

A photograph of a dirt road winding through a misty, wooded area. The road is light-colored and shows tire tracks. The trees are lush and green, and the mist creates a soft, ethereal atmosphere. The scene is captured in a cinematic style with warm lighting.

***FREDERICK
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***TROUBLE'S
MESSENGER***

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Trouble's Messenger

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CHAPTER 1

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Now Louis Desparr was content. For twenty years he had been laboring, trading, hauling, packing, portaging, fighting, and all that he had made from that generation of work was enough to give him one good stock of trade goods. That was when he determined to build Fort Lippewan. Another man would have given up, discouraged. But Louis Desparr was not discouraged. At the very moment when another would have withdrawn from the game, declaring that luck was totally against him, Louis determined to make his greatest fling of all. Louis was not only determined, but he was methodical. He believed in hard fighting, but he believed in generalship, also.

First of all, he decided that he would give up the wandering life of the trapper and select a spot for stationary trading. Then he hunted through the list of possibilities that was stocked in his memory. And, when he came in his list to the Lippewan River, his eyes rolled upward in sudden reflection. He could see the point where the two tributary streams ran into the Lippewan. He could see the point where the rocky bluff advanced well out from the shore, naturally defended by its cliff-like steepness and height, on two sides of its triangular shape. The other side, the base of the little peninsula, was narrow. Sometimes, at high water, a current ran across the neck, and the peninsula became a little island. But in any time or case, the site was eminently defensible. The projecting point was crowded with a heavy

growth of timber. Down the river and its two tributaries, the Indians, the half-breeds, and the white mountain men could paddle their canoes with very few portages, and those only on the headwaters. They could follow a natural road down to the fort. For that was where he built it.

He had to do two things. First, since the country was in the land of the Blackfeet, and he was not a great friend of theirs—having taken a Piegan scalp or two in his happy younger days—he must have a way of cementing a friendship between himself and that tribe. This he managed, at an easy stroke, by taking as squaw wife, Dancing Shadow, the daughter of the war chief, Angry Child. There was nothing pretty about Dancing Shadow, except her name. When her features were young and tender, she had been kicked in the midst of them, and they were rather mixed together as a result. One eye pulled down and one eye pulled aside. She was always looking two ways at once. Her face was so deformed that not even the thick-skinned Blackfeet bucks could persuade themselves to take her as a squaw, even as a gift.

Proud Angry Child consumed his heart with disappointment and grew so tired of the sight of his daughter's face that the very bones of his head ached when he so much as looked at her. Then arrived the trader, Louis Desparr, half English, half French. Or was there a little strain of Indian blood already in him? He did not want a beauty. He was past the age of romance, and merely asked for a worker. Dancing Squaw was as strong as an ox, and built very much like one. She stood six feet tall; she was made solidly, and based on huge feet. And when the trader saw

her, he could tell at a glance that she would be faithful, and never mysterious. So he took her. Not as a gift. He got together some horses, beads, and guns, and gave the handsome lot to Angry Child, who was almost persuaded that it had been worthwhile to wait even as long as this.

The gift was a masterstroke. It restored to Dancing Shadow her self-respect. It warmed the heart of Angry Child. And it established in the minds of the Indians that this was a rich and generous white man, apt to be a little foolish in driving a bargain. All of this seed would assuredly bear fruit a hundredfold.

Then Louis Desparr went with his wife down to the junction of the streams, and for a whole year they labored at the building of the fort. The two of them felled, trimmed, and squared trees into logs, and ran a redoubtable palisade across the neck of the peninsula. When a party of Dancing Shadow's relatives and friends stopped by to visit with her, Desparr got their help in the hoisting of the main timbers, and once the skeleton of the buildings that was to compose the fort had been established, it was comparatively easy for him and Dancing Shadow to build up the walls and do the roofing.

They toiled and moiled without a pause until the task was almost completed. Then he left her there alone, with a rifle for company, and went off down the river. He came back with all the trading stock that he could get together by spending his last cent, and mortgaging his future to the hilt. Then word was sent out to the tribes, and presently they began to come in.

They still were coming. They brought in great piles of beautifully tanned buffalo robes. They brought in any quantity of beaver skins. They brought in their herds of horses, too. There were suits worked with colored quills, and others heavily encrusted with beads until they were almost like suits of chain mail. Sometimes they carried in painted robes that were true works of art. Often they had exquisitely decorated canoes, carved knife handles, eagle feathers in abundance, necklaces of bear claws, baskets, pottery. Whatever they brought, the careless Louis Desparr always was willing to buy or trade for—at a price.

Having once made up their minds, Indians do not readily change them. If a man is once established as a hero, he may run away from twenty fights and have his conduct attributed to mysteriously bad “medicine.” So, when Desparr gained the repute of being a rather foolishly generous price maker, the repute clung to him long after he began to drive the sharpest of bargains. Beaver skins and buffalo robes were what he wanted, but he would take anything he could get and put it in his stores, until he had a chance to trade back with it. He gave the red men beads, mirrors, knives, guns, lead, gunpowder, pins, needles, axes, and hatchets, and he always had tea, sugar, coffee, and trade whiskey. The last was an abomination composed of sheer grain alcohol, afterward compounded with coloring matters and greatly diluted. There was a punch in this liquor that was not altogether that of alcohol. But it was a very popular drink with the Indians. Obviously a liquid that drives a brave mad with half a pint is twice as good as whiskey of which one can consume a quart before beginning to stagger.

Louis Desparr traded every morning from dawn to high noon. Then he closed up his stores. The Indians were invited to wander where they pleased and look at goods that they might wish to purchase the next day, but there was no trading in the fort of an afternoon.

Dancing Shadow took charge of the stock and guarded it with her two-direction eyes that saw all things in a single glance, as it appeared. With such a shepherd, sheep would hardly be stolen.

Louis Desparr was left free to conduct more important items of his affairs. For instance, he could interview the influential warriors and the big chiefs. He could chat with visitors from more distant tribes and invite them to come to this haven of just prices and good stock. He could estimate the importance of the men to whom he must give presents, and hit upon the heart's desire of each one. For a heart's desire is usually reasonably cheap, if it is a red man who is doing the desiring. A strip of red cloth may really, to him, be more than a string of ten war ponies. That was the secret of Desparr's success.

He saw his stores increasing. Marvelously they grew. He began to dispatch boatloads of furs in blunt-nosed, flatbottomed skiffs that could be poled or sailed downstream. For every half dozen or more of these, a narrow canoe would come nosing up the river, keeping to the shallows, delayed only by a few short portages and tugged by horses up to the fort. There, at Fort Lippewan, the stocks were unloaded, and so the trading went merrily on.

Louis Desparr, beginning almost at bedrock, already had cleaned up thousands of dollars in a single season, and a

good part of that season was still to run. No wonder that he was content as he sat on the flat roof of his main building with Henry Lessing, the hunter and trapper, both of them smoking long-stemmed pipes. The tobacco was so good—having just arrived, and being in the height of its unspoiled strength and richness of flavor—that now and again, drawing a long whiff, they half closed their eyes. Henry Lessing was an old acquaintance. Now he looked at the bustle below them, where the crowds of children, squaws, and braves were passing and re-passing, with a few white men of various kinds mixed among them. He looked at this bustle and nodded.

“You’re gonna get rich, Louis,” he said.

“You’ll do this one day,” said Louis.

“I ain’t a thinker,” said the other very frankly. He waved his hand beyond the palisade, where the Indian encampments were spread. There were three distinct sections of three distinct Blackfeet tribes then present. So commodious was the land that there was plenty of space for all of them to have camps where water and wood would be easy to get at, and where there was open country, besides, to race their horses and to play their games. The wigwams, half seen through the trees, shone like snow. Voices came shouting faint and far from the open land. Some young men were flogging half a dozen ponies as they raced out to a rock and back around it. Their long hair streamed out behind them. “I’ll keep to that,” said Henry Lessing. He shook his head. His skin was white, but his soul was now Indian. The other did not argue. He knew that in his own soul there was a great deal of the same urge. To make money was a very

pleasant thing. But to be beyond the need of money was, in a way, a yet pleasanter state.

Lessing again looked down into the yard of the fort. "There's the tenderfoot again," he said.

"Which one?" said the trader.

"The one that can talk the Blackfoot language."

"Is he still hunting?"

"Still hunting." Lessing nodded. "Still looking at faces. Have you found out what he wants?"

"He won't talk," said Louis Desparr. "He'll only look." As though the subject were irresistibly interesting, he leaned forward until he could see the man in question.

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It was not hard to pick out the stranger. In the first place, where all the others were in motion, he stood fast at the corner of the storehouse, with his arms folded. In the second place, their skins were dark. The other whites had lived so long and so much like Indians that they were almost as bronzed as the braves themselves. But this lad was flushed rather than stained by the sun. Besides, the others were robed, or dressed, in neatly fitted deerskins. But the white boy was in a rough, gray cloth.

“What could he be?” said Louis Desparr almost gloomily.

“I dunno,” answered Henry Lessing. “He’s as straight as an Indian.”

“He’s as blond as a Swede,” said Louis.

“He’s got a pair of arms and a set of shoulders onto him.”

“When he finds what he’s lookin’ for, there’ll be trouble.”

“Trouble for the tenderfoot, I reckon.”

“He might be a first-class fightin’ man,” said the other.

After a moment of reflection, Louis Desparr added: “Look here, Henry. How is it that he knows how to talk good Blackfoot? Not like you and me, but the real lingo, like he was raised with it.”

“Maybe he was.”

“That’s likely, ain’t it? You mean in one of the tribes?”

“Why not?”

“All that he knows about the Blackfeet is their lingo.”

"Yeah, he's a tenderfoot, all right. Won't he ever talk none?"

"Not a bit to nobody," said Desparr. "He acts like he thought that he was a duke."

They went on with their smoking, still staring fixedly at the stranger.

"He's looking for trouble," insisted Lessing. "One of them Indians is gonna pass half a foot of knife between his ribs, if he keeps on starin' at every face with that sneer of his."

"Maybe he don't mean nothing," said the trader. "He's too young to know much."

"Aye, that's true. He's pretty young. I'd hate to be that young again, Louis. It makes me feel pretty chilly even to think of being such a kid again. Like jumping off into ice water."

"Aye." Desparr nodded. "It's a hard thing ... in this part of the world."

"Did you ever ask that boy a straight question about what brought him here?"

"No. I ain't a question asker. I listen when I get a chance, but him that asks questions is askin' for lies."

"He needs to have some questions asked," said the other.

"Not by me. He's looking for a man, that's what he's looking for."

"Aye, he's looking for a man. He's got a grudge, maybe."

"Yeah. Maybe he's got a grudge. You remember old Siwash Pete Larkin, that had the grudge ag'in' Cap Mayberry?"

"No."

“Why, it was down on the Columbia, where the fish eaters live, and a low crew they are. And Cap Mayberry come up to a sloop from Portland, Maine....” He let his voice die away, unheeded, for it was plain that Henry Lessing was not hearing a word of what was spoken.

Now suddenly the trapper stood up. He was a tall, lean fellow of nearly fifty, iron gray, hard and tough as bull’s hide from constant living in the open. He was dressed in deerskin trousers, but they were old and fitted rather loosely. He wore a blue flannel shirt, which had faded over the shoulders to a meager tan. His hair was clipped off short across the brow and descended in a matted, unkempt tangle to the base of his neck. He wore what had once been a white belt of the skin of a mountain goat, but the original color had become grimy and hand worn almost past belief. On one side it supported a great knife in a sheath. On the other side was a double pouch to contain ammunition and tobacco. On his feet were clumsy but comfortable moccasins. And it was plain that no man in the world cared less about appearances than did Henry Lessing.

“I’m gonna go down and talk to that boy,” he said.

“I wouldn’t do it,” declared Desparr. “He wouldn’t thank you, and he wouldn’t talk.”

“Hold on!” said Lessing, raising his hand.

A party of three or four young braves, at that moment, was passing the corner at which the stranger stood, and one of them, stumbling or pretending to stumble, fell heavily against the tenderfoot. The shock knocked him from his place and sent him reeling several paces. He who had

stumbled did not stay to apologize. He went on with his companions, and their grins were very broad, indeed.

"Now what'll the boy do?" asked Lessing, muttering to himself.

"Nothing!" exclaimed Desparr. "He's yellow, Henry. Look at that."

For the stranger, recovering from the blow, calmly resumed his former position at the angle of the building and continued, with a high head, to look at the passers-by.

"Yellow as a dog," repeated Desparr.

"Aye ... maybe," said Lessing.

"The word of that'll get around," said Desparr. "There won't be any peace for that tenderfoot, from now on. Every half grown-up buck in the tribe will try to step on his toes."

"What's his name?"

"He calls himself Peter Messenger."

"Well, Messenger will have trouble, anyway. He's made for trouble. There never was a man with a chin like that, that wasn't made for trouble. But yaller? I dunno about that."

"You'll see. They'll try the same dodge again on him."

"If I was them, I wouldn't."

"You think he's something?"

"Kind of an itch in my bones, I do."

Desparr chuckled. "It's that worthless Dust-In-The-Sky," he observed. "He's always around raising a ruction. There ain't any peace when that young buck is about."

"He'll lose his hair, one of these days."

"He's got some hair already drying in his teepee," answered Desparr. "Comanche hair, at that. Aw, he ain't just

a young blow-hard. He loves a fight, does that Dust-In-The-Sky."

"And maybe he'll get it."

"Not out of the tenderfoot."

"Would you bet on that, Louis?"

"I'll bet. What you want to bet on it?"

"You took a fancy to that pinto mare that I rode in."

"Hey, Henry, are you gonna bet that mare on a greenhorn that you never seen before?"

"I been doin' a lot of thinkin' about that greenhorn," said Lessing. "I'll bet the mare. What'll you bet?"

"What do you want?"

"I seen one of those new Colt revolvers down in the store. How about that?"

"It's a mighty expensive gun," said the trader cautiously.

"I'll throw in my saddle, too," Lessing said calmly.

Louis Desparr started and shrugged his shoulders. "This is after business hours, anyway," he said. "The gun ag'in' the mare, if you want to. But you're gonna lose. What do you expect? That he'll follow Dust-In-The-Sky, or that the buck will come back to him?"

"The buck will come back to him. He's got the taste in his teeth now, and he'll try to bully the white man. You'll see, Louis!"

"Aye, I'll see."

"There comes Dust, now."

The same party returned, recruited to seven or eight. They wore an appearance of innocent absentmindedness. "They mean a lot of trouble for that boy," said Desparr.

"They mean trouble," agreed Lessing quietly. "And now you'll have a chance to see."

Almost the same thing happened. As the group came nearer, one of the other young bucks stumbled exactly as Dust-In-The-Sky had done before, and fell toward the white man.

Then Peter Messenger moved. He side-stepped with a gliding speed like that of a cat, caught the young buck as the latter floundered forward, and turning, by a maneuver that even the sharp eye of Desparr could not follow, he flung the Indian over his shoulder. The latter turned a full half circle in the air and landed with such force that the wind was knocked out of him with a grunt audible to the watchers upon the roof.

He did not rise again, at once. The dust that had been thrown out in a great puff on either side of his body now steamed upward and dissolved in the air. But still he did not rise.

"How the dickens did the boy do that?" asked the startled Desparr.

"That's what they call a neck lock," said Henry Lessing. "And if I ain't badly mistaken, young Mister Blackfoot is gonna have a stretched neck and a sore head for a spell. I never seen that trick done better."

"It was neat! It was mighty neat!" said Desparr in generous admiration. "I didn't expect nothin' like that. But there is Dust-In-The-Sky goin' in to finish up the job."

That young brave stepped straight up before the white man and uttered something in an angry voice, but the white man paid no heed to him at all. Oblivious of his presence, he

stared past the Indian toward the more distant faces in the crowd that drifted by.

“Look, look, look!” said Desparr greatly excited now. “Seems to me like a real man has arrived out here at Fort Lippewan!”

“Aye,” said Henry Lessing. “I reckoned that before. If Dust-In-The-Sky makes a move to touch him, there’ll be another explosion. Is Dust-In-The-Sky that much of a fool that he can’t tell gunpowder when he sees it?”

The voice of Dust-In-The-Sky rose higher, with a savage snarl in it. That fighting sound stopped every passer-by, and, from a distance, men came running to enjoy the possible fight.

“Stop it, Desparr!” exclaimed Henry.

“Let ’em have it out,” said the trader philosophically. “Bad blood needs the air. As long as they don’t start fighting inside my store, they can do what they please when the sky is over their heads.”

“Well,” said Lessing, “if it comes to a pinch, I’m sorry for the Blackfoot.”

CHAPTER 3

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So convinced was he of the tenderfoot's superiority that he actually turned his head and looked away from his preferred champion to the flash of the sun on the river and the shadowy forests that walked down to the river's side on either hand. Across the open land to the south, he could see a dust cloud. It had been approaching for some time, and with such incredible slowness that he could only guess at an ox team and at least two wagons in the train.

"There it goes!" gasped Desparr with a chuckle of pleased excitement.

He had been so long among scenes of violence that bloodshed meant almost nothing to him. A man had to take his chances as he found them. After all, life cannot last forever. His own hair had seemed to be very loosely and temporarily fitted on his head several times in his career, and, therefore, he had less sympathy with others when they stood in danger.

As for Lessing, he glanced down in time to see the glitter of steel in the hand of Dust-In-The-Sky. That flash leaped at the throat of the white man, but again Peter Messenger moved. He stepped just enough aside to allow the gleam of the knife to shoot harmlessly over his shoulder. And he stepped just enough in to bring him to comfortable shortarm distance. Then he snapped a hard fist up to the point of the brave's chin.

Dust-In-The-Sky was a brave young man. He was as tough as twenty-five summers and winters of mountain hunting and mountain fighting could make him. But a bell had been rung in his brain with a dull buzz like a swarm of bees. His wits scattered upon the winds. He went backward, like one who cannot get his balance, and, after floundering a few steps, he sank to the ground in a loose, helpless pile, his head slumping down upon his knees.

"He had the shoulders," Lessing said critically, and apparently unmoved by this victory that he had prophesied. "He had the shoulders, and it looked like he had the arms. But he's got the science, too. He's been trained, old son. And he's been trained well."

"Watch, now," said the trader. "There's something more coming. They're gonna mob him, the red dogs!"

The group had swayed threateningly in toward the white man as their leader fell under that stroke. But now they paused for a moment when Messenger leaned and picked from the ground the knife that Dust-In-The-Sky had dropped. A big, formidable-looking weapon it was, brand-new from the store of Desparr, and with the sunlight appearing to run on it like water and drip from its point.

"Hello!" said Desparr. "Does he mean to tackle that band with a knife? They'll cut him to pieces in half a second."

"He won't tackle them. He's defending himself, and that's all," declared Lessing with perfect assurance. "You watch him, Louis."

The hand of Messenger rose with the knife and then flicked it away with a swift and graceful motion. It turned over once in the sunshine, and then landed just between the

knees and an inch from the scalp lock of Dust-In-The-Sky, burying its blade to the hilt in the ground.

Desparr jumped up with an exclamation. "Did you see that, Henry?" he asked, utterly amazed.

Lessing merely smiled as though he were hearing a twice-told tale. "He had the shoulders and the arms. He has the fingers, too," he said. "There's nothing green about that boy but his skin, Louis!"

"There go the Blackfeet. They've had enough of that fellow's medicine, and I don't blame them."

The group of young braves, in fact, had withdrawn a few steps, hastily, and some of them picked up their fallen leader. They supported him as they went off. But he was still in dreamland, his head falling back on his shoulders, his face blank, his mouth open, and his feet trailing.

"What a punch!" said Desparr enthusiastically. "An iron hand, Henry. I couldn't do that with a club, let alone a bare fist!"

"See what the boy's doing now," answered Lessing.

The tenderfoot, stepping back to his chosen place of vantage, had folded his arms again and remained exactly as he had been before—his head high, his eye constantly traveling over the faces of the crowd that, by this time, was closely packed about him.

A white trapper stepped from the semicircle and slapped him cordially on the shoulder. The two on the rooftop could hear the boy being invited to take a drink.

His answer was a mere shake of the head, and the trapper drew back with a black scowl. The crowd, at this,

rapidly melted away, only a little half-naked Indian boy remaining to gape up at this newly found hero.

"There you are," said Lessing. "That boy has made three enemies in two minutes, and every one of the three would like to have his blood, especially Beaver Jones."

"Beaver's no good," said Desparr. "I'm glad that the boy could see through him."

Lessing chuckled. "I'll tell you, old friend," he said, "that the boy wouldn't drink because he doesn't know that stranger. He wants an introduction, before he'll take a drink with a man."

"Aye, or else he don't drink."

"Not drink?" said Lessing, rather startled by this suggestion in a land where all men drank what they could get.

"Maybe," said Desparr, putting out a hand before him in a gesture like that of one who vaguely feels his way toward something of importance, "maybe the business of that boy won't let him fog up his brain with liquor."

Lessing snapped his fingers. "Aye, maybe you've put your finger on it," he said. "I'd guess that you're right, Louis."

"You've won a brand-new gun, Henry."

"I've won more than that," declared Lessing.

"What else have you won?"

"A good time," declared the trapper. "I ain't seen that kind of man in ten years."

"What kind of man? Fighting man, you mean?"

"Why, the land's full of fighting men, Louis. How could I mean that?"

"I didn't know. What kind of a man do you mean?"

"Did you see how he stepped?" asked Lessing.

"He's fast on his feet."

"And light. He's a cat, Louis."

"He's about as fast as a cat."

"He's a cat," repeated Lessing with conviction. "It's been ten years since I seen the like of him."

"Who've you got in mind, Henry?"

"There was that Claud Tamlin, but maybe you've forgot him?"

"Nobody that seen Tamlin ever forgot him. You think this kid reminds you of Tamlin?"

"He moved the same way," said Henry Lessing, "and he held his chin up the same way."

"But Claud Tamlin was three inches shorter, and a foot wider, and six inches deeper. You could've cut three or four of this lad out of Tamlin."

"He's young," said Lessing. "But look at that crowd now!"

"What about it?"

"I've seen people move like that when Tamlin was around ... because they always gave him room enough."

In fact, the casual passer-by now made a wide eddy at the corner of the storehouse, letting the tall young tenderfoot have plenty of elbow room. They did not any longer meet the eye of the youth, either, but pretended to be very occupied with their own business, although, all the time, it was plain that they were scanning him out of the corners of their eyes. The young braves came by most slowly of all, stalking with consummate dignity—and, doubtless, they were busily measuring the dimensions and noting down the features of this strange fellow. The few

white men sauntered past, also, and the squaws came shuffling, their heads jutting forward like beasts of burden.

Only a few of the children stood bravely up to the white lad and surveyed him with smiling pleasure or with a sort of grim curiosity, moving from side to side to view him more closely, while the sun burnished and shone from their coppery little bodies.

"I remember Tamlin at Bent's Fort," said Desparr at last. "I remember him standin' up, and the crowd flowin' around him like water around a rock. He was a rock."

"Aye, he was a rock, and a wildcat, too."

"He was both them things," agreed Desparr seriously. "What became of Tamlin?"

"They got him at last."

"The Injuns?"

"Yeah. They got him at last."

"Which tribe?"

"There's a good deal of question about that. Some says the Sioux, and some says that it was old Broken Feather and his Comanches that finished up Tamlin. And some says that it was these here Blackfeet, as far as that goes."

"Maybe it never happened at all," declared Desparr. "If they got his death scattered that wide apart, maybe it never happened at all."

"Maybe it never did," agreed Henry Lessing. "But they tell the story of him pretty clear. And how he killed seven men and got seven wounds on that last day's fighting."

"That shows that it's all a fairy story," answered Desparr. "You see how it works out? Seven wounds, seven dead men. They always have numbers like that in their folk stories."

“All right,” answered Lessing almost angrily. “But he ain’t been heard of for years.”

“Maybe he’s left the land.”

“How could he live away from buffalo and Injuns?”

“I dunno. I dunno. I ain’t never able to read the minds of people, least of all Tamlin. Well, are you gonna go down and talk to that youngster, Lessing?”

Lessing nodded. He took off his wide-brimmed hat and passed his hand through his tangled hair.

“You’re just likely to be stepping knee-deep in trouble,” cautioned Desparr.

“That’s what I’ve been thinkin’,” said Lessing softly.

But, nevertheless, down he went to the ground.

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Straight down into the compound Lessing went.

The store itself was thickly crowded, still. Through the open door he could hear a sort of babbling song that went up from the crowd inside. Men, women, and children, they all were handling, exclaiming over, crying out about the articles for sale. But nothing would be stolen, even by their clever fingers, for in the background appeared the face of Dancing Shadow, with her double-direction eyes and her weird ugliness. Yet, her expression now made her almost beautiful. For in her hands was all the delegated authority of her husband. She was in importance like a chief among warriors. She could even make small gifts, here and there, to the wife or to the child of some redoubtable figure of the Indians. And she never gave in vain. With that might to give and to receive, she was richly content, and a strange smile beamed upon her lips.

Lessing went on past the store, and almost fell over a pair of Indian lads who, wrestling violently, tumbled out of the doorway of the store, and rolled over and over in the dust, for the grass of the compound had been worn away by the pounding of many hoofs and many moccasined feet.

Weariness of his kind came suddenly over Lessing. He had been several days at the fort, visiting his old friend Desparr, and now a wave of disgust for men and their ways passed over him. The furnishings of his own life were simple. A horse and a mule loaded with traps, a bit of

tobacco and salt, some tea, ammunition for his rifle, a good new axe, a pair of knives, and he was ready to start his trek through the wilderness until, someday, he saw before him the heads of unknown mountains, like vast monsters holding up their hands to stop him. There he would settle into another year of life, sinking deeper and deeper into the woods, until the voices of the wind and of the rivers cleansed from his mind the sound of human speech, human wranglings. The crowd through which he had to elbow his way depressed him unutterably, but at last he found himself on the edge of the open space that surrounded the tenderfoot, Peter Messenger.

Lessing did not hesitate. He walked straight up to the youth. There was an odd feeling that the boy grew as one came nearer to him. From a little distance, he seemed slender, light, made for swift activity rather than for the bearing of burdens. But, close at hand, the dimensions of the shoulders grew. And, from a distance, it seemed a pale, meager face, but, near at hand, he saw the noble proportions of the forehead and, deep beneath the brows, the gray eyes that were both alert and still.

"Come with me, Messenger," said the trapper curtly, and, turning on his heel, he walked away. He half smiled, wondering if the boy would do as he was bid. To his deep surprise and satisfaction, he was presently aware that the tall youth was stepping lightly after him. He led straight out through the open gate in the palisade, and through the woods to the edge of the water. There he paused, and Messenger stepped out of the trees to his side. As he came,

he looked searchingly into the face of Lessing, and then his glance darkened a little with disappointment.

It was as though he had hoped vaguely that this stranger might prove to be the thing for which he was searching. Instantly Lessing knew that the boy was hunting, indeed, for a human face. Messenger, halting at the edge of the water, faced his guide and waited.

"We're alone here for a minute or so," observed Lessing cheerfully. "Though it won't take 'em long to get on the trail, ag'in."

"Who?" asked Messenger, his frown deepening.

Lessing watched him, half amused and half surprised. "You mean you dunno who would want to take your trail, son?"

Messenger shook his head. He maintained this aloof attitude of his without effort. It seemed natural for him to act as though he were of a superior race, or a superior class, looking down upon the rest of the world.

"Well," said Lessing, "d'you know the names of the two bucks that you laid out?"

"No," said Messenger coldly.

"The first one is Spotted Deer. He has a father that's still a warrior in his prime. He has two young uncles, as hard as nails. He has a brother and half a dozen cousins."

"He's a lucky fellow," said Messenger with his natural sneer.

Lessing nodded. "Any one of those people would be glad to throw a war spear into you, my lad. Then there's Dust-In-The-Sky..."

"Who is he?" Messenger permitted himself to ask.

"Somebody that you'll be sure to hear of again," declared Lessing. "Dust-In-The-Sky is the second one ... the fellow that you flattened with that left uppercut. Are you left-handed, Messenger?"

"No," said the boy.

Lessing could not help smiling a little.

"The left is the hand they don't expect," he commented. "The point I'm making, though, is that Dust-In-The-Sky has even more friends than the other lad. He could easily bring out a dozen men to run you down."

"Very well," answered Messenger. "It's plain that I'll have to take my chances with them."

"You take your chances," said Lessing, "and get a knife through your gizzard. That's all it would amount to."

"Is that all you brought me here to tell me?" asked Messenger with his habitual cold sneer.

Lessing was a man who had been through his share of troubles in this world, but now he flushed a little.

"Are you going to stick at that?" he asked.

"At what?" said the boy.

"At being a young, hard-headed fool?" explained Lessing.

Messenger started. His gray eyes, losing some of their indifference, sparkled for an instant, but almost at once they grew dull again. But the trapper felt as though he had seen a wild animal raise its head and look at him.

"I don't know," said Messenger, "what I ought to say to you. I haven't asked for your advice. And I haven't asked to be brought away from the fort, where I was busy."

"Aye, you were busy," agreed the other. "Busy makin' enemies. I never seen nobody make 'em faster."

"How was I making enemies?" asked the boy, a touch of harsh anger appearing in his voice.

"Why, by lookin' over people as though they was horses. Back in your part of the country, maybe it's different. I guess that back there it's good manners to stare at everybody as though they had two heads. But out here, it's different. There's a proud lot, out here, young feller. And if you start to handlin' Injuns and Westerners like that with your eyes, you ain't gonna last long."

"No?" inquired Messenger coldly. "I'll have to take my chances in my own way, as I said before, I believe."

"You won't take 'em long," declared Lessing, "because you'll be dead." He picked up a stone from the bank of the stream and began to juggle it carelessly in his hand.

"Suppose you tell me," asked the boy, "why you're troubling yourself so much about me?"

"You oughta be able to guess."

"No. I don't see what my business has to do with you."

"Well," said the other, "a man can't help bein' interested when he sees a youngster start lookin' for trouble."

"I'm not looking for trouble," insisted Messenger. "I didn't raise a hand at either of those two Indians until they forced trouble on me."

"You hadn't asked for it, either, I reckon?" asked the trapper.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this ... that you stand there and sneer and stare at everybody."

"I wasn't sneering," said the boy.

"I didn't have no eyes to see you, eh?"