

# **MOCCASIN TRAIL**

by Eloise Jarvis McGraw



Puffin Books

**PUFFIN BOOKS**

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

**Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England**

**Published in Puffin Books 1986**

50 49 48 47 46 45 44 43

**Copyright Eloise Jarvis McGraw, 1952**

**Copyright renewed Eloise Jarvis McGraw, 1980**

**All rights reserved**

**Printed in U.S.A. by R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Harrisonburg, Virginia**

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

**McGraw, Eloise Jarvis. The moccasin trail.**

**Reprint. Originally published: New York, N.Y.: Coward-McCann, 1952.**

**Summary: A pioneer boy, brought up by Crow Indians, is reunited with his family and attempts to orient himself in the white man's culture.**

**1. Crow Indians—Juvenile fiction. 2. Indians of North America—**

**Juvenile fiction. [1. West (U.S.)—Fiction. 2. Crow Indians—Fiction.**

**3. Indians of North America—Fiction] I.Title.**

**PZ7.M47853Mo 1986 [Fic] 86-4855 ISBN 0-14-032170-5**

**Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.**

## Chapter I

---

Silently, in the hour between sunset and dark, young Jim Keath moved upstream, his flintlock in one hand and his last trap in the other. He walked with an easy, almost careless gait, yet not a twig snapped under his moccasins, not a branch swayed or a pebble rolled to show he had passed.

His appearance was unusual, even for the time, which was 1844, and the place, which was the wilderness of the great Oregon territory. He wore the leggings and fringed buckskin shirt of a white trapper, but his long dark hair was braided like an Indian's, and an eagle feather was stuck into it. His eyes were not black, but so light a brown they looked almost golden against his bronzed skin; yet they had the Indian's wild, unsettled, wary look in them.

One highly skilled corner of Jim's brain was furiously busy, receiving and digesting the information sent to it by his alert ears and constantly moving eyes. That magpie sounded off key. Why? What had scared it? How far away was it? Was it flying toward him or away from him? There was a broken limb bobbing on the current of the stream. What had broken it? Wind? Indians passing? Animal? What kind? How long ago? Yonder was a gnawed sapling—beaver sign. That made the third. Was it time to take to the water now?

But all this noticing, remembering, judging, interpreting,

deciding, took place swiftly and automatically, without his ever giving it a conscious thought. Even as he changed his course in obedience to that gnawed sapling and moved soundlessly through the leafless underbrush to the stream's edge, his mind loafed among thoughts of food and a warm fire, his horse and mule nibbling bunch grass back at camp, the moccasin he must mend tonight, the good taste of beavertail.

Jim stepped into the icy water, swearing inwardly as the bitter cold penetrated the strips of old blanket he wore for leggings. It was as good as winter already, here in the mountain meadows above the Powder River, though it was only October.

Likely snowed up higher yesterday, he thought, and from the look of that sky it'll snow here tomorrow. Time fer Tom and me to git movin', less'n we aim to winter here. Wisht I could talk him into stayin'. If he heads back to Taos, ain't nothin' fer me to do but go back to Absaroka, on back to Crow country.

The thought made his brows knot, sent the familiar restlessness creeping over him. Was it really meant that he go back to the Crows and settle down once more to be an Indian? He'd run away from them little more than a year ago, lonesome for his own kind, crazy for the sight of a white man. What had gone wrong?

He waded on upstream, plagued by the uncertainties that had dragged at his life for weeks now, ever since Tom Rivers had said he was quitting the fur trade, come fall. What would he do after Tom left? What would Tom himself be doing? Plenty of trappers had gone back east to the States, or taken to guiding wagon trains, or set up trading posts on the Plains somewhere to sell meal and powder and calico to bourgeois heading for Oregon. Tom might do one of those things, but Jim couldn't see himself doing any of them.

He shoved the matter out of his mind and swerved toward

the bank, for his trained eye and that ceaselessly busy corner of his brain had together selected the best spot for his trap. It was there near the beavers' lodge, where a slide came down the bank into the pool created by the dam. He cached his rifle in a low branch and stooped to sink his trap, glancing as he did so toward the mud-plastered structure looming there in the fading light—a big lodge, it was, six feet high and twice as broad. He smiled briefly, remembering the night he had once spent in a beaver lodge, listening to the footsteps and sullen grunts of three Sioux warriors prowling about outside, looking for him. A lodge made a good hiding place, more comfortable than many another, though of course, its only entrances being underwater, you had to get soaking wet getting there. But what of that if you kept your scalp?

The trap was placed now, in the proper depth of water. A stout, dry limb hacked from a nearby cottonwood made a good enough trap pole, and Jim drove it hard through the ring at the end of the five-foot steel chain, into the gravel at the bottom of the stream and through that into mud and the solid stuff beneath, putting all his strength behind it. He tested it, and nodded. It would take a man-sized beaver to yank that free. Still, they sometimes did it, dragging the trap after them onto the bank, and you'd be minus a plew—a pelt—unless you reached them before they could gnaw off the imprisoned foot.

As an added precaution Jim cut a small branch for a float stick, to show him the position of the beaver's body should it yank free but drown before it reached the bank. Then he splashed water over every place he had stepped on the bank, and on the trap pole itself. When all was finished, he arched a small willow shoot over the surface of the water just above the trap's trigger, fastened it, and smeared it with castoreum, that powerful medicine made from the glands of other beavers, which he carried in the plugged horn slung from his belt.

The strong, pungent smell of the stuff filled his nostrils as

he straightened up, corking the horn. That oughta fetch 'em, he thought, if they's any left to fetch.

He turned away, automatically touching for luck the string of blue beads and bear claws that hung around his neck. By gor, I need some luck, he thought. We all do. Country's nigh trapped out.

Retrieving his rifle, he waded back downstream, once more turning and twisting the problem in his mind. That was the whole trouble, the beaver were all but gone. With plenty of beaver, a man could live content day by day, needing neither bourgeway wagons to guide nor Indians to live with, needing no plans and no future, but only the broad land—the mountains, the streams in the high meadows, the good, wild country once choked with beaver dams but now trapped out. Trapped clean out. The Humboldt, the Snake, the upper Green, Pierre's Hole and Jackson's Hole, Wind River, the Clearwater—all were finished. Even the Powder, where he and Tom had prowled for the past month, with only a few plevs to show for it. Lifting empty traps every morning made a kind of emptiness inside you too.

He ran a hand back through the tangled lock of front hair that always escaped from his braids. As he did so, his fingers touched the four thin, slick scars that ran from his hairline down to his right eyebrow.

That grizzly done a sight more than just tear me up a little, he thought. He wondered, as he had wondered so many times, how things would have turned out if it hadn't been for that bear's catching him. He'd never have grown up in the Crow village, that was sure. He'd likely have gone back to the States after Uncle Adam died; or even if he'd gone on trapping it would have been with white men, and he would never have got so mixed up as to which world he belonged to.

He turned toward the bank and waded ashore at the same place he had first entered the stream. As he reached out to

splash water over his trail, his buckskin sleeve hiked up, revealing the other scars, the bad ones, on his forearm—twisted, cruel furrows blazed white on his brown skin—four of them, running diagonally across the underside of his forearm. There were others under his shirt, sweeping down over his chest and belly in that same vicious curve.

He moved into the forest and on downstream with his soundless tread, remembering the bear crashing into the camp on Wind River that evening more than seven years ago; remembering the yells of his uncle and the other trappers as they scattered, the shots, the screaming horses, his own paralyzing fear. He was only eleven then, and a greenhorn—it had been less than a year before that he'd run away from home to follow his uncle. And like a greenhorn, he'd floundered away upwind, through underbrush and over boulders, every move he made bringing his scent more clearly to the wounded and infuriated grizzly, roaring in pursuit.

Within minutes it had been all over. The bear hurtled through a last thicket just as his own legs gave out with fear and exhaustion. His heart knocking wildly, he swung about and raised his rifle. For a fraction of an instant he stared through the gun sights into a red and glaring eye, then squeezed the trigger. As the gun roared, the bear was upon him. He flung up his right arm, felt the claws tear white-hot down his forehead, through the sleeve and the flesh under it, then into his chest. He pitched backward, the bear a suffocating weight on top of him, into spinning blackness.

When he woke at last it was three days later. He was in a Crow lodge, and all around him were the sights and sounds and smells of a strange new world—one which was to become his own.

Jim's thoughts broke off abruptly as an alarm sounded, back in that always vigilant corner of his brain. He froze. Finding his eye riveted on an angle of hill and sky visible between two

branches, he knew that he had seen a split second of what might have been movement there.

For perhaps a count of sixty he stood motionless, bringing every faculty of his mind to bear on the matter. An animal that far away and upwind need not concern him. It was not a white man—seasoned mountain men were the only whites who would be wandering this country in mid-October and still alive, and they would be heading away from these mountains toward the Plains and winter lodge. That left Indians; by the end of his sixty seconds Jim had arrived at the probable location of every tribe in the northwest, modified their positions with regard to the season, the present threat of snow, the probable state of their larders, and the last reports of their activities and mood.

He moved on, puzzling over why a lone Digger Indian, or at the most two, should be scouting so far from their village on the banks of the Snake at this time of year. When Tom got back from setting his traps on the other fork of the stream, he'd mention the matter.

Jim reached camp before full dark. A quick glance told him that all was well, even before his gaunt wolflike dog, Moki, who always slept with one eye open, came wriggling out from beneath a bush to greet him with a flurry of tail wagging and panting. There was Tom's horse, Tucky, and Buckskin, his own half-wild cream-colored Crow mare, both standing half hidden behind a clump of willows near the stream. It took longer to locate the mule, whom Jim had named Wah-Keetcha, Bad Medicine, for a very good reason. There was not the slightest sign of him. Jim stood quite still, scratching Moki's ears and whistling tunelessly under his breath, searching the nearby thickets. He stared for seconds at an irregular dark spot between two clumps of leaves before he realized he was looking directly into the mule's long-lashed and inscrutable eye.



He grinned, walked over to the cache of firewood he and Tom had collected earlier in the day, and selected four small logs, which he arranged like the spokes of a wheel. With a handful of dry twigs, flint and steel, he soon had a blaze going. Still whistling softly, he took a kettle from his pack, which like all mountain men he thought of as his "possibles." Filling the kettle at the creek, he set it simmering over the fire on an improvised tripod. A good chunk of buffalo hump, a handful of the dried wild onions he always carried, and a section of beavertail went into the pot. Then he sat down and stretched his legs to the fire, feeling the warmth slowly creep through the soaked leggings and moccasins.

Moki padded toward him, yawning, and dropped down at his side, stretching his nose out on his forepaws but keeping his yellow eyes on the boy.

"You lazy good-fer-nothin'," Jim said.

Moki's tail thumped ingratiatingly. His eyebrows moved as his yellow gaze went briefly to the fragrant steam starting to come up out of the kettle, then back to Jim's face. He began to drool.

Jim grinned, stood up and turned his backside to the flames, holding up first one foot and then the other to the comforting warmth. "*Wagh!* Too lazy to hunt, even," he drawled. "Whar's all the rabbits? Rabbits, Moki?"

Moki emitted a low, enthusiastic growl but didn't move, except his tail thumped a little faster. Jim reached down and rumbled his ears, then walked over to rummage among his possibles for his other pair of moccasins, his awl, and a length of deer sinew. He also dug out a chunk of meat which he threw to the dog.

"There, you thievin' coyote. Tomorrer you hunt fer yourself or go without, by gor!"

Taking the heavy-bladed knife from his belt, he hacked a tab of fringe off one of his sleeves, and settling down cross

legged by the fire, began to mend the split moccasin with the tab of deerskin and the sinew. As he worked his low, tuneless whistle mingled with the dog's snarling and slavering over the meat.

Lonesome, thought Jim. Wisht Tom'd git back. What'll it be like when he's gone south? Here I'll be, with only Moki and Buckskin and that cussed mule, and never nobody to talk to. Didn't use to get lonesome. What ails me? It's 'cause the beaver's all gone, that's what's done it. Makes a body feel like the ground's cavin' in all around, like ever'thing's slidin' away and there ain't no solid place to step no more. I best go home to Absaroka and git busy fightin' Sioux.

He jabbed the awl through the tab and through the moccasin until he had a row of holes, then began to thread the split sinew through them, binding the patch in place. The smell of meat cooking and the sight of his fingers handling the sinew made him think of Red Deer, his Crow mother, whose seamed and cheerful face was the first thing he'd seen when he woke up in the new world of the tepee that morning.

All he'd really been conscious of at first was the pain in his body, the strange stiff feel of the muscles in his right arm, and the smell of meat and herbs simmering over the fire in the center of the lodge. Then he'd noticed other smells, too—dog smell and smoke smell and the smell of fresh-scraped hides and blood. And something else, very pungent and strong, that he realized finally was the odor of the wet, sticky poultice somebody had bound around his naked chest and his arm. It was made of some kind of leaves he had never seen before. He looked again at the old woman in the vivid skirt crouching there by the fire, and her face crinkled suddenly into a thousand seams as she smiled at him and nodded, her black eyes bright as a sparrow's. She was working at something in her lap. In a moment she finished and held it up—a necklace of blue beads and long, curved, yellow-white claws, strung upon

sinew. He gazed at it, uncomprehending, as she rose and came toward him. She was still nodding and grinning, pointing first to the necklace and then to his chest, and all the time repeating something over and over in a language he did not understand. Gradually it dawned on him. Those cruel ivory curves dangling among the beads were the claws of the grizzly—the same claws that had ripped open his flesh and all but taken his life. Revulsion swept him, and he jerked away from the woman, pressing his cheek into the rough hair of the buffalo hide under his head. The sudden movement sent flame and ice streaking through his wounds, and for a moment he sank once more into blackness. When he came to himself the woman was fastening the necklace around his throat.

He lay there rigid, fighting off nausea at the feel of those talons, cold and heavy against his flesh. After a moment, as they warmed to the heat of his body, he lifted his left hand and touched them. Slowly his fear evaporated; a kind of triumph took its place. The bear was dead, but Jim Keath was alive, very much alive. He turned his head again, looking at the woman. She was watching him closely, and her brown, crooked finger pointed across the tepee to a fresh hide stretched over a frame. The fur was rough and black in color, each hair tipped with silver. So that was all that remained of his enemy! The brute had come to a sorry end, for all his might—all because of eleven-year-old Jim Keath, who had killed him with one shot through his red and wicked eye.

He looked back at the woman and suddenly laughed aloud, gripping the necklace and feeling a fierce joy spurt through him. He was glad the bear had died, glad he had killed him, gloatingly proud of that splayed hide and the talons dangling from his neck, and his own valor. That joy was his first step toward savagery.

He took many more, in the months and years that followed. During the tranquil, shadowy weeks of his convalescence the

lodge became home to him. He lay on his bed—buffalo hide stretched on a willow frame—drowsing or watching the fat, furry puppies, one of whom was Moki, tumble over each other in the sunshine near the entrance, or listening to Red Deer's tales of the Little Men or the warriors of long ago and the great medicine dreams they had dreamed. He had soon learned her guttural language, learned too that when a Crow hunting party had discovered him barely alive under the grizzly's body and brought him to their village, she had claimed him in place of her dead son.

Sometimes in those first months he had been lonely, and longed to run away back to his uncle. Then he would turn a deaf ear to Red Deer's stories, and talk English aloud to the puppies or even to rocks and trees, from pure homesick craving to hear it once more. And Red Deer, half jealous, half compassionate, had named him Talks Alone. But as his wounds healed his life grew more active and his memories less so. He joined eagerly then with the other boys in their rough and dangerous games, tugged constantly at his hair to make it grow long and luxuriant like that of the proud warriors about him, who often worked switches into their braids until they trailed the ground, and had to be doubled back in glossy, coal-black loops.

Scalp Necklace, the graven-faced old chief who was husband to Red Deer, had also accepted him as his son, and saw to it that he learned all a chief's son should know. How to pull a bow, how to bear pain or joy if necessary without the quiver of an eyelash, how to steal a horse from under an enemy's nose and ride him as a feather rides the wind. How to hunt, how to stalk, how to drum his heels in dances, how to keep his scalp.

And in his fourteenth year he achieved the first goals every Crow boy must achieve. He counted coup—won honors in war, earning the right to wear the eagle feather—and dreamed his own medicine dream. After that no memories ever plagued

him; he talked only Crow and thought only Crow and was only Crow.

Then one day in his sixteenth spring—nearly six years after the bear's attack—a group of warriors rode back to the village telling of a party of Long Knives—white trappers—they had found camping without gifts or palaver or permission in Absaroka country. Three Crow braves had gone under in the hostilities that had followed, but here were two of the Long Knives' horses, their rifles, and their scalps.

Something happened inside the boy as he watched one of the warriors curvetting proudly on his beautiful cream-colored mare, waving his coupstick from which a blond scalp dangled. It was no longer Absarokee Talks Alone but white-born Jim Keath who stood there, shaking with sudden anger. His own mother's hair had been that color, and her face, lost to memory for years, now filled his mind.

After that all was changed; it was not enough to win coups and paint himself and be a Crow. As the weeks passed he grew thin with longing to see white faces like his own, and hear a civilized tongue, and sit again by a trapper's campfire while the stars came out over Jackson's Hole or the Popo Agie.

He thought about it until he could think no longer, and had to act. One night he crept alone out of the lodge that had been his home for six long years. He took only a few treasures, his weapons, and Moki, and ignoring his own horses, counted coup one last time by cutting the beautiful mare, Buckskin, from the very lodge of the warrior who had flaunted the blond scalp. She had carried him southward over the Plains and the wild hills, back to Taos and the world of the white trapper—a world which now, two years later, he knew was crumbling under his feet.

Jim jerked a sinew through the moccasin. As he did so he saw Moki's ears go up briefly, then down again. At once his

every sense snapped alert; he began to grin. Though his fingers never stopped their calm work on the moccasin, with one elbow he loosened the sheathed knife at his belt, and his muscles gathered. The tiny rustling of a leaf gave the signal. One lash of his supple body brought him to his feet; his wrist flicked and the firelight glinted on the flying steel blade as he melted into the bushes.

Tom Rivers' familiar laugh rang out from the clump of cottonwoods by the stream's edge. He emerged, his shoulders shaking, and yanked Jim's knife from the tree trunk one inch above where Tom's head had been a second before.

"It was a tie agin, you knife-throwin' coyote! I ducked afore it hit." He walked toward the fire as Jim, still grinning, went back to his scattered sinews. "By golly, I'll sneak up on you someday yet!" Tom went on, tossing Jim his knife. "Done pretty well this time. Got to within thirty foot of you afore you heerd me."

"*Wagh!* I set around five minutes waitin' fer you to come in range. Yer gettin' old, Tom."

"Say, listen, hoss. I was strollin' in and out of double-guarded Blackfoot camps afore you'd cut yer teeth. I'll git old when I git ready, and not afore, you hear? What's in the pot?"

He leaned over to sniff the steam, grunted appreciatively, then settled to the business of drying his soaked legs. He was a tall man, gray at the temples, slow smiling and easy, but dangerous as a rattlesnake, as plenty of Blackfeet and Sioux had found out, and as quick moving as any man needed to be. Even aimed to kill, that knife would never have hit him. Jim liked him better than any white man he knew. You could trap and ride and hunt alongside Tom Rivers and never say a word from sunup to dark if you didn't want to, and still you never felt alone. The fact that Tom was in his fifties and Jim barely nineteen had mattered to neither of them these months they'd

traveled together, though the amiable bickering about it was a nightly ritual. The camp would be mighty lonesome soon, Jim thought, with the night closing down like this and the fire brightening and the pot bubbling, and no Tom standing there angling his long legs one way and another while his leggings dried from wet dark red to faded scarlet.

As if he had read Jim's mind, Tom said, "Reckon I'll be headin' south tomorrow."

Tomorrow! Jim's heart sank as he fastened the last sinew on the moccasin. "*Wagh!* You best git them old bones into warmer weather!" he murmured. As Tom grinned, he added, "Goin' to Taos?"

"Mebbe, mebbe not. Kinda hankerin' to see Californy fer onct. Anyways I'll happen by the Nez Perce country fust to git my squaw loose from her relatives. Tired mendin' my own shirts. Never marry a Injun, boy, they got too many relatives."

Jim got up to toss the moccasins back into his pack, concealing his surprise. He'd never known Tom had an Indian wife. But then he and Tom had never asked questions of each other, and there was no sense starting in now. Instead, he remarked, "I reckon that meat's done."

He ripped two slabs of bark off a nearby cottonwood and they piled stew on them. Tom filled his mouth with beavertail and spoke around it. "Looker here, hoss. Why don't you come on with me?"

"To Nez Perce country? Not much."

"Why not?"

Jim jerked a thumb toward the eagle feather stuck in his hair. "I earned that stealin' Nez Perce horses."

"Shucks, ain't nobody gonna scalp you fer a little thing like that. I thought it was Sioux you was so unpopular with."

"Sioux, Blackfoot, Nez Perce—all the same."

Tom laughed. "All right then, meet me in Californy."

Jim hesitated, then shook his head. "I reckon not, Tom."

"By golly, yer a stubborn—"

He broke off, his eyes snapping with Jim's toward the thicket, where Bad Medicine had suddenly scrambled to his feet. The mule was facing south, his long ears cocked forward and trembling slightly, every muscle tense.

"Digger scout, I think," Jim muttered. "Saw somethin' earlier."

He set aside his bark plate and reached for his rifle, as did Tom. As they rose silently, Moki stiffened and growled, and Buckskin raised her head, muzzle dripping, from the creek. The mule was always the first to be aware of danger.

"Moki, guard!" snapped Jim quietly. The dog bounded out of the circle of light to crouch threateningly in front of Buckskin, blocking her way. Tom had already faded into the trees where Tucky was tethered, and Jim leaped for the thicket at the other side of the clearing, turned the mule half around, and got behind him. He was not seriously alarmed; Diggers were nothing when you were used to Sioux and Blackfeet, and if he had been right about that flash of movement on the hillside earlier, there were only a couple of them. But live trappers were careful ones.

"What in tarnation are them coyotes doin' so fer from home?" came Tom's annoyed mutter. "I wanta finish my meat."

"Dunno. Ain't nobody on the war trail that I've heerd of."

The whole thing was puzzling. Well, no matter, they'd find out soon. Jim primed the flintlock's pan, cocked it, and filled his mouth with extra bullets. Then he slanted the gun barrel over the mule's back and waited.



## Chapter II

---

A long five minutes later, bushes on the southwest side of the clearing rustled. Jim's rifle swung to cover them, then dropped, as a white rag at the end of a stick pushed through the branches. He reached far to his left to make an answering rustle. Since no bullet immediately crashed into the twig he had shaken, he spat his own bullets back into his pouch and grunted, "Reckon it's all right, Tom."

"Friend," came immediately from across the clearing.

"Come out then," said Tom's voice.

Two Indians stepped from the bushes some six feet away from the white flag, holding their rifles above their heads.

"All right, fellas, what's on yer minds?" drawled Tom, appearing from the trees. "Well, it's old Big Bull, ain't it?"

The older Indian, hearing his name, bobbed his head and grinned. Jim felt disgust as he pushed out of his thicket and joined the group. Diggers were poor excuses for Indians. Look at them. Bandy legged, grinning like skinned coyotes, stinking of the fish they lived on.

Big Bull turned and saw him, and his eyes sharpened. Darting a glance at the eagle feather in Jim's hair, he made the sign for "Crow," moving his arms up and down like the wings of a great bird. "Talks Alone?" he said.

Surprised, Jim nodded. He'd never set eyes on this Indian as far as he knew, though Tom seemed to recognize him.

"What do you want?" he asked in the Crow tongue.

Big Bull shook his head and shrugged, glancing at the bubbling pot. "Only savvy white talk."

"Yeah," chuckled Tom. "I'll bet you savvy enough white talk to ask fer meat, anyways. Looks like we split our grub, Jim."

Jim was thinking uneasily of Scalp Necklace and Red Deer and all the others back in Absaroka. Had one of them sent word to him by this skinny-legged old man? It didn't seem likely. "What d'you want with me?" he demanded.

The two Indians merely looked bland and kept their eyes on the pot.

"Keep yer shirt on, Jim," Tom drawled. "They ain't gonna tell us nothin' till we feed 'em."

He tore off a couple of bark strips and motioned the Diggers toward the pot. When they had eaten most of its contents Big Bull produced a long pipe, stuffed it with kinnikinnick and lighted it, puffing smoke to north, south, east, and west before handing it on to Jim.

"Makin' a lot of fuss about this, whatever it is," Jim growled. He puffed at the pipe and passed it on, then with a grunt of impatience got up and moved to his pack, returning in a moment with a small sack of gunpowder, which he tossed at Big Bull's feet. He made the sign for "on the prairie" by brushing one palm quickly over the other, to signify it was a free gift.

Then Big Bull picked up the sack and began to talk, using grunts and signs and bits of English. As the long, confused tale emerged, Jim became more and more puzzled. There was no mention of Absaroka. Whatever Big Bull was talking about had all happened about three or four weeks ago, apparently, somewhere on the Snake River. There was something about

wagons, many of them, and trading for dried salmon, and a lot of white people and spotted buffalo, which meant cattle. A Long Knife had given Big Bull a fine present of blue beads to find Talks Alone who wore the Crow coup feather. But the Long Knife was not with the wagons, he was a beaver man known as Black Jaw.

"Ol' Bill Hervey!" exclaimed Tom. "He was trappin' up north of here a while back, remember? Musta run into this wagon train on his way back to Taos. But what's it all got to do with us?"

Big Bull had caught the gist of his words and was nodding excitedly. Reaching into his tangled braid, he drew out a crumpled and very dirty bit of paper, brushed a few lice off it, and handed it to Jim.

"Well, by gor!" exclaimed Jim disgustedly. "All that palaver about nothin'! What'd I give that coyote good gunpowder fer?"

But Tom was staring at the piece of paper. "Let's see that thing, hoss. Lookee here, it's got writin' on it."

Jim frowned and took another look as Tom smoothed the paper out on his knee. There were words crowded close all over it.

"By golly, it's a letter!" Tom exclaimed. "You say Black Jaw give you this, Big Bull?"

Big Bull nodded again, but pointed to Jim. "Talks Alone," he insisted.

"He's crazy," Jim said. "Who'd be writin' me a letter?"

Tom scratched his ear reflectively. "Not Bill Hervey, that's sartin. He can't write no more'n I kin. You reckon it was somebody in that wagon train?"

Jim suddenly felt queer. "Couldn't be, Tom."

"Many wagons," Big Bull repeated. "Plenty spotted buffalo." He gathered up his pipe, the gunpowder, and his rifle, beckoned to the other Indian, and in a moment they disap-

peered through the bushes, leaving Jim staring uneasily at the piece of paper. He was wishing, for the first time in his life, that he could read. Once he'd known how to read print a little, even how to spell out his name and a few other words in block capitals. But this was writing, and besides, all that was so many years back.

He raised his eyes, finally, to meet the shrewd, curious ones of Tom Rivers. "What's it say, Tom?" he muttered.

"Hoss, you know I can't read wuth a Piute's underbritches. But I'll make a try at it if you want."

"I want."

"All right, then, let's see how I make out." He dropped down cross legged beside the bright flames and Jim squatted beside him. Both squinted at the mysterious letter. "Well, it's fer you all right," Tom said. "Fust word is *Jim*. *Jim*, if you—no, that ain't right, I don't think. Lessee. Here's *dead*."

"Dead!" echoed Jim.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure of that one. D-e-a-d." He scratched his ear thoughtfully. "Hoss, I ain't gonna git fer with this. They's a lot of little words that don't mean nothin' till you hitch 'em with big ones, and I can't do much with the big ones."

"Can't you figger out who's dead, even?"

"No-o—'ceptin'—lessee, ain't this a name? This here word at the end. J-o—" Tom squinted at the word doubtfully. "J-o-, I reckon that's a *n*. J-o-n-n-i-e. *Jonnie*, that's what it says. Know anybody called Jonnie?"

Jim turned slowly to stare at Rivers. "I—I reckon I did, onct."

"Mebbe it's him that sent you this."

"No! That just ain't possible." Jim ran a hand shakily through his forelock and said, "See what else you kin read, Tom."

"Well, lemme see now. S-t-i— That's *still*. Here's one down here looks like *valley*. And lessee, C-h-a—"

Jim's fingers and toes had begun to tingle strangely. *Still*, and *valley*? His eyes widened as he stared at the paper. Those words were part of his own medicine song, part of the dream itself! Were the spirits that Red Deer used to tell him about suddenly beginning to take an interest in his affairs? He peered cautiously around the edge of the clearing into the darkness that shrouded the woods, feeling the little hairs rise on the back of his neck.

"Go on, Tom!" he muttered.

"I got part of it now, hoss. Listen. *All that's left . . . bound for the . . . valley . . . then somethin' else, and then it's our only chanct*. Then that name, *Jonnie*. Any of that mean anything to you?"

Jim didn't answer. He snatched the paper and stared at it, then shoved it back at Tom and was on his feet with one swift movement. His heart was beating like the drum of old Many Horses, the Wise One, as he knelt beside his pack, found his medicine bundle, and tied it with trembling fingers behind his left braid. He hesitated a moment until he could be sure the muscles of his face were under rigid control, and would not disgrace him by betraying emotion. Then he went back to the fire and took the note in his own hands, staring at it unblinking until his eyes watered. But still the words held their secret; he could read them no better than before. Perhaps the powerful grizzly teeth in his medicine bundle were helpers only in battle.

He started convulsively as a log crackled, sending up a stream of sparks.

"Say, what's up, hoss?" exclaimed Rivers softly. "Yer jumpy as a treed painter."

Jim looked at him, then back to the paper, wetting his lips. "Tom, I got to know what that says! All of it."

"Better hunt you up somebody as kin read writin', then.

"How, though? Where?"

"T'wouldn't be hard, hoss. Take 'er down to Laramie or Fort Hall—"

"Too fer! I wanta know soon."

"Well, The Dalles, then. That ain't but a few days ride, the way that Buckskin of yours skitters."

Jim folded the note carefully and tucked it into his pouch. Tom was right. This was white man's medicine, it would take a white man to unravel its meaning.

He moved restlessly across the little clearing, every nerve in him as tight as a bowstring. The wind had risen; a wolf or two skulked out there just beyond the circle of firelight, drawn by the smell of meat. Jim suddenly picked up a pebble and hurled it at a pair of shining gold eyes.

"Hoss, you want to tell me who that Jonnie is?" Tom said quietly.

Jim was silent a moment. The dark out yonder seemed lonelier than ever without the golden eyes, and his thoughts kept going back, and back. He turned abruptly and returned to the fire. Tom was his friend, and a thorough white man. He'd tell him. Maybe it would help. He dropped down beside Tom.

"I reckon it's my brother Jonathan," he said.

"Yer brother! What the devil? A Crow named Jonathan?"

"He ain't Crow, he's white like me."

Tom stared at him, his eyes traveling from the braids to the coup feather, from the claw and bead necklace to the medicine bundle dangling below Jim's left ear. "By golly, hoss," he said slowly. "I thought you was a half-breed. Didn't you grow up Crow?"

"Yeah, but I come from Missouri afore that. Long time ago."

"What happened, Injuns steal you?"

"No. I run away from home. It's nigh nine year back now." Jim hesitated, letting the past drift over him. "Tom, you ever know a trapper called Adam Russell?"

"Russell. Yeah, sure. Tall, git-out'n-the-road lookin' feller, warn't he? He turned up missin' at rendezvous way back in '35 er '36, though. I heerd he got rubbed out."

"He did. Blackfeet tuck his hair. Old Bill Hervey told me that soon's I hit Taos last year. He was with him when it happened." Jim hesitated, then went on. "Russell was my uncle."

"By jiminy!" Rivers stared a moment, then eased back on his elbow and stretched his legs to the fire's warmth. He took a red clay Indian pipe out of his pouch and slowly began to stuff it with kinnikinnick. "Go on, hoss, if you want to."

Jim nodded. He watched Tom's fingers working the tobacco and tried to sort out his thoughts. He might as well tell all of it, now he was started. "Uncle Adam was my mother's brother, but she never seen much of him. He'd been out west here in the mountains fer half his life. I never seen him at all till one day he come to our farm in Missouri. He'd been back in the States spreein' and spendin' his beaver, and he was headin' fer the Plains. I reckon I was about ripe fer bustin' loose from my tether anyways when he come walkin' in, that afternoon. Seemed like it was the fust time they'd ever been any fresh air in that house."

He remembered that vividly enough. Tall, hawk eyed, and swaggering, Adam Russell had seemed a being from another world, a strong, exhilarating wind that could blow a boy's smoldering wanderlust into flames. While Pa sat grim and disapproving, while Mother fluttered excitedly, and the other children stared like a row of owls from across the kitchen, Jim crept close. He listened, dazzled, to his uncle's talk of Indians and prairies and the great sky and snow-capped mountains far to the west. He took in every detail of Adam Russell's

dress and speech, tingled to his boisterous laughter, drank in the wild smell of castoreum that clung to his buckskin shirt.

"Seemed like I couldn't stand stayin' put any longer, onct I'd seed him," Jim murmured. "I never said nothin', but when he left at sunup next mornin' I follered 'im off. Had to stay so fer behind, to keep him from catchin' me, that I come near losin' him twict. But I stuck with him somehow, till we was away out 'crost the frontier and he had to take me on west with 'im. I ain't never been back since."

Rivers swore softly, his keen eyes searching Jim's face. "So yer a farm boy from Missouri. By golly, hoss, that takes some believin'!"

"I never tuck to farmin'. I allus wanted to git away. Do somethin'—bigger."

"A kid eleven year old is mighty young to run that fer, Jim. Warn't you ever homesick?"

"I reckon I was at first." Jim smiled faintly. "Like when Comanches was chasin' us, or we'd git our horses stole and have to git arrers in us stealin' 'em back agin, or we didn't dare show a far and have to eat our meat raw. Fust time I eat raw prairie dog, by gor I wisht fer my mother, and felt mean I'd ever run off and left her. I missed her other times, too, and I missed Jonnie mighty bad. But I was skeered to go back 'cause my pa'd of beat the daylights out'n me. My pa, he was a great one fer beatin's."

"He couldn't beat you now."

"No, but I couldn't go home now, neither."

"Why not? You're young—"

Jim's smile twisted. "Tom, kin you see me plantin' corn in Missouri?"

Tom was a realist. He took one look at Jim, laughed shortly, and said, "No." Then he added, "What'd you do after Russell went under?"

"Oh, we was split up afore that. I'd only been in the moun-



tains about a year when the grizzly got me, and after that I lived with the Crows."

Tom puffed in silence for a moment, and Jim could hear the familiar night sounds—Buckskin's hooves clopping daintily over the gravel to the stream's edge, the wind rustling in the cottonwoods, the fire hissing. Finally Tom said softly, "Hoss, it ain't any of my business, but I'm wonderin' why you ain't still with them Crows."

That was hard to answer. Jim reached out and scratched Moki's ears, digging his fingers into the dog's coarse fur. "I run away from them too, Tom. I—somethin' happened that put me in mind of my mother. I—just got to feelin' *white*." Rivers nodded, as if he had expected to hear just that. Impulsively Jim went on. "I figgered if I come back amongst white men mebbe ever'thing'd turn lucky fer me, I'd git plenty beaver, and— Well, I was wrong about that." He got up, suddenly restless again. "I've been thinkin' lately mebbe I was wrong to leave at all, and oughta head on back to Crow country. But now that paper's come—"

"Reckon yer brother sent that paper?"

Jim shook his head. "Clean from Missouri? Ain't likely. But what if Jonnie's dead?" His voice dropped to a whisper, the whites of his eyes gleamed in the firelight as he turned back to Rivers. "Remember the 'dead' in that paper, Tom? When Jonnie and me was kids, we—" The phrase came to Jim's mind in Crow, "*We knew each other's heart*." He did the best he could with it in English. "We was—close to one another. Mebbe—mebbe his spirit's around somewheres, tryin' to tell me what to do, now the beaver's all gone and yer leavin' the mountains."

Rivers flashed him an odd look, but covered it quickly by pulling a twig out of the fire and relighting his pipe from the blazing tip. The silence urged Jim on. He hunkered down beside Tom again.

"It ain't meant I should go to Absaroka but to some valley. That word 'valley,' that's part of my medicine, it was in my dream! You—you know about medicine dreams, Tom?"

"Not much about 'em, hoss."

Jim's hand crept up under his left braid to finger the medicine bundle, and he could feel the grizzly's teeth moving against each other inside the buckskin. "Well, ever' Crow boy, he's got to have one, so's he'll have helpers on the war trail. They's always some kinda animal in it, a fox or a otter or a wolf or somethin'. And when you wake up the Wise One tells you what the dream meant, and you find you a fox or whatever it is and make a medicine bundle out'n its skin, or maybe its teeth or somethin'. Then yer safe, long as you've got it with you. It turns arrers and bullets away from you and helps you shoot straight."

Tom's eyes went automatically to a deep arrow scar on the side of Jim's neck, but he only nodded and said nothing.

"It's mighty hard to have a good dream," Jim went on huskily. He was staring off into the dark woods, remembering. "You take a long sweat bath and go afoot to a high mountain all alone, and don't eat nor drink nothin' and sometimes you have to hurt yerself with a knife to make the dream come. I was pretty old afore I managed to have one—fourteen. It took me three days atop Crazy Mountain afore I fell down amongst the rocks and the world got all black . . ."

The words trailed to silence as Jim thought of that most important sleep of his life. In that blackness had come the dream. Three times in the whirling dark the old grizzly had loomed up again, alive and savage, all claws and teeth and glistening red eyes as before, but now wearing moccasins and a coup feather like a warrior. And each time Jim had shouted words at it, words like an incantation, which seemed to spring into his head from nowhere—or perhaps from that far corner of his heart where the past lay buried, for the

words were not Crow but English: "*The lord is my shepherd—he makes me lie down in green pastures—he leads me beside still waters—though I walk through the valley of the shadow I will fear no evil—*"

So he shouted three times, wondering how he knew those words and what they meant, and as he did so the bear faded away, bit by bit each time until at last there were only his great teeth scattered on the ground, and the coup feather beside them. Then, in the dream, Jim thrust the feather into his hair, gathered the teeth into his pouch, and fell into a deep and comforting sleep.

He took a long breath, bringing his thoughts back with an effort to the fire-lit clearing and Tom Rivers. "They was white man's words in the dream. Many Horses, he said they was big medicine and never to fergit 'em. Now here they turn up in this paper. You see how the stick floats, Tom? They're tellin' me what to do."

It was a long time before Rivers said anything. He lounged there and puffed his pipe, and gazed with half-closed eyes into the flames. Jim began to think he wasn't going to speak at all, and moved uneasily over to his pack, half frightened at having revealed so much of himself. Never had he talked like this to anyone, except old Many Horses. Maybe his helpers would be angry?

Then Tom spoke, softly and calling him by his Crow name. "I'm wonderin', Talks Alone, if you wouldn't be happier in Absaroka than anywheres else. I'm wonderin' if that ain't what you oughta do—go back."

Jim turned to look at him in astonishment. It was the last thing he expected to hear. "Tom, can't you read signs no better'n that? I'm white. My medicine's white too, with them words in it. I bet you six plews my luck'll turn if I hunt up some valley where they's white folks, and live amongst 'em agin."

"That's a risky bet. Lookee here, Jim, you ain't gonna find trappers and such settin' in no valley, yer gonna find bourge-ways! You sure you savvy how to live amongst bourgeways?"

Jim stared at him, suddenly uneasy. Then he shrugged it off. "Savvy, *wagh!* You show me a bourgeway I can't out-hunt and out-ride and out-trap and—"

"That ain't quite what I mean." Rivers heaved a long sigh and straightened, knocking out his pipe. He looked up, his keen blue eyes gentler than Jim had ever seen them. "Hoss, I hope that medicine of you'n is thunderin' big. I'm thinkin' this ain't gonna be no easy trail fer you to foller."

"I ain't never whined fer things to be easy!"

"Well, I know that, hoss." Tom studied him a moment longer, then with his usual slow grin got up to fetch his buffalo robe. "All right, you knife-throwin' coyote, go at it. I reckon you'll make out."

Jim grinned back at him, feeling relieved. He pulled the grizzly-hide robe from his pack and they lay down with their feet to the fire, wrapping themselves against the cold of the coming night. Jim took a long look at the familiar humped shape of Tom's big shoulders under the buffalo robe beside him, then rolled to his back and watched the stars prick out one by one until they spangled the whole sky.

It's the last time, he kept thinking. Tomorrer we'll be goin' different ways, and I'll never lay here like this again.

Long after he thought Tom was asleep he heard his voice from the depths of the robe. All the humor was gone from it now. "Anyways, hoss, I reckon there jest ain't no easy trail leadin' down out'n the mountains. With the beaver all gone, the good old days is about over fer you and me both."

## Chapter III

---

Jim slept fitfully. At daybreak next morning he was off upstream to lift his traps. As if to underscore Tom's bleak words of last night, five of them were empty. But as he came to the place near the big mud-plastered lodge where he had set the sixth one, he saw that the trap pole was gone. He swore under his breath, then splashed into the water and peered about him in the gray half-light for the float stick. To snare one finally and then have it get away—! It was an anxious few minutes before he spotted the stick bobbing in a little eddy between two rocks, several yards downstream. By the time he had explored the bottom of the stream for five feet around it and finally located the trap, he was soaked from head to foot and all but frozen. But he was grinning as he hauled his beaver to the bank. It was a prime catch. It weighed sixty pounds if it weighed an ounce and had the finest pelt he had ever seen. A good omen! He made short work of skinning it, and hurried, shivering, back to camp.

Tom was there ahead of him, roasting buffalo ribs for breakfast. "Any luck, hoss?" he drawled.

"One. A good 'un. How about you?"

"Six empties."

Jim bent to tousle Moki's ears, feeling unhappy. Tom should

have got one too, this morning—just for a good sign. “Listen, Tom, you take that plew.”

“*Wagh!* Not much! I got too much to pack around as ’tis. Come git some grub, you coyote.”

With an uncertain smile, Jim did as he was told. He felt a little embarrassed in Tom’s presence after all that talking last night, and he ate in silence. But Tom paid no attention to that; his eyes were as bland and his drawl as careless as ever. While Jim set about rough curing the beaver pelt he gathered his possibles and began breaking camp as if this were the same as any other morning in the world.

Jim’s clothes were dry by the time he had the plew stretched on its willow hoop. He left Tom to quench the fire and went to free Buckskin from her stake. She was eager to be gone; she had been stamping and snuffing the wind restlessly, and tossing her wild white mane. Murmuring under his breath to soothe her, he strapped on the apishamore—the buffalo-hide blanket he used for a saddle. With a last caress of her sleek neck he whistled Moki to guard her while he dealt with the mule.

Rivers watched out of the corner of his eye, grinning as he tightened Tucky’s cinch.

Bad Medicine had already emerged from the thicket and was standing with apparent docility beside the pack. But at the first touch of Jim’s hands, he flattened his long ears, buckled his middle, and aimed a kick that would have broken a man’s leg had it landed. Tom’s laugh burst out as Jim, used to the ways of mules and of this one in particular, merely leaped clear, muttering a few remarks in the Crow tongue that would have singed holes in anything less tough than mule hide.

Tom strolled over, still shaking with laughter. “Here, hoss, I’ll blindfold that there primer donner for you this mornin’, seein’ as it’s the last time I’ll git to see the show.”

He did so quickly and efficiently with a strip of old blanket. By some mysterious mulish logic this convinced Bad Medicine that he was a pack animal instead of a spoiled beauty, and he stood quite still while Jim cinched the pack in place.

"I'm gonna miss that critter," Tom chuckled.

"By gor, you kin have him, then!"

Jim grinned and whipped the blindfold off, then with a last look around, vaulted to Buckskin's back. She was in swift motion almost before he was seated, and Bad Medicine, who loved her with that mad devotion possible only to a mule's heart, kept close behind as they started down the mountain-side toward the Powder River.

"Good day fer huntin', if we was to spot a elk," Tom remarked. "Lookee there, Moki's at it already."

Jim glanced down at the dog running along in front, tail aloft and nose to the ground. "Go find us a elk, Moki," he urged. "Go on, git at it."

Moki looked up absently out of his yellow eyes. His mind was on rabbits.

"Oh, well, I'm full anyhow," Tom drawled, and laughed.

It was so much like any other day—and yet it was the last. With every hoofbeat the final minutes of this good, familiar life were running out, the parting with Tom was drawing nearer.

They feigned indifference, both of them, until they descended the last slope and pulled up on the flat stretch beside the river. "Best let the hosses breathe a minute," Jim mumbled. He was feeling oddly short of breath himself.

"Yeah. Tucky's plum winded."

They sat in silence for a while, looking at the river, the wind in the treetops, the rumpled manes of their horses—anywhere but at each other. But finally Tom turned.

"Hoss, this is whar I head south."

"I reckon so, Tom."

"You sartin you don't want to come along with me?"

Jim hesitated, in spite of himself. Then his hand crept to his pouch, in which rested that powerful paper. He shook his head.

"Well—" Tom wheeled Tucky close to Buckskin's flank and thrust out his hand. Jim gripped it with all his strength. "Hoss," said Tom very softly, "take good keer of that medicine of your'n, you hear?"

Then he was gone, trotting swiftly through the leafless underbrush and yellowed grass, the familiar jingling of his traps growing fainter, his straight back and battered old hat smaller and smaller with distance.

Jim watched until a wooded bend in the river hid him from view. Then he swung Buckskin's head northwest, toward the Blue Mountains—beyond which lay The Dalles and, with luck, some white trader who could read writing. It took all his will to bring his heels back against the mare's flanks in the kick that would commit him, once and for all, to this strange new course. But once he was in motion, it seemed as though he could not go fast enough.

Something over a week later—it would have been less had he not been forced to stop and hunt—he reined Buckskin in on a promontory overlooking the dalles of the Columbia. There below him boiled the mighty river, thrashing and foaming between its towering black walls as it plunged into the cleft it had carved for itself through fifty miles of solid rock. This was the Columbia Gorge, most used passageway through the Cascade Mountains to the broad and fertile land bordering the Willamette River on the other side.

Close at hand, to the west, rose the Cascades themselves—shining with snow, impassable except at the gorge even for horsemen this time of year, difficult enough last summer when Jim and Tom had wandered over briefly in a vain search for



new trapping grounds. And back to the east stretched the two thousand man-killing, beast-killing miles wagons must travel to reach this spot from the States.

There were wagons here now, many of them. Jim could see them clustered there far below him, in the last nook short of the actual rapids. Crowded about the dark spots that were the few buildings in the settlement of The Dalles, they looked like stubby gray grubs around chips.

Jim started down the timbered slope, half eager, half frightened at the sight of those battered canvas tops.

In another half hour he was threading his way among them through a light misting rain, toward the largest of the log buildings—the trading post. As he rode, hands busy with his nervous mare, his eyes darted among the crowds of emigrants who were everywhere he looked; huddled over campfires, tending oxen, clustered in groups to look fearfully at the thundering river. Jim found himself breathing hard or else forgetting to breathe at all. So many people! Not mountain men or Indians or Mexicans like at Taos, but bourgeways from the States, folks dressed in fabrics instead of skins, wearing shoes and coats instead of moccasins and blankets and furs. Families. Women and children. He stared at them with sudden hunger, his pulse racing with the half-forgotten, half-familiar look of them. He had not seen a white woman or child for nine years.

They were staring at him, too, curiosity briefly erasing the lines of weariness from their faces as he passed.

Outside the trading post he tethered his animals to the rail and spoke sharply to Moki, who was bristling with suspicion and trying to keep an eye on all two or three hundred of the nearest bourgeways at once. Jim shared his uneasiness. His mouth was dry and he was sweating in the grizzly cloak, which had barely kept off the bitter wind ten minutes before. He shucked it off and flung it over Buckskin's back. Then

with a last hesitating glance around, he tucked his rifle into the crook of his arm and stepped into the post.

There were bourgeways here, too. The place was full of them. He flattened himself against the door as a group of three hurried past him—a sandy-haired young man and a woman, accompanied by a snub-nosed boy of about eleven with a mass of blond ringlets. The child stumbled as he went by and half fell against Jim, turned to pipe "'Scuse me," and stopped short to stare with great, wondering, gray-green eyes. Jim stared back, fighting a purely Indian impulse to touch and finger that unbelievable yellow hair.

Then the boy was gone, darting after his companions. Jim stepped inside, dodged another couple, and moved slowly toward the wooden counter. One quick glance located the trader, the same one who had been here last summer.

"Hello, Harris," Jim said in a voice that shook a little in spite of his best effort. He felt all these people were staring straight at him, though his common sense told him they were busy with their own affairs. He swallowed, and forced carelessness into his quiet tone. "I was wonderin' kin you read writin'."

"Yep, good as a perfesser." Harris, busy measuring out a length of calico for a huge, red-bearded man, didn't look up. "But I only trot out my learnin' fer them as makes it worth my while. You got any—"

Then he did look up, and stopped dead, his coarse, beefy face twisting with surprise. "Well, if it ain't Injun Jim!" he roared, dropping the calico. "Say, you ain't come back to finish off pore old White Bear, have you?"

"Who's White Bear?" muttered Jim. He was rigid with self-consciousness. At the man's bellow every head in the room had turned in his direction.

"Why, my old Chinook, White Bear! He's been a tol'able good Injun since you drapped around to teach 'im his manners

last summer, and he's the best canoer I got. Leave 'im keep his hair!"

Jim didn't like the trader's laughter. He remembered the incident now. The old Chinook had tried to steal Buckskin, and he'd put an arrow through his hat by way of discipline. "*Wagh!* I ain't after no hair!" he mumbled. "I want—"

He stopped, as his sharp ears picked up the familiar ominous sound of Moki's snarl. He grunted, wheeled, and was out of the room before the surprised trader could open his mouth.

The instant he hit the open air he was conscious of danger. He had cocked his rifle even before his eyes focused on the scene before him—Moki crouched with bared teeth beside Buckskin and the mule, holding at bay one frightened little boy with curly blond hair. Behind the child stood the couple Jim had encountered in the doorway. The man, white faced, held a pistol leveled at Moki's head.

With a yell of rage Jim sprang forward. He seized the man's wrist and wrenched it upward as the pistol roared in his ear. Half deafened, he barely heard the woman's scream, the sound of shouts, and running footsteps.

The fellow was struggling angrily in his grasp. "Let go of me, you fool! It's a wolf!"

"Wolf, *wagh!*" Jim flung down the wrist he held, sending the pistol clattering to the ground. With a moccasined toe he flipped the weapon out of reach. "Yer the fool," he remarked. "That's my dog."

There was a moment's silence as the man's pale eyes shifted from Jim to Moki and back again. "Dog?" he echoed.

"What's goin' on?"

"What's wrong here?"

The crowd was gathering. Jim glanced up, snapped his rifle to his shoulder, and saw the first arrivals stop in their tracks and then fall back a pace. At the same time he gave the low whistle that released Moki from his duty. As the dog

came trotting forward, wagging his tail and whining a relieved greeting, the astonishment on the faces before Jim suddenly struck his boisterous Indian sense of humor. He grinned broadly as he lowered the gun. To his surprise, an answering grin spread over the face of the golden-haired little boy.

"Say!" breathed the boy. "He *is* a dog, ain't he? I guess I made him mad, but I never meant to. I only tried to pet that horse there. Is it your horse? My, but she's pretty. I—"

"That'll do! You get on back to your folks now, d'you hear?" The woman's eyes flashed suspiciously at Jim as she reached for the child's collar and hustled him through the crowd and away. The man retrieved his pistol and stood a moment, glaring at Jim.

"Dog or wolf, the critter's a menace," he said. "Oughter be tied up."

"By golly, you're right," muttered somebody else. "These wild Injuns and their hounds—!"

"Y'ask me, they *both* oughter be tied up!" said a louder voice. "'Ja see him aim that rifle point blank at us a minute ago? Why, he blame near—"

"Leave 'im be, folks, I know 'im, it's jest Injun Jim." This was the trader's rasping voice from the doorway of the post. "Yer hair's safe if you don't touch that horse of his'n."

He went back into the building and the men scattered reluctantly, casting hostile glances over their shoulders as they lumbered away in their cracked and broken greenhorn's boots. Jim turned to quiet the nervous mare, glaring scornfully now at the wagons and their owners. Bourgeways! he thought. What've they got to be so git-out'n-the-road about? Ain't got the sense to know a dog from a wolf, tucker themselves out wearin' factory boots in moccasin country . . . He felt his anger dissolve into a nagging uneasiness. "Injun Jim!" He was as white as these folks, even his medicine was white—

He frowned, his mind suddenly full of that unread paper. Where was this mysterious valley, and how did one get there? He had to know. He must go back to the post.

He dug one of the smaller pelts out of his possibles, wondering what Harris would consider "worth his while." Everything in him bucked and shied at the idea of entrusting his magic paper to that peddler. Under ordinary circumstances he would no more have showed it to him than he would have revealed the contents of his medicine bundle.

To quiet his uneasiness he took the bundle from his pouch and tied it under his left braid. It calmed him a little, but he had felt less vulnerable prowling among enemy lodges, a stolen horse trailing from each hand.

Back in the post, the big red-bearded man was paying for his calico with a bag of gunpowder. He looked around, and so did everyone else in the place, as Jim tossed his beaver on the counter in front of the trader.

"I want somethin' read to me," Jim said quietly.

"You back agin?" Harris dropped the bag of gunpowder into a drawer and propped his elbows on the counter, grinning. "Awright, where's yer pay? This here plew? Why, shucks, that ain't enough fer *my* readin'. I—"

"I reckon it's enough," Jim said, very softly.

Harris glanced at his face. "Awright, awright. It's enough this time." He flipped the plew to one side and reached across the counter, winking at the man with the red beard, who stood nearest. "Le's have yer piece of writin'. What is it, a billy-doo from some little Digger squaw?"

"No it ain't!" Jim felt the hot blood climb to his hairline. He drew the paper from his pouch. There would be specific directions in it—rivers named, mountains identified; perhaps a promise of much beaver. Did he want to share it with all those bourgeway eyes and ears behind him?

But Harris already had the paper. He opened it with careless fingers and began to read loudly. "*Jim, if you're still alive come help us. Pa's been dead three year and mother—*"

"Mother?" Jim gasped. "Wait, that's private—gimme that—"

Harris only bellowed louder "*—and mother died two months ago. We buried her by the—*"

Something exploded in Jim's head. Before he knew he had moved, his knife was at Harris' fat throat. "*Gimme—my—letter,*" he breathed into a sudden dead silence.

The trader's body went rigid, his eyes glassy as they clung to that poised brown fist and the steel that glinted from it, then moved upward to meet Jim's stare. Abruptly his face was bathed in sweat. Slowly, careful to move nothing but his hand, he extended the paper. Jim snatched it and turned a face like stone to that roomful of alien eyes and ears. Blindly he pushed through them and was gone.

A stir rippled over the room as people let go their held breaths and shot glances at one another. "By golly, Harris," muttered somebody. "You nigh got what you asked for that time!"

Harris said nothing. He was sagging on the counter, moping at his white face. But the big red-bearded man, darting him one look of contempt, moved quietly through the crowd and out the door.

The trampled mud was under Jim's moccasins, the cold wind on his back, his hands moving over Buckskin's warm, muscled neck in a pretense of adjusting her halter. Even when the worst of his outrage had passed, he stood sick and empty. He raised the crumpled note and stared at it hopelessly. Mother dead. Buried. He had to know the rest. But how? Fifteen armed Sioux couldn't drag him back to that post.

There was a footstep, then a slow, quiet voice at his elbow. "Son, I reckon you must be Jim Keath."

He wheeled to face the huge, red-bearded man who had watched it all. For a moment he stared into grave but gentle blue eyes. Then the man said, "My name's Rutledge, son. I knew your mother. Will you let me read that to you?"

A great, painful knot untied itself in Jim's chest. Wordlessly he handed the paper over.

Rutledge smoothed it, his eyes clinging for an instant to Jim's braids and coup feather before they turned to the message.

*"Jim, if you're still alive, come help us," he read. "Pa's been dead three year, and mother died on the trail two months ago. We buried her beside the Sweetwater. Now me and Sally and Dan'l is all that's left. We are just across the Snake bound for the Willamette Valley, and none of us old enough to claim land after we get there, except you. If you ever cared anything for mother or any of us, then come. It's our only chance. Jonnie."*

There was a silence in which even the roar of the river seemed to recede into a far and dreamlike whisper. Then Rutledge's big hands folded the note, carefully and slowly, and handed it back. His face was troubled but kind.

"They're here in The Dalles now, son," he said softly. "You want I should take you to 'em?"

Jim nodded. His breath was deep and hard, his whole mind full of awe. He knew now which valley he must go to, and why everything had happened just as it had. He was to find Jonnie again, that's what the paper meant. He was to go home. His medicine was more powerful than he had dreamed.

## Chapter IV

---

Dusk was gathering over the broad sloping area between river and hills where the wagon train was encamped.

There was a curious disheveled air about the place. Wagons angled this way and that under the dripping trees; oxen and cattle bawled mournfully; campfires sparked here and there through the gloom; and people moved about them wearily.

"It's ever' family for itself now," Rutledge was saying as he led the way over the muddy, uneven ground. "The train's busted up. Folks got to tackle this gorge the best they know how, ain't no way to go it together. Jonnie and me's been plannin' to team up on our raft—build it big enough for both families, if we can. I reckon we'll find him at my wagon now. We was gonna talk about it some more this evenin'—"

Jim, moving silent as a shadow at his side, with Moki close at heel and Buckskin and the mule clopping behind, was grateful for the quiet, steadying rumble of the man's voice, though he only half listened to the words. His mouth was dry. Would he know Jonnie, after all these years? He groped after fragments of memory—a tousled dark head in the next cot, loud arguments about chores or beanshooters or who broke the window, low-voiced talk after the candles were out at night. But Jonnie's face remained blurred and featureless, save for black eyes with thick black lashes. How far away it all was.



" . . . been a mighty hard trail for Jonnie—for all of 'em—since your mother died," Rutledge was saying. "They're fine kids. I've raised three myself and I know. Ain't a soul in the wagon train wouldn't stake his last ox on Jonnie Keath. And Sally—well, she's got more grit than many a man I know . . ."

Sally. A seven-year-old with a mop of yellow curls, a childish treble, "Mama, them boys! They've woke the baby."

Jim stopped walking. Baby? Yes, Dan'l. The letter had mentioned him: "Me and Sally and Dan'l is all that's left." The three of them on their own from the Sweetwater to the Cascades! A sense of guilt, powerful as it was unexpected, filled Jim suddenly. It alarmed and bewildered him. His fingers tightened on his rifle, his glance flashed over trees, sullen sky, mud, and trampled grass, then lit on Rutledge's burly figure half turning to wait for him a few steps ahead.

"Somethin' wrong, son?" came the deep quiet voice.

Jim shook his head. Nothing was wrong, he was just jumpy. He moistened stiff lips and moved forward. "Let's git on with it. How much further?"

"Just yonder. That's my wagon by the pine trees—now don't let that bunch of people bother you none. Looks like a crowd but it ain't nobody but my family and a few folks from our train. Just neighbors dropped in, likely to borrry somethin'."

Jim hardly heard the low, reassuring flow of words as they neared the wagon. A snatch of melody drifted toward them on the chilly wind and Rutledge chuckled.

"Yep, he's there, all right. That's Jonnie, son, that's him singin'. Hear the banjo? I tell you, that banjo's seen the lot of us through some rough times . . ."

The melody came and went, half lost in the noise of the river and the spurts of conversation coming from the direction of the wagon, winding in and out among the other sounds like a bright thread of embroidery. The voice was lusty and

careless, interrupted now and again by little flurries of laughter; Jonnie's voice, deep as a man's. He'd be seventeen by now.

Jim tied his animals to one of the pines, his eyes on the fire crackling over there, on the figures moving back and forth or lounging under the pine trees. He could smell food cooking, hear scraps of talk. "Now where's that clasp knife? La, I had it right here—" "It's the cattle worries me, Ned. *They* can't ride no raft, we'll hafta—" "Sam, gimme a lift with this—"

Then Jim felt Rutledge's hand on his shoulder as they pushed through a stretch of low bushes, and a few minutes later he stepped full into that blaze of firelight. Heads turned, talk trailed off, the music died. Dazzled by the glare, Jim flung a confused glance around the ring of faces, seeing only blurs.

"It's your brother, Jonnie," he heard Rutledge saying. "Your brother. He's come."

The fire snapped, sounding like a gunshot. Then a tall boy rose slowly to his feet and stood there, the banjo trailing from one hand. For an instant Jim forgot to breathe. He could have sworn he was looking straight at his long-dead uncle, Adam Russell.

He stared at the long legs, wide shoulders, tumbled black hair. They were Uncle to the life. So were the jutting nose and straight dark brows. But the furrows of forty years of hard living were absent; these cheeks were smooth with youth. And instead of Uncle's hawk eyes, here were those thick-lashed black ones he remembered. They were going over him slowly, numbly, from coup feather to moccasins.

"Good lord a'mighty," said Jonathan.

Something in his tone killed the eager greeting on Jim's lips. With an effort he got one word out. "Hello—Jonnie."

He took an uncertain step forward, stopped, then took another. Jonnie suddenly dropped the banjo. "Jim—" he said hoarsely. "*Jim!*" Then he was moving, too, kicking aside a

heap of brushwood that lay in his path, somehow conveying the impression that had a mountain stood there, he would have kicked that aside too. His hand reached out; it was square and muscular and bony like the rest of him, burned dark by months of travel. In another stride Jim was beside him, gripping it.

For a moment they stood silent, taut as two bowstrings, staring at each other. Jonathan spoke jerkily at last.

"Jim, by all that's holy! Never reckoned to see you again in this life. Ain't sure you're real— What's the matter? You're shakin'."

"Well, thunder, you gimme a turn. Yer the spit of Uncle."

"Oh. Yeah, I've heard that. Mother used to say so . . ."

The words trailed off. Suddenly neither could find anything to say. Jonnie freed his hand and wiped both palms on his shabby jeans in a gesture Jim found vividly familiar. Jonnie used to do that as a child, whenever he was wrought up, crammed full of something he couldn't handle.

He exploded into speech. "Mean to tell me you got that letter of mine? Or did you just happen to turn up here?"

"Got the letter."

"Crimeny! How? All that country—I figgered that trapper'd never find you, even if you was still alive. How'd he—"

"Sent Injuns with it. Hervey knowed whar I was, within a hundred mile or so."

"A hundred mile!" Jonathan laughed nervously. "You talk like they was a signpost on ever' mountain."

"Is, onct you git to know 'em." We'll start feelin' easier pretty soon, Jim thought. We just got to git used to each other agin, that's all. "Did—was it a rough trip out?" he asked.

Jonnie shrugged. "We got here. Wagon turned over onct, comin' down Windlass Hill. Nearly lost a ox crossin' the Snake."

"Some river, that Snake."

"Yeah, dunno a worse ford anywheres. That ox of mine, the blamed old goat, he . . ."

Jonnie's voice went on jerkily, but Jim lost track of what he was saying because Jonnie's glance was going over him, this time clinging to his braids and his medicine bundle and his claw necklace with a fierce intensity.

"By the almighty, you've done some changin'," Jonnie said slowly. "What in the name of—" But he didn't say what he'd started to. Instead he stirred, darted a sidewise glance at the ring of faces around them, and muttered, "Say, let's get out of here."

His words produced an awkward flurry among the watchers. Women began to bustle toward the cook pots, men became absorbed in the examination of wagon wheels and their own muddy boots. Jonathan strode off to fetch his banjo, moving with that brusque, shoving gait of his. He walked like a man up to his knees in swift water. Jim, watching every move, noticed that he was limping. On the way back Jonnie stopped beside Rutledge.

"We'll have that talk of ours later, shall we?"

"Sure, sure. I'll come around after supper, Jonnie."

"Yeah, do. Bring Ned." Jonathan moved on, beckoning Jim with a jerk of his head. "Our wagon ain't far, just over yonder a piece. Sally's there."

Jim nodded, his mind a ferment of unfamiliar emotions. This young brother of his had grown up into somebody, all right. He thought of Rutledge's words, "Ain't a man in our wagon train wouldn't stake his last ox on Jonnie Keath." And Jonnie's own grim "Well, we got here." Jonnie would get where he set out to get, you could tell that from his walk and the set of his chin. There was a streak of iron in him that hadn't been there when they were youngsters, and there was something else, too, something that made him look less like Uncle at

times and more like Pa. Jonnie could throw a look at you that was like a blow. Maybe it wasn't going to be easy, this coming home.

The thought took root and grew disquietingly, all but blotting out Jim's familiar world of sensation. The river's thunder, a pine branch that caught at his rifle, the shape of a twig under his moccasin, all had a curious remoteness, as if his body and mind had temporarily parted company. He was almost surprised, when they stepped past the wagon into the chilly dusk, to find that busy corner of his brain functioning as usual, automatically reporting a north wind and the scampering passage of a squirrel.

He frowned. Running into Jonnie after all these years was kind of a shock, that was all. They'd both changed, sure. Nothing so queer about that. It'd been a thunderin' long time.

"You got any belongin's?" Jonathan was asking as they started back through the scrubby bushes.

"Yeah. Tied my critters to a tree over this-a-way. I'll fetch 'em."

Jim swerved to the right, where Buckskin's pale shape loomed ahead in the dusk. But he slowed and then stood still. One of many unasked questions was pounding too hard to be delayed. "How'd it happen—with Mother?" he blurted. "Injuns, or—"

Jonathan shook his head. "She was sick back in Missouri, Jim. One reason we left. She kept havin' this fever. Seemed like she was better for a while, crossin' the Plains, but then—I dunno. I guess it was just too hard."

"It's hard country," Jim muttered. After a moment he added, "Wisht I'd a been there."

"So do I," Jonathan said grimly. "She couldn't talk about nothin' else."

"She wanted to see me?"

Jonathan turned slowly and looked at him as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Yeah," he said at last. "She wanted to see you. She never quit wantin' to."

They stared at each other a moment. "Well, I wisht I'd knowed that," Jim mumbled at last. "I didn't know." He cleared his throat roughly and started walking again. "How come you to head out here, anyways?"

"Oh, a lot of reasons." Jonnie shoved along beside him, swinging the banjo. "We lost the farm when Pa died, three year back. And—"

"Thunder! You did? Whar you been livin'?"

"Here and there, anyplace I could find work. Council Bluffs, St. Louie—I loaded river boats a while there, done farm work up around Independence. Kept hearin' Oregon talk, free land, mild winters and all—sounded mighty good. We finally just packed up and started."

"By gor, I'll say you got nerve."

Jonathan smiled one-sidedly. "'Bout *all* we got, now. Broke, clothes all wore out." He halted and turned, the smile gone. "Can't even get the land, now mother's gone. You gotta be eighteen to sign them papers, and I lack six blasted months." He hesitated, then burst out, "Jim, you aim to get that land for us?"

"Why, sure. If that's what you want."

The depth of Jonnie's relief showed in every line of his body. "It's what I want, all right. By golly, it's all I need, just that land. I'll do the rest without no favors from nobody. Come on, come on, let's get movin'. I wanta tell Sally."

Jim led the way, wondering at such enthusiasm for a job he wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. Farming! Starting from scratch, too. Clearing land. He wondered if Jonnie knew how thick the trees grew in that valley. Then he decided it wouldn't matter if they grew three to the inch—not to Jonnie, it wouldn't.

Preoccupied, he forgot to warn Moki as they stepped around the last thicket. The dog glimpsed a stranger lurking behind his master, and drew his own conclusions. With a snarl he lunged straight at Jonathan's throat. Jim swung an arm violently backward, sending Jonnie staggering; next instant he had Moki by the scruff. A sharp swat and a sharper command restored discipline.

"What the devil?" Jonathan grunted. "You keep timber wolves for pets?"

"It's a *dog*. Stay there, Moki." Jim brushed past, suddenly irritable, to yank the mare's bridle free. He'd had about enough remarks about Moki today. But he could hardly blame Jonathan. "Moki ain't used to so many people around," he said by way of apology. "He'll be all right onct he gits to sniff you."

"Well, suppose we get it over with right now. I'd as soon keep my skin whole."

Jim smiled briefly. "All right. C'mere, Moki."

With a firm grasp on the coarse fur, he allowed Moki to investigate Jonathan's hands and clothing, talking softly meanwhile in Crow, and waiting until the dog's bristling died down and the plummy tail began to thump amiably.

"He'll be friends now," he said, straightening.

"What was you sayin' to him?" Jonnie demanded.

"Oh, just calmin' him down."

"That was Injun talk, wasn't it?"

Jim suddenly wished he'd used English. "Yeah. Crow."

He waited uncomfortably, but Jonathan turned back to the dog. "Guess he's decided I'm all right. Let's go." He took a step, then stopped. "What about Sally? He gonna jump at her like that too?"

"Naw, I'll watch him." The doubt in Jonathan's expression made Jim add, "I won't bite her neither."

Jonnie laughed and turned away hastily, but the flush that

crept up over his cheekbones told Jim he'd struck home. Jim knew that look, he'd had it turned on him many times, not always by bourgeways. Usually it amused him and suited his purposes. This time it was wrong, all wrong.

He tugged on Buckskin's bridle and they headed southeast, away from the river. As they walked along in the gray half-light he let his eyes travel covertly over the threadbare shirt and jeans, the wide shoulders and flat belly that belonged to this grown-up Jonnie. How much of that iron had been in him before he started west? There was a lot of country between here and Missouri; you forgot what it could do to people until you saw its mark on somebody who wasn't used to it. If it didn't make wolf's meat out of them it whittled them down to bone and muscle like this. And all because they fought it like an enemy instead of learning to live with it. You had to give in, fit yourself to it. Injuns knew how, they'd always known. Mountain men found out mighty soon. But bourgeways were too stubborn—or too proud—to change their ways. They had nerve, all right, but they were fools to make so much extra trouble for themselves.

Looked like Jonnie had extra trouble all right, foot trouble. Jim shot a glance downward. Factory boots! Broken and half gone. Jonnie was limping bad and trying to hide it. Still fighting.

"What's the matter with yer feet?" Jim grunted.

Jonathan gave a short laugh. "What *ain't* the matter with 'em!"

"You got oxen to haul you, ain't you?"

"They haul our stuff. We mostly stroll alongside."

Some stroll, thought Jim. Two thousand miles. "Why'n't you ride horseback?" he demanded.

"Don't own a horse." Jonathan's eyes strayed to Buckskin, as they had often in the past few minutes. "I see you got yourself a good 'un! Where'd you buy her?"



"Buy?" repeated Jim. He almost laughed. The Crows—himself among them—were the most talented horse stealers on the Plains. "You can't buy no horse like that one."

"Where'd you get her, then?"

"Stole her, a-course."

Jonathan stopped in his tracks. "You *what*?"

Now then, by gor! thought Jim with satisfaction. That impresses him! "Why, I stole her. From a Crow warrior," he added, in case Jonnie might underestimate the coup. He waited, with an eagerness that surprised himself, for dawning respect to break over his brother's face. But something was wrong.

"What about the mule?" Jonnie said. "Did you steal that too?"

"No. Give thirty plews fer it, Taos Valley."

"Thirty what?"

"Plews! Beaver." Don't he know *nothin*? thought Jim.

"Oh, beaver." Jonathan continued to stand there, studying him with that peculiar expression. Maybe Jonnie hadn't heard about the Crows. Jim elaborated.

"'Taint as easy as it sounds. Tom Rivers, he used to say it took a Crow to steal a Comanche's horse, and there warn't Injun nor white could steal a Crow's. Well, I done it. Cut her right off'n his lodge while he was settin' inside."

Still no awed admiration dawned on Jonnie's face. "Who's Tom Rivers?" he murmured.

"Trapper I know."

Jim turned and started on again. Why, he didn't know Jonnie at all, any more. They were strangers. What was Jonnie thinking, anyhow?

Jim was suddenly and desperately homesick for Tom, and for the old, drifting, uncomplicated life, and the smell of beavertail bubbling over the fire. His stomach twisted with hunger and he realized he was smelling food from all direc-

tions. He could spot three or four wagons among the trees nearby and each one had a pot of something cooking. Not beavertail, not anything he recognized, though the odor nudged something far back in his memory. He glanced around, about to ask Jonathan what it was, and felt a twinge of sympathy. Jonnie was sniffing hard. He looked nigh starved, all right. Likely the others were too. The others— Would Sally stare at him that queer way? He wished he could think what that baby looked like.

He turned, struck by a sudden thought. "By gor. The little one—Dan'l—how old is he, anyway?"

"Eleven."

Eleven! And Sally would be—fifteen? Jim made another hasty mental readjustment and found himself staring once more into the yawning gap of those nine years. It seemed to be getting wider all the time.

"What's he look like, Jonnie?"

"Oh, just a young 'un. Growin' out of his clothes—got yaller hair like Mother's."

Jim slowed, his mind full of a sudden clear image—the little golden-haired boy at the post. At the same moment Jonathan swung around. "I bet you seen him a'ready. He was tellin' us earlier about some tangle with a wolf and a Inj—"

There was an abrupt, strained silence. Jim stood there grimly, watching a dark flush spread over Jonathan's face. All right, it was out in the open. Best get it cleared up once and for all.

"A wolf and a Injun, is that it?" he said.

"Yeah," said Jonathan. Suddenly he burst out, "The kid made a mistake, but I can't blame him. You do look Injun, blamed if you don't! More Injun than white! What's happened to you, anyways, Jim? I don't know you no more. Where you been? How you been livin' all this time? Crimeny, you just dropped outa sight and never even said good-by. I

thought you was dead long since. I just knew you was, 'cause you never come home nor sent word nor nothin'. Why don'tcha *tell* me?"

"Ain't much to tell, Jonnie."

"They's plenty, from the look of you. Let's have it. You run off with Uncle, didn't you? We figgered out that much."

"Yeah. Up the Missouri into Blackfoot country, then acrost into Absaroka and out agin—we trapped about a year, I reckon. Bill Hervey was with us, and some others. We was workin' up along Wind River when we got separated—"

"Separated? How?"

"Well, a grizzly busted up our camp one night. Uncle and the others got away, and—I didn't. I killed the critter, though, and after while some Crows run acrost me layin' there, lucky fer me. They tuck me home with 'em, and made some big medicine, and I got well. Tuck a while, though. Most all summer."

"Crimeny, Jim! You lived with them devils a whole summer?"

"What'd'ya mean, devils?" snapped Jim.

Jonnie's eyes widened, then gradually went expressionless. He murmured, "Sorry."

"I lived with 'em six year," Jim said.

Jonnie didn't move or answer, but he looked as if he'd been hit in the face.

Jim took a long breath and went on. "Well, then a couple year ago I run away from them too, and started trappin' agin with Tom Rivers. But it warn't like it used to be, there ain't no beaver noways, the trade's done fer. Tom and me, we was breakin' camp fer good, and I didn't know whar I was headin'. Then yer letter come and I lit out down here to git it read to me, and—"

"Read *to* you?" exploded Jonathan. "Good crimeny, Jim, Pa taught you to read!"

"I forgot. Thunderation, Jonnie, there warn't no books whar I was!"

Jonathan's shoulders sagged. He muttered, "Go on."

Ever'thing I say is wrong, Jim thought. He shrugged carelessly. "That's all," he grunted.

After a while Jonnie turned away, rubbing his palms on his jeans in that old gesture. "Yeah. Well, it's quite a bit, ain't it. Like I said. Well, let's get on."

He started walking again, toward a wagon half hidden in a clump of straggly pines. It had a big triangular stain on its top, and in the silence of the short walk Jim memorized every dreary dip and curve of its outline. When they were almost there Jonathan stopped and spoke in a strained voice.

"I think I better go first, Jim. Kinda warn Sally you're comin'. She don't remember you at all, y'know, and—"

"Go ahead," Jim snapped.

He stood there waiting, mechanically noting the scurry of a lizard, a couple of blurred and stubby footprints near an overturned stone, the strong smell of oxen. He fingered his braids, wishing he had switches to work into them so they'd hang looped and glossy to his knees like a warrior's ought to, since Jonnie kept staring at them anyway.

The devil with Jonnie, he thought restlessly. I don't care what they're sayin' over yonder.

One of the footprints had a long, wiggly indentation across the heel, and there were a number of slits in the earth nearby, as if a knife had been repeatedly jabbed in and pulled out. Jim thought, I only come here 'cause the medicine said to, anyhow. I don't need to worry about no bourgeways. I'll git 'em in shape and through the gorge and claim their land like I said I would. Then after that I'll lift my own traps and they kin lift theirs. Don't matter to me what Jonnie thinks.

Yonder, in that bare space, was where the oxen had been grazing. Somebody had moved them around the wagon not

five minutes ago; there was mud still crumbling into a deep hoof track. Jim made an exhaustive study of it, burying far, far down in his heart the knowledge that what Jonnie thought might matter more than anything had ever mattered before.

## Chapter V

---

Jim's defenses were built high and double thick by the time Jonathan appeared around the wagon. He flipped Buckskin's bridle over a branch and leaving Moki on guard, moved past the high, battered wheels. Sally was just another stranger; let her look him over as much as she liked. He was prepared for it.

But he was not prepared for the attack of shyness that laid hold of him the instant he saw her. She stood alone and tense beneath the gloomy pines—a tiny, fair-haired figure, straight as a ramrod. Her hair, like their mother's, framed her face in crisp, sun-bleached tendrils, then fell in a honey-colored cascade. She wore a sky-blue dress whose shabbiness Jim never saw. One look at Sally, and all the bead-bedecked Crow girls in Absaroka seemed gawky and overgrown, homely as mud.

My sister, he thought incredulously.

He moved toward her, noting the level brows, the firm, almost fierce little chin, the wide eyes— He halted abruptly. Those eyes were looking straight into his, and they were bright with hostility. She was his enemy before they'd spoken a word.

Jonnie stepped past him. "Sis, ain't you gonna say hello?"

She must have heard the nudge in his tone, for she managed a brief and unconvincing smile. "Of course. Hello, James."

"James?" gasped Jim. She couldn't have staggered him more completely with a war club.

"Why, ain't that right? It's what mother always called you."

"Yeah," Jim said through his teeth. By gor, the place was full of ghosts! First Uncle, then Pa, now Mother—the most disquieting one of all. "I ain't heard the name for years. I'm Jim now."

"Oh."

Her look took in his braids and feather, the buckskins greasy from many wipings of his knife. Her nostrils quivered slightly, and for the first time in years Jim was conscious of the wild, animal odor of castoreum that always clung about him. He edged downwind of her, under the pretext of examining the wagon.

"Pretty beat up by this time, ain't it?" commented Jonathan. "But I reckon it'll hold out till we reach the valley. Say, sis, you got no fire. Run out of wood?"

"Dan'l's fetchin' some," Sally murmured. Was she afraid of him, or only distrustful? Trying in vain to guess what might go on in the mind of a small, golden-haired, white squaw, Jim paid scant attention to Jonathan's questions about the rapids in the gorge, and his own mumbled replies. This was all wrong—everybody stiff and uncomfortable, miles from understanding each other and not even knowing how to start trying. Maybe Jonathan and Sally didn't want to try.

He heard a light footstep and turned to find Sally at his side. Her erect little head barely reached his shoulder. "I hope," she said, "our letter didn't interfere with no plans of yours."

"No."

"Where do you—live?"

He shrugged and nodded vaguely toward the continent east of them. "Anywhere they's beaver. Right now that means nowheres."

"James, what happened to Uncle?"

"He got scalped." It sounded blunter than he'd intended, but every time she called him "James" it rattled him. Hurriedly, he added, "He didn't feel nothin'. He had a arrer in his brain."

His awkward attempt to smooth things over took the remaining color from Sally's cheeks. "Injuns!" she said. "My stars, I can't see how—" She stopped abruptly, drawing a long breath. "Jonnie says you're gonna go clear to the valley with us, and claim our land."

"That's the idee, I reckon."

"We lost the old farm. Did you know that?"

"Not till today."

She looked at him a moment, clearly stifling a dozen questions she didn't quite dare ask. "You sure been gone a long time," she murmured resentfully.

Jonnie stirred, and said, "Sis—"

"Well, it's true, ain't it?" She whirled back to Jim. "Why didn't you ever come home to see Mother?"

He didn't know the answer to that, so he kept still. But Jonnie broke in brusquely, "Look, sis, the main thing is, he's come now. Let's get some supper goin'. Blast it, where's Dan'l? He go to Jericho to get that wood?"

"He'll be here directly," Sally mumbled. She turned in a little swirl of blue skirts and started to climb into the wagon, but hesitated. "We're much obliged to you—for comin' now," she said, civilly but as firmly as if she were marking a line on the ground and daring him to cross it. Then she disappeared into the wagon.

Jim said, "She thinks a heap of me a'ready, don't she?"

"Give her time, Jim," muttered Jonnie. He turned and walked over to a log that lay beside the ashes of last night's fire, dropping down on it with a grunt of weariness.

Jim followed him. "What makes her call me 'James'?" he burst out.



Jonathan shrugged. "She's heard about you all her life by that name. Mother always called you James."

"Well, thunder, you never did!"

"I never talked about you," Jonathan said.

So that was that.

In a moment Sally emerged from the wagon with her apron full of something, peering off toward the south. "Well finally!" she exclaimed. "Yonder comes Dan'l."

Jim turned. If Dan'l were that nice little kid at the post. . . . Yes, here came the same boy, his head like a spot of sunshine in the dreary tangle of trees and mud and wagons.

"'Bout time!" Jonnie grunted. He got up again and started around the wagon, no longer able to hide his painful limping. "We'll have a fire goin' soon, at any rate. But I better move them oxen first."

Jim made a sudden decision. "No," he said. "You better git off'n them feet, that's what you better do. I'm gonna fix the far. And the oxen got plenty grass right where they're at."

"That's right," Sally said slowly. "I moved 'em a few minutes before you come. But—how'd *you* know it?"

Jim thought of that hoofprint—plain as day and twice as obvious—and wondered how anybody could help knowing it. But he said only, "Stay off'n them feet, Jonnie," and strode past the wagon and into the trees to tether his animals for the night, and unload the mule. It was clear to him that there would be no happy home-coming yet a while. Jonathan and Sally had each other. He meant little to them except a means of getting their land.

All right, he thought, giving Bad Medicine an unnecessarily rough push. Want him or not, they needed him. They needed him to claim that land, they needed him to help them through the gorge, and they needed him to get them in shape before they could start. They didn't even know how much they needed him.

But he was going to show them.

When he came back, carrying his possibles and clutching Moki firmly by the scruff of the neck, he found Dan'l there.

"That's the one!" cried the boy. "That's the dog I was tellin' you—" The rest trailed away as he gazed up at Jim. "You really our brother?" he inquired softly.

"Yep." Nothing to dread here, that was plain at once. Jim dumped his pack. Now for a start on all that had to be done. Better settle Moki first. "Come over here," he told Dan'l. "You kin pet the dog now."

Dan'l and Moki took to each other as readily as Dan'l and Jim had done. Sally's turn came next, and though she eyed the big beast with suspicion, she showed no sign of flinching. Jonathan had taken Jim's advice and was sitting beside her on a flat stone near the wagon, his feet stretched out gingerly in front of him, his hands busy splicing a length of rope.

"You notice I ain't arguin' with you on who'll build the fire," he remarked with a grin. "I feel like I got stumps instead of feet. Sally'll have the grub ready by the time you get it goin'. Dan'l, let's have that wood."

The boy ran to get the wood he had dumped. Jim followed to the fallen log, where the old ashes were, conscious of Sally murmuring something to Jonathan as he moved away. They began to talk in low tones, too indistinctly for him to hear.

The boy staggered back with the wood. Jim tossed half of it aside and began arranging a few sticks like the spokes of a wheel. "Say, is that the way you build a fire?" asked the boy in surprise, squatting down nearby. "Jonnie allus piles on a whole lot, so's it'll burn up bright."

"White man's fire," grunted Jim. "So big you can't git near it to warm yourself."

He moved a little distance away and came back with a handful of dry bunch grass, which he twisted into a little nest, the

boy watching every move and chattering eagerly. "We had *real* big fires at night on the trail. And guards to watch for Injuns. Jonnie was a guard lots of times, and I pertected sis. That was after—after Mama went away. Jonnie took care of both of us, and the oxen and the wagon and ever'thing, all the way from the Sweetwater. He can play a banjo, too."

"Jonnie's quite a guy, ain't he?" Jim murmured.

"Yeah, I'll say. Hey, where'd you get them scars on your forehead?"

"Grizzly slapped me."

"Cr-acky! What'd you do?"

"Killed 'im." Jim had filled the nest with bits of punk from his pouch, and now was striking sparks into it with flint and steel. When it began to smolder he waved it in the air until it burst into flame, then thrust it into the pile of twigs underneath the logs.

"Jonnie killed a wolf onct," Dan'l said thoughtfully. He peered again at the scars. "They ain't new, are they? Look all healed up."

Jim answered absently, his mind half on the low-toned conversation behind him, half on the wood, which was too wet to catch well. "No, they ain't new. I was just a young'un when that happened. 'Bout yer age, little older."

There, it was burning all right now. He started to rise, and caught sight of Dan'l's face. "What's up?" he inquired, startled.

"You fought a *grizzly*?" cried the boy. "When you was just *my* age?"

An unfamiliar warmth flowed through Jim. He grinned and shrugged. "Well, it was him er me." A notion struck him suddenly. "Lemme see yer shoe. The left 'un."

Dan'l looked at him in surprise, then obeyed. There was a deep, wiggly scratch across the bottom of the worn leather

heel—the same as had showed on those footprints behind the wagon. Jim squatted down again, smiling. “What’ja find under that big rock this afternoon? Grubworms?”

Dan’l’s eyes widened to twice their size. “Beetles,” he answered mechanically. “Say, how’d you—”

“What was that knife game you was playin’?”

“Mumblety-peg,” gulped Dan’l. He fished a clasp knife out of his pocket. “You take a-holt of the blade, see, and—” He demonstrated, producing a series of slits identical with the ones Jim had noticed earlier.

“Want to learn a new trick or two?” Jim asked him.

“Sure!”

“Look. Hold it this-a-way. See that bug crawlin’ up the tree yonder?”

“Yeah, I see ’im. He’s— *Cracky!*” Dan’l stood frozen. The small black bug was sliced exactly in half by a quivering blade. Slowly he turned back to Jim. “Could I do that?”

“I’ll teach you.”

“I’d as soon you didn’t!” cut in Sally’s emphatic voice. She was standing beside Jonathan. Both of them were staring from Jim to the knife. He rose, his face settling into its impassive mask.

“F’ar’s ready fer cookin’,” he remarked.

Sally came forward, carrying a skillet full of white knobby objects that must be supper. “What’s that?” he demanded.

“Spuds. It’s all we got.”

He smiled at her defiant face. “Throw them things away!” he said. “I got meat, plenty of it.”

Potatoes! he thought as he moved toward his pack. That’s what he had smelled cooking all around the encampment. He dug a bulky, hide-wrapped bundle out of his belongings and came back to the fire. Jonathan walked over and faced him.

“Now listen, Jim. We ain’t gonna take your grub.”

“Not take it? Want me to set and eat it by myself?”

"If you want. We got the spuds, and they'll do us. We don't need—"

"You need plenty, from whar I sit," Jim said.

"All right, mebbe we do. But we ain't aimin' to live off you. That ain't why I wrote the letter."

"I don't keer why you wrote the letter! You gotta eat, by thunder!" Exasperation flared up in Jim as he saw the stubborn pride only deepen in both their faces. "You ain't got no more idee than a beaver kitten what you're up agin!" he roared. "How fer d'you think to git with a raft to build and the gorge to run, and you half froze fer grub and plum crippled? Start shootin' that river yonder on a empty belly and yer a gone beaver afore you hit the first rapids! Long as I got meat we all got meat, and we all eat it, understand? I'm takin' over around here till I git you in shape. Now *set down*."

He turned his back to them, and in his usual quiet, husky tones, said to Dan'l, "Fetch me two sticks. Forked ones. High as my knee."

The sudden burst of temper had been as unexpected to him as to them. But at least it had the desired effect. Jonathan and Sally dropped down on the fireside log in strained silence, and after hastily obeying Jim's order, Dan'l joined them.

Jim stooped, unrolled the bundle, and set to work. The knife slipped in and out of the slab of meat with swift precision.

He rigged a spit across Dan'l's two forked sticks and in a matter of moments a haunch was sizzling there. The ribs he slanted over the flames on a sharp stick thrust at an angle into the ground. When the heady aroma of roasting meat began to blend with the smoke, he turned and looked at these strangers who were his family. Sally sat close by Jonathan on the log, her arm linked tight through his, the set of her chin stubbornly at variance with the tender curve of her throat. They looked alike, those two, in spite of her delicacy and Jonnie's

gaunt strength, though Jim could not tell just why. Perhaps it was the angle of jaw and brow, perhaps their identical expressions of forced carelessness. Only Dan'l, huddled on the other side of the fire, his eyes glazing with hunger, gave any sign of noticing the aroma that floated upward from the haunch. Jim knew the others must be turning faint inside from the smell of it.

Still fighting.

He turned away, shaking his head. He moved back and forth from his pack, bringing the grizzly robe to throw around the shivering Dan'l, producing strips of blanket and a curiously shaped root which he pulverized by pounding it between two stones. He found a bucket of water beside a wheel of the wagon and filled his gourd, then went back and splashed water onto his mortar stone, mixing it with the powder already there. Then he stood up and turned to Jonathan.

"Take off them boots," he ordered.

"What?" Jonathan stared up at him. He looked half drunk with the smell of meat.

"Them boots. Git 'em off."

Jonathan obeyed mechanically. Next instant Jim had flung them into the fire.

"Wait!" shrieked Sally, and Jonathan exploded into profanity.

"Never mind them things," Jim told him calmly. "Nothin' but a nuisance in this country, any papoose knows that much. Stick out a foot."

Capturing one of Jonathan's swollen and lacerated feet, he peeled off the scrap of sock and began smearing on the thick paste he had concocted.

"What's that?" gasped Jonathan.

Jim smiled a little. He knew the marvelous numbness that was creeping through the abused flesh. "Oks-pi-poku. Sticky root. Hold still."

Jonathan held still. Tears of relief sprang into his eyes and his thick lashes dropped down hastily to cover them. Jim softened in spite of himself. After all, they were bone tired and hungry and half sick with worry, and they didn't trust him—yet. Why should they? Nine years and two thousand miles couldn't be wiped out in an hour.

As he secured the last strip of blanket bandage comfortably around Jonathan's ankle, the black eyes opened to meet his own. For a moment their minds met, in a wordless truce. Then Jonnie grinned slowly, and tried out a ragged voice. "Much obliged. I think I'll get there now."

Jim nodded. Then he straightened swiftly, and moving to the fire, began to hack off chunks of meat and pile them on bark slabs. "Let's eat," he said.