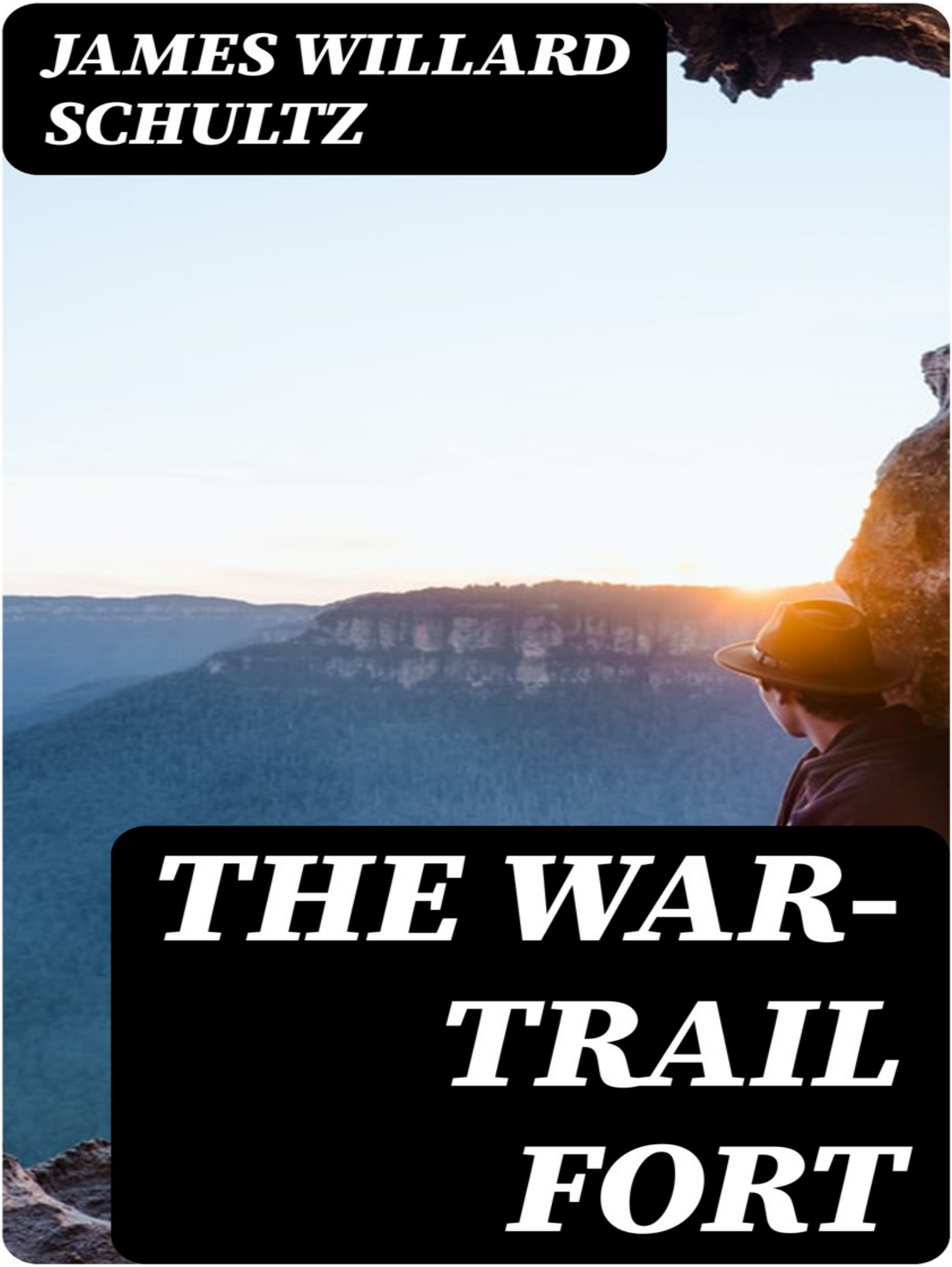
JAMES WILLARD SCHULTZ



THE WAR-TRAIL FORT

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WE SAW HIM STOOP OVER THE FALLEN MAN, THEN RISE WITH A BOW AND A SHIELD THAT HE WAVED ALOFT

Chapter I.

A Company Dissolves and a New Venture Starts

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One of the most vivid impressions of my youth is of a certain evening in the spring of 1865. It was the evening of May 21. Just before sundown the first steamboat of the season, the Yellowstone II, arrived from St. Louis and brought the astounding news that the American Fur Company was going out of business and was selling its various trading-posts, forts and stocks of goods, good-will and all, to private individuals.

To most of us in Fort Benton, factor, clerks, artisans, voyageurs, trappers and hunters, it was as if the world were coming to an end. The company—by which we meant the Chouteaus, father and sons—was the beginning and the end of our existence. We revered the very name of it; we were faithful to it and ready to die for it if need be. Now we were left to shift for ourselves. What were we to do?

Boylike, I had gone aboard the boat as soon as it landed and had passed an hour in wandering about it from end to end and from hold to pilot-house. Up in the pilot-house I found Joe La Barge, the most famous and trusted of the Missouri River pilots.

"Well, Master Thomas Fox," he said to me, "it is bad news that we have brought you, isn't it? What is your Uncle Wesley going to do, I wonder, now that the company is selling out?"

"The company is selling out? What do you mean?" I faltered.

He told me, and I turned from him instantly and ran ashore. I sprang through the stockade gate of the fort and paused, struck by something unfamiliar there in the great court: it was the strange silence. The voyageurs, the trappers and hunters, most voluble of men, were sitting in the doorways of their quarters and saying never a word; the terrible news had tongue-tied them. I had been hurrying to my uncle's quarters to ask the truth of what the pilot had told me; but the dejected attitude of the employees was proof enough that the news was true.

A tall, lean voyageur rushed by me to the center of the court and raised his outstretched hands to the sky. "My frien's," he cried, "dis ees mos' unjust! Dis ees one terrible calamitee! I call le bon Dieu to weetness dat eet is but two summer ago, een St. Louis, dat Pierre Chouteau, he say to me, 'Louis, you are ze bon cordelier! You are serve us mos' faithful dese many year! W'en de time come dat you can no longer pull eet de cordelle, de company, he shall give you a pension; een your hold hage you shall be mos' comfortable!'

"An' now, my frien's, ze great company, he ees dead! Ze pension pour le pauvre Louis, eet is not!" he went on in an increasingly frenzied shriek. "My frien's, I am hask you, w'at am I to do? I am fear ze Pieds Noirs; ze Gros Ventres; ze Assiniboins! I no can trap ze beav'! I no can hunt ze buf'! Eet ees zat I mus' die!"

He turned and with wild gestures fled from the court. His listeners slumped even more dejectedly into their lowly seats. I went on to my uncle's quarters and found two of the clerks, George Steell and Matthew Carroll, sitting with my uncle, and his wife, Tsistsaki,—true mother to me,—at his shoulder. I sat down upon my cot in a corner of the room

and listened to their conversation and gathered that the Chouteaus had written to the three men, offering to sell them the fort and its contents upon most reasonable terms, and that my uncle had declined to enter into partnership with the two in purchasing the place and carrying on the business. At that, like poor Louis, the voyageur, I, too, was dismayed. "What, then, are we to do?" I asked myself.

The two visitors expressed great regret at my uncle's decision, said that they feared he would soon find that he had made a mistake, and went out. As soon as the door closed behind them, my uncle sprang from his seat, whirled Tsistsaki round three or four times, made a pass at me, and cried, "Well, my woman, well, Thomas, this is my great day! I am no longer under obligations to the company—there is no more company. I am free! Free to be what I have long wanted to be, an independent, lone Indian trader!"

Tsistsaki thoroughly understood English but never spoke it for fear that she would make a mistake and be laughed at. In her own language she cried, "Oh, my man! Do you mean that? Are we to leave this place and with my people follow the buffalo?"

"Something like that," he told her.

"O good! Good!" I all but shouted. "That means that I shall have no end of good times riding about and hunting with Pitamakan!"

He, you know, was my true-and-tried chum. Young though we were, we had experienced some wild adventures. We two had passed a winter in the depths of the Rockies; we had been to the shore of the Western Sea and back; and we had seen the great deserts and the strange peoples of the always-summer land. It was in my mind, now, that this sudden turn in the affairs of my uncle was to be the cause of more adventures for us. I could fairly scent them.

As to Tsistsaki, she went almost crazy with joy. "The gods are good to us!" she cried. "They have answered my prayers! Oh, how I have begged them, my man, to turn your steps to the wide plains and the mountains of our great hunting-ground! It is not good for us, you know, to live shut within these walls winter after winter and summer after summer, seeing no farther than the slopes and the cutbanks of this river bottom. To be well and happy we must do some roaming now and then and live as Old Man, our Maker, intended us to live, in airy buffalo-leather lodges, and close upon the breast of our mother [the earth]. Tell me, now, where we are going and when, so that I may have all our things packed."

"I cannot tell you that until I have talked with the chiefs. I am going now to counsel with them, for the steamboat starts back for St. Louis very early in the morning, and upon the decision of the chiefs depends the size of the trade-goods orders that I shall send down with the captain."

"We shall go over to camp with you!" Tsistsaki declared.

My uncle told me to order the stableman, Bissette, to saddle three horses for us. Within fifteen minutes we were heading for the valley of the Teton, five miles to the north, where more than ten thousand Indians were waiting to trade their winter take of robes and furs for the goods that the steamboats were to bring to us. All the North Blackfeet and the Bloods and the Gros Ventres were there, and our own people, the Pikuni, the southern, or Montana, branch, of the great Blackfoot Confederacy. We called the Pikuni "our people," because nearly all of our company men in Fort Benton were married to women of that tribe.

What a thunder of sound struck our ears as we arrived at the edge of the valley slope and looked down into it! It was all aglow with fires shining yellow through the buffalo-

leather lodge skins. Drums were booming; people were singing, laughing, and dancing; children were shouting; horses were impatiently whinnying for their mates; and dogs were howling defiance to their wild kin of the plains, the deep-voiced wolves and shrill-yelping coyotes. We paused but a moment, listening to it all, and hurried on down to the camp of the Pikuni and the lodge of White Wolf, chief of the Small Robes Clan, brother of Tsistsaki and father of my chum, Pitamakan—Running Eagle.

Tethering our horses to some brush, we went inside and were made welcome, my uncle taking the honor seat at the right of the chief. In as few words as possible my uncle explained why we had come and the need for hurry, and White Wolf at once sent messengers up and down the valley to ask the different tribal head chiefs to come to his lodge for a council with Pi-oh' Sis-tsi-kum—Far Thunder—as my uncle had been most honorably renamed at the medicine-lodge ceremonials of the previous summer. Within an hour they had all arrived, Big Lake of the Pikuni, Crow Foot of the North Blackfeet, Calf Shirt of the Bloods, and Lone Bull of the Gros Ventres, and with them came some of their under-chiefs—clan chiefs and chiefs of the various branches of the All Friends Society. The lodge became so crowded with them that the women and children were obliged to retire to other lodges.

"Well, Far Thunder," Big Lake said to my uncle, when all were seated and the pipe was going the round of the circle, "we were all busy directing our women in the packing of our robes and furs for to-morrow's trade, for we had been told of the arrival of the fire boat; but when you called we came. Speak; our ears await your words!"

My uncle had a wonderful command of the Blackfoot language. Briefly in well-chosen words he told them that the

great company was winding up its affairs. He explained that Steell and Carroll would take over the company fort and the business, and then said that he himself had decided to enter into close trade relations with them, especially to keep them supplied with goods and ammunition during their winter hunts; he asked them to decide at once where they would pass the coming winter, for upon their decision depended the size of the order for goods that must be sent on the fire boat, which was to return down-river in the morning. Loud clapping of hands and cries of approval answered this last statement, and then Crow Foot, the greatest chief, perhaps, of the confederacy, said, "Far Thunder, brother! Your offer to winter-trade with us is the best news we have ever had. No more will our young men be obliged to make long and dangerous journeys through winter snows and killing blizzards to the fort across from here for fresh supplies of powder and balls, and other things. No longer will our hunters be obliged to sit idle in their lodges. Brother, I think we may safely leave the choice of our coming winter-hunting country to you!"

"Ai! Ai! Far Thunder, brother, the words of Crow Foot are our words!" cried some of the chiefs. And others said, "Yes, Far Thunder, be yours the choice!"

"I thank you for your generosity," my uncle replied. "Brothers, I choose a part of our country that is black with buffalo; whose wooded valleys shelter countless elk and deer. In its very center will I build my trade-house. Brothers, before the Moon of Falling Leaves is ended you shall see it standing, full of goods, at the mouth of On-the-Other-Side Bear River!"

"Ha! At the mouth of the Musselshell, where the steamboats will unload the trade goods almost at our doors!" I said to myself.

"No! No! I protest! Not there, brothers!" cried Lone Bull, the Gros Ventre chief. "That is too dangerous a country! Last winter, during all its moons, the Assiniboins were encamped in its northern part, the valley of Little River [Milk River on the maps. So named by Lewis and Clark], and the Crows were at the same time camping in the valley of On-the-Other-Side Bear River, where they will doubtless hunt again this coming winter!"

"Ha! All the more reason that we should winter there!" cried Big Lake. "We have too long neglected that part of our country. It is our plain duty to go down there and clean it of our enemies and keep it clean of them. If we fail to do so, they will be soon claiming it their very own, the gift of their gods to them."

"Right you are, brother," cried Crow Foot, "and wise is Far Thunder! He could not have made a better choosing. What say you all? Is it decided that we winter down there?"

"Yes! Yes!" they all answered—all but Lone Bull and his under-chiefs.

"You still object to the choice?" said Big Lake to him.

"I do, though I shall be there with you. My silence now is my warning to you all that you are making a mistake for which we shall pay dearly with our blood!" he answered.

"Ha! Since when were we afraid of our enemies!" Calf Shirt exclaimed.

So was that matter settled. White Wolf knocked the ashes from the smoke pipe, and the chiefs filed out of the lodge to go their homeward ways. As the women returned, I said to my chum, "Pitamakan, almost-brother, we are certainly going to see some exciting, perhaps dangerous times down in that On-the-Other-Side Bear River country!"

"Excitement, danger, they make life," he answered.

Tsistsaki, coming in, heard my remark. She turned to my uncle. "So, man mine, we go to the On-the-Other-Side Bear River country, do we? Yes? Oh, I am glad! Down there grow plenty of plums. I shall gather quantities of them for our winter use!"

We went out, mounted our horses, and hurried home and to bed. That is, Tsistsaki and I did; my uncle worked all night, writing out his trade-goods orders. The steamboat men worked all night, too, unloading freight for the fort, and when I awoke in the morning the boat had left with its load of company furs.

When we were eating breakfast, my uncle said to us, "Well, woman, well, youngster, we start upon a new trail now, a trail of my own making, and I feel that it is going to be a trail easy and worth blazing. All that I have in the world, about twenty thousand dollars, I am putting into the venture, and on top of that I am asking for more than ten thousand dollars' worth of goods on a year's time. Thomas, we have just got to pay that bill when it comes due, fourteen months from now, or Wesley Fox's name will become a byword in St. Louis."

"We shall pay it, sir," I said.

"Absolutely, we shall pay it, if I have to beg robes and beaver skins from my people to make up the amount!" Tsistsaki declared.

Looking back at it after all these years, I see that the dissolution of the American Fur Company was an historical event. Its founders and its later owners, the Chouteaus, had been the first to profit by the discoveries of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and year by year they had built a string of trading-posts along the Missouri, which did an enormous business in trading with the various tribes of Indians for their buffalo robes and beaver and other furs. But little by