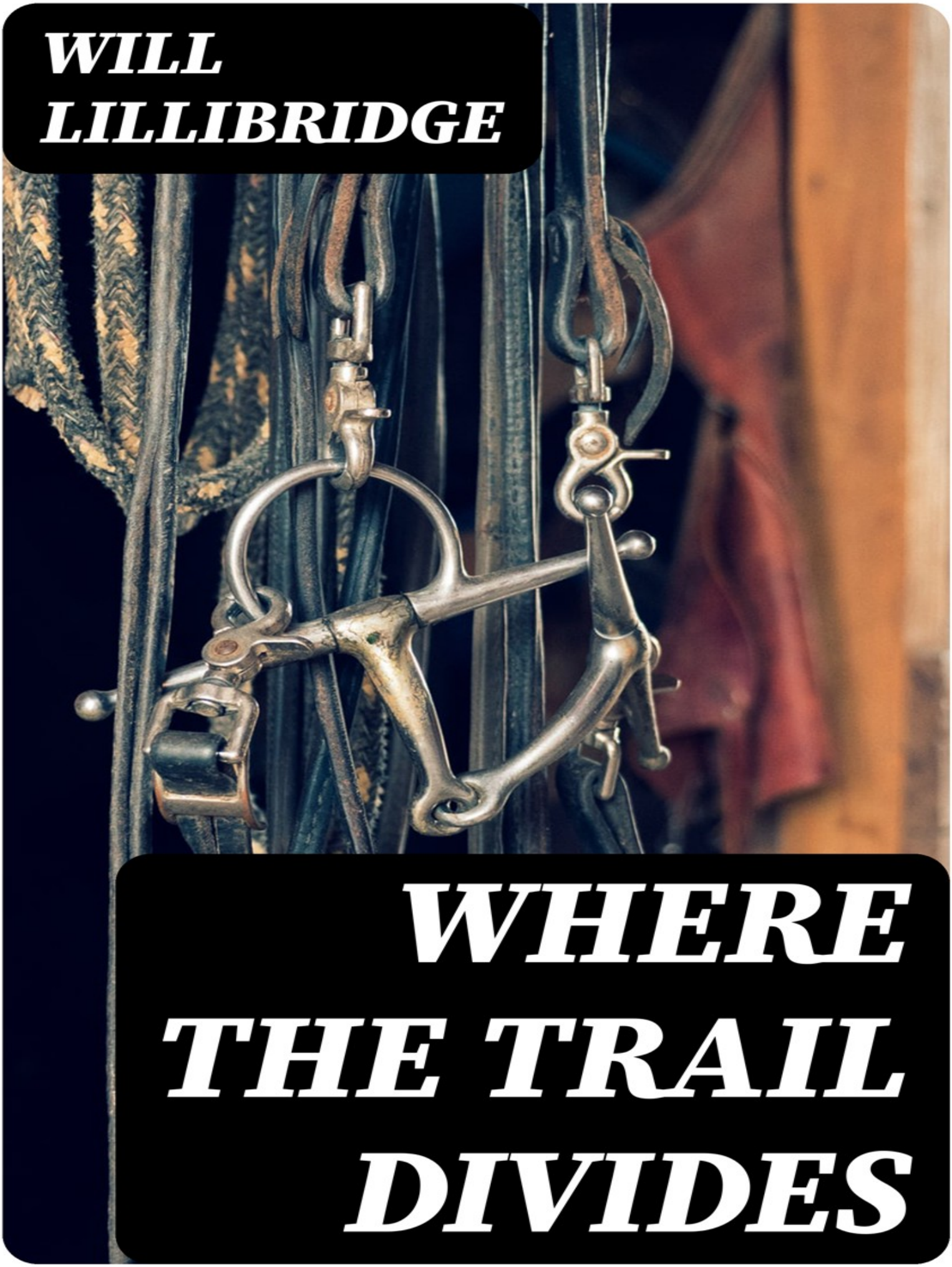
WILL LILLIBRIDGE



WHERE THE TRAIL DIVIDES

Will Lillibridge

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Chapter I.
Presentiment

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The man was short and fat, and greasy above the dark beard line. In addition, he was bowlegged as a greyhound, and just now he moved with a limp as though very footsore. His coarse blue flannel shirt, open at the throat, exposed a broad hairy chest that rose and fell mightily with the effort he was making. And therein lay the mystery. The sun was hot—with the heat of a cloudless August sun at one o'clock of the afternoon. The country he was traversing was wild, unbroken—uninhabited apparently of man or of beast. Far to his left, just visible through the dancing heat rays, indistinct as a mirage, was a curling fringe of green trees. To his right, behind him, ahead of him was not a tree nor a shrub nor a rock the height of a man's head; only ungrazed, yellowish-green sun-dried prairie grass. The silence was complete. Not even a breath of wind rustled the grass; yet ever and anon the man paused glanced back the way he had come, listened, his throat throbbing with the effort of repressed breathing, in obvious expectation of a sound he did not hear; then, for the time relieved, forged ahead afresh, one hand gripping the butt of an old Springfield rifle slung over his shoulder, the other, big, unclean, sunbrowned, swinging like a pendulum at his side.

Ludicrous, unqualifiedly, the figure would have been in civilisation, humorous as a clown in a circus; but seeing it here, solitary, exotic, no observer would have laughed. Fear, mortal dogging fear, impersonate, supreme, was in every look, every action. Somewhere back of that curved line where met the earth and sky, lurked death. Nothing else would have been adequate to arouse this phlegmatic human

as he was now aroused. The sweat oozed from his thick neck in streams and dripped drop by drop from the month-old stubble which covered his chin, but apparently he never noticed it. Now and then he attempted to moisten his lips; but his tongue was dry as powder, and they closed again, parched as before.

No road nor trail, nor the semblance of a trail, marked the way he was going; the hazy green fringe far to the east was his only landmark; yet as hour after hour went by and the sun sank lower and lower he never halted, never seemed in doubt as to his destination. The country was growing more rolling now, almost hilly, and he approached each rise cautiously, vigilantly. Once, almost at his feet a covey of frightened prairie chickens sprang a-wing, and at the unexpected sound he dropped like a stone in his tracks, all but concealing himself in the tall grass; then, reassured, he was up again, plodding doggedly, ceaselessly on.

It was after sundown when he paused; and then only from absolute physical inability to go farther. Outraged nature had at last rebelled, and not even fear could suffice longer to stimulate him. The grass was wet with dew, and prone on his knees he moistened his lips therefrom as drinks many another of the fauna of the prairie. Then, flat on his back, not sleeping, but very wide awake, very watchful, he lay awaiting the return of strength. Upon the fringe of hair beneath the brim of his hat the sweat slowly dried; then, as the dew gathered thicker and thicker, dampened afresh. Far to the east, where during the day had appeared the fringe of green, the sky lightened, almost brightened; until at last, like a curious face, the full moon, peeping above the horizon, lit up the surface of prairie.

At last—and ere this the moon was well in the sky—the man arose, stretched his stiffened muscles profanely—before he had not spoken a syllable—listened a moment almost involuntarily, sent a swift, searching glance all about;

then moved ahead, straight south, at the old relentless pace.

The lone ambassador from the tiny settlement of Sioux Falls vacillated between vexation and solicitude.

"For the last time I tell you; we're going whether you do or not," he announced in ultimatum.

Samuel Rowland, large, double-chinned, distinctly florid, folded his arms across his chest with an air of finality.

"And I repeat, I'm not going. I'm much obliged to you for the warning. I know your intentions are good, but you people are afraid of your own shadows. I know as well as you do that there are Indians in this part of the world, some odd thousands of them between here and the Hills, but they were here when I came and when you came, and we knew they were here. You expect to hear from a Dane when you buy tickets to 'Hamlet,' don't you?"

The other made a motion of annoyance.

"If you imagine this is a time for juggling similes," he returned swiftly, "you're making the mistake of your life. If you were alone, Rowland, I'd leave you here to take your medicine without another word; but I've a wife, too, and I thank the Lord she's down in Sioux City where Mrs. Rowland and the kid should be, and for her sake—"

"I beg your pardon."

The visitor started swiftly to leave, then as suddenly turned back.

"Good God, man!" he blazed; "are you plumb daft to stickle for little niceties now? I tell you I just helped to pick up Judge Amidon and his son, murdered in their own hayfield not three miles from here, the boy as full of arrows as a cushion of pins. This isn't ancient history, man, but took place this very day. It's Indian massacre, and at our own throats. The boys are down below the falls getting ready to go right now. By night there won't be another white man or

woman within twenty-five miles of you. It's deliberate suicide to stand here arguing. If you will stay yourself, at least send away Mrs. Rowland and the girl. I'll take care of them myself and bring them back when the government sends some soldiers here, as it's bound to do soon. Listen to reason, man. Your claim won't run away; and if someone should jump it there's another just as good alongside. Pack up and come on."

Of a sudden, rough pioneer as he was, his hat came off and the tone of vexation left his voice. Another actor, a woman, had appeared upon the scene.

"You know what I'm talking about, Mrs. Rowland," he digressed. "Take my advice and come along. I'll never forgive myself if we leave you behind."

"You really think there's danger, Mr. Brown?" she asked unemotionally.

"Danger!" In pure impotence of language the other stared. "Danger, with Heaven knows how many hostile Sioux on the trail! Is it possible you two don't realise things as they are?"

"Yes, I think we realise all right," tolerantly. "I know the Tetons are hostile; they couldn't well be otherwise. Any of us would rebel if we were hustled away into a corner like naughty little boys, as they are; but actual danger—" The woman threw a comprehensive, almost amused glance at the big man, her husband. "We've been here almost two years now; long before you and the others came. Half the hunters who pass this way stop here. It wasn't a month ago that a party of Yanktons left a whole antelope. You ought to see Baby Bess shake hands with some of those wrinkled old bucks. Danger! We're safer here than we would be in Sioux City."

"But there's been massacre already, I tell you," exploded the other. "I don't merely surmise it. I saw it with my own eyes."

"There must have been some personal reason then." Mrs. Rowland glanced at the restless, excited speaker analytically, almost superciliously. "Indians are like white people. They have their loves and hates the same as all the rest of us. Sam and I ran once before when everyone was going, and when we got back not a thing had been touched; but the weeds had choked our corn and the rabbits eaten up our garden. We've been good to the Indians, and they appreciate it."

A moment Brown hesitated impotently; then of a sudden he came forward swiftly and extended his hand, first to one and then to the other.

"Good-bye, then," he halted. "I can't take you by force, and it's pure madness to stay here longer." Baby Elizabeth, a big-eyed, solemn-faced mite of humanity, had come up now and stood staring the stranger silently from the side of her mother's skirts. "I hope for the best, but before God I never expect to see any of you again."

"Oh, we'll see you in the fall all right—when you return," commented Rowland easily; but the other made no reply, and without a backward glance started at a rapid jog trot for the tiny settlement on the river two miles away.

Behind him, impassive-faced Rowland stood watching the departing frontiersman steadily, the pouches beneath his eyes accentuated by the tightened lids.

"I don't believe there's a bit more danger here now than there ever was," he commented; "but there's certainly an unusual disturbance somewhere. I don't take any stock in the people down at the settlement leaving—they'd go if they heard a coyote whistle; but Brown tells me there've been three different trappers from Big Stone gone through south in the last week, and when they leave it means something. If you say the word we'll leave everything and go yet." "If we do we'll never come back."

"Not necessarily."

"Yes. I'm either afraid of these red people or else I'm not. We went before because the others went. If we left now it would be different. We'd be tortured day and night if we really feared—what happens now and then to some. We came here with our eyes wide open. We can't start again in civilisation. We're too old, and there's the past—"

"You still blame me?"

"No; but we've chosen. Whatever comes, we'll stay." She turned toward the rough log shanty unemotionally.

"Come, let's forget it. Dinner's waiting and baby's hungry."

A moment Rowland hesitated, then he, too, followed.

"Yes, let's forget it," he echoed slowly.

"Well, in Heaven's name!" Rowland's great bulk was upon its feet, one hand upon the ever-ready revolver at his hip, the dishes on the rough pine dining table clattering with the suddenness of his withdrawal. "Who are you, man, and what's the trouble? Speak up—"

The dishevelled intruder within the narrow doorway glanced about the interior of the single room with bloodshot eyes.

His great mouth was a bit open and his swollen tongue all but protruded.

"Water!" The word was scarce above a whisper.

"But who are you?"

"Water!" fiercely, insistently.

Of a sudden he spied a wooden pail upon a shelf in the corner, and without invitation, almost as a wild beast springs, he made for it,

grasped the big tin dipper in both hands; drank measure after measure, the overflow trickling down his bare throat and dripping onto the sanded floor.

"God, that's good!" he voiced. "Good, good!"

After that first involuntary movement Rowland did not stir; but at his side the woman had risen, and behind her, peering around the fortress of her skirts as when before she had argued with Frontiersman Brown, stood the little wide-eyed girl, type of the repressed frontier child.

Back to them came the stranger, his great jowl working unconsciously.

"You are Sam Rowland?" he enunciated thickly,

"Yes."

"The settlement hasn't broken up then?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Is it possible that you don't know, that they don't know?" Involuntarily he seized his host by the arm. "I've heard of you; you live two miles out. We've no time to lose. Come, don't stop to save anything."

Rowland straightened. The other smelled evilly of perspiration.

"Come where? Who are you anyway, and what's the matter? Talk so I can understand you."

"You don't know that the Santees are on the 'big trail'? of the massacre along the Minnesota River?"

"I know nothing. Once more, who are you?"

"Who am I? What does it matter? My name is Hans Mueller. I'm a trapper." Of a sudden he drew back, inspecting his impassive questioner doubtfully, almost unbelievingly. "But come. I'll tell you along the way. You mustn't be here an hour longer. I saw their signal smokes this very morning. They're murdering everyone—men, women, and children. It's Little Crow who started it, and God knows how many settlers they've killed. They chased me for hours, but I had a good horse. It only gave out yesterday; and since then—But come. It's suicide to chatter like this." He turned insistently toward the door. "They may be here any minute."

Rowland and his wife looked at each other. Neither spoke a word; but at last the woman shook her head slowly.

Hans Mueller shifted restlessly.

"Hurry, I tell you," he insisted.

Rowland sat down again deliberately, his heavy double chin folding over his soft flannel shirt.

"Where are you going?" he temporised with almost a shade of amusement.

"Going!" In his unbelief the German's protruding eyes seemed almost to roll from his face. "To the settlement, of course."

"There is no settlement."

"What?"

Rowland repeated his statement impassively.

"They've—gone?" The tongue had grown suddenly thick again.

"I said so." The look of pity had altered, become almost of scorn.

For a half minute there was silence, inactivity, while despite tan and dirt and perspiration the cheeks of Hans Mueller whitened. The same expression of terror, hopeless, dominant, all but insane, that had been with him alone out on the prairie returned, augmented. Heedless of appearances, all but unconscious of the presence of spectators, he glanced about the single room like a beaten rabbit with the hounds close on its trail. No avenue of hiding suggested itself, no possible hope of protection. The cold perspiration broke out afresh on his forehead, at the roots of his hair, and in absent impotency he mopped it away with the back of a fat, grimy hand.

In pity motherly Mrs. Rowland returned to her seat, indicated another vacant beside the board.

"You'd best sit down and eat a bit," she invited. "You must be hungry as a coyote."

"Eat, now?" Swiftly, almost fiercely, the old terror-restless mood returned. "God Almighty couldn't keep me here longer." He started shuffling for the door. "Stay here and be scalped, if you think I lie. We're corpses, all of us, but I'll not

be caught like a beaver in a trap." Again he halted jerkily. "Which way did they go!"

Lower and lower sank Rowland's great chin onto his breast.

"They separated," impassively. "Part went south to Sioux City; part west toward Yankton." Involuntarily his lips pursed in the inevitable contempt of a strong man for one hopelessly weak. "You'd better take a lunch along. It's something of a journey to either place."

Swift as the suggestion, Mrs. Rowland, with the spontaneous hospitality of the frontier, was upon her feet. Into a quaint Indian basket of coloured rushes went a roast grouse, barely touched, from the table. A loaf of bread followed: a bottle of water from the wooden pail in the corner. "You're welcome, friend," she proffered.

Hans Mueller hesitated, accepted. A swift moisture dimmed his eyes.

"Thanks, lady," he halted. "You're good people, anyway. I'm sorry—" He lifted his battered hat, shuffled anew toward the doorway. "Good-bye."

Impassive as before, Rowland returned to his neglected dinner.

"No wonder the Sioux play us whites for cowards, and think we'll run at sight of them," he commented.

Mrs. Rowland, standing motionless in the single exit through which Mueller had gone, did not answer.

"Better come and finish, Margaret," suggested her husband.

Again there was no answer, and Rowland, after eating a few mouthfuls, pushed back his chair. Even then she did not speak, and, rising, the man made his way across the room to put an arm with rough affection around his wife's waist.

"Are you, too, scared at last?" he voiced gently.

The woman turned swiftly and, in action almost unbelievable after her former unemotional certainty, dropped her head to his shoulder.

"Yes, I think I am a bit, Sam. For baby's sake I wish we'd gone too; but now,"—her arms crept around his neck, closed,—"but now—now it's too late!"

For a long minute, and another, the man did not stir but involuntarily his arms had tightened until, had she wished, the woman could not have turned. He had been looking absently out the door, south over the rolling country leading to the deserted settlement.

In the distance, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, Hans Mueller was still in sight, skirting the base of a sharp incline. Through the trembling heat waves he seemed a mere moving dark spot; like an ant or a spider on its zigzag journey. The grass at the base of the rise was rank and heavy, reaching almost to the waist of the moving figure. Rowland watched it all absently, meditatively; as he would have watched the movement of a coyote or a prairie owl, for the simple reason that it was the only visible object endowed with life, and instinctively life responds to life. The words of his wife just spoken, "It is too late," with the revelation they bore, were echoing in his brain. For the first time, to his mind came a vague unformed suggestion, not of fear, but near akin, as to this lonely prairie wilderness, and the red man its child. In a hazy way came the question whether after all it were not foolhardy to remain here now, to dare that invisible, intangible something before which, almost in panic, the others had fled. To be sure, precedent was with him, logic; but—of a sudden—but a minute had passed—his arms tightened; involuntarily he held his breath. Hans Mueller had been moving on and on; another half minute and he would have been behind the base of the hill out of sight; when, as from the turf at one's feet there springs a-wing a covey of prairie grouse, from the tall grass about the retreating figure there leaped forth a swarm of other similar dark figures: a dozen, a score—in front, behind, all about. Apparently from mother earth herself they had come, autochthonous. Almost unbelieving, the spectator

blinked his eyes; then, as came swift understanding, instinctively he shielded the woman in his arms from the sight, from the knowledge. Not a sound came to his ears from over the prairie: not a single call for help. That black swarm simply arose, there was a brief, sharp struggle, almost fantastic through the curling heat waves; then one and all, the original dark figure, the score of others, disappeare d—as suddenly as though the earth from which they came had swallowed them up. Look as he might, the spectator could catch no glimpse of a moving object, except the green-brown grass carpet glistening under the afternoon sun.

Yet a moment longer the man stood so; then, his own face as pale as had been that of coward Hans Mueller, he leaned against the lintel of the door.

"Yes, we're too late now, Margaret," he echoed.

Chapter II.
Fulfilment

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The log cabin of Settler Rowland, as a landmark, stood forth. Barred it was—the white of barked cotton-wood timber alternating with the brown of earth that filled the spaces between—like the longitudinal stripes of a prairie gopher or on the back of a bob-white. Long wiry slough grass, razor-sharp as to blades, pungent under rain, weighted by squares of tough, native sod, thatched the roof. Sole example of the handiwork of man, it crowned one of the innumerable rises, too low to be dignified by the name of hill, that stretched from sky to sky like the miniature waves on the surface of a shallow lake. Back of it, stretching northward, a vivid green blot, lay a field of sod corn: the ears already formed, the ground whitened from the lavishly scattered pollen of the frayed tassels. In the dooryard itself was a dug well with a mound of weed-covered clay by its side and a bucket hanging from a pulley over its mouth. It was deep, for on this upland water was far beneath the surface, and midway of its depth, a frontier refrigerator reached by a rope ladder, was a narrow chamber in which Margaret Rowland kept her meats fresh, often for a week at a time. For another purpose as well it was used: a big basket with a patchwork quilt and a pillow marking the spot where Baby Rowland, with the summer heat all about, slept away the long, sultry afternoons.

Otherwise not an excrescence marred the face of nature. The single horse Rowland owned, useless now while his crop matured, was breaking sod far to the west on the bank of the Jim River. Not a live thing other than human moved about the place. With them into this land of silence had

come a mongrel collie. For a solitary month he had stood guard; then one night, somewhere in the distance, in the east where flowed the Big Sioux, had sounded the long-drawn-out cry of a timber wolf, alternately nearer and more remote, again and again. With the coming of morning the collie was gone. Whether dead or answering the call of the wild they never knew, nor ever filled his place.

Lonely, isolated as the place itself, was Sam Rowland that afternoon of late August. Silent as a mute was he as to what he had seen; elaborately careful likewise to carry out the family programme as usual.

"Sleepy, kid?" he queried when dinner was over.

Baby Bess, taciturn, sun-browned autocrat, nodded silent corroboration.

"Come, then," and, willing horse, the big man got clumsily to all fours and, prancing ponderously, drew up at her side.

"Hang tight," he admonished and, his wife smiling from the doorway as only a mother can smile, ambled away through the sun and the dust; climbed slowly, the tiny brown arms clasped tightly about his neck, down the ladder to the retreat, adjusted the pillow and the patchwork quilt with a deftness born of experience.

"Go to sleepy, kid," he directed.

"Sing me to sleep, daddy," commanded the autocrat.

"Sing! I can't sing, kid."

"Yes, you can. Sing 'Nellie Gray.'"

"Too hot, girlie. My breath's all gone. Go to sleep."

"Please, papa; pretty please!"

The man succumbed, as he knew from the first he would do, braced himself in the aperture, and sang the one verse that he knew of the song again and again—his voice rough and unmusical as that of a crow, echoing and re-echoing in the narrow space—bent over at last, touched his bearded lips softly to the winsome, motionless brown face, climbed, an irresistible catch in his breath, silently to the surface,

sent one swift glance sweeping the bare earth around him, and returned to the cabin.

Very carefully that sultry afternoon he cleaned his old hammer shotgun, and, loading both barrels with buckshot, set it handy beside the door.

"Antelope," he explained laconically; but when likewise he overhauled the revolver hanging at his hip, Margaret was not deceived. This done, notwithstanding the fact that the sun still beat scorchingly hot thereon, he returned to the doorstep, lit his pipe, drew his weather-stained sombrero low over his face, through half-closed eyes inspected the lower lands all about, impassively silent awaited the coming of the inevitable. Of a sudden there was a touch on his shoulder, and, involuntarily starting, he looked up, into the face of Margaret Rowland.

The woman sat down beside him, her hand on his knee.

"Don't keep it from me," she requested steadily. "You've seen something."

In the brier bowl before his face the tobacco glowed more brightly as Rowland drew hard.

"Tell me, please," repeated Margaret. "Are they here?"

The pipe left the man's mouth. The great bushy head nodded reluctant corroboration.

"Yes," he said.

"You—saw them?"

Again the man's head spoke an affirmative. "It's perhaps as well, after all, for you to know." One hand indicated the foot of the rise before them. "They waylaid Mueller there."

"And you—"

"It was all over in a second." Puff, puff. "After all he—Margaret!"

"Don't mind me. I was thinking of baby. The hideous suggestion!"

"Margaret!" He held her tight, so tight he could feel the quiver of her body against his, the involuntary catch of her breath. "Forgive me, Margaret."

"You're not to blame. Perhaps—Oh, Sam, Sam, our baby!"

Hotter and hotter beat down the sun. Thicker and thicker above the scorching earth vibrated the curling heat waves. The very breath of prairie seemed dormant, stifled. Not the leaf of a sunflower stirred, or a blade of grass. In the tiny patch of Indian corn each individual plant drooped, almost like a sensate thing, beneath the rays, each broad leaf contracted, like a roll of parchment, tight upon the parent stalk. In sympathy the colour scheme of the whole lightened from the appearance of the paler green under-surface. Though silently, yet as plainly as had done Hans Mueller when fighting for life, they lifted the single plea: "Water! Water! Give us drink!"

Silent now, the storm over, side by side sat the man and the woman; like children awed by the sudden realisation of their helplessness, their hands clasped in mute sympathy, mute understanding. Usually at this time of day with nothing to do they slept; but neither thought of sleep now. As passed the slow time and the sun sank lower and lower, came the hour of supper; but likewise hunger passed them by. Something very like fascination held them there on the doorstep, gazing out, out at motionless impassive nature, at the seemingly innocent earth that nevertheless concealed so certain a menace, at the patch of sod corn again in cycle growing darker as the broad leaves unfolded in preparation for the dew of evening. Out, out they looked, out, out—.

"Sam!"

"Yes,"

"You saw, too?"

An answering pressure of the hand.

"The eyes of him, only the eyes—out there at the edge of the corn!"

"It's the third time, Margaret." Despite the man's effort his breath tightened. "They're all about: a score at least—I don't know how many. The tall grass there to the east is alive—"

"Sam! They're there again—the eyes! Oh, I'm afraid—Sam—baby!"

"Hush! Leave her where she is. Don't seem afraid. It's our only chance. Let them make the first move." Again the hand pressure so tight that, although she made no sound, the blood left the woman's fingers. "Tell me you forgive me, Margaret; before anything happens. I'm a criminal to have stayed here,—I see it now, a criminal!"

"Don't!"

"But I must. Tell me you forgive me. Tell me."

"I love you, Sam."

Again in the expanse of grass to the east there was motion; not in a single spot but in a dozen places. No living being was visible, not a sound broke the stillness of evening; simply here and there it stirred, and became motionless, and stirred again.

"And—Margaret. If worst comes to worst they mustn't take either of us alive. The last one—I can't say it. You understand."

"Yes, I understand. The last load—But maybe—"

"It's useless to deceive ourselves. They wouldn't come this way if—Margaret, in God's name—"

"But baby, Sam!" Of a sudden she was struggling fiercely beneath the grip that kept her back. "I must have her, must see her again; must, must—"

"Margaret!"

"I must, I say!"

"You must not. They'll never find her there. She's safe unless we show the way. Think—as you love her."

"But if anything should happen to us—She'll starve!"

"No. There are soldiers at Yankton, and they'll come—now; and Landor knows."

"Oh, Sam, Sam!"

There was silence. No human being could give answer to that mother wail.

Again time passed; seconds that seemed minutes, minutes that were a hell of suspense. Below the horizon of prairie the sun sank from sight. In the hot air a bank of cumulus clouds glowed red as from a distant conflagration. For and eternity previous it seemed to the silent watchers there had been no move; now again at last the grass stirred; a corn plant rustled where there was no breeze; out into the small open plat surrounding the house sprang a frightened rabbit, scurried across the clearing, headed for the protecting grass, halted at the edge irresolute—scurried back again at something it saw.

"You had best go in, Margaret." The man's voice was strained, unnatural. "They'll come very soon now. It's almost dark."

"And you?" Wonder of wonders, it was the woman's natural tone!

"I'll stay here. I can at least show them how a white man dies."

"Sam Rowland—my husband!"

"Margaret—my wife!" Regardless of watchful savage eyes, regardless of everything, the man sprang to his feet. "Oh, how can you forgive me, can God forgive me!" Tight in his arms he kissed her again and again; passionately, in abandon. "I've always loved you, Margaret; always, always!"

"And I you, man; and I you!"

It came. As from the darkness above drops the horned owl on the field mouse, as meet the tiger and the deer at the water hole, so it came. Upon the silence of night sounded the hoarse call of a catbird where no bird was, and again, and again. In front of the maize patch, always in front, a dark form, a mere shadow in the dusk of evening, stood out clear against the light of sky. To right and left appeared others, as motionless as boulders, or as giant cacti on the desert. Had Settler Rowland been other than the exotic he

was, he would have understood. No Indian exposes himself save for a purpose; but he did not understand. Erect now, his finger on the trigger of the old smoothbore, he waited passive before the darkened doorway of the cabin, looking straight before him, God alone knows what thoughts whirling in his brain. Again in front of him sounded and resounded the alien call. The dark figures against the sky took life, moved forward. Simultaneously, on the thatch of the cabin roof, appeared two other figures identical with those in front. Foot by foot, silent as death, they climbed up, reached the ridge pole, crossed to the other side. On, on advanced the figures in front. Down the easy incline of the roof came the two in the rear, reached the edge, paused waiting. Of a sudden, out of the maize patch, out of the grass, seemingly out of space itself, came a new cry—the trilling call of the prairie owl. It was the signal. Like twin drops of rain from a cloudless sky fell the two figures on Rowland's head; ere he could utter a sound, could offer resistance, bore him to earth. From somewhere, everywhere, swarmed others. The very earth seemed to open and give them forth in legion. In the multitude of hands he was as a child. Within the space of seconds, ere waiting Margaret realised that anything had happened, he had disappeared, all had disappeared. In the clearing before the door not a human being was visible, not a live thing; only on the thatched roof, silent as before, patient as fate, awaited two other s hadows, darker but by contrast with the weather-coloured grass.

Minutes passed. Not even the call of the catbird, broke the silence. Within the darkness of the cabin the suspense was a thing of which insanity is made.

"Sam!" called a voice softly.

No answer.

"Sam!" repeated more loudly.

Again no answer of voice or of action.

In the doorway appeared a woman's figure; breathless, blindly fearful.

"Sam!" for the third time, tremulous, wailing; and she stepped outside.

A second, and it was over. A second, and the revel was on. The earth was not silent now. There was no warning trill of prairie owl. As dropped the figures from above there broke forth the Sioux war-cry: long drawn out, demoniac, indescribable. Blood curdling, more savage infinitely than the cry of any wild beast, the others took it up, augmented it by a score, a hundred throats. Again the earth vomited the demons forth. Naked, breech-clouted, garbed in fragments of white men's dress, they swarmed into the clearing, into the cabin, about the two prisoners in their midst. Passively, patiently waiting for hours, of a sudden they seemed possessed of a frenzy of haste, of savage abandon, of drunken exhilaration in the cunning that had won the game without a shot from the white man's gun, without the injury of a single warrior. They were in haste, and yet they were not in haste. They looted the cabin like fire and then fought among themselves for the plunder. They applied the torch to the shanty's roof as though pressed by the Great Spirit; then capered fiendishly in its illumination, oblivious of time until, tinder

dry, it had burned level with the earth. Last of all, purposely reserved as a climax, they gave their attention to the pair of half-naked, bound and gagged figures in their midst. Then it was the scene became an orgy indeed. The havoc preceding had but whetted their appetite for the finale. Savagery personified, cruelty unqualified, deadly hate, primitive lust—every black passion lurking in the recesses of the human mind stalked brazenly into the open, stood forth defiant, sinister, unashamed. But let it pass. It was but a repetition of a thousand similar scenes enacted on the swiftly narrowing frontier, a fraction of the price

civilisation ever pays to savagery, inevitable as a nation's expansion, as its progression.

It was eight of the clock when came that final warning whistle of prairie owl. It was not yet ten when, silent as they had come, unbelievably impassive when but an hour before they had been irresponsible madmen, temporarily cruelty-surfeited, they resumed their journey. Single file, each footstep of those who followed fair in the print of the leader, a long, long line of ghostly, undulatory shadows, forming the most treacherous deadly serpent that ever inhabited earth, they moved eastward until they reached the bank of the swift little river; then turned north, leaving the abandoned, desolated settlement, the ruined cornfields, as tokens of their handiwork, as a message to other predatory bands who might follow, as a challenge to the white man who they knew would return. As passed the slow hours toward morning they moved swiftly and more swiftly. The gliding walk became a dog trot, almost a lope; their arms swung back and forth in unison, the pat, pat of their moccasined feet was like the steady drip of eaves from a summer rain, the rustle of their passing bodies against the dense vegetation a soft accompaniment. Autochthonous as they had appeared they disappeared. Night and distance swallowed them up. But for a trampled, ruined grainfield, the smouldering ruins of what had once been a house, the glaring white of two naked bodies in the starlight against the background of dark earth, it was as though they had not come. But for this, and one other thing—a single sound, repeated again and again, dulled, muffled as though coming from the earth itself.

"Daddy! Daddy! I want you." Then repeated with a throb in its depths that spoke louder than words. "Daddy, come! I'm afraid!"