Big Horn Range, even if he should be fortunate enough to discover the lodge in which Wenonah was held captive, he could not rescue her without help. She would be strictly guarded, and he had neither horse nor tomahawk. It would need a big war-party of Pawnees to do such a thing. No; better than following on the enemy's trail would it be to hasten home to his own people and show them the moccasin which gave mute evidence that Wenonah was in the hands of the Crees.

Crooked Pass was a long trail from the lodges of the Pawnees. Softfoot surmised that the horse raid had been made very secretly in the early morning of the previous day, when the women and girls had hardly begun their work of harvesting the berries. Wenonah by some mischance had been captured with the horses; but the Pawnees might not yet have discovered that the raiders were Crees.

First, however, it was necessary to make sure that Wenonah's bold attempt to

escape had failed, and that she was still in the clutches of the enemy.

Softfoot had already followed up her tracks to the base of the cliff. Here, instead of grass and earth, there was solid rock, upon which he could find no trace of her feet. Even her tracks in the sand had been crushed out by the hoofs of horses and the feet of the men who had given chase. She had certainly been followed very promptly, and it seemed more than probable that she had been caught.

"It is no use," Softfoot deplored. "My medicine tells me we shall not see her again until the Pawnees go out on the war-path against these Crees and rescue her from their lodges. That is what must be done."

He looked back towards the place where Wenonah had dismounted. He turned to the cliff and tried to discover the point at which, without considering the risks, she had intended to begin her impossible climb, and he remembered an occasion when this same high-spirited girl had imperilled her life by scaling just such a precipice on Silver Creek to rescue a puppy dog that had been carried up by an eagle. She was brave and fearless. But the Crees must have seen that she was a person of importance. They would surely recapture her.

Softfoot had meant to walk round the base of this mountain on his way to Black Panther Forest. But now he decided to go over the mountain's shoulder and perhaps from there show a smoke signal which might be seen by his waiting companions at their camp in the forest.

He began the difficult climb. He went past the very boulder near which Wenonah had paused to look back at Weasel Moccasin and call aloud her accusing cry: "Coward! Coward!" But he saw nothing that told him she had climbed so far, and he went up and up, thinking only of the immediate need of finding sure hold for his feet and hands.

When at length he came to a grassy slope, he turned and surveyed his wild surroundings. The glen was now far beneath him. There was not a sign within the whole wide range of his searching vision to tell him that any human being had ever been here before; nothing but a barren desolation of rugged mountain and primeval forest, broken here and there by green patches of prairie.

Far away he could see once again the jagged outline of giant fir trees that marked the fringe of Black Panther Forest. The sky above was ominously dark with gathering thunder-clouds. He was not yet high enough to build his signal fire; but the mountain was now less steep and he made his way laboriously upward and upward.

Passing through a group of stone pines, he began to collect some cones and twigs for fuel. He came to a thin stream that trickled among the rocks to join an unseen watercourse, the deep roar of which had been growing louder and louder as

he approached. He went down on his knees to get a drink and was in the act of lowering his lips to the cool water when on the stream's farther side, impressed in the moist earth and moss, he saw the unmistakable marks of moccasins. They were big and wide, and the soles had been soft and pliant, showing the pressure of the toes.

He held his breath, and looked searchingly around.

"The Crees have sent their scouts over the mountain," he said to himself. "They have been searching for Wenonah! They are searching for her even now. I, too, will search, and I will not cease until I find her—alive or dead!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE BRIDGE OF PERILOUS ADVENTURE

IN her escape up the cliff and over the steep mountain slopes, Wenonah had exercised all her Indian cunning not to leave any betraying tracks behind her. She knew that the Cree scouts were chasing her. She knew that her freedom, perhaps even her life, depended upon her quickness and her skill in taking cover. She was careful to tread only upon ground that was hard or rocky, where her feet would make no marks.

She darted from boulder to boulder, from tree to tree; she ventured along perilous ledges and leapt over yawning fissures that in calmer moments she could not have looked at without dread; and when she was compelled to cross the open levels she ran with desperate speed for the nearest refuge where she could conceal herself and recover breath and courage to make another venture. She was like a hunted animal, and she used a hunted animal's instinct.

If Weasel Moccasin had not proved himself an arrant coward and traitor—if he had stolen away with her in that opportunity when the Crees were off their guard—they might both have escaped unseen, hiding in safety until the way was clear. She had not believed that any Pawnee could be so mean and craven as to sit unmoved on his pony's back and actually draw the Crees' attention to her escape.

But as Weasel Moccasin had been afraid to run a risk which she, a young girl, was willing to face, there was no other course open to her but to go on alone and trust to her own unaided efforts.

Once, when she was crawling on hands and knees along a narrow shelf of rock overhanging a deep precipice that rose sheer from the surge of a turbulent stream, she caught her bare foot against a sharp edge of stone. When she reached a position of safety she found that her foot was bleeding. The blood would leave a trail that might be followed. But the pain did not trouble her.

With her knife she cut a long strip from the front of her doeskin jacket and bandaged it round the injured foot, tying it with part of a rawhide lace from one of her leggings.

This caused a delay, and amid the noise from the neighbouring watercourse she did not hear the padding feet and the heavy breathing of the Cree scout who was pursuing her. Before she ran on, she glanced back at the narrow ledge and saw him going down on hands and knees to cross it as she herself had done. She knew him to be the same young Cree who had given her the berries and who afterwards had seized her when she was running for the cliff.

The skin wrappings on her foot helped her now to run and climb without hurt or difficulty. The scout had not yet seen her. But when she had climbed yet higher in a new direction, and had made her way through a small forest of fir trees, and across a stretch of bare stony ground, she knew as by instinct that he was still following slowly but surely on her trail, like some hound of the chase that can track its quarry by a sense that has been denied to civilized humanity.

The sunlight was fading. The whole sky was dark with heavy, leaden clouds. Wenonah knew that it was not the darkness of night but of a threatening thunderstorm. There was no sheltering place on this barren mountain, and she could not hope for food. If, before the storm came on, she should pause in her flight to search for a few berries or to seek for some hiding-place for the night, she would surely be overtaken and caught. She half wished yet half feared that the storm would break and the rain come down. It would not stop her, but it might stop her pursuer. But the rain would soften the hard earth, and her footprints would be seen!

She ran on and on, always climbing upward, always making in the one definite direction which would bring her to the farther side of the mountain and then to the lower levels where she had seen the scout sign of the three white stones. Her only hope lay in the possibility of getting upon the track of her brother. Prairie Owl, and his three companions. One of them was Softfoot. She wondered what Softfoot would have done had he been in the place of Weasel Moccasin. Most surely he would not have let her escape alone to spend this night of storm in these desolate wilds.

A fierce flash of lightning startled her as she reached a level of short grass. By its vivid light she saw that she was on the mountain's ridge, and while the thunder crashed and rolled she realized that far away she had seen the black trees of the forest in which, as she now believed, the four Pawnee boys would be making camp. Then the rain spattered down upon her.

She went downward now, almost blindly, excepting when the lightning flashed its flickering forks around her, illuminating the trees and boulders. In the intervals between the deafening peals of thunder she could hear the roaring of the mountain streams. She began to dread those dangerous, unfamiliar torrents, swollen now by the ram. She was very cold and hungry and almost exhausted. If she had been sure that she was not being followed by the Cree she would have rested. But she feared him more than she feared the lightning, or the swollen streams, or the perilous cliffs.

Once she stumbled over an unseen cactus bush, and fell. She could hardly rise again in her utter weariness of body and spirit, and she lay for a long time with the rain beating pitilessly upon her. Then, when she got up and staggered forward a few

faltering steps, she stopped abruptly. The flashing lightning revealed a yawning chasm in front of her, deep and black and wide; and it seemed that the thunder would never cease. But soon she realized that the continuous roar was not of thunder, but of a mighty torrent far, far down in the black depths.

She could go no farther. In blank despair she huddled herself against the root of a tree and waited; bending her head to her knees and shutting her eyes, trying to forget everything.

How long she remained thus she could not have told. But when at last she raised her head the rain had ceased, the storm had drifted to the east, and in the western sky the sun was sinking through a curtain of gold and crimson clouds.

She stood up and looked anxiously about her. The heavy rain had washed away her back-tracks; but the ground was now soft. Every step she took now left the impression of her feet clear and deep. If the Cree scout should renew his search and discover these footprints, he could not fail to capture her—unless by some chance she should be able to cross to the far side of the awful chasm. No scout, however wise, would expect a girl even to look down into such a terrible gulf. Yet in her desperation she would try to cross.

This thought was prompted in her mind when she walked a little farther down the slope and came upon a tall spruce tree that had fallen from its root-hold on the opposite bank, with its thinner part resting on the nearer side, forming a natural bridge. It might have been there for many years. It was bare of green branches, with only the naked boughs sticking out like fangs from the main trunk.

Wenonah went up to it and examined it in the evening light. It seemed to her that the timber was decayed. One of the thin twigs broke with a dull snap under the pressure of her foot.

"No," she decided. "My medicine tells me that it is not safe."

She glanced backward up the drenched mountain-side. At the spot where she had rested something moved. She thought at first that it was a bear, but as she watched it, she saw it take the shape of a man, bending over with his hands on his knees, looking searchingly at her footprints. Suddenly he stood up at his full height and she knew that the dreaded Cree scout had not abandoned his search. He was on her trail now. He was following it quickly, unerringly. In a few moments he would see her.

Wenonah did not hesitate. She was not agitated. If she trembled it was from the cold of her wet clothing rather than from fear. Very deliberately, very steadily, she stepped upon the fallen tree. It creaked under her light weight. At this near end the pole was not stout; there was barely room for foothold, and the withered bark was

loose and wet.

She went cautiously down on hands and knees and made her perilous way forward, inch by inch, avoiding the snags, gripping her support with strong fingers and rigid knees. Down below her, the boiling torrent tumbled and moaned; but she kept her eyes steadily fixed upon the tree-trunk, not looking down beneath it into the fearful depths. The timber thickened at every onward stride, giving her a more secure hold. It seemed an endless journey, but soon she had passed the projecting branches and was astride as on the back of a horse, jockeying her way towards the root.

The scout had seen her. He had come to an amazed halt close behind her when she was starting. He was watching her. But he did not yet attempt to follow. Perhaps he judged that the frail bridge was not strong enough to bear his added weight.

At last Wenonah gained the farther bank. She clambered over the tree's outspreading roots. Pausing for an instant to take breath, she glanced back the way she had come. She saw the scout looking apprehensively round, as if some danger were behind him, compelling him to take the risk of following the fugitive. It was almost furtively that he stepped upon the tree and crouched himself to crawl over on all fours like a stealthy leopard.

Wenonah flung herself against the bank to continue her flight. The earth where the fallen tree had grown was saturated with the rain, and was slippery as clay. The embedded stones at which her cold, cramped fingers clutched gave no sure support. She could only climb upward like some awkwardly moving reptile.

She felt that she was failing, that it was physically impossible for her to gain the solid ground among the protecting trees before her pursuer should reach her. Desperately she seized a thick root over her head. It broke, and she slipped down, digging her fingers and toes into the moist wall.

She was only half conscious now that the Cree was on the bridge, coming slowly but surely to seize her. Her brain whirled. She looked up between her outspread hands to reach at some new support. At that critical instant an arrow plunged its point deep into the soft earth betwixt her groping hands, as if it had been aimed at her head.

She gasped. Her fingers slackened, her feet lost their hold. She slipped down yet farther, but swiftly turned, facing outward with her back pressed flat against the steep bank, her hands clenched.

The Cree scout was now midway across the bridge. She thought at first sight of him that he was fixing a second arrow to shoot at her. But she perceived that he had no bow. He was on his knees, swaying helplessly from side to side to preserve his

balance. The tree was rocking under his uneasy movements. His hands were clutching frantically at one of the withered branches. Then his knees seemed to give way under him. The branch broke in his grip. Wenonah held her breath in horror. He turned bodily over and dropped down, down, out of sight, into the terrible gulf.

Something moving swiftly, stealthily, behind the trees on the opposite bank gave her a new alarm. She did not wait to know if it was another of the Crees. She turned once again to climb upward while there was time. Then she caught sight of the arrow above the level of her head. She reached up and seized it. She dragged it forth excitedly, looked at its shaft and feathers, and saw to her amazement that it bore Softfoot's familiar mark.

From the arrow she gazed back over the gulf, and in the fading light she discovered Softfoot himself, slinging his long bow behind his shoulder, calmly preparing to cross to her side over the perilous bridge.

CHAPTER XIV

SIGNAL FIRES

IT was a perplexing and hazardous situation that confronted Wenonah and Softfoot. They were separated from each other by that wide and awful chasm with its turbulent mountain torrent, swollen by rain, racing and roaring between them. The evening light was quickly fading, and the only means by which the gorge could be crossed was the frail, insecure bridge formed by a fallen pine tree.

Wenonah knew that if she could not at once reach Softfoot's side she must spend the long night, and perhaps many dreary days, alone on the dismal mountains; hungry, cold, without shelter, without hope of rescue. She would be lost. She might even die of starvation in the desolate wilds. For the heavy rain had surely washed out the back-tracks of the Crees, upon which she had trusted to find her unknown way home to the lodges of her people.

She dreaded to cross the ravine by the fallen tree in the dim twilight. She had boldly faced the adventure when driven to desperation by the Cree scout who was pursuing her, and she had ignored the danger. But since then she had seen the experienced scout himself attempt to cross over by that perilous bridge. She had seen him falter midway, lose his balance, and fall down to certain death in the terrible depths. Yet she did not now shrink from the prospect if, by crossing once again, she could prevent Softfoot from risking his life.

Her resolution was made quickly. It was for her to cross to Softfoot.

She climbed down from the wall of cliff against which she had been leaning, and stopped to look over to the farther bank. Softfoot was already kneeling on the thinner extremity of the tree. The dividing space was too wide, the roar of the water too loud, for her to call to him to go back. Before he began to crawl, he glanced across at her and halted, staring at her in doubt.

He thought she was but cautioning him against the danger. The fingers of his right hand caught at the little white mystery bag hanging from his necklace. He was asking his medicine to guide him. It was a moment in which he needed all his courage. Wenonah then signed to him not to attempt the terrible difficulty. He shook his head. Then he thrust his hand into his wet clothing and drew out her lost moccasin to let her know that he had followed on her tracks to save her. She nodded to him in understanding and raised her mud-covered foot with its bandage of doeskin.

They were both at the fallen tree now; she at the stout root, he at the thin end that rested lightly on the opposite cliff. They could see each other plainly and could talk in the sign language which they both knew so well.

Wenonah seemed to be saying to him:

"Stay where you are. Do not try to cross by the dangerous tree. You will fall, as the scout fell. I will come over to you. I am lighter. I have crossed by the same way before. I am not afraid."

But Softfoot brushed the proposal from him, and with many signs he pointed the way by which she might safely reach a shelf of rock and afterwards climb to the solid ground among the trees.

"When you are there," he indicated, "wait until I come to you. Do not look at me now. I am coming over to you."

Again she pleaded to be allowed to cross instead of him. He shook his head obstinately and began to move carefully outward on hands and knees, keeping his eyes fixed upon the narrow, trembling bridge that bent and swayed under his weight. He paused now and again to allow it to become steady; and he took short, irregular strides so that the motion also should be irregular and not violent. He had seen that it was because the Cree scout had taken evenly measured strides, hand over hand, that the pole had rocked up and down, causing him to lose his balance.

Wenonah half turned to obey. But her hand did not relax its tight grip of one of the serpentine roots. She could not yet bring herself to go away; not till she knew that Softfoot was safe. Her anxious gaze was fixed upon him, watching his every movement, watching how skilfully he preserved his balance, how he avoided the withered branches and the sharp-pointed snags, always planting his palms flat and firmly on the main trunk.

Once in her trepidation she fancied she felt the root sinking, as if the whole fabric of the tree, loosened by the rain, were about to sway round and crash down into the yawning chasm. She closed her eyes. The ground under her feet was quaking ominously. But, when she looked again, Softfoot was sitting astride, jockeying his way towards her. Then she turned to obey him, going the way he had pointed out to her.

It was an easy way. She climbed down to the rocky shelf and then upward to the higher level. Going cautiously to the brink of the upper cliff, she looked down into the gorge. What she had feared had happened. She saw the loosened tree plunging bodily downward with its roots in the air and a great gash of white timber in its middle, showing where it had broken.

She screamed and clasped her fingers over her eyes as she sank to the wet ground, believing that Softfoot had gone with the falling bridge.

"Wenonah!" The name was spoken very gently.

She leapt to her feet. Softfoot stood beside her, holding forth his two hands. In

one of them she saw her restored moccasin. In the other was a small parcel with wrappings of white cloth. Mechanically, she took the moccasin and, leaning unsteadily against the nearest tree, proceeded to cover her foot with it, while he slowly opened the wrappings of his parcel. The white napkin was wet; but the contents had been well protected from the rain.

"My medicine tells me that you are hungry," he said. "Eat!"

She seized the hem of the napkin and looked up into his face.

"It is white man's cloth," she stammered in wonder.

"And white man's food," he nodded, pressing it nearer to her. "It is good food. It was given to me by a rider on the far prairie trail. His Indian name is Little Cayuse, his white name—Kiddie. He is a friend of Blue Eye. I was saving the food for Little Antelope. But Wenonah needs it more than he. Eat!"

There were two slices of wheaten bread, with meat between them. She obediently took the food and, dividing it, handed the larger half back to him. But he drew away.

"No," he said. "You will eat it all. I will go for my arrow."

"Your arrow is here," she told him, hesitating to eat. "Why did you shoot it at the Cree scout when he was in danger and unarmed?"

"But I did not aim at the scout," he assured her. "I aimed between your hands, so that you should see my arrow and know by its mark that I was near. If the Cree had touched you, I would have shot him."

He picked up the arrow from the ground beside her and returned it to his quiver as he strode towards the brink as she had done to look for the fallen tree. But it was far out of sight.

Wenonah had eaten the food and was searching for crumbs when he returned to her.

"Never have I tasted such beautiful food!" she exclaimed, beginning to fold the empty napkin. "But never before in all my days have I been so hungry."

They spoke no further word of the peril they had just gone through. It was not a matter for talk. Softfoot led the way through the timber to the open mountain-side. In the deepening dusk he looked far across the land to the dark line of crowded trees that marked the fringe of Black Panther Forest, searching with busy, expectant eyes. At length his gaze was centred upon a particular spot in the distance where, against the blackness of the forest, there appeared a tiny glow of light and a thin, faint film of fire-smoke. And at sight of it his mood changed from despair to hope.

While Wenonah helped him in seeking for dry fuel to make an answering signal fire he said to her:

"You were alone in the hands of the enemy Crees. My medicine tells me that they captured you, and many of our Pawnee horses, while you were away from the lodges with the women, gathering berries."

"That is true," said Wenonah. "You have read the signs. But they did not tell you that I was not alone. One of our young Pawnee braves was also seized and taken away with me. He was riding your buffalo pony, Snow-white. He would not escape with me. He is still in the hands of the Crees. He did not help me to escape. He was afraid to help me. He told the enemy Crees that I was running away. He pointed to me as I ran. That is why the Cree scout followed on my tracks so quickly—before I could hide."

Softfoot drew a deep breath of amazement.

"Tell me the name of this Pawnee coward," he demanded.

Wenonah demurred for a moment. She did not want to betray more.

"No," she said firmly. "I will not speak his name. You will know it soon enough. Let us light our signal fires—one for you, one for me."

CHAPTER XV

A GIFT FOR THE CREES

"IT is bad medicine, our having lost our canoe," declared Mosquito Child, leaning forward and adroitly tearing off the leg of a well-roasted jack-rabbit and passing it to Prairie Owl. "If we had not gone into Red Squaw Cañon, we might still be happy in our teepee on Silver Creek. Softfoot would have been with us."

"But it was you who begged Softfoot to take us into the cañon," Prairie Owl reminded him, beginning to gnaw hungrily at the delicious meat.

"That is true," acknowledged Mosquito Child. "But I did not think that Softfoot would dare to do such a big thing. Such adventures are only for grown men. It is not easy taking a canoe through such danger."

"Pah!" exclaimed Little Antelope, neatly cutting a section from the rabbit's fleshy loin. "Softfoot knew the danger. He knew that we could not come back in our canoe. But he would dare to do anything that a grown man can do. He does not know any fear. With Softfoot at the paddle I knew that we should be safe. I was afraid. But I trusted him."

"And what does it matter that we have lost our canoe?" asked Prairie Owl. "We can make another and a better one."

"After all," resumed Little Antelope, "we have been through the cañon. We have seen the Red Squaw, and I for one am not sorry. I shall remember it always when I face danger. I shall remember it long after I have forgotten the bullet wound in my arm."

Well before the thunderstorm had come on, the three Pawnee boys had reached their appointed destination in Black Panther Forest. They had pitched their rest-camp on its outer fringe, so that, later, their fire-smoke might be seen from afar and serve as a guiding beacon for Softfoot. In searching for a convenient shelter from the threatening storm, they had discovered an aged taxus tree of immense girth, with a hollow chamber as spacious as the inside of a warrior's medicine lodge.

On entering this hollow tree they found that its cavernous space was already occupied by a grizzly bear, lying asleep. Having no wish to encounter so formidable an animal, they withdrew, leaving the grizzly in possession while they went scouting round to gather material to build a wicky-up for themselves and to hunt for food more easy to secure than bear-steak. But when a little later they returned to their chosen pitch with three good jack-rabbits that had fallen to their arrows, they saw the same bear disappearing into the forest depths. The storm was by this time breaking, so they decided to take shelter for the night in the hollow tree.

While Little Antelope went to bring in soft balsam branches for their beds, Prairie Owl and Mosquito Child lighted a fire within the threshold and prepared the rabbits for cooking. They were comfortably settled in their refuge and well protected from the deluge of rain.

They believed that Softfoot, wherever he might be, would surely find some shelter from the storm, and they were not alarmed when, the tempest having ceased, they went out to the open beyond the dripping trees and could see no sign of him. But they kindled a signal fire, and when it was well aglow, covered it with damp leaves and cones to make a smoke that would be seen many miles away.

By this time their rabbits were well roasted under the cooking-fire, and now they were making a meal of one of them to allay their hunger until Softfoot should arrive.

"Something else than the storm is keeping him," reflected Little Antelope.

"It may be that he was hurt by the paleface men who fired upon us and broke our canoe," said Prairie Owl. "I think those men took us for scouts sent out to spy upon them. It is against the white man's law that any of the paleface people should make camp on the Indian reserves. At the time of the buffalo hunt Blue Eye made a big talk with Mishe-mokwa and our medicine chiefs. He told of some white men who have found gold in the Sioux country. He said that the Sioux and the Crees are getting ready to make war upon these gold-diggers and drive them away. Blue Eye came to our lodges to ask Mishe-mokwa upon whose side he would fight. It will be great medicine if the Pawnees go out on the war-path."

Little Antelope glanced from one to the other of his companions.

"It was very strange," he said curiously, "that to-day when we were on our trail to this forest we all three heard the far-off tramping of many horses!"

"It was the voice of the running water in Red Squaw Cañon that we heard," said Mosquito Child. "Our Pawnee horses are all out on the ranges."

"I for one am ready to say that I both heard and smelt horses and men," averred Prairie Owl. "To me it seemed that it was a big war-party riding along on the far side of the mountain. But it may be that they were the ghosts of departed warriors trailing across the sandhills in the land of spirits."

"If they were living Indians," said Little Antelope, "it may be that they have taken Softfoot as their captive. What else could stop him?"

Prairie Owl stood up.

"Softfoot is too clever a pathfinder to let himself be caught," he declared. "But something is keeping him. I will go out and waken our signal fire."

He made his way among the giant trees to the open space beyond, and with a stout stick of deadwood stirred the smouldering fuel and fanned the underfire into

flames that shot high, and cast their bright glow upon the glistening wet firs and upon the cloud of smoke rising in a tall column above them. He added dry fuel and then more damp leaves and twigs.

Mosquito Child and Little Antelope had followed him, and now the two of them went together some distance away beyond the light of the fire, so that in the gathering gloom they might search across the intervening land towards the mountains in the direction from which they expected Softfoot to come. They climbed a high bluff and stood there for a long, long time silently watching and listening.

They believed that if Softfoot were near enough he would sound their tribal call to let them know that he had seen their signal smoke.

But no sound broke the silence. Little Antelope began to search the farther distance, even to the steep black mountain peaks which no Indian could climb.

Suddenly he clutched his companion's arm.

"Look!" he cried, pointing.

And far away Mosquito Child saw two thin columns of smoke showing against the blackness of one of the most rugged of the mountains.

"It is Softfoot's signal!" he exclaimed. "Why is he so far away? And why two fires? His message tells us that he is lost—that he wants help!"

"Yes," agreed Little Antelope, "unless there is some one with him—two smokes for two persons. But who could be with Softfoot?"

They called back to Prairie Owl. He had raised his fire into a tall blaze that threatened the near scrub. But when he heard their call, he contrived to cover the fire-pit with his blanket so that it seemed suddenly to be extinguished. Then he drew the blanket quickly away and the flames and smoke again shot upward. This he did three times in succession. It was a well-understood message, signifying that all was well with the three Pawnees in their camp.

Meanwhile Little Antelope and Mosquito Child kept their gaze steadily fixed upon the two fires, miles and miles away, and the same signal was repeated from them in answer, only twice instead of thrice.

"My medicine tells me that Softfoot has picked up a companion," said Mosquito Child. "But I cannot think who it can be, or why they are so far away."

When Prairie Owl joined them on the bluff and they looked again for the distant smudges, none could be seen. The mountain stood out grim and black against a curtain of drifting clouds, behind which the moon was rising.

"At dawn we will go out on a big scout and search for him," decided Prairie Owl. "We must now sleep and get strength. One of us will keep watch."

The dull pain in Little Antelope's wounded arm kept him from sound sleep until

nearly midnight, when it came to his turn to take sentry duty by relieving Prairie Owl; and then he was sleeping so heavily that Prairie Owl took pity on him and would not waken him. But an hour or so later he awoke.

"It is now your turn to sleep," he said to Prairie Owl, wrapping his blanket over his shoulders.

He went out and looked at the signal fire. Deep down, the turf glowed red, but it was well covered with wet fuel, needing no attention. He listened, but heard no other sounds than the voices of the creatures of the wilds, and the murmur of a far-off watercourse. He found his way back into the forest and seated himself on a couch of balsam at the opening of the hollow tree near the small camp-fire, which was kept alight for the double purpose of driving away the mosquitoes and cooking the remaining two rabbits that they might be ready if Softfoot should return.

There seemed no reason for keeping a close watch; but it was the habit among Indian boys when they were camping out in lonely places where there were wild animals and other surprising dangers to guard against. Now that he was expected to keep awake, Little Antelope was painfully sleepy. He had gone through an exciting day and was very tired. He allowed himself to dose, knowing that any strange sound or movement would certainly waken him. But more than once he stood up and walked to and fro to keep himself from going off into a sound sleep.

Yet again when he sat in the comfortable warmth of the fire his eyes closed wearily and his brain carried him away into dreamy forgetfulness.

He awoke with a sudden start and leapt to his feet. A shaft of bright moonlight shone upon him through the tree-tops. He listened. Many weird unusual sounds came to him—muffled human voices, the screech of an owl, the chirping of insects, the cracking of twigs under the tread of heavy feet. He looked searchingly around him. His two companions were sound asleep. He sniffed at the night air, but was conscious only of the aroma of roasted rabbit mingled with the pungent odour of wet pine-wood.

Gripping his tomahawk, he crept out beyond the fire. Something moved in front of him. He heard laboured breathing and the padding of shuffling feet. He drew back in alarm at the sight of a huge grizzly bear crossing towards him. It was closely followed by a second bear and by a smaller cub. The three animals bounded past him into the hollow tree. The cub butted against him, hurling him violently aside, and the dam, turning sharply, charged at him as he rose. She reared on her hind legs, towering above him menacingly with arms outstretched. He ducked under them and she wheeled round, but stopped abruptly and gave a wild roar of pain as she stepped on the fire.

The disturbed fuel shot into flame, singeing her hairy side. By the light of the blaze, Little Antelope saw his two companions jump from their sleeping places in alarm. He ran in to them. They tried to drive the intruders away, lashing at them with tomahawk and knife. The grizzlies seemed determined to regain possession of their den. The dam even flung herself like a log upon Prairie Owl's couch and began to lick her burnt foot. The big he-bear nosed around, grunting and scratching at the piles of balsam fir. But the frightened cub, chased by Mosquito Child, made a bolt for the open, and its parents ran out to its protection.

"Let us follow them and kill them with our arrows," Little Antelope proposed. He was so fully awake that he could think of securing a good bearskin as a present for Mishe-mokwa.

"No," Mosquito Child objected. "We do not need to kill them. It is their own lodge. When we are gone, they will come back and be happy."

Prairie Owl was watching the bears as they disappeared into the bush. But presently he gave a cry of astonishment, pointing across the moonlit glade at a dark, silently gliding figure among the trees.

"What is it?" questioned Little Antelope.

"It is Softfoot," Prairie Owl answered in amazement. "And there is a stranger with him!"

Softfoot was looking back over his shoulder.

"There is no danger," he was saying. "The bears have gone away. Come! My medicine tells me that at last we have found food and shelter. I can smell the good food. I can see the shelter. I hear the voice of your brother, Prairie Owl."

The three Pawnee boys ran forward to meet him. They led him and Wenonah into their lodge and hastened to give them food, rescued unharmed from the cooking fire.

Prairie Owl stood staring in wonder at Wenonah as she ate. He was unable to explain to himself how she had come here, so far away from Mishe-mokwa's village. He knew by instinct that she had not come by her own choice.

"What has happened?" he asked her anxiously.

"When I have slept, I will tell you," she answered him wearily.

Softfoot turned to Mosquito Child and Little Antelope.

"Go and put out your signal fire," he ordered. "It is too big. It is too near the pine trees. It has done its good work. Put it out."

When they returned after smothering the fire, Softfoot had stretched himself across the floor in a deep sleep, and Prairie Owl was spreading his blanket over Wenonah, who was also asleep.

"Tell us what strange thing has happened," Little Antelope asked as Prairie Owl crept silently out from the tree.

"I do not know," Prairie Owl answered in a mysterious whisper. "When Softfoot has finished his sleep we shall hear. Come, let us not disturb him. He is weak. He has been on a long trail. His moccasins are in holes."

At sunrise when they crept back into the tree, Softfoot was no longer there. But on the smooth earth where he had slept there were scratches as with the point of a knife—picture writings which told as plainly as words that he had gone home alone to the lodges of the Pawnees.

Already he was many miles away, running at a steady pace, finding his path by the remembered landmarks. At midday he halted in the teepee beside Silver Creek to get food and to replace his worn-out moccasins. Early in the evening he was crossing the prairie. There were no horses on the ranges, and, later, when he ran into the circle of lodges, there were no signs of any Pawnee men.

Morning Bird met him as he neared his home teepee.

"Where are our men?" he cried.

"Our warriors and braves are on the war-path," she told him. "They have gone into the country of the Crees, who have stolen our horses and carried off Wenonah and Weasel Moccasin as their prisoners."

Softfoot frowned in anger.

"Weasel Moccasin!" he repeated. "So, then, Weasel Moccasin is the coward who was afraid to help Wenonah to escape—whose name Wenonah would not tell me! Truly did she say that I should learn his name soon enough! Bring me a horse that I may ride after the warriors and tell them that Wenonah is safe. I will tell them to make a gift of this Weasel Moccasin to the enemy Crees. The Pawnees have no use for a traitor and a coward."

CHAPTER XVI

SOFTFOOT'S LONE SCOUT

"TELL me what has happened," demanded Morning Bird. "How do you know that Wenonah has escaped? If she is safe, why have you come home to the lodges without her? And why are you here without the three Pawnee boys who went away with you in the canoe? I cannot think that you have deserted them."

Very weary after his long and lonely hike across the pathless wilds, Softfoot followed his mother into their wigwam, where his wolf-cub welcomed him with short glad yelps. He threw himself upon his couch of bear skins.

"For a little while I will rest, and then ride out on the war-trail," he said. "Many of our warriors and braves will be on foot. There were not horses for all. If I am quick, I can overtake them before they reach the Cree country. I must tell our war-chiefs that there is no need to look for Wenonah in the Cree village. If they can get back our stolen horses, why should they make war and try to bring home many scalps?"

"The enemy Crees must be punished for what they have done," Morning Bird reminded him. "They have taken our best horses—your own buffalo pony among them. They will not give them back without a big fight and the loss of many scalps. It is always so when there has been a horse raid. Tell me where you have been—what you have done."

Softfoot told Morning Bird how he had taken his three comrades safely through the perils of Red Squaw Cañon, and of how their canoe had been attacked and broken by the paleface gold-diggers encamped in Ghost Pine Gulch; and then of how, going on a lone scout, he had seen the tracks of the Crees and found Wenonah's moccasin in Crooked Pass; how he had afterwards followed on the trail of the escaping girl herself over the steep mountain heights, finding her at last and leading her to Black Panther Forest, where he had left her in the care of Prairie Owl.

He gave no boastful details of his adventures. It was as if he were telling his mother of very ordinary, everyday happenings. But Morning Bird did not need to hear more. She pictured it all in her quick brain. She herself, when an adventurous girl, had been with Fast Buffalo Horse through the dangers of Red Squaw Cañon. She knew what skill and courage were needed. She knew, also, what it meant to be captured by hostile Indians as Wenonah had been captured by the Crees. In her own case Fast Buffalo had rescued her at the risk of his life, and she did not doubt that Softfoot was not less courageous than his father.

"My medicine tells me that Softfoot has only done his simple duty," she said to

him quietly, while putting a bowl of food before him. "He has done what no true Pawnee would shrink from doing. Three Stars will take him by the hand when he hears what he has done for Wenonah. But our warriors will be cross with Weasel Moccasin. They will call him a coward."

"Yet it may be that his mind was still in a dark cloud from his hurt in the buffalo hunt," said Softfoot, in excuse for Weasel Moccasin's cowardice.

"No," Morning Bird insisted, "he was no longer ill. His brain was clear; he could see; he could think; he could act. No, it is that his medicine is weak. His ways are crooked. No true scout would ride away, deserting a young girl as he deserted Wenonah, leaving her alone to be carried off by a cruel enemy. If he had stood by her she would not have been captured. He, too, could have escaped from the Crees. There was time. But he failed her."

"He failed her," repeated Softfoot. "But he did worse than fail her. He told the Crees that she was running away. He can speak in the Cree tongue. He sent their scouts after her."

Morning Bird shook her head gravely.

"I, for one, shall not be sorry if Weasel Moccasin never comes back to our lodges," she declared. "Let the Crees do what they will with him. He is not worth saving from them. Singing Water, his mother, was a Cree woman. Her tongue was forked. She made great mischief among the Pawnees. Weasel Moccasin is like his mother. There are bad places in his heart. He is not to be trusted."

While she spoke she saw that Softfoot was staring curiously at one of the teepee poles beyond her.

"What do I see?" he exclaimed. "Some stranger has been here while I have been away. He has left his gun!"

Morning Bird smiled at his quick observation.

"It is true," she told him. "But the gun is for you, Softfoot. The paleface man whom you named Blue Eye sent it for you by the hand of a young scout. It is for you to keep and to use if ever you should go out on the war-path."

"But why?" cried Softfoot. "Why should Blue Eye be so good to me? I have never done anything to deserve his kindness. I cannot understand."

Morning Bird took down the revolver.

"It seems," she explained, "that Blue Eye and Fast Buffalo Horse were friends. The scout told me that it is because you are the son of a brave Indian that he sent you the gift of the little gun. No, it is not loaded. And you need not use it if your medicine tells you that it is wrong to carry a weapon that was made for no other purpose than to kill."

She put the gun in his eager hand, and he began to examine it curiously.

"Wait!" she said. "You do not know how it works—how to feed it with bullets. I will show you."

She crossed the floor and brought one of several packets of cartridges which she had hidden under a buffalo robe. She took the gun in her hand. Very adroitly she pressed the lever, opened the cylinder and fixed a cartridge in each of the six chambers. He watched her deft fingers at the work.

"It is now loaded," she said, and proceeded to remove the cartridges so that he might do as she had done.

"I am very proud to own a white man's gun," said Softfoot. "I will take it with me on the war-trail."

"But you will first promise me that you will never fire it without good cause," she enjoined him. "Before you take it out you must ask your medicine if it is right that you should use it."

"I promise," Softfoot nodded.

While he slept, Morning Bird made herself very busy getting things ready for his journey. She roped the best prairie pony she could find for him in the corrals, she brought out a new pair of moccasins and his best buckskins, and filled his quiver with a supply of arrows and his bag with pemmican and dried berries. Then she went the round of the lodges, visiting many of her friends and telling them of Wenonah's safety and Weasel Moccasin's treachery.

Softfoot had been troubled about how he was to follow on the trail of the Pawnees and yet not neglect Wenonah and the three boys whom he had left in their rest-camp in Black Panther Forest. If they understood his picture writing, they would not remain for another sleep in the hollow tree, but break their trail to the woodland camp on Silver Creek, where their outfit and their store of peltry had been left.

He could not easily take his pony through the woodland, and he did not know how long he might be kept over the work of recovering the stolen horses. Morning Bird solved the difficulty by arranging to go herself down the creek in one of the large canoes, taking Fleet Wing and Red Crow with her to help in bringing home the young people and their complete equipment.

Wenonah's mother, Moves-like-a-Swan, helped Morning Bird in making these plans, and the two women went together to consult with Mishe-mokwa in his lodge and receive his consent for Softfoot to go on this important journey. Great Bear was highly pleased with what Softfoot had done in bringing information about the gold-diggers and in helping Wenonah.

"Softfoot has acted wisely," he said. "I shall not forget that he has proved himself

a good scout. When he has slept I will see him and learn these things from his own lips. I will pray for him."

Accordingly, very early in the morning, when Softfoot had bathed and was getting ready to start, the chief paid him a visit, listened to all he had to report, inspected his kit, his pony and his provisions, talked to him of the dangers to which he was about to expose himself, urged him to be steadfast, gave him a message for Three Stars, and finally made a special and solemn prayer for his safety.

It was no easy task that Softfoot was undertaking. Never before had he travelled beyond the frontier of the Mishe-mokwa Reserve. He was going into unknown places where there were no made roads or beaten trails that he could follow, where all the landmarks were strange to him. His vague, uncertain destination lay hundreds of miles away among the Rocky Mountains. He knew its direction; but that was all.

The Pawnees had two days' start of him. They would be going slowly, as most of them were on foot; but it would be their object to leave no tracks. They would go by the secret ways, taking cover in narrow valleys, avoiding the exposed places where they might be seen by watchful enemy outposts. How was he to track them? How could he expect to overtake them in time? Three Stars and his war-party had set out with the purpose of rescuing the two captives and bringing back the horses that had been stolen. But it was now needless for Three Stars to go among the Cree lodges to rescue his daughter. Wenonah's captivity would have been a just cause for war; but since she was at liberty and Weasel Moccasin had refused to escape with her, there was less urgent need to provoke a pitched battle. The object of the expedition was therefore changed.

Softfoot was quite as anxious as any other Pawnee that the horses should be recaptured and the raiders punished. But what he most wanted now was to be in time to prevent the reckless shedding of blood and the taking of scalps. Three Stars and his warriors had not prepared themselves for entering into fierce battle against a tribe stronger than their own. If they were not stopped they would surely lose more than they could possibly gain.

He did not at first waste time by trying to find any trail. Whether riding or walking, he was an accomplished pathfinder. The wild life of the woods had taught him that if he could be sure of an animal's intention to gain a particular object, it was not always necessary to follow on its foot-tracks. A quicker way was to place himself between the animal and its known objective, and watch some runway or piece of ground which it must inevitably take. He decided that the Pawnees, making for the Cree country beyond the Big Horn Mountains, would find their easiest and

most secret course through the gateway of Crooked Pass. Therefore, he would ride with all speed to that place in the hope of picking up their tracks and following them.

The first day's lonely ride was wholly without adventure. He saw not one human being or sign of human habitation. But in the early afternoon he came upon traces of where Three Stars had made his first camp, and he judged that he had already gained half a day. Some hours later he discovered the ashes of camp-fires where the Crees had halted; but beyond this place all tracks of the quickly travelling enemy had been washed out by the rainstorm. He went slowly for a few miles and at sundown made a halt at the wooded side of a stream, to rest his pony and snatch a sleep until moonrise, when he again went onward, guided by the far-distant, barren peaks of the mountain over which Wenonah had escaped.

It was not until noon on the second day that he reached Crooked Pass. At its entrance he came to the Pawnees' second camping place and was thus assured that he was following in the right direction. But his friends were still far in advance of him. They were making haste. In the ravine he found many signs that men and horses had gone through, and he pressed on at a steady canter, keeping to the level ground, always considering his pony.

He thought with envy of Little Cayuse, the express rider, who was provided with relays of fresh ponies at regular stages on his journey across the wilds. But his own prairie pinto was a sturdy, sure-footed animal, strong of wind and limb, and it never seemed to ask for more rest than he was willing to afford.

Beyond Crooked Pass his way became difficult. Many separate valleys opened out, leading in as many different directions, and each one of them as he came to it seemed to beckon him into its unknown gorge. He searched for footprints, for any sign that would help him; but always he chose the direction which his scouting instincts and the position of the sun told him was the right one to take, and invariably when he had taken it he discovered some little proof that confirmed him.

But more than once he had to return on his own tracks, finding the way too steep for his pony; and after a while he realized that the Pawnees were no longer travelling in close company, but had separated into scattered patrols that would leave no tracks. He was perplexed. The whole country was one vast maze of mountains and twisting valleys and dense forest. There was nothing to guide him, not a landmark, no faintest trail, no sign that living man had ever before penetrated into the bewildering fastnesses.

"I am beaten," he confessed to himself, idly fingering the little ermine bag that hung from his necklace. "I am a useless tenderfoot. Mishe-mokwa was blind when he said that I was a good scout."

CHAPTER XVII

SOFTFOOT MEETS A FRIEND

IN his perplexity Softfoot resolved that the only course open to him was to climb to one of the mountain heights and get a wider, larger view of his wild surroundings. By doing this he would give his pony a deserved rest.

The mountain along the base of which he was riding was of suitable height and not too rugged. He dismounted and led the pony through a narrow strip of woodland to a wide level stretch of grass. Here he hobbled her so that she might not stray too far away during his absence, and, leaving her safely grazing, he began his arduous climb.

It was less difficult than he had expected and he went quickly up and up almost to the shoulder. As it happened, he could not have chosen a better outlook. He could see far away over the lower hills and the intersecting valleys. They were stretched out in front of him like a map that he could read. In the blue distance there was a curiously shaped, very craggy mountain with three separate sharp peaks half hidden in clouds. He gazed at it for a long time.

"It is as if three animals were peeping over the barrier ready to spring down," he reflected. "They are like the heads of wolves. Three wolves? Yes, Eagle Speaker has talked of the Three Wolf Mountain. It is in the land of the Crees. Their lodges are on this side of it! Now I can see how my trail lies. My medicine is good."

He traced his zigzag course through the intervening network of valleys and stored it all in his memory, fixing the true direction by the position of the setting sun. Then well satisfied, he retraced his steps down the mountain side to the place where he had picketed his pony and where he intended to rest during the hours of darkness.

The sun had set and it was deep dusk when he approached the level ground. The pony had wandered, and he had to search for her. At last he found her among the dwarf elder scrub. She was struggling to get free her forefeet, which were held in a tangle of the trail-rope caught in a projecting root. But this was not the whole cause of her distress. Softfoot saw the movement of a second animal near her, and then yet another—two big grey timber wolves. One of them was crouched ready to make a spring on her.

Softfoot, alarmed at the danger to his pony, upon whom so much depended, ran forward. The wolf leapt at her throat. She threw up her head and reared, and the wolf fell under her pawing hoofs. But it turned swiftly to renew the attack, joined now by its companion. The pony swerved and kicked, but the two were upon her,

snarling, biting and scratching, while she tugged violently at her tether.

Softfoot was feeling for his knife; but he remembered his loaded revolver. He had never yet fired the weapon, but he had handled it when it was not charged and he knew how to use it. He stood still as he pulled it out to take aim at the nearer wolf. He pressed the trigger. Then, without lowering his hand but only deflecting his aim, he fired a second bullet.

The effect of his two shots astonished him. Both of the wolves slipped to the ground and rolled over, yelping and writhing. One had been hit in the chest; the other in the head. The pony, startled by the shots, pulled at her tether again, uprooting the snag that held it. But Softfoot seized her and led her quietly away from the dead wolves.

He supposed that if any enemy scouts were within hearing distance of his gunfire there would be risk in his making camp anywhere near, and he sought for another pitch about a mile away in a sheltered gully where there was a good water-hole. There he took food and, wrapping himself in his blanket, slept until moonrise.

By the dim light of the moon he could not expect to discover any foot-tracks. But he knew now that he was going in the right direction. At dawn there was a thick wet mist, and he could go no farther. But soon after sunrise, when the mist cleared, he found himself crossing a marshy level, heavily marked with footprints. They were the footprints of buffalo, of horses and of men, all mingled in confusion.

He studied them, trying to discover their meaning. He made out that the buffalo tracks were more than a week old. It was a small wandering herd. The horse marks were more recent, as well as more numerous. These, he judged, indicated the trail of the Crees returning with the spoils of their raid. More recent still, were the impressions of moccasins. He knew by the broad, flat soles that they were the tracks of the Pawnee scouts who had been separated from the mounted warriors. This was all satisfactory. But what amazed him was that while he was examining these tracks he came upon the fresh impressions of hoofs that had worn forged shoes such as were never worn by Indian ponies.

Could it be that a white man was following the trail?

He crossed the marsh to the higher ground. The spoor of the buffaloes disappeared; but the tracks of the Crees continued, overtrodden by the Pawnee scouts, whose light footprints were in turn crushed down by the impressions of the shod hoofs. Where the ground was hard or grassy no signs could be seen. It was only very rarely that Softfoot discovered any tracks at all, and sometimes he would ride for miles, seeing nothing of them.

He was now in the heart of the Cree country and had need to be very watchful,

moving by hidden ways, by side ravines or low places, traversing open ground without leaving any sign of his passage; searching not only for traces of enemy scouts but also noticing the movements of birds and animals, and always listening, always sniffing the air to detect the possible smell of fire-smoke.

In the early evening of that day he became conscious that his danger was increasing. He could no longer find any tracks of the Pawnees. The marks of shod hoofs had disappeared, and he did not dare to follow on the trail of the Crees. He began to realize that he was already within the circling line of enemy outposts. And yet he had not discovered his friends. He wondered if he had overpassed them.

Moving stealthily about the low ground, taking caution against exposing himself, he could not possibly get a wide survey of his surroundings. He resolved to repeat his plan of the previous evening. Once again he tethered his pony in a secluded gully, and, leaving her there, he crawled up the side of a wooded hill.

From its top he could see over an adjoining hill into a long green valley where many horses and cattle were grazing. And far away, beyond a stretch of prairie and some wooded bluffs, there rose a faint mist of fire-smoke, and he could hear a low murmur as of the beating of drums and the voices of men.

He descended the hill quickly to get back to his waiting pony and ride to a safer distance away from the Crees. He felt sure now that Three Stars and his Pawnee warriors were far behind him, that he had ridden beyond them and must go back to find them.

As he reached the lower level and was about to cross the narrow glade to his pony, he came to an abrupt halt. He heard the tramping of horses coming nearer. Concealing himself in the shadow of a boulder, he peeped out through a curtain of bushes and saw a patrol of Cree scouts riding past. They were obviously going on outpost duty. He could not see more of them than their legs and their blankets hanging against the sides of their mounts. One of the ponies was white. He thought of his own lost Snow-white.

When they had gone by he waited, crouched beside the sheltering boulder. There were only a few yards of bush and sunlit grass between him and the hidden entrance of the gully where he had left his pony. But he hesitated. Something kept him back. He felt somehow that he was not alone. It was as if one of the Crees had dismounted and were creeping towards him. It seemed to him that from the other side of the boulder he caught the faint sound of rustling leaves, of creaking leather. Then all was still and silent.

The slanting light of the setting sun was behind him, casting the shadow of the rock across the grass. He leaned forward, but drew instantly back, seeing that the

shadow of his head-feathers was cast upon the grass. But in that momentary glance he had seen yet another shadow—the shadow of a hand gripping a knife ready to strike.

Very silently, Softfoot drew his revolver. He knew that at the other side of the rock there was danger—that the person in hiding there was aware of his presence and was waiting to leap upon him.

There was no further movement, no slightest sound. Each of the two was waiting for the other to reveal himself. And while they waited the shadows grew longer, the sun dropped behind the mountains and twilight came.

In the dead silence a rider approached at a steady trot. Softfoot drew back to get a fuller view of him over the bushes. It was one of the patrol of enemy scouts—the one on the white pony. As he came nearer, Softfoot's own pony, hidden in the timber, gave a short whinny. The scout wheeled round. As he did so, Softfoot saw his face. It was the face of Weasel Moccasin.

Instinctively, Softfoot raised his revolver. But his wrist was gripped from behind in fingers that were like bands of steel. He turned sharply upon his captor. The two of them who had waited so long beside the boulder were now face to face. The grip on Softfoot's wrist relaxed and both at the same moment whispered the other's name in surprised recognition.

"Softfoot?" said one.

"Little Cayuse?" said the other.

CHAPTER XVIII

LITTLE CAYUSE

THE situation in which Softfoot found himself had come about with astonishing suddenness. He had to think very quickly to find an explanation for the perplexities that crowded upon him.

How was it that Weasel Moccasin, a captive, was riding at liberty, acting as a scout for the Crees by whom he had been captured? And what was Little Cayuse, the rider of the Salt Lake trail, doing here in the far country express of the Crees, disguised as an Indian scout? Was he an enemy to be feared, or a friend to be welcomed? He had seemed to be an enemy when he was lying in wait behind the boulder with his knife held ready to strike. But now he was smiling in friendly recognition.

"Softfoot?" he said, and then added, whispering in the Pawnee tongue: "No, do not fire your gun. The Crees will hear it."

By this Softfoot knew that Little Cayuse was on his side, just as surely as he knew that Weasel Moccasin had gone over to the enemy.

He pointed through the bushes to Weasel Moccasin, who was now riding into the opposite gully, evidently in search of the horse that had betrayed its presence there by whinnying.

Little Cayuse nodded. He seemed to know where Softfoot's pony was hidden. He had perhaps even seen it and concealed himself near by, to wait until its absent owner should return. He did not interfere now when Softfoot, putting aside his revolver, took his bow in hand and slipped an arrow on the string. He even signed to Softfoot to shoot quickly. It would be disastrous if the pony should be captured.

Softfoot took aim, not at Weasel Moccasin himself, but at a cottonwood tree towards which he was slowly riding. The silent arrow flew past him and plunged its sharp point into the bark. The feathered shaft trembled with the impact. With a start of alarm, Weasel Moccasin stared at the weapon. He had hardly time to see the familiar totem mark on its shaft; but he seemed to divine that it was a Pawnee arrow and that it had been aimed at himself from no great distance away. He turned sharply and sent a swift, searching glance among the bushes and trees. But not discovering his well-concealed assailant, he again looked at the arrow sticking out from the tree's smooth grey bole.

It was one of the arrows which he himself had used in the buffalo hunt. He must have recognized it and guessed that, by some strange train of circumstances, Softfoot, while abroad on his canoe trip, had heard of the horse raid and come out

on the trail of the raiders. He pulled his pony round and, still searching, returned to the open level, turned right-handed, and made off round the foot of the hill in the direction of the Cree encampment.

"It is my stolen buffalo pony that he is riding!" muttered Softfoot. "Help me to get her back from him. Listen! He is a Pawnee. He was captured by the Crees, and he has now joined them as their spy."

Little Cayuse signed to him that he was going for his own pony which he had hidden somewhere near. He stooped and darted like a woodland animal through the tangled bushes.

Softfoot slung his bow over his shoulder, ran out across the level of grass and into the wooded gully where his pinto was still waiting impatiently. It seemed almost as if the animal had by some instinct recognized the near presence of its lost companion, Snow-white. Softfoot mounted quickly and started off in pursuit of Weasel Moccasin, who was by this time out of sight beyond a projecting buttress of rock. He was no longer searching, but hurrying away as if afraid of being seen and recognized.

When Softfoot had ridden a short distance he heard the dull thud of hoofs on the soft turf behind him. Were some of the Cree scouts giving chase? He glanced back over his shoulder and was relieved at seeing Little Cayuse, now mounted on a dun-coloured broncho, riding to join him.

"Head him off!" cried Little Cayuse. "He must not get back to the Cree lodges."

Softfoot urged his pony forward. She was fatigued by her long day's journey through the wilds and could put on no more than a steady canter over the rough, unfamiliar ground; whereas Weasel Moccasin was mounted on Snow-white, one of the swiftest of all the Pawnee ponies, and he knew his way.

Little Cayuse was coming along at a gallop. For a little while he rode level with Softfoot. Neither spoke, but each knew what the other wanted. Softfoot was eager to regain possession of his favourite white pony—Little Cayuse was anxious to prevent an enemy scout from getting back to the Cree encampment with his report that there were Pawnees in the neighbourhood.

Presently, when Weasel Moccasin again came into view on an open stretch of prairie, Little Cayuse dashed in advance. As he gained ground, Softfoot saw that he was armed with a rifle as well as revolvers. He also saw the gleam of forged shoes on the broncho's hoofs. This latter discovery enlightened him as to the tracks of horseshoes which he had been following so long; but it did not tell him why Little Cayuse should have abandoned his usual duty of riding with the express mails and come disguised into the Cree reserve, acting like a redskin scout.

Little Cayuse was a much more experienced rider than Weasel Moccasin, although not so well mounted, and if the ways were strange to him he nevertheless quickly lessened the dividing distance. Weasel Moccasin was belabouring the white pony with his quirt, and she was beginning to buck instead of galloping ahead in the way he wanted. He was leading round in a sweeping half-circle in order to double and reach a gap between two low hills that he had already passed.

Softfoot, seeing his intention, made a slant across the little prairie and so managed to get in advance. He seized his lariat and, still galloping at top speed, began to whirl it ready to throw. But Weasel Moccasin now saw him and, understanding his plan, adroitly turned his pony in a new direction, racing off between his two pursuers across the middle of the plain in the direction from which he had started. He now ceased to use his quirt and Snow-white increased her speed, while her rider fixed an arrow to his bow-string and twisting bodily round shot backward, aiming at Softfoot.

But, however good a bowman Weasel Moccasin had shown himself to be in the arrow game, he was by no means a clever marksman shooting from the back of a galloping horse. He was only wasting his arrows and tempting Softfoot to retaliate.

"Quick!" cried Little Cayuse. "Stop him with an arrow!"

"I am afraid of hitting my pony," Softfoot objected. "Why do you not fire your gun?"

"The Cree scouts would hear it," answered Little Cayuse. "They are posted all round us."

The two of them raced on, hoping to get near enough to use their lariats. But at last Softfoot realized that Weasel Moccasin, with the advantage of his better pony, was escaping.

"It is no use," he declared, reaching for his bow and an arrow. "We cannot catch him. He is leading us nearer and nearer to the Cree village. I have seen the village. I know where it is. He is trying to trap us."

He notched his arrow to the string. At the same time Little Cayuse seized his Winchester rifle and took quick aim. The arrow went first. The bullet followed. Weasel Moccasin flung up his empty hands, swayed from side to side; his pony swerved and stumbled, throwing her rider, and then galloped on, leaving him where he fell in a heap, with an arrow in his right shoulder and blood flowing from a wound in the lobe of his left ear.

CHAPTER XIX

PALEFACE AND REDSKIN

"WHAT I should like ter know, sheriff," drawled Tex Bruxby, looking around the dim woodland clearing in which his many companions—frontiersmen and Indians—were crowded, "is what we're all hangin' around here for, planted like a lot of fool vegetables in a cabbage-patch, instead of goin' ahead on the trail we started on? Why don't we get a move on? Ain't we a big enough company? Ain't these Pawnee guys comin' along with us? What're we waitin' for?"

Sheriff Isa Blagg pressed down the cold tobacco in his pipe and smiled.

"Bruxby," he explained, "if we was all of us gaspin' to lose our scalps, the easiest and surest way would be to ride along right now and attack the enemy's camp. We'se waitin' for our marchin' orders from our leader; and Buckskin Jack he ain't no hustler. What he's delayin' for is young Kiddie. As soon as Kiddie blows in with word of where that camp is located, I guess we shall start right away. But not before. Everything depends on what Kiddie discovers back of the mountains, and I'm sartin he'll discover exactly what Buck wants to know."

"Ah!" nodded Tex in satisfaction. "I notioned Kiddie was back. He's sure a long time over his job."

"He's gone on a long scout, Tex," resumed Blagg. "He's gotter locate our stolen hosses. He's shapin' ter crawl around the Cree village and spy out just how we can do our business with the least possible risk. That's why he'd gotten himself up to look like a Injun, see?"

"Kiddie looked a heap more like a Injun than any redskin I've ever struck," commented Tex Bruxby, glancing round at Three Stars and his warriors who sat in a picturesque group not very far away from him. "But thar was one mistake Kiddie made in his get-up, and that was his fool notion of goin' off scoutin' among Injuns on a pony wearin' iron shoes on its hoofs. Kiddie don't often make a mistake like that."

"I've known Buckskin Jack hisself do the same thing, Tex," said the sheriff. "Buck examined Kiddie's cayuse 'fore he started, and he allowed it was all serene. What's more, I seen Buck takin' stock of the footprints of Kiddie's plug, and I guess he'd know them again among a thousand. Say, you can't teach Buck nor Kiddie a whole lot on the art of scoutin'."

"You're plumb right, Mr. Blagg," admitted Tex. "Buck he's the master-hand, and Kiddie's top-notch every time."

"As for these yer Pawnees that have butted in with us," continued Blagg, "Buckskin Jack and their boss chief there—Three Stars—they'se holdin' a council

of war right now. Soon as they're through. Buck will make us wise."

"They're goin' ter help us, then, to get back our stolen ponies from the Crees?" said Bruxby.

"Help us?" repeated Sheriff Blagg. "That ain't the way to describe the situation. Matter of fact, we're goin' ter help 'em get back theirs. The Crees they've bin runnin' a wholesale line in the horse-stealin' business, raiding pretty well all round. The same night when they was mussin' around on our Sweetwater ranges, thar was a second bigger band of 'em at work on the Great Bear reserve, back of Silver Creek. They drove off the whole picked herd of the Pawnee war hosses. Three Stars is here ter try to get 'em back; and seein' as we're all on the same job, why, we're joinin' forces."

"Seems kind of queer goin' on the war-trail along with redskins," said Tex. "But I got no objections so long as they'se Pawnees. I met a young Pawnee along the trail some days back. Quite a decent chap, he was. Couldn't talk with him. But Kiddie could. Kiddie gave him more'n half his dinner and even shook hands with him, same as if they was equals."

Isa Blagg stood up, pocketed his pipe and strode across to where Three Stars, Long Hair and several dignified-looking Pawnee warriors were seated on their heels round a small council fire. Buckskin Jack was the only white man among them. He had called to Sheriff Blagg, and he now signed to him to be seated beside him. The peace pipe was passed round.

"Isa," began Buck, "I've been having a friendly chat with Three Stars here. He's an old-time acquaintance of mine. I was with him on a buffalo hunt a while back."

"You told me about the buffalo hunt, Buck," said Isa.

"It appears," went on Buckskin Jack, "that as well as stealing a big herd of war-horses and buffalo ponies from the Mishe-mokwa ranges, the Crees carried off two Pawnee captives. One of them was a girl—Three Stars' own daughter, Wenonah. I met Wenonah: I spoke with her, and I am grieved for her father. I want to help him all I can."

"Meanin'," said the sheriff, "that you'se figuring to rescue this yer Injun girl from the Cree lodges; not knowin' in which one she's liable ter be located. Ain't it like lookin' fer a needle in a stack of hay! And a Injun gel, too, that mebbe can't savvy a word of plain English! Say, we shall sure need ter get busy with our guns if you're figurin' ter enter the chivalry business."

"Guns?" repeated Buck, fingering his black beard. "Well, yes, I guess there'll be some shooting. But any man would take the risk for a white girl. Does it make a lot of difference her being a Pawnee? There's the second captive, too—a young brave

named Weasel Moccasin. I got a hunch it's our human duty to rescue 'em both, if Kiddie can put us up to the position of the Cree village and the best way of entering it. Do you agree?"

"Buck, you're the responsible leader of this expedition," returned Isa Blagg. "You was elected ter run the show. Wherever you lead, the boys'll sure foller. I ain't just wise, mind you, how much they'se willin' ter risk their scalps fer the sake of this Weasel guy that you've mentioned. He ain't white, I figure. He's just a or'nary Injun, not even a medicine chief that's important in his tribe. If he's as tricky as most redskins he'll sure slip outer the trap on his own. The proposition of riskin' white men's lives ter pull him out, it don't offer no attractions, Buck. But a gel—daughter of a boss chief—she's different: a whole lot different. Our Stella, home at Lavender Ranch, she's thoroughbred Pawnee. I'd face a army of Crees ter rescue Stella."

"Unfortunately," Buck pointed out, "Kiddie knew nothing of the horse raid on the Silver Creek reserve, or of a girl being captured. He will not scout for signs of her or of the Pawnee ponies. And the girl will be well guarded."

"Buck, I ain't figurin' ter choke you off from this chivalrous scheme of rescuin' a princess in distress," observed Isa, "but the Crees and the Pawnees they'se deadly enemies. You'll be draggin' us inter their quarrel, sidin' with the Pawnees agin the Crees an' Sioux. There will sure be a big battle, endin' in a general bust up."

Buckskin Jack turned to speak to Three Stars.

"We will help you to save your daughter and Weasel Moccasin," he told the chief, "if the Pawnees will help their white brothers to get back their stolen horses."

"It shall be so," Three Stars acquiesced.

"By a general bust up," said Buck, turning again to Sheriff Blagg, "you mean that if we join with the Pawnees, we proclaim our hostility to the Crees and Sioux who are their enemies, and that there will be an Indian war against the whites. But signs are pointing that way already, Isa. The Crees and the Sioux have been celebrating the sun-dance. They are busy at their old game of horse-stealing and raiding peaceful homesteads. They are secretly storing up piles of repeating rifles and patent ammunition. They are training their young men for battle against a civilized foe."

"That's all clear as daylight," nodded Isa. "It's bin comin' along for years. The redskins they'se had enough of bad gover'ment and broken faith. It's all our own fault. We've occupied the huntin' grounds that was theirs long before the time of Christopher Columbus and George Washington. We've treated 'em like animals. We've given 'em doped firewater; we've taught 'em the use of gunpowder; and now we're killing off their buffaloes and startin' gold-minin' camps on the lands that was sectioned out for their own exclusive enjoyment. The whole policy of the American

Government is rotten so far as the Injun is concerned."

"Exactly," agreed Buckskin Jack. "And since it's hopeless to expect the Government to take stock of what's going on in the wilds of Wyoming, we're forced to be our own policemen and act on our own responsibility as we are doing right now in trying to get back what has been stolen. If Kiddie comes in before midnight, we shall start straight away and attack the Cree encampment at dawn. If we are forced to kill, or get killed—well, it's all the fortune of war."

There were some forty well-armed, well-mounted and determined ranchmen in Buckskin Jack's following. It was only by chance that they had met Three Stars and his band of Pawnees bent upon a mission similar to their own of regaining their horses stolen by the Crees. The two companies had combined and they now made up a force formidable enough, if necessary, to attack their common enemy in open battle.

But Buckskin Jack, although prepared for emergency, had not planned to go to such an extreme. He had counted on surrounding the horses on the outlying ranges apart from the lodges, and with this plan in view he had sent Kiddie as his advance scout to discover how the herds could be approached and driven off without the firing of a shot or the loss of a scalp on either side.

The capture of Wenonah, however, made a material difference in the situation. Before she could be liberated there would have to be something like a cavalry charge through the Cree encampment, and a fight was inevitable.

Three Stars very naturally thought of his captive daughter. He would have been willing to sacrifice all the Pawnee horses if by doing so he could rescue Wenonah from the enemy Crees.

"If Softfoot were with us," he said to Long Hair, "I would send him to look for her. Softfoot is a good scout. He would creep among the lodges and search until he found her. He would perhaps even bring her away while the Crees are asleep. But Softfoot has gone off in the canoe, thinking only of his own pleasures in making camp in the woodland glades where he can watch the birds and animals and see the flowers. He does not know that while he and his companions are at play, Wenonah is a helpless prisoner in the cruel hands of our enemies."

"Be patient," urged Long Hair. "My medicine tells me that Weasel Moccasin is watching over Wenonah. He will not let any harm come to her. He will wait until the Pawnees are close to the Cree village, and then he will bring her out to us and all will be well."

"Yes," said Three Stars, "there is wisdom in your words. Weasel Moccasin will help her to escape. I will trust him."

The moon had not yet risen and most of the men were rolled up in their blankets asleep when Tex Bruxby, who had been stationed on guard, crept up to Buckskin Jack and touched him.

"Well, Tex?" said Buck, fully awake. "What's up? I have been listening to Kiddie's pony coming along for a while past. No need to worry any."

"Thar's two riders, Buck," Tex informed him. "It ain't Kiddie. He went out alone. Thar's a pair of 'em. They'se liable to be Cree scouts. I'm here ter ask leave ter open fire on 'em."

"Don't alarm yourself, Tex," said Buck. "Kiddie's coming along right enough. He gave the bird call half an hour ago, and I answered him. I allow he ain't alone. There's an Indian riding with him—a Pawnee. I'm some puzzled to know how a Pawnee comes to be along with Kiddie. But it's a Pawnee right enough. It can't be young Weasel Moccasin or he'd have brought Wenonah as well. There's no girl with them, however."

"Gee!" exclaimed Tex. "You ain't seen nothin', an' yet you know all that! How'd you manage it? How'd you know it's Kiddie and a Pawnee?"

Buck smiled to himself as he stood up and tightened his belt.

"Heard the clip of a horseshoe on a stone," he answered. "Heard Kiddie's pardner make use of a Pawnee word. Tell Isa Blagg to make ready to start, Tex."

Kiddie and Softfoot presently rode into the clearing and dismounted. It would have been hard for a stranger to say which of them looked the more Indian. But Kiddie quickly revealed his identity.

"Where's the chief Three Stars?" he cried. "Bring him right here. We've got news for him. Buck," he added, "I guess you've heard about that Pawnee girl. Thar's no occasion for you to go moochin' round to rescue her. She's safe. Softfoot here'll tell you everything. It's his show, not mine. Take him to the chief and he'll tell you both at the same time while I get food and a sleep. Wake me when you're ready to start."

Softfoot stared at the tall, black-bearded frontiersman.

"It is Blue Eye!" he exclaimed, taking Buck's proffered hand. And he still held it when Three Stars walked up to him.

Softfoot was not long in explaining the escape of Wenonah and in telling of the treachery of Weasel Moccasin; and when everything was made clear, Buckskin Jack drew him aside.

"Softfoot, you have done a big thing," said Buck. "But for you there would have been a great battle. Many lives would have been lost, many scalps would have been taken. You have proved yourself a good scout."

"I am glad, Blue Eye," said Softfoot. "But we have not got back our horses. I must save my buffalo pony. She is not happy living among the Crees."

He had seen his pony running riderless towards the Cree village; but it was too late for him to try to capture her while the enemy scouts were so dangerously near. Both he and Little Cayuse believed that Weasel Moccasin had been fatally wounded by the arrow and the bullet that had been fired at him. They had not ridden up to him, but had left him lying on the prairie where he fell. He had not moved, and they were at least satisfied that he was disabled and could not crawl back to the Cree lodges until long after they had taken safe cover. The report of the rifle-shot, they knew, would alarm the enemy scouts.

But although Weasel Moccasin was wounded, although he was also badly hurt by his fall from the swiftly galloping pony, he was yet capable of attempting to do harm.

Guided by Softfoot, who had discovered the grazing ground of the stolen horses, the ranchers and the Pawnees were within sight of the Cree village at earliest dawn. Directed by Buckskin Jack, they rode in single file round the great herd, encircling it and closing in upon it. Their lariats were needed, but for the most part the horses quietly bunched together like a drove of cattle. The Pawnee braves who had come on foot now had mounts. Each man of the combined band led one or more with his trail-rope, and those that were loose could still be driven.

It was all done very quickly, very quietly. But the danger was not yet over. Weasel Moccasin had been a witness of the recapture. He had guessed by which way the horses would be taken, and when Buckskin Jack and Three Stars, leading the cavalcade, were on the point of galloping out from the valley, they were met by a blinding, choking cloud of smoke and a barrier of crackling flames that barred their passage.

Weasel Moccasin had set the prairie on fire!

CHAPTER XX

THE PRAIRIE FIRE

WEASEL MOCCASIN had lain for many hours where he had fallen. There was an arrow wound in his shoulder. He had pulled out the arrow and seen, as he expected, that it bore Softfoot's mark. His left ear was torn by a bullet that had been fired at him by Softfoot's unknown companion. Both wounds were bleeding, and he did not like the sight of his own blood. But his most inconvenient injury was a sprained ankle, which prevented him from walking.

He had feared that when he was thrown from his pony, his two pursuers would ride up to him and take his scalp. He had never before been so near to losing his scalp, and he dreaded the thought of its being taken by Softfoot. Even as he fell to the ground and rolled over, he snatched a new arrow and fixed it to his bowstring ready to shoot, heedless of the sharp pain in his right shoulder.

But the two riders had turned aside from him.

"They think they have killed me," he told himself, "or else Softfoot is afraid. If they had come nearer, I would have killed them both. I would have caught one of their ponies. I would have galloped away with Softfoot's scalp. It would have been great medicine."

He watched them riding away.

"Why has Softfoot come here?" he asked himself. "He cannot have known about the Crees coming to Mishe-mokwa's village. He was far away in the canoe down Silver Creek. He cannot have seen Wenonah. If she is not lying dead on the mountain, then the Cree scout who went after her has caught her again.

"But she could not have climbed over the mountain. No. Softfoot knows nothing of Wenonah. And my medicine tells me that the Pawnees have not yet started on the trail to rescue her. But why is Softfoot here?"

This question puzzled him very much. If Softfoot had not by some strange chance discovered Wenonah—if he had not deserted his three canoe companions and gone back to the Pawnee lodges—then what had brought him here into the land of the Crees? Weasel Moccasin had recognized the Pawnee pony on which Softfoot was mounted, and this added to his bewilderment. He knew, too, that Softfoot could not have failed to recognize his own favourite buffalo pony, Snow-white, as well as her rider.

Reasoning with himself, Weasel Moccasin ceased to question the exact means and methods by which Softfoot had got to know that the Crees had been out on a horse raid and carried off two Pawnee captives. All that he could be certain of was

that Softfoot was now his enemy and that he was here with a strange companion scouting around the Cree encampment.

"They think they have killed me," he repeated. "They will tell the Pawnees that I am dead. It is good medicine. I will now go back to my friends the Crees. They are a great nation, rich in horses; they are strong in warfare. I will live with them. I will be a Cree and become a great Cree warrior, perhaps a famous chief."

He started to crawl back to the lodges. But before he had got very far darkness came over the land and he thought he had better rest his injured foot. He crept in among the bushes and slept.

Very early in the morning he awoke, hearing strange sounds. In the dim light he saw a long procession of horsemen and many Indians on foot. Some of the riders were white men with long guns; others were Pawnees. As they rode past him he recognized the big black-bearded man whom Softfoot had named Blue Eye. And then came Three Stars, Long Hair, and many warriors and braves who were known to him.

He did not dare show himself. If only he had a horse he could ride off to the lodges and alarm the Crees. He would tell them that the Pawnees and white men were at work rounding up the horses that had been stolen from them. But now he was helpless. His ankle was so painful that he could not stand.

He wondered how these people had succeeded in passing through the ring of Cree outposts. They must have approached very cleverly by secret ways. Perhaps —yes, perhaps Softfoot had guided them, Softfoot and the strange young scout who was with him! Weasel Moccasin was bound to admit to himself that Softfoot was a clever scout. If he had not been so clever there would have been no reason to be jealous of him.

"Why did not my arrows fly straight and kill him?" Weasel Moccasin now deplored. "I ought to have halted to take sure aim. But I did not want to run the risk of Snow-white being hurt. It was Snow-white that Softfoot was after. But he will not get her now."

He looked for Softfoot in the procession, but could not see him. Through a gap between two low hills he watched the riders going silently forward, surrounding the big herd of horses without alarming them.

Then when the encircling file was complete, they faced inward, as in a buffalo surround, and began to close in, each man of them with his lariat coiled ready. It was all done with astonishing speed and silence, while the Crees in their far-off lodges were wholly unaware of what was taking place.

Weasel Moccasin could do nothing. Yet he wanted to gain favour with the

Crees. Thinking only of himself, he did not realize that he owed any duty or loyalty to his own people.

Suddenly an ingenious idea occurred to him and he proceeded to put it into practice.

He did not doubt that Blue Eye and Three Stars would return by the way they had approached. They would drive the re-captured herds through this same narrow valley to the prairie beyond. The prairie grass was long and very parched, and, like all Indians, Weasel Moccasin never went about without his fire-sticks.

Forcing himself to bear the pain of his sprained ankle, he retreated to the spot where he had fallen from his pony. Gathering a bunch of dry grass, he worked with his flint and steel until the sparks set a light to the dry tinder. He blew it into a flame, from which he lighted other wisps of grass. With these he went about industriously kindling a long line of fires across the mouth of the valley and back on the prairie.

The separate fires quickly united and blazed up in one continuous line of crackling flames and thick dense smoke. Above the growing roar of the fire he heard the horses coming nearer and nearer. They could not pass that barrier. They would have to turn back. And in turning back they must come within sight of the Cree village, only to be met by a band of the Crees who would most certainly be alarmed by the rolling clouds of smoke.

In his glee at having thus cut off the escape of the raiders, Weasel Moccasin had forgotten that his own way of escape lay through that same valley. He had not counted that the direction of the wind through the glen might not be the same on the open prairie. But more important than all else, he had neglected the precaution of glancing round at the neighbouring hillsides to make sure that he was not being watched.

Buckskin Jack was far too experienced a frontiersman to attempt such an exploit as this without considering every possible risk. He had posted a scout on every hill-top; he had stationed pickets of sharpshooters between his main forces and the Cree village and left others in his rear, and he had taken every precaution against a possible surprise.

On the upper slopes of the valley through which he had planned to retreat with the recaptured horses he had posted his two best scouts. Little Cayuse on one side and Softfoot on the other.

On seeing the first filmy haze of fire-smoke, Little Cayuse quickly took in the situation. He saw that the wind was blowing the smoke to the farther side and that where the fire had started at the foot of the lower slope there was still a clear passage out to the prairie beyond, on the windward side. He led his pony downward

and was in time to lead the procession of riders through into safety.

Softfoot, stationed on the opposite hill, was encumbered by a second pony—a Pawnee pony which had strayed from the main herd and which he had roped and taken with him up the hill. It was a lower hill than the one on which Kiddie was posted; but it commanded a wider view of the prairie down below.

Softfoot was careful not to expose himself and his two ponies on the ridge against the growing light of the eastern sky. He took up a position on the shoulder of the hill in front of a wall of cliff and bush. It would need very sharp eyes indeed to discover him.

With the hill behind him, he could not see the grassland where the horses were herded; but his searching glance ranged the whole prairie and the hills and woods right back to the mountains. There was no sign of enemy scouts. But he had not been there long before something moving on the level ground far below him caught his eye. It was an Indian limping awkwardly out from the valley. It was Weasel Moccasin.

Softfoot watched him; saw him stop and kindle a small fire; saw him going to and fro lighting other fires. And he understood. He hurried down the hillside with the two ponies. The descent was awkward, and before he reached the level ground he was in the midst of a blinding, choking cloud of smoke. The wind was driving the fire outward to the prairie; but urging his mount to full speed he quickly rode across the intervening space to the windward of the advancing fire.

He had not yet got quite free from the smoke when glancing towards the red barrier of flames he again saw Weasel Moccasin.

He was limping painfully, stumbling, limping again and screaming in terror as he tried to escape from the pursuing fire which he himself had started. For a moment he was hidden in the dense smoke. But he came out again, now crawling on all fours like the frightened creatures of the prairie that were racing in front of him—rabbits, gophers, and a rushing crowd of squealing little animals. He staggered to his feet, limped a few strides and then began to hop on one foot. Once more he was lost in the smoke, and when it lifted Softfoot saw him throw up his hands and fall.

CHAPTER XXI

SOFTFOOT, SOFTHEART

ALREADY Softfoot was galloping towards him through the drifting curtain of nipping smoke and stinging sparks. The two ponies were maddened by the fire, but he urged them onward, driving the one and leading the other. A roaring gush of flame met him as he dismounted and seized Weasel Moccasin round the body and lifted him to his quaking knees.

"Quick!"

Weasel Moccasin stood up and flung himself against the spare pony. Softfoot helped him to get astride and then himself mounted his own broncho and rode away beyond the immediate reach of flame and smoke.

Little Cayuse came galloping up to them.

"I was comin' around ter look after you," he cried, speaking in English. "Who's the guy that's with you? One of the Crees? Why, no! I see who 'tis! It's the Injun we was chasin'!"

Softfoot did not understand the spoken words.

"It is Weasel Moccasin," he said. "Go back to the men. I am safe. Can they get past? Go and help them. The Crees will see the smoke. They will give chase."

Little Cayuse rode off. Softfoot then turned to Weasel Moccasin and drew to a halt.

"I have saved you from the flames," he said, "because I want to talk. I want to tell you to your face that you are a coward."

Weasel Moccasin was now firmly astride of the spare pony. He had got its halter rope into his fingers and was drawing it inch by inch towards him. Softfoot saw the movement and understood its meaning. If the knot could be untied there was nothing to prevent Weasel Moccasin from turning and galloping back to the Cree encampment.

"Drop that rope!" Softfoot commanded. And, drawing his revolver, he pointed its muzzle at the wrinkle that gathered between Weasel Moccasin's eyes.

Weasel Moccasin let the rope fall.

"Why do you call me a coward?" he asked, with an air of innocence. "Is it because I changed our arrows for the buffalo hunt and afterwards took the feather?"

"No," returned Softfoot, lowering his hand. "You may keep the feather—if you think you earned it. I call you a coward for many reasons. You were a coward just now when you lighted this prairie fire, so that your own people might be burnt, or else turn back and be set upon by your friends the Crees. Weasel Moccasin, you

have been my playmate; we have been as brothers. But we are no longer friends. We are enemies. I have seen that there are bad places in your heart. You are not a true Pawnee."

Weasel Moccasin looked round at the flaming prairie and then again his hand reached for the halter rope as if even now he saw a way of escape. But Softfoot's gun was again raised in menace.

"Why did you not help Wenonah to escape?" asked Softfoot. "Why did you let her escape alone and then tell the Crees to run after her?"

"Because it was not possible for her to escape," declared Weasel Moccasin. He hesitated a moment and then went on: "Listen, Softfoot. Wenonah did not escape. The Cree scout caught her on the mountain. He brought her to the Cree village. She is there now, a prisoner in one of the lodges. Many times I could have escaped without her. But I have waited. I have waited, knowing that the Pawnees would come and rescue us both. They are here now. I have seen them rounding up our ponies that were stolen. Let them wait. I will ride back to the lodges and bring Wenonah and your white pony."

Softfoot had listened with seeming patience, but the forefinger of his weapon hand was pressed against the ermine bag hanging from his necklace. He was asking his medicine to give him courage to resist the strong temptation to use his finger for another purpose. He was remembering his promise to Morning Bird that he would never fire his gun in anger or without honourable reason.

"Your tongue is forked, Weasel Moccasin," he said firmly. "You are telling me things that are not true. Wenonah is not among the Crees. She is safe. I have seen her. I have talked with her. She has told me how you were a coward when she called to you for help, when she asked you to escape with her. She thought you were a brave Pawnee. But the Pawnee is not a coward. His tongue is not crooked. He speaks straight from the heart. He is not false; nor does he shrink from helping a woman, even at the cost of his own life. You, whose heart is black, you are not fit to live among the Pawnees. I despise you. I hate you. I do not want to look into your face."

Weasel Moccasin gave an empty laugh.

"You will look into my face and thank me when I bring back your buffalo pony," he said. "I know where to find her. Let me ride away now and I will bring her."

Softfoot was very anxious to regain his favourite. He knew that he could not himself go and search for her.

"It will make me very sorry if Snow-white is lost to me," he said, relenting. He glanced apprehensively at the burning prairie and at the long train of Pawnees and

ranchmen streaming out from the valley and galloping off into safety. He knew by instinct that Weasel Moccasin's offer was only a cunning ruse to get away with a good pony and hasten to help the enemy Crees in their pursuit.

"I will follow on your tracks with Snow-white," Weasel Moccasin promised.

Softfoot thought deeply and quickly. Now that he had taken the measure of Weasel Moccasin's duplicity, he considered that it would be a good way of getting rid of him.

"Go, then," he decided, unfastening the halter. "But you must ride round by the far rim of the prairie. You cannot go through the fire and smoke."

"I can go through the valley by the way that the Pawnees are coming out with the horses," objected Weasel Moccasin, eager to gain time.

"No," said Softfoot, again fingering his revolver. "You will go by the way I tell you, or not at all."

He wanted to delay Weasel Moccasin's return to the Crees, well knowing his treacherous design. He watched him riding away. Then he himself rode up to the rear of the train where the other scouts were straggling in from their various outposts on the hills.

The Pawnees, led by Three Stars, had taken the advance. Buckskin Jack had mustered the white men in a bunch to form a rearguard and repel the expected attack from the Crees. Softfoot galloped after them and took up a position between Blue Eye and Little Cayuse.

"I think you would have done better to give him to the flames," said Little Cayuse. "Why did you let him go free? He will cheat you. If he had been in your place he would have put a bullet into you, and gone off with your scalp. I saw you pulling your gun. Why did you not use it?"

"He was wounded and was not armed," explained Softfoot. "I think he has lost his bow and arrows. But I did not want to kill Weasel Moccasin. He is weak. He is my enemy. But I do not forget that we have played together. We have sat together at the same camp-fire. We have been together in the buffalo hunt. My medicine tells me that Blue Eye gave me this gun to defend myself when I am in danger. I was not in danger from Weasel Moccasin. He was afraid of me."

"What Softfoot ought to have done," Buck said, "was to give him one in the eye with his fist. Kiddie, if you're figuring to pal up with Softfoot, you'd best teach him boxing. I can see he'll not do much damage with that gun. He's too soft-hearted."

Softfoot had already done his fair share of scouting, and there were many others, both Indians and white men, who were sent out far in advance and to wide distances on either flank of the marching army to keep watch, while the best marksmen were

kept in the rear where an attack was most to be expected.

The Crees did not delay long in giving chase. They had been diverted for a time by the prairie fire, but a large band of them had started on the war-trail with the aim of heading off their enemies by approaching them from side valleys and falling upon them as they passed. The Pawnees, however, were going too quickly for this plan to be of any value, and their scouting was too good to allow their being surprised.

Tex Bruxby, who had been scouting on the right flank, dashed up to Buckskin Jack in the middle of a narrow defile.

"Thar's a big bunch of 'em pluggin' along through the next valley, Buck," he announced. "Put on speed and you'll get past in time. Plant a few of the boys across the mouth of the gulch and give it 'em hot an' strong as they ride up."

Buck followed this advice, and as the Crees came in sight they were met by a sharp volley of rifle fire. They scattered in confusion, but many continued the chase and there was a running fight for some miles. The Crees were armed with repeating rifles, but, like most Indians, they were bad marksmen when firing from horseback, and they did no harm.

It seemed as if the Crees were paying more attention to the white men than to the Pawnees. Some few of them got well in advance and, lying in ambush, allowed the Pawnees to ride past unmolested, but opened fire when the ranchers rode along. The white men were too alert for them, however, and it was seldom that a second shot was fired.

At one moment when Buckskin Jack and Isa Blagg were riding together at the rear, Softfoot turned and saw them both firing up the hillside, and their weapons were not lowered when two riderless Cree ponies raced madly up the incline.

While he watched he was conscious of a movement behind a boulder to the right of him. He rode on a few paces and bending round glanced back at the boulder and saw a feathered head-dress and the shining barrel of a gun. The gun was levelled in aim at Blue Eye.

The Cree was squinting along it and his finger was feeling for the trigger. As Blue Eye galloped forward the muzzle of the rifle followed his movements. The Cree was making sure that he would not miss.

Softfoot had halted. This time he did not consult his medicine. Quickly, impulsively, he whipped out his revolver and fired two shots in succession. The Cree's gun went upward, exploding in the air, and the Cree himself rolled down the bank to be stamped under the hoofs of Blue Eye's horse.

"Thank you, Softfoot," nodded Blue Eye. "That's one to you."

"I have killed him!" cried Softfoot. "I did not mean to kill him. Take back your

gun, Blue Eye."

"No," said Buck. "You have learned the use of it. Would you rather that the Cree had killed me, or Isa Blagg?"

"I think it is you he would have killed," said Softfoot. "Why was I not afraid to shoot?"

"You were not afraid," returned Buck, "because you knew it was the right thing to do. Come along, quick—unless you want to claim his scalp as a trophy."

Soon afterwards it was felt that the Crees had given up the chase. Three Stars reduced his pace to a walk and when later he came to a secluded grassy level beside a creek, he called a halt.

The ponies were then carefully separated into groups according to their ownership. Not many were missing, and the ranchers and Pawnees were equally satisfied in having regained so much of their property with so little loss.

It was planned that Buckskin Jack and his followers should branch off from Crooked Pass. But in the meantime the two parties remained together for mutual protection.

They were crossing a wide expanse of rolling prairie when Softfoot, looking back at the landmarks to impress them on his memory, observed a dark moving line of horsemen in the far distance.

They were a small band of Crees who had hastened by nearer ways in the hope of getting in advance. But they were too late, and their force in any case was far too weak to attempt an attack in the open. They were now turning slowly back.

The sunlight was upon them. Most of their horses were dark in colour, but one of them was conspicuously white. Softfoot's keen far-seeing eyes were concentrated upon this particular pony. He knew without doubt by its shape and action that it was Snow-white. And he recognized the figure of her rider as Weasel Moccasin.

"You see he has cheated you," said Little Cayuse, "and it looks as if you have not seen the last of him."

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE LARAMIE TRAIL

"AM I hurting you?" asked Softfoot, gently probing with the point of his knife at Wenonah's swollen forefinger.

"You are hurting me very much," she answered calmly. "But I will bear the pain if you are getting out the thorn. I tried to bite it out with my sharp teeth, but your knife is better. You see, I cannot use my needle when the thorn is in my finger, making it so big."

"It is always so with wounds," wisely remarked Little Antelope, folding up the beautiful black fox skin which he had been dressing. "When the paleface hit me with his bullet, I could not use my bow for many days, because my arm was stiff and swollen. I did not mind the pain: not I. Eagle Speaker has said that a Pawnee is no good in his tribe if he cannot bear pain without shrinking."

"That is so," said Softfoot, bringing out the offending thorn on the tip of his blade. "And Eagle Speaker should know the meaning of pain. He has borne more than most men. I have seen him without his blanket. His body is covered with old wounds received in the battles of long ago. He has lost many of his fingers that he cut off in mourning for his brothers who have gone beyond the sandhills. On his chest and arms you can still see the knife-marks left from the time when as a young man he went through the trial of the sun-dance."

"Eagle Speaker is an old man," said Prairie Owl. "He is of other days than ours."

"And we are not like our great fathers," added Softfoot. "We can be proud of having wounds, as they were. But we do not wound ourselves in order to be proud or to show that we are brave enough to go on the war-path. There are many ways of proving that a young man is brave and able to bear pain without putting him through the trial of the sun-dance. And why should we cut off a useful finger every time a brother is killed in battle?"

"Woo-woo-woo!" exclaimed Wenonah. "Softfoot has been having a talk with Blue Eye. That is not Pawnee medicine that he has been speaking. Blue Eye is a paleface. He does not know the ways of the Indian."

"It is because Blue Eye is a paleface that he is so full of wisdom," argued Softfoot. "Do not speak against Blue Eye. He is my friend. He is as my brother. He has talked with me—yes. He asked me if I should run away from the Pawnees if they ordered me to go through the sun-dance trial. I said no. I should not be afraid. Why should I be afraid? I would let the mystery men put their skewers through my

flesh and hang me up by them to the lodge-pole."

"I, too," declared Little Antelope. "I would bear it all. I would not shout or lie dead."

"But Blue Eye shook his head," continued Softfoot. "He said that it was bad medicine to wound and disable a young man at an age when he should be kept strong, and not weakened by the needless loss of blood."

"This same Blue Eye made a big talk about the sun-dance when he was here with our mystery men in the great lodge," said Wenonah, examining her sore finger. "And Mishe-mokwa has forbidden the Pawnees to hold it. So unless you get a nasty thorn in your hand, you will have no chance of showing how much pain you can bear without crying like a whipped papoose. Have you ever known any pain, Softfoot?"

Softfoot smiled and turned to his work among the peltry.

"Yes," he answered her lightly. "A wasp once bit me on the end of my nose. And once when I was crawling across a fallen tree I got a splinter in my thumb and nearly fell into the torrent far beneath."

"You were very brave at that time," said Wenonah, remembering their adventure on the mountain. "And you did not tell me about the splinter in your thumb. You make me very sorry."

"Softfoot is only laughing at you, Wenonah," said Prairie Owl. "Wasps and splinters do not count. Many times Softfoot has been badly hurt. But I have never heard him cry."

"No," added Mosquito Child, "and there is no need for Softfoot to go through the sun-dance to prove that he can bear pain."

The young people were out on the open plain in front of the lodges busy in the work of folding and packing the dressed skins of the trapped animals which they had brought with them by canoe from their woodland camp down Silver Creek. The skins were to be sent to the trading post of the American Fur Company at Fort Laramie and sold in exchange for their value in trade goods.

Softfoot was to accompany the men on their long journey to Laramie, and he had consulted each of his companions as to their respective wishes.

Prairie Owl and Mosquito Child were willing that he should make his own choice on their account. Little Antelope wanted a gun and a knife; and Wenonah, who was to have an equal share of the proceeds of the sale, loaded Softfoot with a multitude of orders, including glass beads, silk thread, needles, scissors, red cloth, ribbons, sweets and children's dolls.

Their expectations were not too ambitious, for, as it afterwards turned out, their furs were exceedingly good in quality and of high value in the market. During the

days of preparation, however, Wenonah had always been adding to her list of requirements.

"In your place, Wenonah," said Little Antelope, "I should not trust a man—not even Softfoot—to buy all those woman things. What does Softfoot know about ribbons? He will perhaps bring colours that you do not like."

"If Softfoot likes them," retorted Wenonah, "they will be just what I want. Softfoot is a very good judge of pretty things—pretty flowers, pretty birds and insects, and the pretty colours of the rainbow. He will make no mistake in choosing beads and ribbons."

"Yes, but that is not what I mean," corrected Little Antelope. "I mean that in your place I should ask Three Stars to let me go with the Pawnees and choose my own things. Other women are going—Morning Bird, and Laughing Water, and your own mother, Moves-like-a Swan."

Wenonah's eyes brightened.

"Why not?" she cried. "It would be very dull for me here among the lodges. And soon the season of snow-lying will be here, when I must stay all day long in the wigwam like a naughty child. I will go now and talk to Three Stars."

Very little talk was needed to persuade her father. Three Stars agreed that the experience of travel in strange lands would be good for her and keep her out of mischief and idleness at home.

Many dressed and tanned buffalo robes as well as bales of beaver and ermine, strings of dried tongues and bags of pemmican, were to go to Fort Laramie; and the Pawnee women were sending many moccasins, snowshoes, winter capotes and buckskin jackets to be bartered at the Fort in exchange for sugar, tea, red cloth, pots and pans, and other merchandise from the outside world of the white people. There was only one commodity forbidden by Mishe-mokwa. Whatever else the Pawnees might buy, they were not permitted to bring back with them any of the white man's firewater.

When the train of pack-horses was made up it formed a long procession stretching far across the plain. The men were well armed. Many went on foot, but most of the women rode. Progress was slow, but there was no cause for haste.

They had with them an abundance of food and their portable teepees, and they could live as well on the trail as at home in their tribal encampment on Silver Creek. It was, indeed, a travelling village, and each evening when they made camp—choosing always a pitch where water and fuel were convenient—the women occupied very little time in lighting their cooking fires and in making each separate lodge ready to receive its household.

Often when the long caravan was trailing across the prairie, the young riders would gallop off apart in chase of antelope or bighorn, or perhaps a small herd of buffalo would give them sport, or they would engage in mimic battles, horse-races, or running and wrestling matches.

Fleet Wing once challenged Softfoot to a pony race through a level valley among the foothills of the Porcupine Range. Wenonah declared that she would race them both if they would let her ride on a horse of her own choosing. They agreed, and she borrowed a rangy broncho of her father's and rode out dressed in her gayest colours. Red Crow was to ride in advance to act as umpire near a distant rock that was to be the turning point.

They started level. Fleet Wing soon got in front. Then Softfoot steadily gained upon him and they were riding neck and neck when Wenonah flashed past them with a wild Indian yell of triumph. She raced far beyond Red Crow, and went out of sight round a turn in the valley. Fleet Wing and Softfoot were wheeling for the return lap when Red Crow held up his hand.

"Stop!" he cried. "Her pony has run away with her. You must not go back without her!"

They drew rein, disappointed at the failure of the race. Presently Wenonah rode excitedly back to them.

"Come with me, all of you!" she called. "There is something I cannot understand out there. Come quickly!"

CHAPTER XXIII

WAR TO THE KNIFE

SHE led the three of them from the green valley and out upon a wide-stretching plain walled round by steep mountains that rose abruptly from the levels of parched prairie grass. As the riders emerged from the mouth of the gulch they heard the sharp, far-off crack of a rifle-shot, followed by other shots less distinct. Softfoot's skill in localizing sounds drew his searching gaze across the plain. He saw a band of mounted Indians galloping off in disorder towards the mountains. They were firing back at a solitary horseman far in their rear, and he was returning their fire as he rode in pursuit.

"Look!" cried Wenonah, pointing to a spot much nearer. "What has happened down there? I think there has been a battle. Why are all those warriors riding away afraid of one little man? What have they been doing? Look!"

About half a mile away from the foot of the slope down which she was leading her companions they saw a confused mass of wreckage—a prairie coach lying on its side, with here and there a dead horse, here and there a dead man, and round about the wrecked coach a strange litter of bits of white paper that fluttered like carrion birds in the breeze.

Impulsively, Wenonah dashed off towards the solitary horseman. He had come to a halt and dismounted. His pony was lying down and he had thrown himself at full length on the grass behind it with his rifle supported on its neck as he fired shot after shot at the retreating Indians. Already several of their ponies ran riderless.

"Bring Wenonah back, Red Crow," commanded Softfoot. "We must all keep together."

Red Crow rode after the girl. But she had stopped. The Indians were now hidden from sight in a dip of the rolling prairie. The rifleman had risen to his feet. His pony stood uninjured beside him and he was putting away his gun before remounting. As he started to ride back towards the wrecked coach he saw Wenonah and Red Crow, and he drew rein and again handled his gun.

Wenonah threw up her right hand, palm outward, and he seemed to understand her sign of friendship. The sunlight was upon her brilliant red saddle-blanket and her white doeskin jacket with its glitter of coloured beads and gay fringes of fur and feather. He raised his own hand and rode at a canter towards her, while Red Crow, seeing that she was in no danger, hastened back to join Softfoot and Fleet Wing.

The three of them first made sure that there were no enemy Indians lurking in ambush, before they ventured to examine the wreckage. Then, dismounting, they led

their ponies nearer. Close beside the coach there were two dead Indians. In the rigid left hand of one of them was gripped a white man's scalp with long ruddy hair.

The other lay beneath a horse that was kicking to free itself from one of the under wheels of the upturned vehicle in which its broken hind leg was jammed. There was a cut from a tomahawk on the animal's shoulder. Softfoot took out his revolver and fired a bullet at a vital spot and the horse ceased its painful moaning.

The coach was bristling with arrows and splintered by bullets. All the straps, buckles, leather and loose fittings had been stripped and carried away. At the farther side were the bodies of four white men. They had all been scalped, and their weapons, belts, and most of their clothing had been taken. They had evidently stationed themselves to fire at the attacking Indians from behind the barricade of the coach. The driver and a young passenger were found lying some distance back along the trail.

Softfoot looked down at the two dead Indians beside the horse.

"They are Sioux," he told Fleet Wing. "The other horses have been stolen. Something must have frightened the Indians away, or they would have waited to carry off their dead. It may be that they heard the Pawnees coming, or perhaps it was Wenonah's shouting that frightened them."

Wenonah was now coming back, accompanied by the rifleman. Softfoot looked up at him as they approached.

"It is Blue Eye!" he exclaimed.

Buckskin Jack nodded in greeting but did not dismount. He was concerned about the loose papers that lay about in confusion—the contents of heavy mail-bags. Valuable letters, bank cheques and bills for large amounts of money were scattered over the ground, but of the sacks that had held them there was no sign. The Sioux had carried away the coveted canvas.

"We can do nothing," said Buckskin Jack. "The Sioux are out on the war-path. The trails are not safe."

"Yet you ride along them alone?" questioned Wenonah. "You were not with these poor white people, or this would not have happened."

"I was not with them," said Buck. "No, I was riding the other way, towards Fort Laramie. I was too late to give help. It was all over: the Sioux were plundering the coach when I disturbed them."

He dismounted now and, dropping the reins at his pony's feet, went up to the wrecked coach to make closer inspection. There was nothing to tell him who or what the five passengers might have been, and he could only conjecture that they were a prospecting party on their way to the newly discovered goldfields. He

recognized the driver as one of the most experienced of the mail-coach men who were engaged in the responsible work of carrying the heavy mails across the continent.

"The trails are no longer safe," he reflected, beginning to gather some of the scattered letters. And to Softfoot he said: "Why are you here? Why have you brought Wenonah so far away from the Pawnee lodges?"

Softfoot pointed across to the gap in the hills from which the Pawnees were already appearing, headed by Three Stars.

"We are on our way to trade our buffalo robes with the white men," he explained.

"Then I will not wait," said Buckskin Jack. "You can help me if you and your people will gather all these papers, pack them safely in buffalo robes and bring them with you to Fort Laramie. I will send some white men to do the rest. They will be here very soon."

Three Stars galloped up before Buckskin Jack was ready to continue his journey, and the two rode together some distance along the trail, discussing the situation which had brought the Sioux and their allies out on the war-path.

Buck explained that he had been summoned to Fort Laramie for military purposes. It was convenient that he should have met Three Stars, who could tell him how far the Pawnees were prepared to enter a war. They were at enmity with the Sioux and Crees. But would they throw in their lot with the white men?

"The Pawnees are with the whites," Three Stars assured him as they parted. "They will fight against the common enemy."

As Softfoot afterwards acted as a professional scout in the military actions against the great Sitting Bull and other Indian generals, it is necessary to explain the origin of the Sioux war.

It was primarily due to a breach of faith on the part of the United States Government. A treaty had been made with the Sioux nation, by which the district of the Black Hills was reserved exclusively for their use. Within certain limits of territory they were to enjoy full liberty to live and hunt as they desired, and it was a provision of the treaty that no white men were to be permitted to settle within the Indian reserves, or to trap beaver, or hunt buffalo, or molest the redskins in any way. At the same time the Government supplied the Indians with vast quantities of improved fire-arms and ammunition.

Just before the outbreak of the war Sitting Bull had received between three and four thousand new Remington and Winchester rifles, over a million rounds of patent ammunition, and many cases of Sheffield-made knives; and, having furnished him

and his fighting men with suitable weapons, the Government provided them with a very good excuse for using them against the whites.

Gold was discovered by a party of trespassing trappers among the Black Hills, and the usual gold fever broke out. There was a wild rush of white men into the Indian country, all bent upon finding an easy fortune, lighting their camp-fires and starting their mines in the very midst of the Indian reservations.

Very naturally, the Sioux and Crees resented this intrusion. If the white men did not respect the conditions of the treaty, neither would they. So they broke bounds. They raided peaceful homesteads, they attacked bull wagons and mail coaches, and waylaid innocent travellers along the trails.

Instead of expelling the intruders, the Government tried to induce the Indians to permit the miners to occupy the gold-producing lands. But everywhere the Sioux rose in arms. They danced the terrible sun-dance as a preliminary to going on the war-path. They practised rifle-shooting, held pow-wows, elected additional chiefs, sent out their scouts in all directions, and made horse raids wherever horses were to be stolen.

When, having dispatched Sheriff Blagg and a posse of his men back along the trail to the wrecked coach, Buckskin Jack galloped into Laramie, he found the town crowded with noisy soldiers and quarrelsome cowboys. They crowded round him as he dismounted in front of Brierley's saloon.

"Hullo, Buck!" cried one. "Comin' along with us? Been appointed one of Colonel Carrington's scouts?"

"No, Lem," Buck answered. "I was figuring on seein' General Custer."

"The Gen'ral he ain't around yet," Lem told him. "But you'll locate the Colonel right here in the hotel."

Buck hitched his pony to the tie-post and entered. He found Colonel Carrington in a small room, busy over a cigar and a mass of official documents.

"I am known along the trail as Buckskin Jack," he announced. "I'd a message from General Custer asking me to report to him. I have been riding for three days to keep the appointment. You are preparing to deal with this Indian trouble, I understand. Say, it will be no pleasure picnic, Colonel. It's going to be a big war."

The Colonel laid his cigar on the edge of the table.

"War?" he echoed. "Oh, no. We shall soon put a handful of redskins in their place. I guess you've heard that Crazy Horse has been busy on the ranges, disturbing the peaceful community? We're out to twist his tail: that's all. We have only to capture him, and all danger will cease. The warriors will slink right back to their wigwams."

"But, Colonel," protested Buckskin Jack, "Crazy Horse is not alone in this business. There is Sitting Bull, and Rain-in-the-Face, and Spotted Tail—all capable and experienced war chiefs. They have the Crees as well as the Sioux behind them. They can make up a big army. Don't under-estimate their combined strength."

Colonel Carrington looked up with a curious unbelieving smile at the tall black-bearded frontiersman.

"You are figuring an impossible situation," he said. "The Indians are incapable of combining as you suggest. We are up against a local outbreak, not an open rebellion."

Buckskin Jack shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Have it your own way, sir," he retorted calmly. "You are a military man. It is not for me, a mere frontiersman, to contradict you. But I am warning you. A handful of white men cannot go into the Indian country as they'd go on a hunting holiday. You will need a mighty big force to deal with a military genius like Sitting Bull and an army such as he can muster."

He leaned with his hands on the table, looking into the Colonel's face. As he did so, a bronze medal slipped out from his open shirt-front and hung dangling. Buck quickly replaced it, and Colonel Carrington had not time to see that it was the Victoria Cross. He did not guess that the rough-looking man addressing him was an English nobleman who had served as an officer in the British Army. But Buck's earnestness impressed him.

"What proof have you that the redskins are mustering in force?" he asked.

"None," Buck answered. "That is for your scouts to discover. Nor can I say where Crazy Horse is to be located."

"The last that was heard of him," said the Colonel, "he was west of the Porcupine Range."

"Crazy Horse is not liable to be fooling around the Porcupines," averred Buck. "I'd say he is now busy rounding up the tribes east of the Big Horns."

"Would you undertake the job of finding him?" asked Colonel Carrington. "I see you are recommended as a scout by General Custer himself."

"I will wait, then, for his special instructions," said Buck.

The General did not arrive in Laramie until two days later. Having seen him, Buck went into the trading store to complete his outfit. At the trading counter he discovered Softfoot and Wenonah bartering their furs. He helped them with their bargaining, and when the business was over he drew Softfoot aside.

"Softfoot," he said, "I want you to go with me on a big scout among the mountains. It will be hard. It will be dangerous. Will you come?"

“Blue Eye,” said Softfoot, “I am ready to do anything that you ask me. Yes, I will come.”

CHAPTER XXIV

MESSAGE BY BONE

"NO, Softfoot," said Blue Eye, letting a thin film of cigarette smoke drift into the evening breeze, "you must not suppose that the white man is so much cleverer than the Indian. They are clever in different ways, just as the buffalo and the wolverine are different. If you yourself were put into the middle of a village of white men where you couldn't understand their talk or their ways of living, you would be like a fish taken out of the creek and left to find its home on the prairie. But if a white man were brought out of a town and told to live here among these foothills, he would be lost, he would starve."

"He could follow his back-tracks," argued Softfoot. "He could remember the shapes of the mountains and the trees. And why should he starve? He could get food. He could make a bow and arrows and kill an antelope. He could make a teepee for himself and a fire, and wait until his people came to find him."

Blue Eye smiled and shook his head.

"No," he repeated, "the white man is not as the Indian. He cannot find his trail by the little signs that would speak to an Indian scout. To his eyes these hills would be all alike. To him one tree in the pine forest would be like every other tree. He does not look at things with an Indian's eyes. He would sit down and die. Without ready-made bow and arrows, he could not kill the antelope; and he does not know the use of the fire-stick."

"But, Blue Eye, you are a white man," pursued Softfoot. "You would not be lost; you would not die for want of food."

"That is because I have lived among the Pawnees," Blue Eye explained. "They have taught me many things. But I am not so clever as you are, Softfoot. You are a better pathfinder than ever I shall be. If you had not been clever in finding a trail, I should not have brought you with me on this big scout in search of the Sioux and Crees."

"But I have not found them," returned Softfoot. "For five sleeps we have now been among the mountains looking for them, and we have not got upon their trail. My medicine tells me that they have gone away, as the birds go away from their nests and the bears from their dens."

Blue Eye finished his cigarette, crumpled it between his fingers, and dropping the fragments, crushed them under his heel. As he did so his boot turned up the tiny, empty shell of a revolver cartridge. He picked it up.

"What do you make of this, Softfoot?" he inquired.

Instead of looking at it, Softfoot pointed some distance away among the encircling bushes.

"Over there," he said, "I can see something white. It is the skull of a timber wolf. There is a second one near it. The two wolves were killed with bullets that I fired from the little gun that you gave me. It happened many moons ago, when I was scouting in search of Three Stars and his Pawnees."

"Then you have been here before?" exclaimed Blue Eye in surprise. "And you know where we are?"

"Yes," acknowledged Softfoot. "That is why I brought you in here. It is a good place to sleep in. While you and our ponies are resting, I will climb up the hill and look for signs of the Crees, or of their camp-fires."

"There will be no moon. It will be very dark," Blue Eye warned him. "If we are so close to the Cree village, it is better that you should stop here. At daylight I will go with you up the hill; because I want to find the position of the mountain of the Three Wolves."

Softfoot stood up and looked at the surrounding trees, at the sky above them and at the side of the hill he had intended to climb. Then gathering a handful of twigs and kneeling beside his companion, he proceeded to make a rough map of the Cree country, using twigs laid on the grass to indicate the positions of the village, the horse ranges, and the far-away mountain with the three peaks, all in their relationship according to the points of Blue Eye's pocket compass.

Blue Eye copied the map in his notebook, and afterwards found that the positions were correct in every detail.

When they had taken food and securely tethered their ponies, they rolled themselves in their blankets and slept undisturbed until dawn.

Before sunrise they had mounted, and were making their way very cautiously in the direction of the Cree village. But they drew to a halt beside the boulder where, weeks before, Softfoot and Little Cayuse had encountered Weasel Moccasin and started to give chase.

Softfoot now proposed that Blue Eye should remain here with the ponies concealed in the brush, while he himself should climb the heights from which he might look down upon the encampment of the Crees.

He went by the same way that he had taken on the previous occasion, and he had the precaution to take his Winchester rifle with him. This gun he had purchased for himself at Fort Laramie, and he had since received many lessons in its use from Blue Eye, expending several packages of cartridges in taking aim at targets set up on the prairie. But although an excellent marksman with the bow and arrow, he was, as

yet, far from being clever with the gun.

He was dressed now in his fringed buckskins and wore a dark-coloured blanket; for the weather was cold. And, of course, he had no conspicuous feathers in his head-dress. It was important that while scouting in enemy country he should wear nothing that would draw attention to him. He had even considered this in choosing a dun-coloured pony which would not easily be discovered among the autumn trees or against the parched grass.

Taking cover always, he climbed the hill very cautiously, lest he should be seen by any prowling scout. He worked his way round the back of the hill, and when he came within sight of the stretch of prairie that still bore signs of the fire, he went down on his elbows and knees and crawled from rock to rock, from bush to bush.

No sounds came to him from the Cree village. He could see no horses or cattle grazing on the ranges. He began to think this strange; but he crept farther round the shoulder of the hill. Then, in case he should have been seen, he lay flat in the sage scrub for a long time without moving. Still no sounds of the encampment reached him.

Very slowly he raised himself on the support of his hands and arms and looked searchingly down the slope to where he expected to see the Cree squaws carrying in water and fuel. But instead, all that met his surprised gaze was a bare plain, dotted over with circles which showed where the wigwams had been and with patches of blackened turf where the camp-fires had burned. There was no sign of a living Cree, man, woman or child. The whole village had moved off.

Softfoot stood up. There was no longer any need to take cover. He made his way down the hill and through a long valley and across a shallow creek to the deserted encampment. There he found nothing but refuse which even the careful Cree women had not thought worth carrying away—scraps of worn-out moccasins, rotten and tattered fragments of lodge-covers, broken lodge-poles, and a discarded pile of buffalo hoofs too dry to be made into glue.

He made a circuit of the ground in search of a trail which might show him in which direction the Crees had migrated. But there were many trails, all leading in different ways. He made out that the people had left the camp in small, separate parties and not in a combined marching army that would make a distinct track which could be followed.

What he most wanted to discover was the direction in which the Crees could be trailed. But there was nothing to help him, and he decided to go back to Blue Eye and report the results of his scouting.

As he crossed the plain to make a short cut, he came close to the spot where the

medicine lodge of the chief Rain-in-the-Face had stood. The totem pole had been taken away. In passing, Softfoot realized that it must have been an unusually large lodge—much larger than Mishe-mokwa's. He paused for a moment by the ashes of the council fire. At his feet he saw a small, finely pointed feather, such as the Indians use for painting their faces. Its point was clogged with vermilion paint.

He was about to pass on when his eye was caught by a finger-mark of the same brilliant red colour on the thin end of the bleached shoulder-blade of a buffalo lying in the hole where the totem pole had stood. Why should the buffalo bone be here so conspicuously planted?

He turned it over with the toe of his moccasin and saw on its flat, smooth surface some picture writing in the same red paint.

Picking up the bone, he carried it away, examining the picture writing as he walked. It was a message, evidently left there for someone who was expected to arrive after the Crees had gone away. He could not wholly understand what the writing meant, and he was anxious now to get back to Blue Eye unseen and as quickly as possible.

Blue Eye was patiently waiting, and Softfoot reported to him all that he had seen and done.

"It is very clear," said Blue Eye, "that the Crees have gone off to join some other tribe on the war trail. The hostile Indians are out. They are gathering together secretly and in strong force. That is the thing that we have come out to discover. It is the one thing that the white men want to know, and they must be told."

"Then we go back to the place we came from?" questioned Softfoot. "Our scouting is at an end?"

"Not quite," answered Blue Eye; "and we do not go back to Fort Laramie, but to Fort Kearney, east of the Big Horn range, where Colonel Carrington has gone. Let us look at this bone."

They examined the picture message together. The bone was marked with many triangles, circles, dots, horseshoes, arrows and the crude figures of animals.

"It's a conundrum," said Buckskin Jack. "I could figure it out if it were written in plain English; but I'm puzzled over the Crees' ideas of natural history. What are those animals, anyhow?" he asked Softfoot. "Horses?"

"They are meant for wolves," Softfoot explained.

"Gee!" cried Blue Eye. "And there's three of them together! What about Three Wolf Peak? Is it a clue?"

"It is a sign," said Softfoot; "and the arrow beside them is pointing to the rising sun."

"I was notioning the round thing was a moon," nodded Blue Eye. "But I guess you're right. It means east—east of Three Wolf Peak. Say, we're getting along. What do you make of this queer mushroom thing with all the little dots around it—horseshoes, too?"

"The little spots are the tracks of white men with horses," Softfoot presently decided. "But I do not understand the other big mark."

"Wait!" exclaimed Blue Eye. "It isn't a mushroom. What would white soldiers want fooling around a mushroom? No, it's meant for a fort—a fort lying east of Three Wolf Peak. Seems to me that's about the position of Fort Kearney, where we're going. Can you make anything of these three-cornered things peppered around the animals, and down here at the south?"

"They are lodges," Softfoot interpreted, laying the bone flat on his knees. "My medicine says that the Crees left the message for some of their friends to read. It tells them why the Crees have gone away from their village. They have gone to Three Wolf Mountain to make camp. Afterwards, when the Sioux and Cheyennes are with them, they will trail to the east to make war on the white men in the fort."

"Exactly!" agreed Blue Eye, filling his pipe. "That's the whole story. The tribes are joining hands and their meeting-place is round about Three Wolf. We'd best bury that bone, Softfoot."

CHAPTER XXV

GATHERING FIRES

THE situation was difficult. The full extent of Buckskin Jack's duty was simply to discover if the redskins were actually out on the war-path against the whites, and to report to the commandant at Fort Phil Kearney. He had now confirmed this suspicion, for the Crees, at all events, had quitted their old-time camping ground with a war-like purpose.

But it was clear to him that he would be doing an additional service to the military authorities if he could ascertain whether the Indian tribes were combining their forces under recognized leaders. There had been no formal declaration of war. But this did not put aside the possibility that the united tribes were preparing to open hostilities, and the message of the bone could not be overlooked. It was obviously intended to direct the way to the meeting-place.

"Softfoot," said Blue Eye, "we must now go on different trails. I will ride to the fort and tell the white soldiers about the bone, while you will make a big scout among the Black Hills and find if other tribes are joining the Crees. If the Sioux and Cheyennes are with them on the war-path, it will be bad medicine for the whites."

"They will be wiped out," nodded Softfoot. "The white men must be told of their danger. I will go. I shall see if it is a big war party. But how am I to tell the white soldiers? Where shall I meet you, Blue Eye?"

"At Fort Kearney," Blue Eye decided, and, consulting his map, he gave Softfoot instructions how to find the place, describing in their order the mountain ranges and the various creeks and prairies that were to be his landmarks.

It was no great help to Softfoot to learn that the fort was beside a creek bordered by tall pine trees and surrounded by rugged hills with a sharp continuous ridge, or to be told that the stream was known as Big Piney Creek and the hills as Long Trail Ridge.

The main direction would be a sure enough guide, and he was satisfied in knowing that his destination was distant four sleeps due eastward from Three Wolf Peak.

The two scouts had divided their food and ammunition and were riding together before parting on their different ways when from the mountain heights at their rear there came to them the shrill tremulous cry of a human voice that sounded strangely weird in the desolation.

"It is the war-cry of the Sioux," said Blue Eye.

"Yes," agreed Softfoot. "They are coming this way. It was for the Sioux that the

message on the bone was left by Rain-in-the-Face. One of their scouts has seen that the Crees have gone away. They will look for the bone. Go, Blue Eye. Go. We will meet again."

Softfoot rode by hidden ways among the near foothills. Once when crossing an open gap he looked back in the direction of the deserted encampment and saw a large band of mounted Indians prowling like scavenger wolves about the plain, while others were trailing out from the same gulch in which he had so lately parted from Blue Eye.

During the day he had noticed a heavy bank of white clouds in the north, and in the evening when the clouds lifted for a little while he saw that the higher mountains were newly capped with snow, giving warning that winter was at hand. Half through the night he rode at a steady pace, pausing to rest his pony occasionally after a difficult climb. When deepest darkness made further progress dangerous, he halted in the shelter of a forest of giant pine trees, tethered his pony and loosened its girth, and wrapped himself in his blanket to sleep until dawn.

When he awoke, his limbs were cramped with cold and there was a thick layer of snow upon his blanket. Beyond his shelter the ground was deeply covered and snow was still falling. He could not hope now to find any tracks; but he rode on, finding his way by instinct. There were wolves about, but no signs of Indians. He began to fear that he was lost, and at midday, when the snow was falling very heavily, veiling the mountains in a thick white mist, he was forced to take shelter in a deep ravine, where he remained for many weary hours.

With the coming of evening the snow ceased, but it was then too dark for him to venture farther. But he still had food for himself and his pony, and he built himself a rough wicky-up and lighted a small fire well hidden from the mouth of the ravine. This was a wise precaution, for in the morning, when he crept out to gather more fuel, he was alarmed at hearing the muffled sounds of horse hoofs in the snow.

He drew back into cover and watched. Two Cheyenne scouts rode past. They were talking. He could not understand their tongue; but one of them spoke the name *Ta-ton-ka-ig-oton-ka*, which Softfoot well knew to be the Indian name of the great Sioux chief, Sitting Bull.

After a while two other horsemen followed. One of them was the Cree chief, Rain-in-the-Face, and his companion, Crazy Horse. Many young Crees rode behind them as a bodyguard. They were going away from the neighbourhood of Three Wolf. Softfoot wondered at this. Perhaps their plans were frustrated by the snow, he thought. But they had no pack-horses with them.

The last of the small band was going by when Softfoot saw that one of the guard

was mounted on a pony which was not strange to him. It was a piebald pinto—the same animal that Wenonah had ridden at the time of her capture. So surprised was Softfoot that he did not notice the rider until he had almost passed, and then he recognized that it was Weasel Moccasin.

It was clear that he was on the main trail that led back to the Cree encampment. More Crees might soon follow their chief. He could not venture out of the ravine. He waited. After an hour or so he heard many horses approaching. But this time they were coming from the opposite direction. He crept forward to a better place of concealment, and lay across a slab of rock under a low-growing fir tree whose heavily laden boughs completely hid him while he could look out through them.

When the horsemen came level with him he understood. The two Cree chiefs had gone out to meet their leader. With them now rode a magnificent Indian wearing a splendid war bonnet and carrying a feathered staff. Softfoot could not doubt that this was the great Sitting Bull himself. Blue Eye had told him what manner of man he was, and there was no mistaking his importance.

Behind the three chiefs rode the Cree bodyguard, and then came a long, long procession of Sioux, all armed with shields, spears, battle-axes, bows and arrows and repeating rifles, and all mounted on beautiful war-horses. Their pack-horses all carried heavy loads. But there were no travois frames and no women or dogs. It was an immense army of warriors and braves, equipped for a big war.

Softfoot did not attempt to calculate their numbers. He had hardly supposed that there were so many Indians in the world. Very truly had Blue Eye said that if the Sioux and Cheyennes were with the Crees it would be bad medicine for the whites!

At the rear of the army were many stragglers, riding wearily in broken order, seeming to care nothing about their surroundings. A bold thought came to Softfoot. He crept back to his pony and mounted. Riding slowly and with his blanket over his head and his shoulders hunched, he joined in the march. There was nothing suspicious in his appearance, and the Sioux did not suspect him. He joined them as if he were one of the Cree or Cheyenne scouts. None spoke to him and he did not speak. There was only one person among all these Indians whom he had reason to avoid. But fortunately he did not encounter Weasel Moccasin.

For hours and hours the march continued. But in the evening the trail ended on a wide open plain crowded with lodges so close together that the trodden snow could scarcely be seen. Cooking fires were ablaze and round each of them was a noisy throng of women. For the Crees had brought their families and all their camp equipment with them and they had settled down to their ordinary life and occupations.

Softfoot avoided the Crees, but he felt no fear of discovery among the Sioux. They were of several distinct villages and were not all known to one another. For two nights he slept among them, pretending that he had got separated from his own particular companions; and his pony fared equally well.

But on the third morning there came a new move. All the warriors and braves of the combined tribes were mustered and reviewed by Sitting Bull and his attendant chiefs, and arrayed in marching order. Softfoot, observing these preparations for the war-trail, escaped to the heights, from which he watched the vast army start on its eastward march. He rode only so far in advance that he could always if necessary drop back to assure himself that he was not going astray.

On the second day he reached the Powder River and had to go aside by many miles to find a possible fording place. From this point Blue Eye's instructions helped him, and he travelled at his pony's utmost speed until at last he found himself riding along the level of Long Trail Ridge, looking down upon Big Piney Creek and Fort Phil Kearney.

Blue Eye and also Little Cayuse had arrived only a few hours in front of him. They had been together for several days and had passed through many adventures. Blue Eye was under the surgeon's care. He had two broken ribs and a wound from the knife of a Cheyenne scout. He listened to Softfoot's report with amazement and took Softfoot at once to the commandant.

"I do not believe a word of what the boy says," declared Colonel Carrington. "The whole story is an impossibility. The redskins are not capable of combining in that way. They have no organization or discipline. They have no military knowledge, no system. You might as well try to persuade me that the gophers of the prairie or the beavers in the creeks could join together in a united band. It has never happened in history, and it's not happening now. I repeat that the Indians have no sagacity beyond what's needed for killing buffalo and raiding an occasional ranch. As for their having a leader with the genius that you attribute to this Sitting Bull—it's beyond all imagination."

"Colonel," said Buckskin Jack, "you engaged me on the recommendation of General Custer to do this work of scouting. I have had the help of two of the most capable trackers I have yet known. We have found out exactly what it is your business to know. If you do not credit our report—if you deny that a big army of Indian warriors is marching right now to attack you—it is your own fault. You are ill defended, your garrison isn't anything like strong enough and you cannot call in reinforcements. But you have had your warning and there is time even yet to protect the lives of the white men under your charge. What about getting your hospital ready,

sir?"

"The hospital will not be needed," returned Colonel Carrington, turning on his heel.

It happened that he spoke the truth. But this was only because when the attack took place no white man engaged was fortunate enough to escape with so slight an injury as a wound.

CHAPTER XXVI

SOFTFOOT'S WARNING

"BLUE EYE, why is the white chief so cross?" Softfoot asked when Colonel Carrington had gone away from the orderly-room in which they were standing.

Blue Eye crushed a log of dry wood farther into the stove and watched the crackling fire.

"It is that he does not think the same as we do, Softfoot," he answered slowly. "He thinks that you and I are not good scouts. He does not believe what I have told him about there being so many Indians out on the war-path."

"You mean," returned Softfoot, "that he thinks my tongue is crooked? Yes, I could see by his eyes, I could tell by the way he talked to you that he thinks I have not told the truth, or that I have been dreaming. His medicine is weak. My mother, Morning Bird, believes me. Every Pawnee knows that I would rather die than say what is not true."

"So do I know, Softfoot," Blue Eye assured him. "I could not doubt you."

"But it makes my heart very heavy that the white chief does not trust my word," declared Softfoot. "Let him ride out with me, and I will take him to the place where from the hill-top he can see Sitting Bull's great army in camp. He will see that I am not a bad scout—that I have done what you told me to do. I have not counted—I cannot count—how many enemy Indians are in the lodges. They are like a great herd of petzekees. They are like the stars in the sky; always more and again more, wherever you look. Will you ask him to come with me, Blue Eye?"

Blue Eye smiled at the idea of the commandant of a military fort riding out in the darkness, over miles of snow-covered mountain, to prove to himself that an Indian scout had brought in a true report.

"Do not trouble, brother," he said. "You have done your duty well. When daylight comes I think the chief will know that what you have said is true. Go and eat. Go and sleep. Ask Kiddie to get you anything you want. He will find you some good food, and a soldier's bed to lie on. At sunrise, you will ride out again and see what is happening among the enemy warriors."

Softfoot found his way back through many passages to the barrack-room crowded with white soldiers. Some sat at long tables eating from plates and using knives and forks instead of lifting their food in the fingers. Others were writing, reading, or playing strange games which filled him with wonder.

Many were gathered in a wide circle around the stove, smoking and talking

loudly in their unfamiliar tongue. He looked for Little Cayuse, and saw him at last beyond the stove, drying his long hair with a beautiful white towel. He had washed the paint from his face and the disguising brown stain from his neck and chest and muscular arms.

One of the men near the stove was watching curiously, and when Little Cayuse smoothed back his hair and showed his clean ruddy face and white teeth and dark violet eyes, the man laughed and leapt to his feet.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "Why, I'll eat my gaiters if it ain't Birkenshaw's Kiddie himself! How do, Kiddie? I didn't reco'nize you at first. I sure took you for a real red Injun! Say, you hain't fergotten me, eh?"

Kiddie glanced at him.

"No, Speechley," he answered lightly. "Guess I seen you once on the Salt Lake Trail along with a bunch of other fellers that was bein' chased by a band of yellin' Sioux."

"Kiddie, that was the time you saved my scalp," said Speechley. "I'm proud you remember my name. What's wrong with the Pony Express? How c'n it be run without you?"

"It ain't runnin' just now," Kiddie explained. "What with Injuns and road agents, the trails ain't safe for a lone rider. And bein' off duty, I just thought I'd come along here and see a bit of soldiering. No, I'm not figurin' to enlist. I'm here as a guest—see?"

"Well, Fort Kearney ain't a hotel," said Speechley. "But thar's heaps of good grub around if you're ready."

"Thank you," returned Kiddie. "I'd a good feed 'fore I washed. I'm hangin' around now for a pardner of mine that's with Buckskin Jack reportin' to your chief. Oh, he's here!"

He had caught sight of Softfoot hesitating at the door. He signed to him, and Softfoot glided silently and bashfully forward.

"Boys," said Kiddie, drawing on his buckskin jacket, "this is a friend of mine, Softfoot of Silver Creek. Government service. He's fresh in off a long scout among the Black Hills, and I guess he's some hungry."

"Kiddie, if he's a friend of yours, he's welcome," said Speechley. "I'm goin' right now to send in some grub for him."

"Hold hard, then," Kiddie interrupted. "Softfoot, he wasn't brought up accordin' to Eastern ways. You c'n see he's Indian. Don't embarrass him with any of your knife-and-fork banquets. Trot out a chunk of meat and a loaf of bread and leave him to eat 'em in his own way."

Softfoot sat very quiet and thoughtful among all these strange white men. He did not appear to be taking any notice of them. But afterwards he could have described any one of them, even to the colour of his eyes, the buttons on his tunic and the stripes on his sleeve. When he spoke it was only with Little Cayuse and in the Pawnee tongue.

"Kiddie," said one with a sergeant's stripes, "I ain't ignorant of your reputation of trackin'. I'm figurin' thar's something in the wind that blows two such scouts as you and Buckskin Jack into Fort Kearney. What's your game? If thar's any chance of a campaign, let's be put wise. What are we here for, anyway? You wouldn't guess we was soldiers by the kind of jobs we're put to. You'd take us for a gang of lumber-jacks. Where's the reason for scouting when there ain't no war-path Indians prowlin' around?"

"You haven't seen any signs of Indians, then?" questioned Kiddie.

"Never a sign," Sergeant Lee answered. "Neither me nor nobody else."

"Wait a bit," interposed the man Speechley. "Alf Hawthorn and me was out yesterday roundin' up one of the mules that was prospectin' for grass among the snowdrifts along Peno Valley. Alf, he picked up a feather, meanin' to clean out his pipe. But it wasn't what you could call a new feather. No self-respectin' bird would have owned it, an' yet it was lyin' top of the snow. Thar was thread twisted round the quill end of it that smelt of rancid grease. Alf made out it had dropped from some redskin's head-dress. Didn't you, Alf?"

The man appealed to nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I found later that there'd been a scarecrow redskin here beggin' for food, and wantin' to warm his frozen fingers at the cookhouse fire."

"Scarecrow?" repeated Kiddie. "That would describe the individual that I knocked up against this morning alongside of Bad Water Creek—a Cree scout, he was, and he'd managed to get away with a considerable amount of valuable information about Fort Kearney. I wonder if your commandant has any idea of how much the Indians know of his defences?"

"Defences?" queried Sergeant Lee. "Defences against what—Indians? Oh, we're never liable to be troubled with any truck of that sort. You haven't hit on the trail of a war-party, have you?"

"I ain't at liberty to tell you, Sergeant," Kiddie answered guardedly. "All the information that Buckskin Jack and Softfoot and I have brought in is now in the possession of Colonel Carrington. I'm not doubting that he's acting upon it."

"Something serious, then?" conjectured the sergeant.

Kiddie nodded and turned to talk with Softfoot.

The men showed no excitement, no alarm; but continued with their games and recreations until long after Softfoot and Little Cayuse were sound asleep.

No orders were issued. Even on the following morning there was no change in the routine life of the garrison. Colonel Carrington appeared indeed to ignore the reports brought in by the three scouts.

After breakfast, Kiddie found his way into the hospital ward; where he discovered Buckskin Jack sitting up and dressed.

"Buck," he announced at once, "Softfoot has quitted. I can't find him or his pony about the fort."

"That's all right, Kiddie," said Buck. "He went out before dawn to make a big scout towards the hostile camps. Keep yourself ready. You may be wanted. It's no business of ours to interfere in military matters; but we've got to do all we can to prevent a disaster. I've done my best to open Colonel Carrington's eyes to the danger that's threatening him; but he won't listen. He won't believe; and he's making no preparation for defence, even when I tell him that the enemy is at the door. Softfoot has gone to see if Sitting Bull is moving. It's time he was back. If he's not here in another hour it will mean that he has gone too far and got killed or captured —see?"

"No use in waiting until it's too late," suggested Kiddie. "If Softfoot is killed, it means that the redskins are nearer than they were last night. Don't worry. I'm going right now to search for Softfoot and find out what's doing on the far side of Long Trail Ridge."

"Right," agreed Buck. "Don't go beyond the creek, though. Come back soon as you can, and report."

Kiddie hastened round to the stables, got a pony, and rode out of the fort. At the gate, he stopped while a company of infantry marched in from morning drill.

From the low hill beyond the parade ground he saw down into the farther valley to a point along the creek where a train of bull-wagons, under a small escort of soldiers, was being loaded up with cut timber for winter fuel. From this it was evident that the commandant was not at all apprehensive, or the men would not have been sent out on such work.

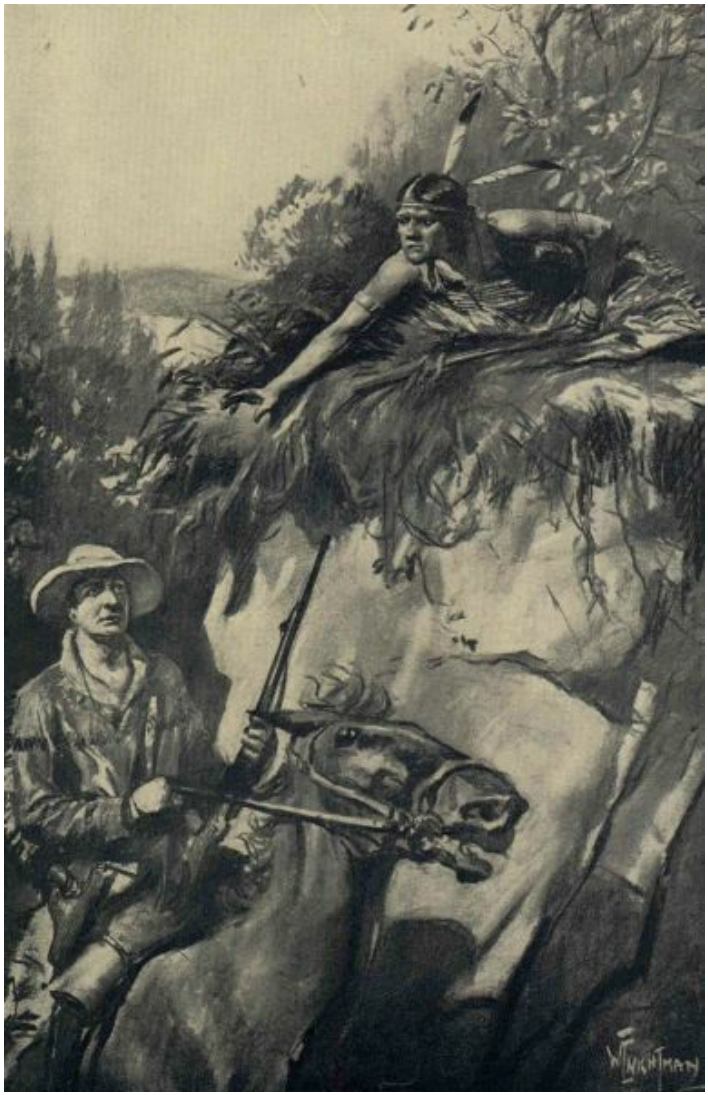
Crossing the valley and passing the wood train on his left, Kiddie rode by the made trail up the slope of Long Trail Ridge. From the crest of the hill, where he halted, he saw nothing to excite suspicion, and he went slowly down the steep incline towards Peno Creek. But he had hardly moved when from among the sunlit bushes at the side of the stream he caught sight of a quick flash of light. He watched the spot and the light showed again, quivering in distinct flashes. It was a message, meant for

himself, and he remembered that, like most Indians, Softfoot carried a small mirror among his neck ornaments. The signal called him nearer.

He rode down the slope, taking cover among the trees. He could no longer see the flash of light. But as he drew closer he heard the Pawnee tribal call, and presently from behind a group of bushes Softfoot crept out on all fours and beckoned to him. He rode closer.

"Keep on riding!" called Softfoot. "Do not stop. Ride back very quickly. Tell Blue Eye that the Sioux and Crees are everywhere—everywhere. They are creeping nearer and nearer, under cover. Soon they will be here in a big crowd. I will watch. I have hidden my pony. When you get back, look for my sun signal. Quick! Go! Their scouts will see you."

Kiddie did not wait for a further explanation. The urgent excitement in Softfoot's voice was enough to assure him that something very serious was imminent.



“From behind a group of bushes Softfoot crept out on all fours and beckoned to him.”

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DISASTER OF LONG TRAIL RIDGE

AS he galloped across the barrack square towards the officers' quarters, Kiddie discovered Buckskin Jack and the commandant engaged in an earnest argument.

"Well, anyway," he heard Buck saying, "you can do no harm in getting out your howitzers and your ammunition wagons." And as Kiddie dismounted and saluted, he asked: "Have you seen anything?"

Kiddie reported what Softfoot had told him—that the enemy Indians were advancing in force.

Glancing back to Long Trail Ridge, he already saw the flickering light of Softfoot's signal. Both he and Buckskin Jack understood it. But Colonel Carrington needed to have it interpreted.

"Your wood train is being attacked, sir," Buck told him. "The Indians have corralled it and the escort are fighting! Listen! Rifle-fire! War-cries!"

From where they stood, looking out to the surrounding heights, they could see the stealthy movements of several distinct parties of Indians, and there was a band of about twenty riding down the mountain road towards Big Piney Creek. From the hidden distance came the sounds of volley firing mingled with wild yells and whoops.

In the fort, bugles were sounded. Two or three howitzers were drawn out and a detail was made up of four companies of infantry and twenty-six cavalrymen. They formed up in beautiful order under the watchful eye of the commandant, but to Kiddie's surprise, it was Buckskin Jack who issued the important orders.

In the meantime a party of gunners were loading and training a howitzer gun, and soon the whistling shells were curving through the air and falling into the midst of the redskins on the mountain road.

The entire force of infantry and cavalry was now sent out under the command of Colonel Fetterman, and before they started on their doomed march, Colonel Carrington gave his instructions in a loud voice.

"Support the wood train," he ordered. "Relieve it and report to me. Do not engage or pursue the Indians at the expense of the train. Under no circumstances pursue them over Long Trail Ridge."

On the high ground in front of the fort, Kiddie stood beside Buck and watched the companies march rapidly to the right of the wood road for the purpose, he believed, of cutting off the retreat of the redskins then attacking the wagons.

As they advanced across Piney Creek a few Indians appeared in front of

Fetterman and on his flanks, and continued flitting about him. In all directions there were Indians; but in scattered, skirmishing bands, not in formidable compact order. On the ridge of the hill Kiddie noticed an Indian mounted on a white pony. He caught at Buck's arm.

"Buck," he said, pointing, "that's Softfoot's buffalo pony. And Weasel Moccasin is riding it. Look! What's he doing?"

A second rider was seen galloping towards Weasel Moccasin. It was Softfoot himself. Each had levelled his gun at the other. They fired at the same instant. Softfoot's pony staggered and fell. But Weasel Moccasin wheeled round and rode down the mountain trail, where many of the Crees had gathered in a bunch.

To Kiddie it appeared that Weasel Moccasin was in command of this patrol, and that he was trying to allure the white soldiers to the farther side of the hill. Already the redskins had retreated from the wood train, which now moved on unmolested towards the trees, while Colonel Fetterman led his command up the hill. On nearing the topmost ridge he opened out his companies in skirmishing order and halted.

At this juncture there was not an Indian to be seen on the fort side of the ridge. Fetterman rode from end to end of his line and then returned to the centre, waving his sabre as if ordering an advance over the hill.

Kiddie gripped the arm of Buckskin Jack.

"He ain't obeyin' his orders!" he exclaimed. "He was told not to pursue them over the ridge. He ought to turn back now. He's going on—just as the Indians want him to do."

Even as Kiddie spoke the soldiers disappeared over the crest. Then almost immediately there followed the rattle of rifle-firing.

Buckskin Jack strode towards Colonel Carrington, who was now roused to a point of helpless despair.

"What can I do? What can I do?" he cried, stamping his feet as he paced to and fro.

"The first thing is to send out reinforcements with your howitzers," said Buck. "You ought to have sent the heavy guns forward at first. Send your orderly in to see that they're getting the hospital ready."

The two men ran back together. Kiddie followed and seized his pony.

The firing beyond the hill was now rapid and continuous, and amid the crackle of rifles wild Indian war-whoops and battle-cries could be heard.

Two wagons of ammunition were rushed out and some seventy or eighty men hastened off with orders to join Colonel Fetterman immediately. Captain Ten Eyck, who had command of them, advanced rapidly towards the point from which the

firing came. Kiddie made out that the battle was taking place on the far slope of the ridge where he had met Softfoot. He wondered what had happened to Softfoot, and wished that he might have accompanied the two ammunition wagons. He saw that they were not moving by the shortest route. He also realized that the firing was becoming intermittent, diminishing in rapidity and in the number of shots.

He went boldly up to Colonel Carrington.

"If you've no objection, sir," he said, "I think I could get a sight of the battle before Captain Ten Eyck, and ride back and tell you how things are. I'm a pony express rider."

"Indeed, I should be obliged," said the Colonel. And in a very few moments Kiddie was astride of his pony galloping across the snow to the mountain road.

He reached it well in advance of Ten Eyck, and while the relief party was still lumbering up the steep slope, he had gained the crest of the hill and was looking down into Peno Valley.

The fighting was at an end. All was silent. There was not a shot to be heard or a puff of smoke to be seen. But the lower slopes down by the creek were densely crowded with Indians. Thousands of mounted warriors and braves rode to and fro across the field of snow or moved half hidden by the bank of the stream. And of Colonel Fetterman's command there was not a sign.

At his pony's feet lay a dead horse. He looked down at it and saw that it was the one that Softfoot had ridden. It had been Softfoot, then, at whom Weasel Moccasin had fired. There was no sign of Softfoot now.

What had become of him? And what exactly had happened?

The last that Kiddie yet knew of Softfoot's movements was when he had signalled with his mirror from the ridge of the hill.

Softfoot had waited among the bushes, watching Little Cayuse riding away back to the fort with the message for Blue Eye. He had known that there were hundreds of Sioux, Crees and Cheyennes lying in close ambush along the creek; but Little Cayuse had hardly disappeared when a long procession of mounted chiefs and warriors came in sight from beyond the bluffs and formed up under the bank of the stream. He saw Sitting Bull himself directing operations and sending a patrol of picked braves down to attack the bull-wagon.

Leaving his pony in concealment, Softfoot snaked his way through the sage scrub to the ridge and succeeded in making his promised signal. He then returned for his pony, intending to ride back to the fort and give a fuller report and if possible prevent the white men from climbing the hill and falling into the trap that was waiting for them.

But the Indians acted with unexpected speed, and their plans were deliberately laid. Softfoot saw clearly that their attack on the wagons was only a ruse to bring the soldiery out of the fort and over the hill. He perceived that it would be better even to sacrifice the wood train and its escort than to risk the loss of many more lives.

In the haste to reach the fort, perhaps he was for once less cautious than usual. His trust that the Sioux and Crees would mistake him for one of themselves was reasonable. There was nothing about him to distinguish him as a Pawnee scout in the service of the whites. He would indeed have accomplished his purpose unsuspected and unchallenged had it not been for the misfortune that he was observed and recognized by Weasel Moccasin.

Seeing him, guessing his intention, Weasel Moccasin rode forward to head him off. Softfoot, knowing that many lives certainly depended upon his reaching the fort, did not hesitate to use his rifle. But his pony, unmanageable in the clamour of gunfire, swerved and reared, while Snow-white remained steady. Weasel Moccasin's bullet, meant for Softfoot, struck his pony in the forehead and she rolled over.

In the fall, Softfoot got a kick in the shin; but he managed to rise from under the pony's body and crawl painfully back to the bushes. Here he tried to signal, but the sun was not strong and he was in an awkward position. Possibly he was in view of the Indians that were near him. They were retreating over the hill and, at the same time, led by Weasel Moccasin, enticing the white soldiers to pursue them beyond the crest.

Unable to signal, Softfoot now dared to creep out and, enduring the pain in his shin and his bruised body, stood up facing Colonel Fetterman, signing to him to go back. He saw Sergeant Lee and Private Speechley too; but they took no notice of his frantic signs and his loud cries of warning.

It was too late. He crawled back into safety. And from his place of concealment he saw the whole of the awful battle.

The cavalry and infantry swept over the ridge in a compact long wave, only to be met by a rain of arrows from the Indians who were near and by bullets from the Sioux and Crees who were well hidden behind the protecting banks of the creek. At first the rifles were beyond range. The bows and arrows were the main weapons of destruction.

Colonel Fetterman had gone out of the fort at eleven o'clock. Within three-quarters of an hour his command had reached the summit of Long Trail Ridge. Within another half-hour the massacre was complete. Of the eighty-two officers and men who had gone over the ridge to meet their savage enemy, not one was left alive.

When it was all over and the Indians were beginning to retreat, Softfoot, seeing a

way clear, crawled out to the open to go back to his dead pony. For a moment he hesitated, seeing a rider galloping over the crest and coming to an abrupt halt of astonishment a few yards distant from the pony. But Softfoot knew him, and putting his open hand to his mouth, he gave the Pawnee tribal call.

Little Cayuse saw him and rode up as he limped to meet him. The two scouts looked each into the other's eyes.

"It is bad medicine," Softfoot murmured sadly. "The white chief said that my tongue was crooked. But you see I told him the truth."

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTER THE BATTLE

LITTLE CAYUSE, known to the frontiersmen as Kiddie, sent a searching glance round the valley of battle in the hope of being able to help any of the fallen who might be only slightly wounded. He saw many ominous dark blotches on the snow—the motionless forms of men and horses lying in gruesome confusion. Some that were only a short distance away from him were certainly beyond help, and nearer the creek there were others that seemed equally lifeless. Nowhere on the open ground could he see one that moved.

"They are all dead, Little Cayuse," Softfoot told him, "every one. The Sioux have taken their scalps. I watched them. I would have stopped some of them. But my gun was here under the body of my poor pony that Weasel Moccasin killed. What could I do? It is bad medicine."

On the opposite bank of Peno Creek, far beyond gunshot range, many warriors and braves were hurrying away: some riding, others on foot and leading ponies, across whose backs the bodies of their fallen tribesmen had been hastily flung. Many of the ponies were loaded with rifles, clothing that had been looted from the white soldiers, saddles and bridles that had been stripped from the cavalry horses.

It seemed that the victorious redskins were retreating in fear that reinforcements of white men from the fort would presently appear from over the hill with their heavy guns. They were retiring in broken order, urged on by their chiefs, who knew full well that what they had just done would rouse the whole army of the United States against them.

To make horse raids on unprotected ranches or to waylay a stage coach on the open trail was one thing, but to attack a military fort and massacre uniformed soldiers was a very different crime.

Little Cayuse could tell by their hurried movements that there was no trickery in this retreat. The Indians were quitting the scene of their outrage and he might ride down into the valley without danger of interference.

He looked down at Softfoot, who was recovering his rifle from under his dead pony.

"You are hurt; you are lame," he said, "and you cannot walk back to the fort. Wait here, and I will bring you another pony. Then we will go round together and see if any of the white men are still alive."

He galloped back to the ridge of the hill and waited until Captain Ten Eyck drew nearer, riding in advance of his men and the now needless ammunition wagons and

howitzers.

"You are too late, sir," he called out. "Send one of your men back to the fort to tell the Colonel that it's all over."

"Any of our boys wounded?" the Captain innocently inquired. "We can take them back in the wagons."

"Wounded?" Kiddie repeated. "Sir, the command is wiped out. No use looking for wounded. They are all killed and scalped."

The officer rode swiftly to the hill-top and soon understood the truth. He called a halt and dispatched a mounted messenger to the fort. Kiddie then claimed a remount for his fellow-scout and led it to Softfoot, who was engaged in flashing a signal to Buckskin Jack, receiving a flag message denoting that the news was understood. There was no need for Kiddie to ride back to Colonel Carrington.

Instead, accompanied by Ten Eyck, a subaltern and Softfoot, he rode down into Peno Valley to where the Indians had done their worst work.

Here, very close together, they found the dead bodies of Colonel Fetterman, Captain Brown, and sixty-five of the soldiers of their command. There were no signs of a severe struggle. All the bodies lay within a space not more than twenty yards in diameter.

Several American horses, stripped of harness, lay dead a short distance apart, with their heads turned to the fort, indicating that they had been retreating from the rain of arrows and bullets and death-dealing tomahawks. There were no empty cartridge shells to be seen, but there were some full cartridges lying about. Most of the arrows had been collected and carried off.

"They were riding away," Softfoot explained. "They could do nothing against such a crowd. The Sioux surrounded them, using their arrows and spears, and then their scalping knives. It was all very quick. Sitting Bull himself was riding about, telling his warriors what to do. He is a great war-chief."

Farther down the slope where the mountain trail led to the creek and its shallow fording-place, was found the dead and mutilated body of a lieutenant, and beyond this the bodies of three young and five old soldiers. At this spot there was an abundance of empty cartridges, and beside one man, who had used a Henry rifle, over fifty were counted. This man Softfoot recognized as Sergeant Lee, and near him was Private Speechley.

Within a few hundred yards of this position, where the veterans had stood their ground to the death, ten Indian ponies lay dead, and the snow was stained with blood, showing that the redskins had carried away their dead and wounded. All the eighty-two officers and men who had started out were accounted for.

Captain Ten Eyck questioned Softfoot, through Kiddie, who acted as interpreter, and when afterwards he reported himself to the commandant he had formed a fairly clear story of the fight.

The Indians, to the number of fifteen or eighteen hundred warriors, had been massed in the natural entrenchment of the stream, to resist Colonel Fetterman's expected advance along Peno Creek.

Colonel Fetterman had formed his lines on the summit of the hill overlooking the creek and valley, and, allured onward by the Crees, with whom Weasel Moccasin acted, he had advanced with confidence until he came within bow-shot of the warriors concealed in the trench, when he was vigorously attacked.

He had successfully resisted the onslaught for half an hour.

Then the command, being short of ammunition and awed by the greatly superior force of the enemy, attempted to retreat towards the fort. Only the older soldiers had held their ground to the end. But, as Softfoot said, they could do nothing.

Softfoot's heart was heavy because he had not been able to avert this disaster. It seemed to him that all his scouting had been useless. He had warned the garrison that the enemy was advancing. He had signalled to the fort about the attack on the wood train; he had tried to frustrate Weasel Moccasin's trick of alluring the soldiers over the ridge, and, failing in this, he had attempted to turn Colonel Fetterman back from the trap that awaited him. Then, having neither horse nor gun nor the possibility of sending further signal messages to the fort, he had been powerless.

"I prayed to Tiráwa who lives up in the sky," he told Little Cayuse. "I asked my medicine to help me. But Tiráwa did not hear me; and my medicine was weak. And now I am unhappy. I must go back to the lodges of the Pawnees. Eagle Speaker will tell me why my medicine did not help me."

"Softfoot," said Little Cayuse, "do not blame your medicine. It is good. It is only that the white man's medicine has been weak. Come back with me and talk to Blue Eye. He is full of wisdom. He understands these mysteries."

Buckskin Jack had seen Softfoot's last signal, telling him what had happened. He could not easily credit it. But he sought out Colonel Carrington.

"The guns and ammunition are too late, sir," he told the commandant. "See! They have halted. Listen! There is no longer any firing. I am afraid Colonel Fetterman went too far. He has been overwhelmed. My Pawnee scout has just signalled that there is nothing left of the command. Every man has been killed."

Colonel Carrington stared in blank amazement at the snowy summit of Long Trail Ridge. He saw that the drivers were turning back.

"You are quite right," he said at last. "The worst has happened. You have been

right all along. I must beg your pardon for having doubted you. I did not know—I did not guess—that you were an experienced campaigner. You look like an ordinary frontiersman. Yet you allow yourself to be known along the trails by the western name of Buckskin Jack. I will not inquire what your true name may be, nor will I question how it happens that you should be wearing so highly honourable a military medal as the Victoria Cross——"

Buckskin Jack pressed his big open hand to his broken ribs.

"I will go in and see that the hospital is all ready," he interrupted. "You will send ambulances up there, of course—for the wounded. Though I doubt if they will be needed. The Sioux are not liable to leave their work half done."

The commandant moaned in despair.

"I ought to have been better prepared for such an emergency," he faltered. "You warned me. It is all my fault."

Buck bowed his head.

"It is no fault of yours, Colonel," he returned. "It is the United States Government that has been wrong all the time. When they ask the commanding officer of a district to defend a fort like this, right on the borders of a hostile country, and give him no more troops or supplies for a state of war than they'd allow him in a time of peace and quiet, then I calculate they needed to be taught a lesson."

He had spoken with the wisdom of long experience in declaring that the American Government had been wrong in their dealings with the Indian tribes. From the first they had failed to appreciate the true strength of the savage enemy. Stories of raids on isolated ranches and prairie farms, and of attacks on travellers across the plains, were heard at Washington with sympathy; but that a force consisting of eighty-two officers and men should be totally annihilated in the course of a short half-hour's fight was truly alarming.

The disaster at Long Trail Ridge did not fail to awaken the War Department to a sense of grave responsibility. Yet even after the warning had been sounded very little was done, and it was many months before the military authorities were brought to realize the great seriousness of the rising among the red men. No credit was given to the Indians even for a reasonable amount of intelligence and sagacity; and that they should have a leader with the military genius of Sitting Bull was beyond imagination.

But the Indians, trained by generations of warfare, were cunning enough to screen their movements and wholly to deceive their white enemies as to their numbers and their intentions; whilst, by means of magnificent scouting, they kept themselves thoroughly informed of every movement of their opponents.

On the other hand, the Americans too often neglected to avail themselves of the

assistance of capable and trustworthy scouts, and even ignored the information volunteered by observant frontiersmen such as Buckskin Jack.

As a consequence, when the time came for resolute action, small companies of ill-equipped troops were sent out to subdue a handful of undisciplined savages, when a brigade should have been dispatched to do battle against an army of thousands of well-trained warriors, artists in cunning, who were furnished with the material for carrying on a long and terrible war.

CHAPTER XXIX

KOSHINEE

WENONAH was clever with her needle. The Pawnees always knew her handiwork by the good quality of her chosen material, by the firm regularity of her stitches and the beauty of her designs. No other girl in all the lodges had such artistic taste and neatness in decorating soft white doeskin with coloured beads and silken threads, porcupine quills and fur.

Moves-like-a-Swan had taught her the use of the bright steel English-made needles which were so much finer and sharper than the clumsy bodkins of bone used by the squaws.

But Wenonah had long since surpassed her mother in skill. She had made a wonderful jacket of closely knitted beads for her father, Three Stars, to wear on important occasions; and in the last trading journey to Fort Laramie a belt of tanned deerskin, which she had decorated with beads and silk to represent a spray of russet autumn leaves and purple berries, had been exchanged for a gun, a pair of scissors and a sack of sugar.

"The moccasins you are now making are very pretty," remarked Moves-like-a-Swan, watching Wenonah's deft fingers at work one winter's afternoon. "But they are too big. They will fall off your feet when you walk. They are nearly big enough for a man."

Wenonah picked several blue beads on the point of her needle from the open white napkin which she held on her knees.

"But I did not tell you that they are for myself to wear," she smiled.

"They are perhaps for Prairie Owl, then?" pursued her mother.

"No," Wenonah answered. "They are for Softfoot. When he climbed the big mountain and saved me from the Cree scout and led me all the long way through the night to Black Panther Forest, his moccasins were spoiled: they were no good, and his tired feet were bleeding. I am making these for him to show him that I do not forget the brave things that he did for me."

Her mother nodded.

"You have always been good friends," she acknowledged. "But you do not know that Softfoot will ever come back to the lodges to wear your moccasins. He has been away for many, many sleeps—ever since the first fall of snow. We have heard no word of him. He is as one that is lost. He has gone into the far-off land beyond the Big Horn Mountains where the Sioux and the paleface people are at war. It may be that Softfoot's scalp is already hanging from the lodge-pole of an

enemy. And yet you are making these warm moccasins for his feet that may never wear them!"

"If Softfoot were dead, his spirit would have come to me and told me," Wenonah averred with confidence. "But his spirit has not yet gone over the sandhills. You forget that his medicine is powerful to save him from all harm—that he is brave and wise and strong."

She paused, poising her needle, and then went on:

"He was not afraid when he seized the deadly snake in his hand and cut off its head. He was not afraid to ride in among the buffaloes to save Weasel Moccasin; or when he steered the canoe past the Red Squaw. He was brave and strong when he crossed the bridge of peril. His good medicine saved him always. It will save him now from the enemy Sioux. Eagle Speaker has said that Softfoot will one day be a great chief among the Pawnees. Eagle Speaker knows."

"Well, I am sure Softfoot should be very proud to own such a beautiful pair of moccasins," said her mother. "And if he does not come back they will always do for Prairie Owl."

"If Softfoot does not wear them, nobody else shall," returned Wenonah. And she carefully wrapped her work in the white napkin and put it away among her personal treasures in her own curtained-off section of the lodge.

When she came forth again, she was wearing her winter leggings and thick bearskin capote, and her rawhide quirt was hanging by its loop from her right wrist. In its dainty case at her belt was her knife, which she always carried when she went abroad.

"There is snow in the heavy clouds up there," Moves-like-a-Swan warned her, spreading a folded blanket over the back of the pony waiting by the entrance of the lodge. "Do not ride far."

Wenonah stroked the pony's warm velvet muzzle and then, stepping back, vaulted lightly astride, drew on her fur gauntlets, and rode at a walking pace along the fronts of the neighbouring teepees, greeting the women who worked at their cooking fires or were on their knees grinding corn or pounding dried buffalo meat into pemmican.

More than once she paused to speak with men engaged in their occupations of pointing and feathering arrows, making bows and spears, or doing work too heavy for the women.

She watched small companies of warriors playing their favourite guessing game of bone in the hand; and once she stopped beside a group of boys and girls at practice with their bows and arrows. She chided a tall youth for not gripping his

arrow on the string in the approved way.

"Let me show you," she said, borrowing his weapons and baring her hands. And from her seat on the pony's back she not only illustrated the proper finger-grip, but drew the bowstring and shot at the target, hitting it true. Then she turned and rode across the snow to Morning Bird's spacious lodge.

Morning Bird sat within the open doorway hemming a blanket, while from beyond the skin curtains came the voices of the women who helped with the housework. At her side lay Softfoot's pet wolf, Koshinee, no longer a cub, with his muzzle on his folded paws in the warmth of the fire of buffalo chips and resinous pine-wood.

Koshinee rose to his feet and stretched himself, yawning and showing his big white fangs and long red tongue. He strode towards Wenonah.

"He is very tired, waiting all this long time for his master," said Wenonah.

"Yes," returned Morning Bird, patting the pony's shoulder. "But he will have many more sleeps before Softfoot comes back."

"But Softfoot cannot stay away always," said Wenonah. "One of the Pawnees has told Three Stars that Blue Eye has been seen along the white man's trail; and if Blue Eye is no longer scouting beyond the mountains, surely Softfoot will come home soon?"

"There has been a big battle over there," Morning Bird said mournfully. "Many, many of the paleface warriors were killed by the Sioux. I shall not believe that Softfoot is safe until I see him here among the lodges."

Koshinee stood looking expectantly at Wenonah, even swaying his tail from side to side like a dog.

"He wants to have a big run with me again," smiled Wenonah, snapping her fingers invitingly.

"It would be very good for him," said Morning Bird. "He is getting lazy and wild. He has killed many of the Pawnee dogs. Sometimes I am afraid he will bite the Pawnee children when they tease him." She signed to the animal. "Go, then; go with Wenonah."

The wolf seemed to understand, and when Wenonah rode off into the woodland trail, he followed at her pony's heels, keeping an even, loping pace.

"I wonder if you could race my broncho," said Wenonah when she reached the level prairie.

The grass was all withered and lay flat under the dry, powdery snow. Riding was easy. Koshinee was like an obedient, well-trained dog, always at the same distance behind or at either side, never seeming to alter his steady, loping stride. But when

Wenonah touched the broncho's flank with her quirt and broke into a gallop, the wolf began to bound forward at full racing stretch.

The fresh, keen wind was exhilarating, and Wenonah galloped on joyously. She went round the high bluffs and through the valley where, months earlier, she had been captured by the raiding Crees, and then eastward over a further level of prairie, and again into the twisting gulches among the hills. But soon she realized that the wind was rising, sweeping the loose dry snow before it into long, deep drifts. The sky was overcast. Heavy, leaden clouds rolled over the mountains, dragging their broken shreds behind them.

Remembering her mother's warning, she turned to go homeward to the lodges. She called Koshinee; but he did not heed her, but went on with his nose lowered as if following up a scent. She called again, and he still galloped on in the same direction. She whistled and called once more. Never before had she known him to be so obstinate.

Had he been an ordinary Indian dog, she would have trusted him to find his way home without her. But a wolf was different. And Morning Bird had said that Koshinee was getting wild. But Wenonah dreaded the thought of losing an animal that was not her own, but Softfoot's. Softfoot would be vexed if she allowed Koshinee to escape.

She rode after him; but there were many trees about, hiding him from her. She could only follow his tracks in the snow. At one place they went aside into a small forest of larches, where she could not pursue him. Here, where he had entered, she saw a heavy trail of footprints similar to his own, as if he had been running to and fro, hunting.

Then suddenly Koshinee came out, with his ears thrown flat and his tail between his legs, looking frightened. He turned quickly and darted past her. She galloped after him and soon overtook him. He ran by her side for a little time, then dropped to the rear. She listened for his panting breath, for the crunching of his feet in the snow. These sounds seemed to grow curiously more distinct. She could hear them plainly above the drumming of her pony's hoofs.

A sharp yelp caused her to look back over her shoulder, and her heart leapt within her. Close behind her was a great pack of wolves, chasing her hungrily, rushing towards her with open jaws and fiercely expectant eyes. She could not tell which of them was Koshinee. They were all of the same breed, the same colour and size and shape.

The broncho seemed to know what was coming, for he increased his speed without the urging of the quirt. But the wolves were gaining upon him. One of them

made a savage snap at his hocks. One leapt at his shoulder, and its sharp fangs clashed against Wenonah's near legging.

She had no gun: no weapon but her knife. She knew that if her pony should stumble there would be an end to everything. She gave the broncho his head; she gripped his throbbing sides tightly with her knees and kept her eyes fixed steadily upon the trail in advance of her. The trees flashed by. She came out upon open prairie, but always from close behind her came that ominous sound of panting throats and crunching feet, mingled with sharp, eager yelps.

The pony was breathing hoarsely, its ears were lying back, its neck and shoulders were wet with sweat; its stride was becoming irregular. The wolves were now clamouring and springing at its flanks. One was running by its forelegs, snapping as it ran to snatch a hold. Wenonah gripped her knife, resolving to fight to the last. Then suddenly her pony bounded forward with a new energy and for a moment the wolves dropped a few paces behind.

In that same moment from her left side there came the sharp crack of a gun, many times repeated. Instinctively Wenonah pulled at the halter, and the pony swerved round in its forward careering gallop. Between her and the wolves a mounted Indian was racing towards her, firing at the savage beasts with the deliberate aim of his rifle and never missing a shot.

"It is Softfoot!" Wenonah cried. "Always it is Softfoot!"

CHAPTER XXX

SOFTFOOT'S RESOLUTION

SOFTFOOT was emptying the spent cartridges from his Winchester and proceeding to reload the weapon when Wenonah turned, saw him and halted. Beyond him she counted five of the wolves lying at intervals on the snow where they had fallen to his well-aimed bullets. Their still living companions of the hungry pack, alarmed at the gunfire and the appearance of a second horse, were slinking back to tear at the carcasses and devour them.

As Softfoot lowered his rifle and looked round at the girl, she rode fearlessly towards him.

"Why, it is Wenonah!" he exclaimed in amazement, meeting her and drawing to a halt. "I did not know it was a woman. Why are you here, riding alone, so far away from the lodges?"

"I was not alone," she answered him. "Koshinee was with me. I think you have killed him. He did not mean to hurt me. But the other wolves, when they came out from the wood, saw him running after me. They thought he was one of themselves chasing me. They joined in the chase and would have killed and eaten me and my pony if you had not stopped them. Softfoot, it is always that way. You always come to help me when I am in danger! It is very strange. It is your good medicine that sends you."

"But you should not have put yourself in this danger," Softfoot reproached her. "You know that there are always hungry wolves about when the snow is on the ground. Why did you do it? Why did you ride so far away from the village?"

"It was that Koshinee ran away from me," she explained. "I brought him with me to give him a run. I did not mean to come so far. But when he ran away, I tried to catch him. I did not want to lose your wolf-cub that you are so fond of."

"Koshinee is no longer a cub," said Softfoot. "He is a full-grown wolf. It was not wise to keep him so long. We could not have tamed him. I do not want him any more. If I have killed him, I cannot help it. I think he must have got on the scent of his wild brothers and wanted to live with them. That is why he ran away from you. I wish you had let him go, and turned back without him."

Wenonah was staring at him with wide-open eyes.

"If I had turned back, I should not have met you," she said. "I am glad I did not turn back. Morning Bird will sing songs when she sees me bringing you home instead of the wolf."

"She is happy—Morning Bird?" he asked, now dismounting at her side.

Wenonah nodded.

"She will be very happy when you are again among the lodges," she answered. And, glancing at him, she added: "It is a beautiful horse you are riding, Softfoot. And you are wearing a new buckskin jacket and leggings, and new winter moccasins. And you are changed. You are like Koshinee, no longer a cub, but a full-grown wolf—a grown man. Where have you been to, all these many moons, since you went away?"

"Many moons?" he laughed. "Oh no; I have not been away so long as all that."

He saw that her broncho had come to no harm. He slung his gun over his shoulder and rode by her side.

"You have been on the war-path," she resumed. "But I do not see that you have brought home any scalps."

"Only my own," he told her. "But I have been where many scalps were taken by the enemy Sioux and Crees, in a big battle against our friends the paleface soldiers. I was not fighting. It was not my quarrel. That is why I am here alive."

"The warriors were saying that your spirit had surely crossed the sandhills," Wenonah went on, "or else that you had forgotten the Pawnees. Blue Eye has been seen along the trails. You did not come back with Blue Eye—no?"

"No," said Softfoot. "Many sleeps ago I left him with the white soldiers. He was hurt; he could not ride. Since then, I have been living among the paleface people in the Sweetwater country, where Little Cayuse has his home. For me it has been a great time. I have been very happy. Little Cayuse is as a brother to me. He has taught me many things about the wide world beyond the far rim of the prairies. It is a big world, Wenonah. The white people are very mighty."

"Ah!" Wenonah regretted. "You will now look down upon us, as the eagle looks down from the blue sky at the tiny animals in the grass. You have made friends with Blue Eye and Little Cayuse and so many splendid white people. You will wipe your moccasins on the poor Pawnees."

"Do not be so stupid, Wenonah!" he said in reproof. "Have I not come back to my own people? Besides, Little Cayuse is not a paleface—not like Blue Eye. His mother was an Indian, the same as you and Morning Bird and Moves-like-a-Swan and the other Pawnee women. He is between the two. He has in him the best of the paleface and the best of the Indian. He is very clever, very good, very wise, very strong."

"In those things he is like Blue Eye," said Wenonah. "To me, Blue Eye is the greatest of men. It makes me glad to know that you went scouting with him."

"I would give my life for him," ruminated Softfoot.

“That is a big thing to say, and a bigger thing to do,” added Wenonah.
And, long afterwards, Softfoot of Silver Creek remembered her words.

CHAPTER XXXI

REDSKIN RECREATION

THE winter was not far advanced when Softfoot returned to his people after his visit to Birkenshaw's camp on the Sweetwater. But the Mishe-mokwa's village was already isolated from the outer world. The creek was frozen, the valleys were deep under snow; every lodge was firmly anchored down with heavy stones and furnished with its storm-cap on the poles projecting above the smoke-vents: the skin-covers had been carefully patched to keep out the bitter north wind and to hold in the warmth of the fire.

It was fortunate for the Pawnees that the great buffalo hunt in the late summer had provided them with a good store of food for the season of snow-lying, when the hunters could not go far afield. In addition to the buffalo meat there had been a good crop of wild berries, camas roots and corn, and there was the dried flesh of antelope, elk, wild sheep and goat. Many sacks of flour, meal and salt, and chests of tea and sugar, had also been brought home from Fort Laramie.

But in a community where there were so many mouths to fill, even this abundance had to be supplemented, and there was still plenty of hunting and trapping to be done. Winter was indeed the great time for the hunt; for then the creatures of the wild were fat and their skins were in the best condition, rich with full deep fur, glossy and of good colour for making robes and peltry. Only in the snow-time was the precious fur of the ermine of purest white; only in the cold weather was the buffalo clothed with its heaviest mane of long black hair and a coat of smooth brown, free from matted tufts.

The bison did not now run in big crowds across the open prairie; but occasionally when a small herd could be found the Pawnees would go out wearing their snowshoes and stalk them, or else creep up to them disguised as wolves that could approach without giving alarm, and then, being near to a giant bull or a well-grown cow, they would let fly their arrows or hurl their spears at a vital part and come home burdened with good red meat and splendid robes.

The bighorn antelope, the black-tail deer, and the wild goat would come down from the mountains to feed on the lower ground, and perhaps a bear would venture out from his den among the rocks. These gave good sport as well as helped to supply food and valuable peltry; while the smaller animals—jack-rabbits, beavers, gophers, ground squirrels, wild cats, rats, and all birds that were good for food, were caught in traps and snares, usually by the boys.

Round about the lodges, the Pawnees had occupations in plenty—the men in

attending to their horses and cattle, making canoes, and weapons for hunting and warfare, and manufacturing pottery; the women in grinding corn, dressing and tanning skins, or weaving and sewing. The boys and girls joined in these duties; but they were especially encouraged in outdoor sports and games that would keep them active and make them strong.

They engaged in pony races or foot-races on snowshoes; they took sides in mimic battles, with snowballs for weapons; or they cleared a long wide track for their favourite game of the ring and stick. They had many games with footballs on the ice, and a popular recreation in winter was sliding down hills on sleds made of buffalo ribs. Their lives were a continuous holiday, with no schooling, but only severe training in the duties and occupations that would make them useful and capable Indians.

So it was that boys like Prairie Owl and Little Antelope, and girls like Wenonah and Owaissa, grew up competent, self-reliant and strong. Theirs was a hard but healthy existence, with constant exercise in the open air, abundance of wholesome food, ample sleep and cleanliness which brought them into superlative bodily condition.

Wenonah was perhaps right in her impression that during his absence from the lodges Softfoot had somehow changed. He was less of a boy and more of a man. He had become more serious. His intercourse with Little Cayuse and the men at Birkenshaw's had taught him that Mishe-mokwa's village was a very tiny world, and that even the wisest of the Pawnees knew very little beyond the things that their eyes could see or their ears could hear within the limits of their own encampments. He had come to understand the value of knowledge. He had learned to speak many English words and even sentences. He was quick at learning, and his memory was like a steel trap from which nothing could escape.

Even after he had returned to the lodges, he was always coming out with some piece of information that was new to his companions.

Once at a great feast in the grand lodge of Three Stars, Wenonah, who was seated near him, saw him draw from his pouch a curious round object that glittered in the light. He looked at it intently.

"What is that?" she cried with girlish curiosity. "Is it talking to you when it says 'tick-tick-tick' like a pah-puk-keena hopping in the grass?"

"It is what the paleface people call a watch," he answered her, opening it and displaying the moving wheels. "Gideon gave it to me. When I remember to wind it up with this little key, it tells me the time of day and I need not look at the sun. It tells me now that it is four o'clock in the afternoon and that Little Cayuse is drinking his

tea with the ranchmen."

"That is all a very wonderful mystery," said Wenonah in amazement. "But what is the use of it? It is not like the sun. The sun does not need any winding up, and we do not want to hide our sun in a pocket. Without any watch, we know when it is time to eat and to sleep. Oh, the white people are very strange!"

"But they are very clever," said Softfoot. "I have seen their picture writings of fire-ships that swim across the big sea without paddles; trains that go along without horses or dogs to pull them, and things that they call machines that can make a blanket while you are looking, as a spider spins its web. But the most wonderful things are their books and the things that books teach them. I shall not be happy until I can read the white man's books. It will be like climbing a steep mountain."

"You will not be happy even then," averred Wenonah, "because there will always be higher mountains to climb."

"I, for one," said Little Antelope, "would rather be a good Indian on the plains than a bad white man on the hill-top. Why should we envy the white man with his tick-watch and his fire-ships and his long shooting gun? We are Indians. Let us be faithful to our sun, let us keep to our canoe and our bows and arrows. Let us dance and sing songs and be happy."

When the feasting was at an end, Three Stars made a solemn prayer. The calumet pipe was lighted and passed with ceremony to the men guests, while the women made ready the lodge for dancing, clearing a wide space of floor with the fire of sweet-scented pine-wood in the middle.

Wenonah was famed among the Pawnees for her light and graceful dancing. At the first she danced alone, watched by the large company of her father's guests and by many who crowded round the open door from outside. She looked very beautiful in her dress of white doeskins, beaded, fringed, trimmed with red cloth and ornamented with elk tusks and stained porcupine quills. Her hair was shining and neatly braided behind each ear, and the paint on her face and in the parting of her hair was bright and fresh. She danced to the music of beaten drum and crooning voice. Presently others joined her, and soon the lodge was full of dancing, singing people.

Every evening such feasting and dancing went on in one or more of the lodges of the medicine chiefs, and sometimes in the great lodge of Mishe-mokwa himself. Always they began before dusk and were continued until the fires died down, when the people dispersed and went home to their various teepees. In the darkness of night the camp sank into a deep silence, broken only by the occasional stamp of an uneasy hoof or the sharp bark of a wakeful dog.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE EAVESDROPPER

SOFTFOOT and Little Cayuse lived so far apart that they could not hope to see each other often. In the winter they could not communicate by any means. But they had arranged that when the snow had melted from the trails they should meet at Fort Laramie, which was midway between their homes. They had appointed the time. It was to be on the first day of the moon of bright nights, which the white people call the month of April.

Little Cayuse had not forgotten. He had resumed his interrupted duties as a rider in the Pony Express; but he easily contrived to take his turn with the western-bound mails on that particular day, and he arrived in Laramie in the early forenoon with several hours to spare.

"Say Kiddie, you'se a heap too soon for the relay," remarked young Abraham K. Dexter, watching him dismount in front of the Big Horn Hotel. "The westbound mail it ain't due till twenty-four minutes past one. You got four empty hours ter fill up and thar's no entertainment around. They ain't a gunman in Laramie. The town's that quiet and peaceable, I ain't heard a gunshot inside of three days."

"It's true I'm some early, Abraham," smiled Kiddie. "But I got an appointment with a friend of mine from over the Rocky Mountains. Likely you've seen him hangin' around, kind of anxious? He ain't accustomed to the turmoil of a town like Laramie."

"Kiddie, I ain't struck nobody respectable enough to be a friend of yours," said Abraham. "The only stranger I've seen around was a blanketed Injun, early this mornin'."

"Was he young?" questioned Kiddie.

"'Bout your own age more or less," returned Abraham. "I was a heap more interested in his white pony than in himself."

"Was he a Pawnee?" Kiddie asked.

"Dunno," said the boy. "I never takes much stock of redskins. He might have been a Sioux; he might have been a Cree. But seein' as the Crees an' the Sioux they're hostiles an' not liable to come nosin' around a town like Laramie, I guess the guy I'm alludin' to may have been a Pawnee."

"Abraham, the friend I'm expectin' is a Pawnee of about my own age and height," explained Kiddie. "I guess he's the one you noticed. If you c'n find him, bring him right here and tell him to wait. I'm going across to the Express bureau. Yes, you can stable my pony and give him a rub down."

"Right!" nodded Abraham, leading the pony away.

About an hour later, Abraham was strolling through the town in search of the Indian when he saw Kiddie come out bareheaded from the Express bureau and run up to a young brave mounted on a magnificent black horse. The young brave slipped lightly from his saddle and the two shook hands. Abraham went boldly up to them, staring at the stranger in admiration of his athletic figure, his handsome refined face and beautiful fringed and beaded clothing.

"Kiddie," said the boy apologetically, "your friend ain't the same Injun I seen this mornin'. I made a mistake."

"Never mind," said Kiddie. "Take the horse round to the stable and put him in the stall next to mine."

The two friends were curiously silent as they walked side by side to the Big Horn. It seemed as if they were satisfied in meeting each other again without talking.

"We will eat," said Little Cayuse as they entered the almost empty saloon. It was not the usual meal-time, and there were but two or three groups of cowboys playing dominoes and cards. He ordered food and chose a table near one of the open front windows. "You are fond of fresh air," he said to Softfoot. "Here we can talk. There is nobody about who will understand the Pawnee tongue."

While waiting, they spoke of the past winter, of the work of the pony express, of Birkenshaw's camp, and of Softfoot's uneventful life among the lodges at Silver Creek.

Young Abraham Dexter, who had not seen them enter, looked in at the doorway in search of them and was surprised to see them so far away from the warmth of the stove. As he went out again, he decided to wait in the veranda until they should be ready for their mounts. He was striding towards the window, but stopped and turned away. The seat he had meant to take was occupied by an Indian, who sat back with his chin on his breast and his blanket over his head and shoulders, apparently enjoying a sleep.

"That's the identical guy I seen hangin' around this mornin'," Abraham reflected as he went away. "Fancy me thinkin' that Kiddie'd have any truck with a scarecrow like that! For a cent I'd tell him ter quit."

Unfortunately, no one was present to offer such a handsome reward, and the Indian remained under the window within easy hearing distance of the conversation inside.

"You have not perhaps seen Blue Eye since the season of snow-lying?" Softfoot inquired.

"No," Little Cayuse answered. "I hear he has been living all lonesome over the

mountains, keeping an eye on Sitting Bull's armies."

"Sitting Bull is still on the war-path," nodded Softfoot. "He is powerful. He is cunning. The white soldiers will not soon trap him."

"Not in the way they are trying," said Little Cayuse. "They are blind. They are deaf. Sitting Bull is wide awake. He has his scouts everywhere—even in the frontier towns. He knows everything that is going on. One of the best of his scouts is your enemy, Weasel Moccasin. But there are many others that are as sly and cunning as the serpent."

"Weasel Moccasin is a clever tracker," Softfoot acknowledged. "But he is not an honest Indian. Like the serpent, he has a forked tongue. There are black places in his heart. Why do not the paleface people get good Indian scouts to go among their enemies and find out the truth?"

"It is because they make the mistake of believing that the Indians are weak," Little Cayuse explained. "Listen! There was another big battle since the one you saw at Peno Creek. It was against Crazy Horse's village on the Powder River, not many moons ago. General Crook, in command of the whites, gained an easy victory. But it was only over a separated handful of Sioux. It was not Sitting Bull's main army. General Crook made out that his expedition proved that the strength of Sitting Bull was greatly exaggerated: that instead of there being some twenty thousand Indians in the Black Hills and Big Horn country, the total number could not be more than two thousand. You grasp that?"

"You mean," said Softfoot, "that these white chiefs still think that Blue Eye and you and I and their other scouts have all got eyes that cannot see, and tongues that cannot tell the truth?"

"Yes, and now they are asking for scouts. Are you willing to be one of them, Softfoot?"

"Tell me what to do," said Softfoot.

Little Cayuse gave him particulars concerning an expedition which was then being organized under three important American generals with the purpose of finally quelling the Indians. He advised Softfoot to report himself to General Crook at Fort Reno. He was describing the position of the fort, on the Yellowstone River, when a disturbance from outside interrupted him.

Young Abraham Dexter's voice was heard, and there were light, hurried footsteps along the floor of the veranda.

Little Cayuse stood up and looked out by the window. He saw the corner of a brown blanket disappear over the rail.

"What's the matter, Abraham?" he inquired.

"I was chasin' away the young redskin I told you about," the boy explained, striding towards the window. "He was settin' right here on this bench, with his ear glued against that crack in the timber, an' listenin'—listenin' ter whatever you was sayin'. I guess he understood every word. I know you wasn't talkin' English."

Little Cayuse snatched up his hat and ran out, Softfoot at his heels.

"He's slipped away back of the stables, Kiddie," cried Abraham. "Come along if you want to catch him!"

He led them round among the outhouses, searching. They saw nothing of the fugitive. Softfoot examined the moist ground. He discovered the faint marks of moccasins and was following them towards some low-growing bushes when his sharp hearing caught the sound of beating hoofs some distance away.

"Look!" he cried, as Little Cayuse joined him. He pointed to a white pony galloping off across the open ground. "Where is your gun? Quick!"

Both of them carried revolvers, but the escaping rider was already beyond range, and their horses were not saddled.

"It is Weasel Moccasin!" declared Softfoot. "He is riding Snow-white."

"And he has overheard all that we were saying!" added Kiddie. "Did I not tell you that Sitting Bull's scouts are everywhere?"

"It is bad medicine," Softfoot regretted. "It would have been better if I had never come to see you."

Some hours later, Kiddie was riding with the express mails across Laramie Plain. Softfoot was accompanying him for a few miles.

They had gone beyond a bluff of poplars and Kiddie was leaning over to pat his pony's neck with his open hand, when something like the hum of an insect passed his ear. Immediately there came the sharp crack of a rifle. He pulled round and looked back to the bluff. Softfoot also drew rein.

There was a puff of powder-smoke and a second bullet kicked up a spurt of dust from the trail between the two ponies. Then for an instant Softfoot caught sight of something white moving quickly among the poplars. Kiddie gripped his loaded Winchester.

But already Weasel Moccasin had disappeared beyond the bluff.

"I think it was at you that he aimed," said Kiddie.

"My medicine tells me that he aimed at us both in turn," said Softfoot.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ON THE WAR-PATH

ONE of the most serious drawbacks in Softfoot's life, as a professional scout in the service of the American Army, was the fact that he could not easily understand the white man's language. He was very quick at picking up the meaning of spoken words, but when holding conversation, he always looked for the help of the sign language, at which he was, himself, so extraordinarily clever.

With any Indian he found it perfectly easy to convey ideas without the use of words; and Blue Eye and Little Cayuse could both hold long talks with him, never uttering a sound. But very few American soldiers could follow an unspoken thought by the expression of an eye or the movement of a hand, and it was not to be expected that military officers should learn the difficult Pawnee tongue.

"General, there's a young redskin waitin' around ter see you, reported one of the sergeants at Fort Reno. I can't make out where he comes from, sir, nor what he wants. He jest keeps on repeatin' your name. Will you see him, sir?"

General Crook shook his head.

"Sergeant, I've seen quite enough of the Indians," he objected. "The more I see of them the more I like the clean-smellin' white men. Give him a screw of tobacco and tell him to quit. And look here, Unwin, I shall want you to ride with this dispatch to General Terry at Fort Abraham Lincoln."

Sergeant Unwin did not seem pleased.

"General, I've never been to Fort Abraham Lincoln," he demurred. "I sure couldn't find the way. It's a hundred miles from here, right across the Dakota frontier."

"That's the place," said the general, "and a hundred miles is the distance. Study well the map hanging up in the guard-room. There's no other responsible person I can send."

Sergeant Unwin saluted and went out. He found Softfoot standing in front of the map tracing the mountain trails, trying to discover if he could have found a better trail to Fort Reno than the one by which he had come.

"You c'n go out an' admire the scenery from the veranda," said Sergeant Unwin, "and here's ammunition for your pipe."

Softfoot glanced at the proffered pinch of tobacco and shook his head.

"I will talk to General Crook," he said.

After a long interval, the general appeared. Softfoot knew him by the portrait which Little Cayuse had shown him at Fort Laramie. He held up his right hand, palm

outward.

"How!" he said in Indian greeting. Then from his buckskin satchel he drew forth a clean, sealed letter which he presented.

"Real elegant handwriting," nodded the commandant, examining the address.

"Little Cayuse made it," said Softfoot, as he watched the officer tear open the envelope and take out the neatly written letter.

What General Crook read was this:

"To General Crook, at Fort Reno, Powder River, Wyoming.

"DEAR SIR,—The bearer is a young Pawnee scout, by name Softfoot of Silver Creek, Great Bear Agency. He is an unusually capable tracker, recommended by Mr. Isa Blagg, Sheriff of Sweetwater; Buckskin Jack, the well-known frontier rider; and also by the Pawnee chiefs, Great Bear and Three Stars. He was engaged as an Army scout in the Big Horn country at the time of the affair at Long Trail Ridge. It was he who informed Colonel Carrington of the advance of Sitting Bull's hostile army, and his information was afterwards proved to be correct in every detail.

"It is probable that you might find Softfoot's scouting abilities of valuable service in the present military situation.

"Faithfully yours,

"KIDDIE OF BIRKENSHAW'S

(Pony Express Rider, Sweetwater Sec.)."

General Crook looked critically at Softfoot standing at attention, very plainly dressed in simple buckskins which would not distinguish him from any other Indian brave. He wore his hair roughly braided and without feathers, and his moccasins were of coarsely tanned elk skin. Even his revolver was carefully hidden from sight in a square holster on his hip.

"No," the general decided, shaking his head as he folded up the letter. "We want experienced men in the service, not boys. Besides, we have scouts of our own, without engaging redskins who can't talk plain English."

He turned on his heel, but stopped at the door of his private room, and looked back.

"Could you break a trail to Fort Abraham Lincoln?" he asked.

Softfoot glanced at the map and promptly put his finger on the spot.

"I can find it," he answered with confidence.

"Good!" ruminated the commandant. "I've a mind to try you."

He ordered Sergeant Unwin to inspect the scout's outfit for the hundred-mile journey across the mountain wilds, and the sergeant, well satisfied in having escaped an unpleasant duty, gave careful attention to Softfoot's comfort.

"You've gotta good cayuse," he said in commendation of Softfoot's pony. "What name? I'd call her Freckles."

"Freckles?" repeated Softfoot, preparing to mount. "You mean Many Spots? It is the same thing. I will name her Freckles."

The dispatch for General Terry was handed to him and he started off, taking his direction north-eastward by the sun.

He had not been told that the dispatch was urgent, and he rode at an easy pace, meeting with no adventure, seeing not one human habitation until on the second morning he came among the Black Hills and noticed in the far distance a few Indian lodges.

Soon after he had crossed the Little Missouri river he came upon the trail of a big village. He could not calculate the number of war-horses that had passed; but he was sure that the Indians were Sioux, trailing in the direction of the Yellowstone River.

Fort Abraham Lincoln was difficult to find and he spent many weary hours in searching for it. The tracks of American horses at length gave him a clue, and, following them, he arrived at his destination and delivered his dispatch to General Terry.

For two days he lived, almost unnoticed, in the fort. But there were other Pawnee scouts attached to the command—Pawnee-wolves, not from his own village. From them and his own observation, he gathered that the garrison consisted of twelve companies of the 7th cavalry and three companies of the 6th and 17th infantry, with four Gatling guns. The whole force comprised thirty-eight officers and nine hundred and sixty men.

General Terry, he understood, was here for the purpose of joining with two other divisions stationed in readiness at other frontier forts, commanded respectively by General Crook and General Gibbon. Their plan of campaign was that they should move simultaneously from north, east, and south and form a junction near the head-waters of the Yellowstone River in north-west Wyoming.

It was believed that these three forces combined would be strong enough to put an end to the rising of the redskins. But even collectively they did not exceed two thousand seven hundred men; whereas, opposed to them was the great chief Sitting Bull with fully seventeen thousand Indians, all of whom were provided with the latest and most improved pattern of repeating rifle.

Sitting Bull, with his splendid system of scouting, concealed himself from each one of these three divisions, moving with baffling speed and secrecy from place to place. But the whites knew nothing of his strategy and almost as little of their own.

For some unrecorded reason, when it was of vital importance that they should join hands and act in concert, they did not start at the same time; their means of inter-communication was defective, the relative positions of the divisions were not known, and the intended junction of the forces on the Yellowstone River never took place. Sitting Bull, on the other hand, knew exactly what was going on in all directions and he could make his plans and movements accordingly.

Softfoot found himself placed under the orders of General George Custer, who was General Terry's second in command. He was not enlisted as a combatant or expected to wear uniform; but he was provided with a service rifle and revolvers; he kept his own pony Freckles, and he enjoyed many privileges without the necessity of engaging in military routine.

On the third day after his arrival the command started on the march. General Terry's column, advancing from Fort Abraham Lincoln, crossed the Little Missouri, the Powder, and the Tongue Rivers in succession, scouting the country south and west, feeling for the elusive enemy everywhere, without finding a trace of him.

Softfoot and his fellow-scouts were sent out in all directions separately or in couples. But it was not until the command had crossed the Tongue River and had come into the wilds of the Big Horn Mountains that any signs of the Indians were discovered.

Here every valley bore traces of deserted camps and old-time hunting grounds, and a new excitement revealed itself at every turn. It was then that Softfoot began to work with confidence in his real skill as a scout. He used his imagination in figuring what Sitting Bull was likely to do in fixing upon a battle-ground. He knew that in their care for their horses the Sioux would never break a trail over a steep mountain, but would always give themselves ample room to move in safety through the valleys.

During the march between the Tongue River and the Rosebud, he rode into camp to report that he had discovered the main trail of Sitting Bull's army. He dismounted and made his way to his commanding officer's tent, and was astonished on approach to see his friend Blue Eye seated in earnest conversation with General Terry and General Custer.

Softfoot drew back, but Blue Eye saw him, gave the Indian sign of recognition and beckoned to him.

"You perhaps have news," said Blue Eye. "Speak!"

"It is that I have found the trail of the Sioux," Softfoot reported. "It is a very big

trail."

Blue Eye turned to the two generals.

"This confirms what I have just been telling you," he said. "Softfoot has struck the same trail."

Softfoot was closely questioned by General Custer, who could speak in the Pawnee tongue with the help of signs. But it seemed that he could not add to what Blue Eye had already reported, and he was dismissed.

Early on the following morning, when Softfoot was saddling Freckles, he was surprised at hearing his name called by a gay young voice which he recognized. He looked round and, as he expected, saw Little Cayuse coming towards him, accompanied by Blue Eye.

"I heard from Buck that you were with us," said Little Cayuse as they shook hands. "I am glad. We can go scouting together and see if we can follow up that trail which you found last night. Something will surely be done now that we are on the enemy's tracks."

"I am curious to know what you two scouts think of General Terry's new plan," said Blue Eye. "You both know something of frontier fighting. I am wondering if you have the same views as I have."

"Tell us what his new plans are, and we will give you our opinion," said Little Cayuse.

"Well," explained Blue Eye, "General Terry means to divide his forces. He intends to send General Custer with the 7th cavalry up the Rosebud while he himself takes the remainder up the Yellowstone River and the Big Horn. He is breaking his column in half—see?"

Little Cayuse looked up with sharp disapproval.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "Why, he might as well turn right back home and give up the whole campaign."

"My medicine tells me that he is not nearly strong enough, even now," added Softfoot. "The white warriors should keep close together, as the Indians are doing."

"Sure," agreed Blue Eye. "He is only weakening himself. But he has made up his mind that he can crush Sitting Bull as you might crush a mosquito. No argument will convince him that the enemy is more than his equal in number."

"It is because he has not seen the Indians with his own eye," said Softfoot. "But the Sioux do not want to be seen. They hide their heads. They are too cunning for him."

"That is true," nodded Blue Eye. "Barring the few scouts who are with us, I have not seen an Indian for weeks past. But I know there are thousands of them around

us right now—many thousands."

"What is more," said Little Cayuse, "Sitting Bull has more military skill than all the American generals bunched together."

Softfoot raised a cautioning finger to his lips. He had seen the two generals approaching. They were talking seriously. Blue Eye and Little Cayuse caught their words and understood.

"Custer, I do not know what to say for the last," said General Terry.

"Say what you want to say," urged General Custer.

"Well," returned his senior, "you are a capable soldier. I will only tell you to use your own judgment and do what you think best, if you strike the trail. But whatever you do, Custer, hold on to your wounded. Do not let any of them fall into the hands of the savages."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE DAWN OF BATTLE

IT happened that Blue Eye, Little Cayuse and Softfoot were all three attached to General Custer's division of the 7th cavalry. The command moved out of camp at once, upwards of six hundred strong, and their leader was fully confident that he would be able to deal with any body of Indians that they were likely to encounter. His only fear was that the redskins might make their escape without daring to risk an engagement. Therefore he moved cautiously, taking four days to cover a distance of a little over a hundred miles.

In the course of those four days the scouts were busy. The Indians had not been seen; but there were many signs which showed that they were close at hand and keeping in close company.

Early on the morning of the fifth day, Softfoot and Little Cayuse rode out together over the divide, between the valley of the Rosebud and the valley of the Little Big Horn. They were crossing a dip in one of the hills, when Softfoot drew rein and sniffed the cold air.

"I can smell wood-smoke," he announced mysteriously. "Can you?"

Little Cayuse sniffed also, but shook his head in doubt.

"I smell only the fresh sage grass," he said.

Softfoot dismounted and dropped his halter rope over Freckles' feet. He crept up the incline until he came to the ridge of the hill, where he lay down at full length on the grass, going forward inch by inch until he could see right down into the level valley beyond. He drew back very slowly and waved a beckoning hand to his companion.

Little Cayuse dismounted and, leaving the two ponies together, crept up to him. They both looked over, raising their heads behind a curtain of grass until they could see into the valley below. Through a faint mist of fire-smoke they saw the pyramid shapes of many Indian lodges arranged in regular ranks across the valley.

By going a few inches farther, they might have been able to estimate the size of the village. But they had seen enough. They had discovered the enemy, and, knowing the danger of being detected by Sitting Bull's sharp-eyed scouts, they withdrew as warily as they had advanced, remounted their ponies and rode cautiously back to communicate their news to General Custer.

Upon the strength of their information he decided to make an attack. He divided his command into three sections which were to advance by separate ways, one under Major Benteen on the extreme left, one in the centre under Major Reno, while

Custer himself held the right wing. As these battalions were moving forward into action, General Custer rode with his scouts well in advance, ascending the hill from which Softfoot had discovered the village.

"Go on in front," he told Softfoot. "Signal back to me if they are mounting their war horses."

Softfoot rode up the hill to the spot where he had been before. Once again he dismounted and crept to the brink, to look down into the valley. It was empty. There was not a warrior, or a horse, or a lodge to be seen. He stood up and signalled back to the general. Custer waved his hand in sign to him to go farther on. He obeyed, going on foot over the hill and climbing to a higher position on the next. Searching the wide valley, he discovered that the Sioux had moved their encampment some two miles away, down the left bank of the Little Big Horn River.

Most of them were mounted; others were erecting their teepees beside the stream. Softfoot knew that the enemy's change of position would necessarily mean a change in the order of attack, and he ran with all speed back to General Custer with the important information.

"You had better wait, sir, until Major Benteen can swing round to your support," suggested Blue Eye. "Softfoot could take a message."

General Custer hurriedly wrote on a page of his notebook the words, "Come on. Big village. Be quick. Bring packs," and tearing out the written leaf he folded it small and handed it to Softfoot.

"Take this," he said, "and ride as quickly as your pony will carry you to Major Benteen, and come back to me to tell me that he has received it."

The order was too clear to be mistaken. It meant that Custer had discovered the village, which he intended at once to attack, and that Benteen was to hurry forward to his support, bringing up the pack train with the ammunition and ambulances.

Softfoot knew the direction which Major Benteen's battalion was taking. He also understood the new position which it was expected to take on the general's right flank. He hoped that General Custer would delay the attack until he was sure of the necessary support: but in any case the message was exceedingly urgent, and he raced Freckles over the rough ground at breakneck speed. Fortunately the pony was sure-footed and accustomed to the mountains.

It was not very long before the column of cavalry came in sight, marching according to the original plan through the vale in order to form the left wing of the attacking army. Softfoot dashed down the slope and rode up to Major Benteen, delivering the note into his hands. There was no answering message.

In the meantime, General Custer's battalion had formed in eager readiness to

charge down the mountain-side like an avalanche upon the Indian village encamped at the near side of the creek on a wide stretch of open ground.

"Take your time, sir," advised Buckskin Jack.

He was serving merely in the capacity of chief of scouts, and he had no military standing in the campaign; but he was an experienced soldier, he had been a distinguished officer in the British Army, and he was also a frontiersman with intimate knowledge of Indian warfare. He saw very clearly the error which General Custer was about to commit.

"You cannot do it, sir," he warned. "It is impossible. You have no more than three hundred men with you, and there are thousands of Sioux down there—thousands! I implore you to consider the awful risk."

"I have already considered it," returned the general.

"But at least you will wait until you are certain of Major Benteen's support," pursued Buck.

General Custer looked at him severely.

"You are at liberty to fall back if you are afraid to go forward with me," he retorted. And he gave the fatal command to charge.

Buckskin Jack rode close behind him as the troop galloped in compact order down the incline and out upon the plain. But already it was too late. In front of them a vast crowd of Indians leapt into view and opened fire. Custer called a halt, and his followers formed a hollow square about him, to meet the rush and fury of the yelling savages.

Five thousand redskins had swarmed out from their ambush on every side. Down from the hills, up through the valleys, from every hidden gulch and ravine the awful torrent of Indian cruelty poured forth in a flood that could not be stemmed, and above the clamour of rifle-fire sounded the fiendish war-cry of the Sioux.

Softfoot heard the firing, even as he rode away after handing the note to Major Benteen. The cavalrymen and ammunition wagons would have to go round by the foot of the hill; but he could return by the way he had come, and he galloped up the slope, eager to follow his instructions and hasten to inform General Custer that his message had been delivered.

From the ridge of the first hill he glanced back and saw that Benteen had not yet turned. Why was he delaying? There were Indians everywhere, it was true. Perhaps he was fearful lest he should endanger his position. But he was not yet obeying his orders.

Softfoot rode on. As he raced along the hill-top he could see, from below him, Custer's open square, with crowds of mounted Indians surrounding it. He realized

that even if Benteen and Reno should fly instantly to the relief they would be powerless.

When he came to the place from which he had first discovered the enemy camp, he saw that Major Reno's battalion had begun skirmishing with a separate band of Crees who were barring his way to the main battle.

He saw also that his own passage to the fighting line was menaced by enemy scouts who, if they saw his pony's saddle, would know that he was not one of themselves. He drew rein and was about to dismount and get rid of the saddle when Freckles plunged forward on her knees and rolled over with an arrow in her heart.

The mounted brave who had shot at him, from across a ravine, was riding away. Softfoot was not hurt and he ran on desperately, throwing aside his blanket and rifle as he ran, thinking only of his immediate duty, although knowing that without a pony he could not hope to reach General Custer's side.

Suddenly, as he came upon a smooth expanse of grass, he swerved. He saw in front of him yet another scout, standing beside a white pony, gazing down into the valley, watching the battle. Softfoot knew him instantly, even as he knew the pony. Silently, swiftly, he ran up to him.

Weasel Moccasin turned and looked into the shining muzzle of Softfoot's revolver.

"This is my pony," said Softfoot, "I am going to have her."

With a quick step backward, Weasel Moccasin gripped his knife. Softfoot lowered his weapon hand, but his left fist shot out to the point of the other's chin, and in an instant Weasel Moccasin lay flat on his back and the pony was dashing off with Softfoot firmly astride.

"Go! Snow-white, go!" crooned the voice that she had loved of old, and with his knees pressing her sides she galloped willingly down into the field of battle.

CHAPTER XXXV

"ALL THAT WAS LEFT OF THEM"

SOFTFOOT had been very wise in discarding his heavy rifle and blanket. There was nothing in his appearance now to betray him as a Pawnee. As he galloped down the hill, he passed within close arrow range of several of the hostile scouts; but they paid no heed to him, no doubt believing him to be one of themselves. Moreover, he was now riding astride an Indian pony, which they probably recognized as one that had been in their company for many days past, and they showed no suspicion as Snow-white dashed willingly forward across the battlefield.

As he drew nearer to the fighting line and mingled with the crowds of Sioux and Crees that were assailing General Custer's broken square, Softfoot became aware that he was not alone in his bold endeavour to reach the centre of the awful conflict.

He saw Little Cayuse riding in advance of him, closely pursued by two Cree warriors who were shooting at him with their arrows. Softfoot could only believe that Little Cayuse had, like himself, been dispatched to summon reinforcements, and that, like himself, he was hurrying back to assure General Custer that the much-needed help was at hand.

Yet there was no sign that this message of hope was true. For an instant Softfoot looked back over his shoulder, but could see nothing of Major Benteen's battalion and the urgently needed ammunition wagons and ambulances. Already there were many gaps in the square that had been formed round General Custer. The plain was thickly strewn with the bodies of lifeless horses and dead or wounded Indians; but the battling redskins seemed to be increasing in number while the gallant band of whites grew smaller.

Even if relief should come at once the position was hopeless. But Softfoot knew that he would not have fulfilled his duty until he had reported that he had delivered the note into Major Benteen's hand.

Drawing his revolver, he urged his pony to greater effort, and she raced on at full gallop, quickly overhauling the two Crees until he was close behind them. Then, as if he were joining in the chase after Little Cayuse, he gave a wild Indian yell, took aim, and fired forward across Snow-white's outstretched neck.

One of the warriors swayed back over his pony's haunch, lost the grip of his knees and tumbled to the ground, to be dragged along by his trail-rope. The second Cree had let fly an arrow when he, too, flung up his arms and fell.

Little Cayuse rode on. But the Cree's arrow had buried its point deep in his pony's flank and her onward racing speed was checked. Softfoot now galloped a

few paces in advance.

"Follow me, Little Cayuse!" he shouted. And, believing that Kiddie was still at his heels, he raced onward.

Kiddie's pony, however, had stumbled, and when Softfoot tried to break his way through the dense, yelling throng of redskins, he was swept violently aside and the gap that he had seen was closed. He turned to look for Little Cayuse, but could not find him.

Just as it had been in the buffalo hunt when he was in the midst of the great stampeding bulls, so now he was carried along in the stress of the close ranks of the mounted Sioux with their guns and clubs and battle-axes. He could not turn either way, but was forced to move with the tightly crushing throng, seeking in vain for a way of escape.

He saw many chiefs with their feathered war-bonnets and painted faces, and once he caught sight of the great Sitting Bull himself, calmly directing the attack. The warriors were careering round and round the outer margin of the compact band of white soldiers, firing inward at them with bullet and arrow, and trying to get near enough to use the spear and tomahawk.

Softfoot could see very little through the powder-smoke, except the splitting streaks of fire and the arrow shafts flying over the barrier of lifeless horses. Most of the cavalrymen seemed now to be on foot, pressed into close group about their leader, breasting the battle shock and bravely facing the blazing muzzles of hundreds of deadly rifles. But above the crackle of the firing there sounded always the fiendish war-cry of the exultant Sioux and the shrill yelling of the Crees.

For a moment, when the cloud of powder-smoke lifted, he saw the tall figure of General Custer in the midst of his men, waving his sabre and seeming to be cheering them with heartening words, while he peered anxiously through the mist, towards the distant hills, for any signs of Reno and Benteen.

Near him stood Blue Eye, very calm and grim, loading and emptying his heated gun with determined regularity.

"Blue Eye! Blue Eye!" cried Softfoot. "Hide yourself or you will be killed!"

He pulled his pony round, thinking that he might force her to rush in to the general's side. He did not consider the danger to himself. For an instant he hesitated, searching for a possible gap in the writhing, swaying crowd.

His hand went up to his necklace. He asked his medicine to help him to deliver his message before he should be killed. In that brief instant, looking towards the centre, he was astonished at seeing Little Cayuse, now on foot, worming his way in, vaulting lightly over a dead charger and then staggering to General Custer's side.

"They're coming, boys!" cried Blue Eye, during a sudden lull in the battle, while the general bent down to listen to Kiddie's message.

The desperate defence was continued now with a new vigour. The white men had exhausted all their rifle cartridges and had abandoned their carbines for revolvers and side-arms. There was a sharp crackle of revolver shots. The Indians shrank back in confused panic from the rain of bullets, leaving many of their number behind. Softfoot saw his opportunity in a wide gap and he rode boldly through, urging his pony to leap over the gruesome barriers.

Kiddie quickly recognized him and waved to him to go back out of danger; but instead Softfoot slipped lightly to the ground and led Snow-white forward a few strides and told her to lie down, as he had trained her to do. She obeyed him, and he left her lying as if she were dead, while he scrambled yet nearer to the now ominously small group of white men.

"I have delivered your message," he reported to General Custer.

"They are too late," deplored the General, glancing about him anxiously.

The Indians had rallied and were making a final charge, yelling and whooping. Kiddie and Softfoot went round among the dead, collecting revolver cartridges from their belts and serving them to the men who most needed them to meet the onrush of the redskins.

Sitting Bull was leading his warriors. Their guns had been used at long range, but now each warrior gripped his battle-axe or spear and not many shots were fired. It was to be close, hand-to-hand fighting for the end, and then the scalping knives would begin their deadly work.

Softfoot had crawled up with a handful of cartridges and was in the act of offering them to Blue Eye, who stood back to back with General Custer, when Blue Eye swayed forward, dropping his empty weapon.

"Give them to someone else," said Blue Eye, sinking to his knees.

Softfoot glanced round and saw that there was no one else to give them to. General Custer alone was on his feet, striking out with his sword. His mighty blows felled three warriors and his blade broke on the musket of a fourth. Then, with useless sabre and empty pistol, he dropped back, the victim of a dozen wounds.

"Quick!" cried Softfoot, seizing Little Cayuse by the arm, and dragging him along. "Blue Eye is hurt. We must get him away. Help me to lift him and carry him to Snow-white. She is waiting, ready."

Kiddie leapt to Buck's side and raised his head to his knee, while Softfoot brought the white pony. Together, with great difficulty, they lifted Buck and got him astride the pony.

"Jump up and ride away with him!" commanded Softfoot. "Go! Quick, quick, quick!"

He helped Little Cayuse to mount and saw him ride against the stream of Indians who were now bent upon their grim work of mutilation and looting.

The battle-cries had ceased, there was no more gun-firing. Some of the white men were still alive, calling for water; but every water-bottle was empty. There was nothing that Softfoot could do to help the wounded, and the battle-ground was now swarming with Indians, busy with their scalping knives.

Looking like any other young Indian brave, he could move about without great risk, and foot by foot he crept stealthily out of the crowd.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BLUE EYE'S SANCTUARY

A GLANCING bullet had scored a deep groove across Softfoot's left cheek and an arrow point had pierced his side; but these slight wounds did not interfere with his movements, and he succeeded in getting free from the Indians without being molested.

His first impulse was to try to find Little Cayuse; but he realized that it was important that the terrible fate of General Custer and his command should be reported as soon as possible to Major Benteen or Major Reno, if by chance he could discover either of these officers. Very well did he know that, apart from Little Cayuse, there was no other survivor who could tell the story of the massacre.

He therefore made his way to the hill-top to see if he could find any signs of the two missing battalions and perhaps learn why they had not hastened to the relief of their superior in command.

Looking down into the valley where a little time before he had seen Major Reno's detachment skirmishing with a band of the Crees, he made out that there had been a battle and that the whites had been driven back by overwhelming forces. In the farther valley he could see no sign of Major Benteen's battalion or of the pack wagons, and he could only surmise that he, too, had been forced to retreat.

It was evident that Sitting Bull had kept himself well informed of the dispositions of his enemy and that he had taken measures to foil General Custer's intentions by preventing the three separated detachments from forming a junction.

"It is bad medicine," reflected Softfoot. "If they had listened to Blue Eye, this need not have been. And now Blue Eye himself is hurt. I could not save him. I am weak. I have done nothing."

On his way over the hill he came upon the body of his pony Freckles. He found also his saddle, his gun and his blanket. He took the gun and the blanket with him; but he had no use for the saddle now that he was without a mount. He did not know what to do or where to go.

He still thought it possible that he might get on the track of Little Cayuse, and he went down to the level ground, avoiding the battle-ground upon which the Indians were engaged in stripping the dead and collecting harness, weapons and all else that was of value in their eyes. It seemed almost a mockery now that General Terry should have instructed Custer to "hold on to his wounded."

When Little Cayuse rode away with Blue Eye, he had gone eastward in the direction of the Rosebud River and the nearest range of hills. Softfoot reasoned that

he would not go far before halting to attend to Blue Eye's wounds. He would seek for some sheltered place where there was water. He would not be riding very quickly, because the pony had a double burden. But concealment would be more important in the emergency than either speed or distance.

Before he reached the level ground, Softfoot had determined in his mind how to proceed in his almost hopeless search. He had lost valuable time in trying to find Major Benteen's missing command with the ambulance wagons, and he supposed that Little Cayuse could hardly have gone off in the hope of finding one of the surgeons. He would be much more likely to apply his own skill in giving first aid to Blue Eye.

Softfoot wandered about for a long time searching for some sign; but there were horse tracks everywhere, and he was beginning to despair, when he came upon a tiny stream trickling between sandy banks beside a bluff of birch and spruce trees. He saw the fresh footmarks of a fox, in the moist sand, and he followed them backward, wondering what might have disturbed the fox, to send it prowling in the daytime. Then, where the stream took a turn into the timber, he discovered the clear impressions of an Indian pony's hoofs.

He examined them carefully. There was something about their shape, size and relative positions which suggested to him that they were the footprints of Snow-white. He became more sure of this when he followed them and found that the near forefoot was planted down with a peculiar little twist that blurred the even edge of its impression.

The sandy ground gave place to gravel and grass, but he had seen that the hoofprints had led into a narrow wooded chasm of the rocky hillside. It was just such a place as he himself would have chosen as a refuge. He went farther in, up the stony slope, taking always a passage where the overhanging trees would admit a horse and its rider. At one place he came upon a white, flat stone with a spot of crimson moisture on its clean surface. He stooped and turned the stone over.

"Poor Blue Eye!" he murmured.

Yet farther on, he came to where the herbage was crushed and torn and thickly stained with blood, as if a wounded man had been lying there, and the grass was splashed with water.

He stood up and looked about him searchingly, listening. From in amongst the trees and bushes there came to him the slight sound of a horse's snort and the stamp of a hoof on hard ground. He crept in its direction and presently discovered the white shape of his own pony. She was well hidden and tethered by her trail-rope to a stout tree.

"Snow-white!" he said to her, stroking her warm neck. "Where is Little Cayuse? Why has he left you here alone?"

He turned and gave the scout call. But he received no answer.

Standing very still, beside the pony, he reasoned out the situation. Little Cayuse intended to come back, or he would not have left Snow-white. But where had he gone to? He could not have walked away with Blue Eye, who was seriously wounded. They could not have found two other ponies to carry them. And why should they ride away, leaving Snow-white, even if they had found other mounts?

"It is, perhaps, that they left her here so that I might find her and follow on their tracks," he reflected. This seemed the only possible solution to the problem, and accepting it for the moment, he went about the ravine, searching for some sign or message that might have been left for him. He examined the ground and bushes near to the pony, and very soon he began to realize that neither Blue Eye nor Little Cayuse had gone away on horseback.

Behind the tree against which Snow-white was tethered, he saw that something heavy had been dragged along the grass, leaving an ominous red track. He saw a corner of cloth and a mound of balsam boughs and ferns, and on the top lay a long straight stick, crossed near the end with a shorter stick and surrounded with prairie flowers.

Softfoot knew that the cross was the white man's most sacred medicine sign. He knelt beside it, bowing his head, not daring to touch. But his knee, pressing upon one of the balsam boughs, made it sway over, and beneath it he saw a man's white hand.

"Poor Blue Eye!" he repeated, touching the cold hand. "You have gone on the long, long trail across the sandhills. You have gone to the happy hunting grounds, and I shall know you no more. My heart is heavy, my big brother. My eyes are wet."

For a long time he knelt in solemn silence. Then he rose to his feet and spoke to his pony, telling her to wait. He went out from the ravine and along the stream and gathered an armful of flowers—blue and white and red—and brought them in and laid them reverently at Blue Eye's feet.

Leaving his rifle and blanket beside the pony, he strode a few paces towards the mouth of the ravine and seated himself on a grassy bank by the root of a stout tree to wait for the return of Little Cayuse. He was hungry, weary in body and spirit, and his wounds were still bleeding. But he did not concern himself with his bodily discomforts. He was content to wait in patience for days if necessary, until Little Cayuse should come back. It was possible that he had fallen into the clutches of the enemy, or that he had been killed. But if he were alive he would surely return.

Softfoot listened. From the far distance he could hear the shouting and laughter

of the Sioux and their allies. It seemed as if they had loaded up their pack-horses and were marching. Suddenly in the midst of these distant noises he heard a nearer sound. At first it was like the steady padding of moccasined feet; then there came a long silence. But presently he again heard footsteps, coming nearer and nearer, very slowly entering the ravine and approaching with curious caution; not with the confident stride of one who had been here before.

Softfoot did not move. He thought he would not alarm Little Cayuse, but let him pass. He would see the gun and blanket, as well as the flowers, and would know who had come into his place of refuge. But some instinct gave warning that it might not, after all, be Little Cayuse. There were many Indians prowling about. One of them might have discovered footprints or other signs that there was a fugitive hiding in this ravine.

Even from his concealed seat under the tree, Softfoot saw that he had dropped one of the flowers he had been carrying—a blue flower that now lay conspicuous on the gravel. A moving shadow crossed it. A bent figure went quickly past and disappeared among the bushes. Snow-white was pawing the ground, betraying her presence. The intruder was making his way towards her.

Leaping from his seat, Softfoot ran after him, certain now that it was not Little Cayuse.

They reached the pony at the same moment. Weasel Moccasin seized the bridle-rope. So also did Softfoot.

"Untie it!" Softfoot commanded. He was afraid that if they should struggle for possession of the pony and remain here many moments, Weasel Moccasin might discover the flowers and know what was beneath them. The whole place was sacred to him now, and he could not bear that there should be anything like sacrilege.

"Quick!" he said, prodding Weasel Moccasin with the muzzle of his revolver.

When the rope was untied, he gathered the coils and led the pony away, down to the level ground. Then he dropped the rope at Snow-white's feet. Weasel Moccasin snatched at it. But this time the cold ring of the revolver barrel was pressed firmly against his ribs.

"Stand back!" ordered Softfoot, pointing to a patch of sand. "Stand just there!"

"But I want my pony," objected Weasel Moccasin. "You stole her from me, and I mean to have her back. I have tracked you to here. Give me my pony."

Softfoot signed to him again and looked him all over as he took his stand on the sandy ground. He saw that he was not wounded, that he had no weapon but his knife, and that from his belt were suspended two scalps, one of them having fair hair.

"Once again you are in my power, Weasel Moccasin," he said. "For all your black treachery you deserve that I should shoot you dead. But I will not use my gun. We will fight for the pony. We will fight fairly and with the same weapons."

He drew his knife, dropped his revolver behind the pony's forefeet, and stood back. Weasel Moccasin had already drawn his knife from its sheath.

The two stood about four paces apart, facing each other. They leaned forward, each with his weapon gripped in the right hand. For some tense moments they circled round and round, breathing deeply. Each knew the other's swiftness of cunning thrust and dexterous parry. Many a time they had fought and wrestled together in boyish play; but never in grim earnest, never with deadly weapons. Each watched the other's eye and sought for an opening, for a forward spring and a quick, fatal thrust.

As they circled, they drew inch by inch nearer together, until Weasel Moccasin leapt forward and with a light turn of the wrist brought his point dangerously near to Softfoot's right eye. But Softfoot was ready with his strong guard arm and flung the blow aside. They drew apart again, bending forward with their right arms extended. Their blades crossed, clinking, trembling, scraping together as they fenced and feinted, lunged and parried. Neither seemed to gain the advantage.

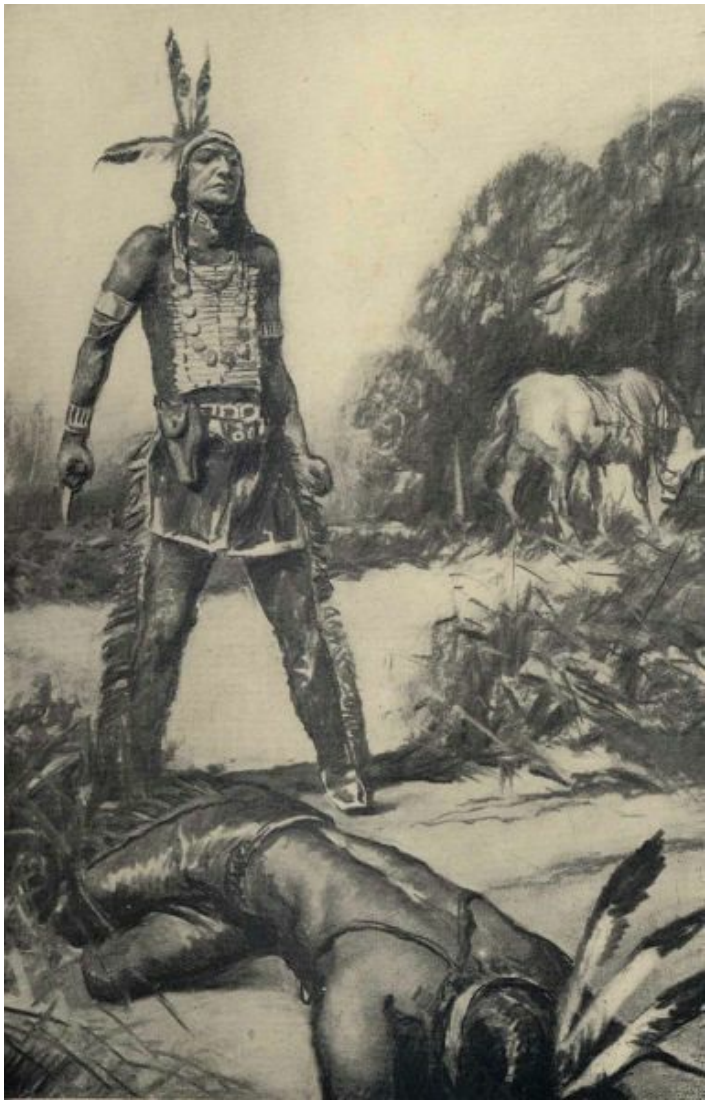
Softfoot was cool and silent. Weasel Moccasin growled and snarled like an angry wolf. He darted forward, under Softfoot's outstretched arm, but a swift upward cut from Softfoot's left fist hurled him aside as lightly as a wind-blown feather. He staggered under the unexpected blow and fell to his knees, but was on his feet again quickly. And now he became desperate. He gripped his knife like a dagger, swerved and hopped from side to side and leapt back and forth with one hand ready to seize Softfoot by the throat, the other lifted to give him a fatal downward stab in the chest.

His inward leap was as swift as lightning. But the parry of Softfoot was even quicker. His left hand clutched Weasel Moccasin by the right wrist and the downward stab was stopped in mid-air, while the long-nailed fingers that would have seized his throat were drawn back bleeding from a swift cut across the knuckles.

They had closed. Softfoot's strong right arm was flung in a crushing wrestler's grip round the other's body and left arm. His left hand held Weasel Moccasin's other wrist in a vice of iron. Neither of them could use his knife. Weasel Moccasin struggled, writhed, and ground his teeth, but his weapon hand was forced back and down and round. He was as helpless as a child in the strong arms of a man, and all the time the clutch round his body was tightening and the grip on his wrist hardening. His numb right arm was beginning slowly to give way. But he still held his knife.

Suddenly Softfoot loosened his own right arm and raised his knife as if to strike. But while the blade was poised he released his other hand. Weasel Moccasin, now free, reeled unsteadily to avoid the expected stab, swayed backward, falling on his own knife, and its long, sharp-pointed blade was buried to the haft between his ribs.

Softfoot picked up his revolver and led Snow-white back to the tree.



"Weasel Moccasin, now free, reeled unsteadily . . . falling on his own knife."

CHAPTER XXXVII

SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF

THE nesting birds were singing their evensong, the golden glow was fading from the western sky, a purple gloom was creeping over the mountains, and Softfoot had kindled a small fire of sweet-scented cedar twigs when Little Cayuse returned at last into the ravine.

He had been out over the hills, searching for signs of the missing battalions of Reno and Benteen; anxious to give a report of General Custer's last stand and the massacre of his three hundred stalwart men. But he had found only their trail, which had shown him that instead of rushing to the support of the main battle, the two detachments had made a hasty retreat before the overwhelming forces of the savage enemy, taking with them the greatly needed ammunition and ambulance wagons.

On turning to enter the ravine, Little Cayuse had noticed the disturbed sand where Softfoot and Weasel Moccasin had engaged in their desperate duel. The upturned ground had not been smoothed. It still bore the marks of the combatants' feet and of the waiting pony's hoofs, and there was an ominous dark patch of moisture where Weasel Moccasin had lain before Softfoot had dragged the inert body away to bury it among the rocks.

Little Cayuse did not pause to ask himself what had happened. The pungent odour of burning wood drew him into the ravine. He was alarmed and distressed at the thought that some stranger had intruded into the sacred place and perhaps discovered and abused what was hidden under the pall of balsam boughs and prairie flowers. He strode onward very quickly, making no sound on the stony ground. Then he halted abruptly at the sight of a blanketed figure bending over the fire.

In spite of the caution with which Little Cayuse had approached, Softfoot had heard him and recognized his steps. He stood up, raising his open hand.

"How!" he said in greeting.

"How!" said Little Cayuse, and each grasped the other's left hand. But neither spoke any further. Little Cayuse went alone beyond the fire and past the pony. He remained for a long time out of Softfoot's sight hidden among the dark trees.

When again he appeared he was standing in front of Snow-white with his hands clasped over her mane, his brow resting against her forehead, his tears trickling down her nose. Softfoot crept up to him and laid his arm across his heaving shoulders. Kiddie caught hold of his hand and gripped it tightly.

"Thank you for bringing in those flowers, Softfoot," he faltered. "It was real nice of you."

"Blue Eye was very fond of flowers," Softfoot sighed. "To me he was as a brother. We had the same thoughts. I would have given my life to save him. But I could do nothing—nothing."

"You did very much, Softfoot," returned Little Cayuse. "You offered your life—you risked an awful death—when you gave up your pony. If it had not been for you, he could not have been brought away. The Sioux would have taken his scalp and all that belonged to him. I should never have known what I know now."

They went back together to the fire, and sat there talking.

"He was alive, then, when you brought him in here?" questioned Softfoot.

"He died in my arms," returned Kiddie. "He spoke my name with his last breath. Before he died I learned many strange things about him, and about myself."

"He was the first white man who ever spoke to me," reflected Softfoot, after a pause. "He taught me that the white man is greater than the red."

"He was not of these lands," resumed Little Cayuse. "He was one of the white people who live far away in England, across the big sea. He was a great soldier. He fought in many battles in the country called India."

"Blue Eye was a wise warrior," said Softfoot. "If General Terry had listened to his counsel, many lives would have been saved in this war. He was a clever scout. He knew Sitting Bull's plans. His medicine was powerful. You are now wearing his medicine."

Kiddie was fingering the bronze medal which was hung by a chain of gold and coloured beads from his neck.

"Yes," he nodded. "It is the Victoria Cross. He gave it to me to wear for his sake. It was given to him by his great Queen, because of his bravery. His name is written upon it. He was known by many names here in the wild places. But his true name was not known. None of the men of the plains knew his history; and when his people sent their law-man out to the prairies to take him to his home in England, he could not be found."

"But why did they want him to leave the prairies where he was happy?" asked Softfoot.

"It is a long story," Kiddie answered, "and you would hardly understand. But Blue Eye was the son of a great medicine chief named the Earl of St. Olave, and when Lord St. Olave died, his son Blue Eye was wanted in England to take his father's name and be very rich, owning many horses, many lodges, and taking his seat as a law-maker in what is called the House of Peers. They wanted him to take an Englishwoman for his squaw. But Buckskin Jack—Captain Fritton—had been living a rough life on the prairie trails out here among the Rocky Mountains. He did

not think himself fit to be an English nobleman. He had married a Pawnee named Pine Leaf. They had a son."

Softfoot leaned over and stirred the fire. He looked up as Kiddie paused.

"Blue Eye was fit to be a king," he said. "He was brave; he was strong. He could make men obey him. Yet he was as gentle as a woman. His tongue was not crooked. I do not think he ever told a lie. But why could he not have taken Pine Leaf and their son with him to England?"

"Pine Leaf was killed by the Sioux," Kiddie explained. "And their child was stolen and lost. Blue Eye thought that he was dead."

"If Blue Eye's son is alive, we will find him," Softfoot determined. "We will find him and send him to his people in England to be a great medicine chief. But how shall we know him? We do not even know his name. And it may be that he is weak and not fit to be shown as Blue Eye's son. A well-bred foal is not always a good horse."

"His name," said Kiddie, "is Little Cayuse. We have no need to search for him."

Softfoot clapped his open hand over his mouth in astonishment.

"Then you—Little Cayuse—you yourself are the lost son of our Blue Eye!" he exclaimed. "And you and he did not know this until he was starting for the sandhills—dying in your arms! It is very strange. But it is very beautiful. It is a thing to be proud of to be the son of a brave and good man like Blue Eye."

"I should not have known that he was my father," said Kiddie, "if you had not lent me your pony to ride away with him. How can I thank you, Softfoot?"

"True friends," Softfoot assured him, "do not need to be thanked for acts of friendship. I knew what the Sioux would do to Blue Eye, and to you. That is why I made you take Snow-white. When you were safe, I did not fear the cruel scalping knives. My medicine kept me from harm. I crept away. I tracked you to this place. I saw what you had done. My heart was heavy because of Blue Eye and because you were no longer here with the pony."

"Yet you knew I would come back, or you would not have waited," said Kiddie.

"I waited for you," Softfoot nodded. "And while I waited Weasel Moccasin came instead. He, too, had tracked you. He was a clever scout. He wanted to have Snow-white. He tried to take her. He would have touched Blue Eye with his evil hands. It was hard for me not to use my gun. But I fought him. We fought with knives."

"You killed him?" questioned Kiddie.

"He was killed," Softfoot told him. "So Snow-white is still here. My medicine tells me that you must ride with her and find the white soldiers, to tell them what has

happened to General Custer. There is no one else alive who can tell them."

"Snow-white is a good pony," said Kiddie. "She will bear us both. I have found the trail of the pack wagons. When I have doctored your wounds—when we have had food and sleep—we will follow up the trail."

During his time of waiting, Softfoot had not neglected to set some snares, and when, a little later, he went the round of them, he found two young rabbits. These he cooked.

For two days afterwards the trail was followed by the companion scouts, and on the second evening they came into Major Benteen's camp and told their alarming story. Here Kiddie was provided with a mount, and, bidding farewell to Softfoot, he rode southward, to the familiar Salt Lake Trail and along to Birkenshaw's camp on the Sweetwater, while Softfoot remained with the soldiers, travelling in their company as far as Crooked Pass.

Major Reno's detachment was believed to be still in the Black Hills country, and therefore in considerable danger; for it was unlikely that the Indians would be satisfied with their victories over small forces. They would follow up their success and continue to make war on the whites wherever they could be found.

Major Reno, however, was too regardful of his own safety to imperil his position by remaining within easy reach of the hostile redskins. After a two days' retreat, he had made camp in a secluded valley not many miles distant from Silver Creek, and there he resolved to pause until summoned to rejoin General Custer. He knew nothing of General Custer's fate, and, as he had an ample store of provisions, he remained undiscovered and undisturbed for many days.

He did not calculate upon the circumstance that, in the recent fighting, Sitting Bull's armies had lost so many horses that their need for remounts had become a serious drawback to their movements. Hundreds of Indian war-ponies had been killed in the Custer fight alone, and as many more had been maimed and become useless on the war-path. None of the American cavalry horses had been captured. All had been killed.

It was therefore more than probable that there would be further raids on the frontier ranches and on the encampments of Indians such as Mishe-mokwa's Pawnees, who had refused to take up arms against the whites. Mishe-mokwa, indeed, had openly declared his enmity against Sitting Bull, and the Pawnees were thirsting to be at the throats of their hereditary foes.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

FORE-WARNED, FORE-ARMED

THERE had been signs of buffalo on the far reaches of the Silver Creek Reserve. Buffalo runners had been sent out. But although here and there among the foothills they had found a few straggling tracks, yet there was no indication of a herd large enough to induce the Pawnees to go forth on a hunt. Prairie Owl and Little Antelope thought that they might be more successful than the grown-up buffalo runners; and on a bright morning in the month of green-grass they made up a party of hopeful youths like themselves who were glad of any excuse to ride out in search of adventure across the sunlit prairies.

Wenonah, Owaissa, Mosquito Child, and Fleet Wing were of their number. They spent the whole joyous day away from the lodges. They made garlands of wondrously beautiful flowers and watched the young beavers and prairie dogs at play; but in the evening they returned without having discovered the hoof-marks of a single buffalo.

They were crossing the home prairie towards the woodland trail. Wenonah and the boys were watching the graceful flight of a pair of eagles over the blue mountains in the distance when Owaissa drew her pony nearer to Wenonah's side.

"Why do you look at the eagles when you should turn your eyes to the rider over there, near the forest?" she asked. "Look! It is surely Weasel Moccasin! He is coming back to make mischief in our lodges, riding on the same white pony that he took away when he went to live among the Crees."

Her companions all turned to gaze in the direction in which she pointed.

"Yes, it is Weasel Moccasin!" declared Mosquito Child. "I should know Snow-white anywhere, among many white ponies."

"It is Snow-white," agreed Fleet Wing, "and who else than Weasel Moccasin should be bringing her home?"

"Let us go and talk to him!" cried Prairie Owl.

"No," objected Little Antelope. "I for one will never talk to him again. He is our enemy. He is not our friend. Let us show him that we do not want him. Let us turn our backs on him."

Wenonah tightened her grip on her halter.

"You are all blind," she declared. "Where are your eyes? Do you not see who it is that is riding on Snow-white?"

She broke away, urging her pony to a gallop. As she rode forward she took out her revolver and fired six quick shots into the air as a salute.

Softfoot turned and galloped to meet her.

"Do not waste your bullets," he cried. "You do not need to make a noise to let me know you have seen me, and the eagles are too far off."

"But, Softfoot, I am so happy that you have come home," she laughed, taking his proffered hand. "You have been away so long. The Pawnees have missed you very much. Tell me where you have been. I think you have been among the enemy Crees, or you could not have found Snow-white and brought her back with you."

"I have been to the far end of the world, swinging my moccasins over its rim," he told her. "I have been beyond the Big Horn Mountains on the war-trail with the white men. It has been bad medicine. I have seen many of the white men killed in battle against the Sioux."

"Yet they cannot all have been killed," said Wenonah, "for to-day we have seen many paleface warriors in a big camp across the hills. They were perhaps your friends."

"I do not understand," returned Softfoot, mystified. "You say you have seen a camp of white soldiers? Where? I must go to them!"

"Oh, they will not fly away like the eagles," Wenonah assured him. "They have put up their white teepees in the valley where you killed the wolves when Koshinee ran away from me. They have many war-horses; but they are not on the war-path. We did not go among them. Owaissa was afraid that they might chase us. For how would they know that we were peaceful Pawnees? But we met one of their Pawnee scouts. Left Hand was his name."

Softfoot was greatly interested in this news. He could only suppose that the troops were of Major Reno's missing battalion.

"To-morrow I will go and talk with them," he resolved.

Prairie Owl and the other youths rode up to him, all anxious to know how he had recovered his stolen pony. And as they trailed homeward through the woodland path to the lodges, he told them of his duel with Weasel Moccasin and of the death of Blue Eye. But it was to Wenonah alone that he told the strange story of the relationship between Blue Eye and Little Cayuse.

"Softfoot, it makes me very happy to know that you were such a good friend to Blue Eye," she said. "You could not have done more than you did—you and Snow-white. I shall always be fond of our Snow-white because she helped you so well."

When he came to the village, Softfoot at once made his way to his home teepee. Morning Bird braided his hair and brought out his best jacket and leggings, with Wenonah's moccasins, for him to wear, before presenting himself in audience with Mishe-mokwa.

He found the chief in the medicine lodge of Three Stars. Long Hair and Three Stars were with him, and Moves-like-a-Swan and Wenonah were also in the lodge, serving the chiefs with food. Softfoot was invited into the circle round the council fire.

He reported to Great Bear all that he knew of the war and its disasters in the Black Hills. But the chief was more immediately concerned with another matter which Softfoot called upon him to discuss. It was on this same day, during his lone ride from Black Panther Forest to Silver Creek, that he had discovered the trail of a big war-party of Sioux and Crees. It was his opinion that these hostile Indians were advancing on Mishe-mokwa's village with the presumed object of stealing his horses and raiding his lodges.

"Sitting Bull has lost many horses in these battles," he explained. "He will want others to carry on his war against the paleface. My medicine tells me that he will come here for them."

"Three Stars was wise when he had our herds brought in from the ranges," reflected Great Bear. "But the danger is great. The Pawnees are the sworn enemies of Sitting Bull. To him we are as the paleface, who is our friend. He will not spare us. Our horses are safe in their corrals; but our women and children are not safe. Let them be well guarded. Let all our warriors and braves be warned of this coming danger. Softfoot is now a tried warrior. He will take command of our braves in defending the horses. Every one must be well armed and ready before the rising of the moon. I have spoken."

He rose to his feet and strode out of the lodge, followed by Three Stars and Long Hair. Softfoot was also going when Wenonah detained him.

"Tell me what I can do to help," she pleaded, lightly fingering his necklace. "I have my little gun. I can shoot."

"You cannot use your gun as if you were a man," he told her. "It is not for a girl to put herself in such danger. No. You will help best by looking after the women and children. If there is need, you can then use your gun."

"And you, Softfoot; where will you be when the enemy comes?" she asked him anxiously.

He did not answer her at once. But at length he said:

"Listen, Wenonah. You have told me of the white soldiers camped in Koshinee Gulch. I will take Snow-white and ride quickly and bring them here to our help."

Wenonah drew back from him.

"Then you will leave us all here to be killed by the cruel Sioux?" she protested. "If you stayed among the lodges you could save many lives. I do not want you to go

away, Softfoot. If you go, I shall be afraid. I am a coward."

"But the white men are so near," he urged. "I could bring them before the Sioux would have time to do any harm." He smiled grimly, and added: "But if you are afraid, I will let you wear my medicine, and nothing can hurt you."

Wenonah breathed deeply. He did not know what her thoughts were.

"I will wear your medicine," she faltered, "if you will promise that you will not leave the village where we need you. Mishe-mokwa expects you to command the young braves. You must obey him."

Softfoot slowly took off his necklace and looped it over her head. She stroked his hand.

"Now I feel very brave," she averred, "and I will go and tell Fleet Wing or Little Antelope to ride to Koshinee Gulch. Do not trouble. Think only of your duty."

They shook hands. Softfoot looked back at her, wondering why she, who was usually so courageous, should now be afraid.

Some two hours later, Little Antelope ran up to Softfoot in his ambuscade near the horse corral overlooking the moonlit prairie. He had been out scouting and had just returned.

"The Sioux are coming!" he reported. "I have seen them creeping up through the sage grass. I have told Long Hair."

Softfoot glanced round at him.

"Has Fleet Wing gone for help?" he questioned.

"Fleet Wing was not among the scouts," Little Antelope answered. "I saw him talking with Three Stars and Wenonah before I went out. Wenonah was holding Snow-white."

"Take your place between Red Crow and Prairie Owl," Softfoot ordered. "Be ready to open fire when I give the sign."

They waited, as silent as the bushes that sheltered them. The moon rose higher and higher and still there was no sign of the enemy. The slow minutes went by. It was as if the whole village was asleep. Once a dog barked. Once, as he listened, Softfoot heard a light cheeping sound as of a brood of prairie chickens wandering aimlessly through the grass.

After a long pause, the cheeping was repeated, this time a little nearer, and the "cheep-cheep!" extended in a line that seemed to surround the corral.

A knife-blade flashed in the moonlight. Many dark mysterious shapes were seen moving stealthily towards the stockade. Softfoot pressed his trigger, shifted his aim and fired again. From either side of him a dozen rifles opened fire and the bullets were mingled with a shower of arrows. From all around volley after volley met the

shadowy figures as they crawled nearer.

Taken by surprise, the Sioux drew back in panic, leaving many of their number behind. But they rallied to renew the attack and dashed forward with reckless courage, making for the corrals, where the alarmed horses were now racing about in wild confusion. Among the lodges, dogs were barking and women and children screaming.

Amid the clamour the Sioux rushed again and again to the stout gates of the corrals, belabouring the palisades with their tomahawks and clubs. But always when they gathered in a close crowd they were forced to fall back under the constant rain of bullets and arrows. Some tried to climb over, but none dropped alive on the inner side. Softfoot often moved his braves to a new position to avoid the return fire or to get surer aim. He could hear the conflict going on at many points around the encampment. There was no pause in the crackle of rifle-fire. Wild shouts, war-whoops and the cries of the wounded increased in volume. But the horses were still safe.

There came a command from one of the Pawnee chiefs behind him, summoning him to the defence of the lodges. He called his braves together and led them within the circle of wigwams. One of his companions was struck down by an arrow. He looked down into the young brave's face. It was the face of Fleet Wing.

"Why did you not ride for the white soldiers?" Softfoot demanded, drawing out the arrow.

"What white soldiers?" Fleet Wing asked blankly.

Softfoot ran on. The open plain within the circle of lodges was alive with a vast black crowd of the enemy, yelling their war-cries as they made a determined stampede towards the teepees where the women and children were gathered.

Suddenly in that moment of direst peril a strange new sound trembled through the night air—the shrill, piercing notes of a military bugle sounding the charge. And it had hardly ceased when from every side Major Reno's cavalry dashed gallantly forward to the rescue of the Pawnees.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE BATTLE OF SILVER CREEK

SOFTFOOT was amazed at seeing the cavalry arrive just at the moment of extreme crisis, when its help was most urgently needed. By what means had the white men been summoned?

Ever since the first alarm of the coming of the enemy Sioux had spread consternation through the camp, he had regretted that he had not obeyed his impulse to ride off for help, to the troops at their camp in Koshinee Gap. But Wenonah had persuaded him, against his will, to stay and take a man's part in the defence of the Pawnees.

She had told him that she would send either Fleet Wing or Little Antelope, who both knew where to find the white soldiers.

She had not done so. Perhaps she had not realized the importance and danger of the situation.

He told himself that Wenonah was now busy among the women and children, keeping them quiet, comforting them and standing resolutely, ready to protect them with her revolver, which she knew so well how to use. But she had sent no messenger. Little Antelope and Fleet Wing had not left his side since the first shot had been fired.

And yet here were the mounted soldiers dashing bravely into the fray. How had they known?

They swept like a great flood into the encampment, surging round and round, between the Sioux and the lodges, firing into the centre with their carbines and Colts and closing in in a quickly tightening ring upon their panic-stricken victims.

There was no chance for the Sioux to escape out of that constricting circle. The Indians were all on foot, bent upon attacking the Pawnee women and children with knife and tomahawk.

Very few of them were provided with fire-arms. They had left their guns behind with their war-horses on the outer prairie, not expecting to need them. They had approached the village stealthily, never counting upon a fierce resistance, but intending to stampede the Pawnee ponies from the ranges and drive them off as the Crees had done months before.

Their first surprise was at finding that the herds had been withdrawn from the open grazing grounds and were enclosed in strong stockades. They could not understand how the Pawnees had been forewarned or by what magic they had so completely prepared themselves with an armed defence. But nothing daunted, the

Sioux attacked the corrals, determined to gain possession of the coveted horses.

Failing in their purpose, because of the heavy firing of the defenders, they had turned their attention to the lodges in the hope of drawing the Pawnees away from the corrals, thus affording them an opening. And now, just as they were streaming in upon the plain, assured of an easy conquest, these paleface horsemen had come like a thunderclap from a clear sky!

For once, the Sioux were outwitted by an enemy with greater alertness than their own.

Major Reno's battalion had previously had more than one sharp encounter with Sitting Bull's warriors. There was not a trooper in the command who had not some personal reason for vengeance against the Sioux, with their cunning methods of concealment and their ferocious cruelty to their defeated foes. Now had come a chance of paying back old scores.

Mishe-mokwa had rallied his warriors and braves to repel the savage onslaught. He had gathered them close about him and stationed them, in force, among the lodges where the women and children, the old and the feeble, had taken refuge. They had been ready to meet their enemy who now filled the level plain within the circle of wigwams.

Softfoot and his detachment of young braves took up a strong position in front of the great medicine lodge. They opened fire point-blank as the Sioux streamed menacingly towards them in a frontal charge. But the cavalry now swept in between, driving the raiders backward into a confused, struggling mass.

With all the desperate courage of their race, the Sioux Indians packed themselves into a solid barrier, shooting their arrows, flinging their spears and waving their terrible clubs and tomahawks as they yelled defiance at the horsemen. But the white soldiers, who were seething with anger on having heard of the massacre of General Custer and his gallant followers by these same savages, showed no mercy. When their carbines were empty, they used their revolvers; when they could not pause to reload their revolvers, they drew their sabres and fought at close quarters. Then the remaining redskins turned in panic, broke through and ran off in terror, to scatter themselves over the moonlit prairie beyond the belt of trees.

They aimed at regaining their horses, left in the shelter of a near valley. But when Major Reno had been advancing to the rescue of the Pawnees he had come upon the great bunch of ill-guarded steeds and had detailed half a company of his troopers to surround and capture them. Very few had escaped, and the surviving Sioux Indians were thus deprived of their mounts and were forced to escape on foot.

Softfoot had been in the thick of the fight around the corrals and in front of the

council lodges. He had received no hurt, although many of the braves beside him had been wounded. In his excitement throughout these hours of danger and conflict he had not consciously realized that he was no longer protected by his "medicine." He had not asked it to help him. Not until the immediate peril was passed did he think of it and remember that he had given it to Wenonah to wear about her neck.

He wondered now if its mysterious powers had served to shield Wenonah from harm; if, in wearing it, she had felt her heart grow big with courage and confidence. He was turning towards the lodges when he encountered Three Stars.

"I search for Wenonah," said the chief. "She is not with the other women in our lodge."

"But there are so many other lodges than yours," Softfoot reminded him. "It is perhaps that she is taking care of the little children who were gathered together in the medicine lodge. Or it may be that she is with Eagle Speaker and the old men who needed her help. Do not trouble. Wenonah is safe. None of our women have been hurt. And there is no longer any danger."

"I do not know who it was that brought the paleface warriors to our help so quickly," said Three Stars. "They have saved us. But for them the Pawnees would now be no more. Our scalps would have been taken. The white men are mighty in warfare. Mishe-mokwa is waiting to talk to their chief and tell him that the Pawnees will pray for him."

Softfoot supposed that Major Reno had gone off in pursuit of the retreating enemy, and he thought that he might find him more readily by riding than by trying to find him on foot. He went among the near teepees to where he expected his pony to be waiting. But Snow-white was not there. It seemed that Wenonah had removed her to some place of greater safety, as she had offered to do. "I will take Snow-white and keep her beside me," she had said.

There was no need for Softfoot to ride, however. Major Reno did not leave the village to follow in pursuit of the redskins. He was not sure that they would not attempt to renew their attack upon the horse corrals. Also, he was aware that many of the Pawnees were giving chase, and he foresaw the difficulty of distinguishing friend from foe in the uncertain moonlight.

He rode back over the plain, with some of his officers and a Pawnee interpreter, to see that the regimental surgeon and ambulance men were properly attending to the wounded.

Softfoot saw him approaching the lodges, and strode towards him, followed by Three Stars and Little Antelope. The Pawnee scout gave the tribal salutation.

"It is Left Hand," Little Antelope explained. "He is the same scout that we met

to-day across the hills. Wenonah talked with him. He is a good Indian."

Major Reno and Left Hand dismounted. Softfoot and Three Stars went up to them. Softfoot saluted the officer in the way that Blue Eye had taught him.

"You do not know me, sir," he began. "But I was one of General Custer's scouts. I was with him to the last."

"Tell me about General Custer," said Reno. "It is only a few hours since I first heard of the disaster. I hear that every man in the command was killed."

"Not a man escaped," Softfoot informed him. "They were killed and scalped by these same Sioux Indians who have been here to-night."

"The messenger from your chief told us so much," resumed Reno. "That is why we came so promptly. We seem to have come in good time."

"Great Bear sent no messenger," Softfoot said. "He did not know that you were so near. I do not understand."

"Yet the messenger came," pursued Major Reno. "How else could we have known that you needed help? She came riding at hot haste on a white pony right into our camp. She told us that the Sioux was attacking your village. She told us, too, of the Custer massacre."

"She!" echoed Softfoot, amazed. "Riding a white pony?"

He drew back as though he had received a blow. What was the meaning of these strange words?

CHAPTER XL

"GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN"

THE Pawnee scout looked at him searchingly.

"It is true," he said. "Wenonah is her name."

"Where is she?" cried Softfoot. "Say where I shall find her."

"I cannot tell," Left Hand answered. "She did not wait in the camp of the white men. Her pony was tired. She rode on, far in front of us. We did not follow on her trail. She did not need to guide us. I, Left Hand, knew where to find your village. And soon we heard the rifle-fire and the war-cries."

"It was a brave thing that the girl did," added Major Reno.

Softfoot turned to Three Stars, who had not understood the strange language.

"It was Wenonah who rode out on Snow-white and brought the paleface soldiers," he told the chief. "She is among the lodges. Come! Let us go to her!"

Three Stars shook his head.

"Wenonah could not have done this great thing," he denied. "No warrior or brave could have done it. For a weak, timid girl it was not possible. There is some mistake. Ask the white chief to say more."

Softfoot appealed to the officer.

"This is her father, the medicine chief, Three Stars," he explained. "He cannot believe that what you say is true—that Wenonah could have done as you say."

"I did not get her name," returned Major Reno. "I only know that whoever her father may be, he should be real proud of her heroic action. It was just great. I guess it was his daughter right enough. Tell him that the girl is beautiful, that she wore a queer necklace with an ermine bag hanging from it. She carried a gun—a revolver. She rode in to our camp astride a white pony, Indian fashion. She spoke of someone named Softfoot. She did not dismount, but turned as soon as she was sure we were figuring on following her. Then she galloped off like the wind. Go right now and find her in among the wigwams. She's sure there. She will explain better than I can."

Softfoot told all this to Three Stars. He was himself astonished at what Wenonah had done. But it was all clear to him. He understood now why Wenonah had persuaded him to remain in the village, where he would be more useful than she could be. She wanted him to stay and protect the Pawnees in her absence.

Even when he had been telling her of his intention to ride away for help, she had formed her brave resolve to go in his stead, facing all risks.

That was why she had so readily agreed to wear his mascot.

That, too, was why she had claimed to take care of his buffalo pony. She knew

even better than he how to find the military encampment in Koshinee Gap, and for her there would be no difficulty in speaking to the white men through one of their Pawnee scouts.

Softfoot reflected that she might have sent Fleet Wing or Little Antelope as messenger; but she had known that they were needed for the man's work of defending the lodges, whilst she herself, riding on the swift-footed Snow-white, could cover the ground quicker than either of them.

So, then, she had gone off on her lonely mission over the hills in the night darkness, telling no one of her intention. And she had succeeded. She had saved hundreds of her people from a terrible fate.

Many of the Pawnee warriors and braves had been wounded, but not a woman or a child had been hurt; not a pony had been stolen or a scalp taken. And the enemy Sioux had been driven off in panic retreat, leaving many of their number lying dead upon the plain.

Not for a moment did Softfoot imagine that Wenonah had done this thing for his own sake, to save him from the very certain danger of breaking through the ring of enemy outposts. He did not question her secret reasons. He only thought of her bravery in facing the perils in order to do a noble duty.

"My medicine has helped her," he assured himself. "My good medicine told her what to do. She listened. It gave her courage. She was not afraid."

He wanted now to go to her and tell her of his pride in her achievement. But when the village had been cleared of the last lurking enemy, the women had come out from their refuge and were scattered over the encampment attending to the wounded, cooking food and soothing their frightened children. Clouds had gathered in the midnight sky, shutting out the light of the moon, and all around was a curtain of darkness, weirdly broken by the flames from many camp-fires.

Softfoot did not search for Wenonah while there was work to be done. The Pawnees had brought in the captured horses of the retreating Sioux and were harnessing them with travois frames on which the wounded troopers were to be carried.

Towards dawn, Mishe-mokwa found Softfoot busy among the soldiers, and urged him to go to his teepee and get sleep.

"Where is Wenonah?" the chief asked him as he turned to obey.

And when he went into his home teepee. Morning Bird's voice reached him in the darkness asking the same question:

"Where is Wenonah?"

Softfoot could not sleep. A strange foreboding overcame him. Never until now

had he fully understood what Wenonah meant to him for companionship and sympathy. He tried to account to himself for her absence. She had not been seen among the lodges, and his pony could not be found. What had happened to her?

There were many places among the hills and forests where she might have sought safety, waiting in hiding until daylight.

But it might be that in racing homeward across the dark prairie the pony had caught its foot in some gopher hole or rabbit burrow. Or it was possible that Wenonah, having fulfilled her purpose, had gone back to the camp in Koshinee Gap. Thinking these things over, he resolved to go out in search of her, accompanying the white soldiers.

He hurriedly dressed himself in his fringed buckskins and feathered head-dress and went across to the ambulance tents, only to discover that Major Reno and his officers and men had already gone.

Mounting a black pony, Softfoot determined to ride after them. But he did not follow on their tracks by the level ground. He went by a nearer way through the woodland trail and across the little prairie where he had met Wenonah and her boy companions on the previous day. By taking this short cut he would soon overtake the cavalry with its loaded chargers and heavy wagons.

The light of early dawn was spreading its rosy flush over the mountains and the birds were twittering in their nests as he came out from the woodland path to the high bluff above the laughing cataract of Rising Mist. Far below him the light crept across the prairie where the spring flowers were opening their bright colours and the wild creatures were rising from their beds in the scented sage grass. There was no sign of hostile Indians. All was at peace.

He rode along the ridge and then went down the slope to gallop across the ranges to the wooded foothills and their narrow valleys beyond. As he entered one of the secluded vales he became aware of signs that a horse had gone through by this same way not many hours before, and in the same direction in which he was now riding.

He believed that he was on the tracks of Snow-white. The earth was kicked up in places, indicating speed. But there was no backward track, as surely there would have been had Wenonah returned by the same way.

Suddenly as he galloped onward, his horse pricked up its ears and altered its stride, and as he turned sharply round a thick growth of elder bushes Softfoot noticed something dark lying on the ground in advance of him.

He rode up to it and saw that it was the body of an Indian lying on his back with a bullet-hole in his naked chest. Near the man's body there were hoof-marks that

showed he had fallen from his escaping pony. A few paces farther on there was a second Indian, with a bullet wound in the back of his head.

Softfoot began to have an inkling of what had happened. He checked his pony to a walk and went forward searching. Beyond a projecting wall of cliff he came abruptly into a wide vale, brilliant with flowers that lifted their coloured crowns to the rising sun.

On a smooth level of sage grass a little distance away he saw something which filled him with consternation.

He rode towards it with his gaze fixed upon it. His heart seemed to cease its beating. His breath came in quick, uneven gasps. His fingers tightened upon his pony's halter. He leapt to the ground, dropping the trail-rope, and ran pantingly forward. Then he came to a stop, clasped his two hands over his eyes, and moaned piteously.

At his feet lay his white pony, with the sharp edge of a tomahawk buried deep in her forehead. The haft of the weapon was still gripped in the hand of a Cree Indian whose upturned painted face showed a dark bullet-hole between the closed eyes. Round about the dead pony were the brass husks of half a dozen revolver cartridges, some scattered glass beads, and several arrows.

For a few terrible moments Softfoot hardly dared to move. When at length he uncovered his eyes they rested upon Wenonah's lifeless body.

She lay on her back, with her arms outstretched beside her and her glassy eyes seeming to be staring upward at the feathered end of the arrow whose poisoned point was hidden in her heart. In her right hand she still grasped her revolver. In her left she held the tangled chain of his mystery necklace, with its torn ermine sachet showing white between her fingers.

"My medicine is broken!" he murmured as he dropped to his knees. "It was weak. It had not power to save her from this! It is the end of everything."

He drew the fatal arrow away, broke it under his moccasin and cast the splintered fragments aside.

"It is the end," he repeated. "Once when I told her that I would give up my life for Blue Eye, she answered: 'It is a big thing to say—that you would give up your life for your friend. But it is a bigger thing to do it, Softfoot.' And now she herself has done that bigger thing. She has given up her life for others, and we shall see her no more in our lodges."

He glanced aside at the pony that had helped her so well.

"Snow-white is with her to carry her across the sandhills," he murmured. "Blue Eye will find her. He will know what she has done. He will be good to her. She will

be happy."

He drew off his head-dress, and removing the feathers fixed them one by one in Wenonah's dark hair. Rising to his feet, he went among the fir trees and collected many fragrant sprays of balsam and spread them gently upon her as a garment. Then he wandered among the prairie flowers, gathering all the most beautiful he could find, white and blue and red, and laid them as a wreath around her.

When this was done, he sank to his knees at her side, with his head bowed and his hands tight clasped, talking to her in soft whispers as if she were still alive.

And it was thus after many hours had passed that the Pawnees found him when they came to lead him back to the lodges on the prairie beside Silver Creek.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Softfoot of Silver Creek* by Robert Leighton]