The Quarterbreed

A Modern Indian Reservation Story by Robert Ames Bennet

IF you discovered that an able man of unscrupulous character and political power enough to wreck your career was trying to do harm to the girl you loved by stealing her affections and turning them to evil purposes, would you shoot him before he spoiled the girl or wait until he did it and then kill him? Consider Captain Hardy's predicament, as described in this installment. The army officer, you will recall, went to Lakotah reservation as acting agent following the murder of Agent Nogen and a threatened uprising of the Indians. Wounded by an ambush shot, he falls in love with Marie Dupont, a quarterbreed, who nurses him, but gives no definite answer to his proposal of marriage because she is enamored of Reginald Vandervyn, agency clerk and scapegrace nephew of Senator Clemmer. Hardy learns the Indians are disaffected because old Jacques Dupont, a wily post trader, and Vandervyn have cheated them in an illegal tribal mine deal. At first the red men, deceived by Vandervyn, misunderstand the officer's motives, but finally accept him as their friend, and a commission, led by Vanderwyn, prepares to go to Washington to secure a division of tribal lands and the sale of mines owned by Indians. Vandervyn plans to get profit for himself.

CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

—9—

So began the second period of Hardy's close companionship with the girl, and the intimacy appeared as sincere and friendly as the first one, when Vandervyn was in the mountains with Redbear. Almost every day they rode out to examine the Wolf river watershed, and estimate as best they could without surveying instruments the number of acres that could be put under ditch.

Hardy had at once written for reports on similar undertakings. Before receiving them he was agreeably surprised by an official telegram from Washington instructing him to at once send on the tribal delegation, in the charge of Redbear. So swift an unreeling of government red tape proved that powerful influences were favoring the consummation of the new treaty. Hardy ungrudgingly gave Vandervyn the credit of being a very successful benevolent lobbyist.

A runner was dispatched to bring in Redbear and the delegates. They came without delay. Redbear's arm was so nearly healed that he had full use of it. Oinna did not accompany him. He said their grandfather had become so fond of her that he had insisted upon her remaining in the mountains until the return of the delegation from Washington. Marie offered to send for her and give her a home while her brother was away, but Redbear hastily declared that the girl wished to stay with the old chief.

Hardy took charge of the delegation as far as the railroad, and Marie and Dupont went along to keep him company. He provided for the comfort aboard train of Redbear and the five solemn chiefs, and shipped them off with through tickets to Washington and a careful set of instructions to help them in the conduct of their mission.

"My only wish is that I might go with them," he remarked, as the "iron horse" whirled them away toward the land of the sunrise. "They will be like Babes in the Woods."

"You sure have done your level best for them, Cap," replied Dupont. "You ain't got no license to worry nohow. Mr. Van is there to boost 'em along."

"Besides, you have your work here," added Marie with a glance that completely diverted his thoughts.

They spent the night in the rough shack misnamed a hotel, and at dawn started on their return to the agency. As Dupont's pony was continually lagging behind, Hardy had the pleasure of Marie's company virtually alone for the greater part of the ride. She seemed to enjoy this quite as much as he, and remained in gracious good-humor even through the blazing heat of midday. Nor did she allow herself to feel fatigue until, after their arrival at the agency, she had cooked a savory supper, and then entertained Hardy for an hour or more in her artistic little parlor.

The next day, fresh as ever, Marie was ready to ride up to the falls and help him run a line of levels with the instruments that he had hired in town. Never had he known anyone so abounding in life. Mentally as well as physically, she seemed ever tireless, buoyant, animated.

Day after day they worked and planned for the good of the tribe; day after day her graciousness toward him increased. And day after day his love for her deepened and strengthened until it could be seen in his every look and act, and heard in every inflection of his voice when he spoke to her. Though her manner toward him showed no trace of overt coquetry, she made no effort to repulse his silent devotion or to check the growth of his passion.

A week after the departure of the delegation found him fully looking the part of a gallant lover—ardent, youthful, almost handsome. He had lost much of his former look of pensive severity. Even the silvery hairs over his temples seemed to be regaining their original ruddy brown.

A few days later one of the lines of levels happened to bring him and the girl to the edge of the coulee, across from the butte. He suggested that they go down and across to the spring rill for a drink.

As they turned back, Marie recognized the exact spot where he had been shot. Womanlike, she shuddered and turned pale at the recollection, though at the time of the occurrence she had been so brave.

"Look!" she said in a half-whisper. "Here is where you fell. I thought you were killed!"

"The experience was well worth while," he replied. His voice shook with the irresistible passion of his love. "Dearest!—let me call you that here, this once! It was here I first looked into the depths of your heart, and learned how good and kind you are."

The girl turned to hide her face from the reverent adoration of his gaze.

"No, no," she murmured. "Don't, please!"

"I must speak, dear," he replied. "I ask nothing of you. It is only that I wish to tell you how you made me realize again that life is worth living. When I came from the Coast, I had lost one dearer to me than anyone else in all the world—my mother. She was a little woman, very frail—her blue eyes were dim and faded, her hair white; but even when she—was at the very end—her dear eyes sought to ease my grief with the same look you gave me as you bent over me here and thought me fatally injured."

"Please!" begged the girl, choking back a sob. "I do not deserve—Your mother!—but I am not kind nor good!"

Hardy went on in the same voice of profound passion: "You lifted me out of the shadow of the Valley. You came to me in my blank darkness, a glorious light of divine goodness that compelled me to see that all was not wrong with the universe—that even so great a loss as mine might be for the best."

"I am not what you think me—I am not!" she reiterated.

"You restored my faith and hope," he insisted. "It would be selfish of me to ask anything more of you now—"

"It would be useless—useless!" she cried.

He was too little versed in feminine nature to realize that her vehemence might indicate an effort to suppress an inner doubt of the assertion. Had he been a few years younger, youthful impetuosity might have won him that which his reverent respect shrank from urging. He had taken her gloved hand. He pressed it to his lips, and freed her.

"I shall not annoy you, dear," he said. "Yet I cannot take that as final. I shall wait until he returns. Then I shall take my fighting chance."

"You will?" she whispered.

"I shall not give up until you have pledged yourself to him. If I can. I will prevent that. He cannot possibly love you as I love you. If it is possible to win you for my wife, I will do it."

Marie quivered, and shrank from him as if startled. "You say, when

"My Friend, Jake Dupont, Gentlemen."

he comes back— But until then you—you will not—"

"Until then we shall continue to be the same good comrades that we have been."

The girl drew in a deep breath. "Then—let us go back to work."

Hardy accepted the suggestion with a self-control that was as remarkable as it was misplaced.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Only Woman.

During the pleasant, busy days that followed, to all appearances Marie enjoyed the work and planning and the long hours of companionship fully as much as Hardy. Dupont, now ever bluff and genial, kept close to his store. But during the long evening discussions his eyes often twinkled cunningly under their gray thatch. No word had been received from Washington except two notes from Vandervyn to Dupont, reporting favorable progress and inclosing sealed letters to Marie. She told nothing of what these contained, even to her father.

Hardy's first—and last—message in regard to the new treaty was an official notification that it had been duly approved and signed, after fifteen million dollars had been decided upon as the compensation to the tribe for the mineral lands. Special commissioners had been named to proceed to the reservation and arrange for the immediate opening of the mineral lands to entry, and the allotment of the remaining lands to the members of the tribe.

Hardy was surprised when he saw that the time set for the departure of the commissioners had already passed. The document had been misdirected, had been returned to Washington, and then seemingly had been pigeonholed for several days by some careless clerk before being remailed to him.

If he had not established a more frequent mail service, in place of the customary weekly trip to town by one of the police, the commissioners might have arrived before he received the notice.

He was still more surprised when, the following day, he and Marie rode down Sioux creek to where it flowed into Wolf river. The moment the view down the coulee opened before them, they perceived several tents pitched in the bottom, at the foot of the butte. They found twenty or twenty-five rough-looking men encamped along the spring rill in light dog-tents. A few were cowboys, but the greater number had the appearance and outfits of prospecting miners. They stared at Marie with the respectful admiration of typical Westerners for an "honest" woman, and readily answered Hardy's civil questions.

Notice of the prospective opening of the mineral lands of the reservation had been published in a few very obscure weekly papers. One of the men gave Hardy a blurred sheet of a little country journal, and pointed out the government notice. It was printed in the midst of several uninteresting legal notices. The old fellow winked knowingly, and remarked that, as long as he was in on the game, he didn't care how quiet it was played.

"What could that man have meant about being in on a quiet game?" Marie asked Hardy, as they rode down the coulee to take the road back to the agency.

"I believe I understand, and I do not altogether like it," replied Hardy. "The fellow probably is right in thinking that undue influence is being exerted to give as little publicity as possible to the opening of the mineral lands to entry."

"Do you really think so? Of course it is not right— Yet where is the harm? These men have been enterprising enough to seize the opportunity, and they deserve the chances of good fortune."

"The transaction has rather too much the appearance of a prearranged scheme," replied Hardy. His thoughtful face darkened with the shadow of anxiety. "If I could be sure that it would bring only good fortune to you!"

The profound tenderness and concern in his voice seemed to startle Marie. She leaned forward, and put her pony into a gallop.

The day before, immediately upon receipt of the official statement from Washington, Hardy had sent a messenger to notify Ti-owa-konza. Two days later the head chief came with all his large family, including Oinna. Marie insisted that the girl should come to stay with her until the return of Redbear, and immediately fitted out the girl with good dresses from her own wardrobe. When Hardy spoke of her generosity, she smiled and shrugged.

"It is little enough to do for anyone, captain. I was tired of those old gowns. Anyway, as a quarterbreed, I owe it to my own self-respect to keep a halfbreed girl from going around like a full-blood woman."

"Her brother will be greatly pleased."

"I had no thought of him. He is rather a worthless fellow. It is strange to me how proud Oinna is of him. She says nothing, but one can see that she is in a fever of joyous excitement over the prospect of his return."

Hardy frowned, parted his lips to speak, and thought better of it.

"You were going to say—?" observed Marie.

"Something that must be left unsaid, if you will pardon me," he replied, and he shifted the conversation to the question of accommodations for the commissioners.

The arrival of the commissioners early in the afternoon of the following day would have taken the agency by surprise if Hardy had not posted a lookout on the signal mountain. The prearranged smoke-sign gave warning of the approach of the party while it was yet many miles away over the plains. Even at that, Hardy and Marie and Dupont were not quite ready to greet the visitors when they came into view down the valley. The explanation of their quick trip from the railroad at once became evident. Commissioners, Indian delegates and all were stowed in two large touring cars.

Vandervyn was driving the foremost car. He brought it up the slope of the agency terrace with a rush, and spun it around in a curve that ended before the porch of the Dupont house. The second car rolled straight on across the terrace to the tepee of Ti-owa-konza.

Hardy, who was about to start across to the office, paused in the porch to welcome the commissioners. Dupont hurried out of the rear doorway of his store. Marie, after a slight bow in acknowledgment of Vandervyn's respectful salute, quietly drew back into her parlor.

In the front seat beside Vandervyn was a big, red-faced man, whose bleared eyes immediately began to scrutinize Hardy, and as quickly turned away when they met his clear gaze. The five men in the tonneau all had the look of a certain kind of politician, and all met Hardy's cordial greeting with a cold formality that would have chilled even a place-hunter.

Put upon his dignity by this unexpected rebuff, the captain drew back into the porch. Dupont received a more pleasant response to his bluff welcome. He jerked open the door of the tonneau, and offered his hand to each of the commissioners in turn as they stepped stiffly out into the porch.

"My friend Jake Dupont, gentlemen," said Vandervyn.

Every member of the party at once smiled upon the trader, and shook hands with him. Most cordial of all was the big man who had sat in the front seat.

Marie now stepped out to greet the visitors, and was formally introduced by Vandervyn. With a gracious composure that would have done credit to the most exclusive of drawing rooms, she welcomed the visitors, and invited them to luncheon.

The most portly member of the commission promptly accepted the invitation on behalf of himself and his companions, and the party followed their hostess into her parlor. Vandervyn lingered a moment to favor Hardy with a smile of ironical condolence.

"Chesty lot, these lame ducks!" he said. "But they stand in with the big fellows. They had the cars shipped out from Chicago to accommodate them. Better snuggle up on their warm side— What, not going, surely? You must come in to lunch and show us how tactful a tactician can be."

"Thanks, no," replied Hardy. "I'll ask you kindly to excuse me to Miss Dupont. The commissioners may find me at the office at any time that suits them."

Vandervyn shrugged and went indoors, his smile a trifle forced. He at once joined his party in their eager acceptance of Dupont's most cordial expression of hospitality, his eight-year-old whisky. Marie had excused herself to the guests. By the time she reappeared every member of the party was aglow with good feeling. The girl at once became the target for a shower of compliments, all in doubtful taste, and some decidedly too free and easy.

She looked to Vandervyn, and met only with an uneasy smile. Seeing that he would say nothing, she replied to the offenders with a wit and dignity that soon altered their bearing toward her. They were puzzled to find a garden rose in this rough wilderness, but she soon brought them to the realization that they were not at liberty to splash mud on her petals. The luncheon completed her conquest.

Vandervyn came to the table with all the uneasiness gone from his smile. He took his seat, and proceeded to extol Marie's skill as a chef. Oinna, bearing a tray, came in, and began to serve luncheon. Though extremely shy, she started with a deftness that showed careful training. Several moments passed before Vandervyn looked up and perceived her. The surprise was too sharp even for his assurance. He stopped short in his talk, and stared at her, disconcerted.

At sight of his frown the girl dropped her tray, now fortunately empty, and with a little, gasping cry fled from the room. She did not reappear. Marie passed off the awkward incident with a smile and a tactful explanation of Oinna's excessive shyness. The Indian boy finished the serving.

Vandervyn had delivered Hardy's messages. They had been received alike by Marie and by the commissioners without comment. After luncheon one of the commissioners brusquely proposed that Hardy be summoned to attend upon them. Vandervyn interposed with the suave suggestion that the acting agent might leave in the safe some of the papers necessary to a full understanding of the affairs of the agency.

At this the party lingered only for a parting nip at Dupont's liquid hospitality. Assuring Marie that they would return in time for dinner, they left under the escort of their host. With the excuse that he had mislaid his hat, Vandervyn returned to the dining room. When he came out, he shut the door. Marie was alone in the parlor. All the suppressed fire of his passion flamed in his face, as he turned and came swiftly back to the waiting girl. There could be no doubt that he expected her to meet him halfway.

She stood beside a chair, somewhat pale, but outwardly very calm. She did not advance a single step. Yet,

"You've Been Letting Marie Get Thick With Him."

blinded by his own ardor, he came on without heeding the look in her face until within arm's-reach of her. Then at last he perceived her lack of response, and stopped.

"I say!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter? Is this the way to welcome me back, sweetheart?"

The term of endearment brought a quick blush into the girl's cheeks. But she replied in cold, even tones: "Are you now at liberty to address me as your fiancee?"

His eyes shifted before her level gaze. "Don't be foolish, Marie. You know you're the only woman. You know that engagement must stand until we are sure of the mine. There is something else, as well—"

"This is quite enough for the present," she broke in. "I promised to wait for you until you should come back—free from your cousin. You have returned, but you are not free from her. Is it honorable for you to speak to me now?"

"How can I help it?" he urged, seek[illegible] ing to melt her with his ardent gaz[illegible] "You are the only woman—the o[illegible] one in all the world to me. There [illegible] not another half as beautiful, a te[illegible] as charming!"

She quivered in response to the de[illegible] golden notes of his voice, yet held h[illegible] self firm with all the strength of [illegible] resolute will.

"You speak of love," she rejo[illegible] "You say nothing of marriage."

"How can I?" he asked in an [illegible] grieved tone. "You know that u[illegible] we get the mine— But that won' [illegible] long now. These commissioners [illegible] jumping-jacks in the hands of m[illegible] cle. They will hustle matters th[illegible] for us—short order. Once I—w[illegible] the mine, I'll be a free man, an[illegible] sweetheart—"

But the girl drew back fr[illegible] pleading arms.

"No," she said. "If I must [illegible] must you. If you mean what [illegible] you should be satisfied that I [illegible] I may have to wait."

"You mean—what?" he stam[illegible]

She clenched her hands conv[illegible] "Why did you come first? W[illegible] I not have known him first?"

"I see," he muttered. "It' [illegible] that tin soldier."

"Yes, it is—that gentlem[illegible] flashed back. Again the sle[illegible] nails cut into her palms.

"Nice fatherly old fogy [illegible] Vandervyn. "You're far too [illegible] too much of a real woman [illegible] your feeling toward hi[illegible] Love! that's the word, sw[illegible] youth and love and happi[illegible] and I, sweetheart!"

She blushed and trembl[illegible] had spent all the days of [illegible] in that intimate comrad[illegible] Hardy. At the moment wh[illegible] vyn thought to take her into [illegible] her will rallied, her eyes [illegible] with resolution.

"I have said that I will wait. T[illegible] is enough. You also shall wait."

His eyes narrowed. "Has it never [illegible] occurred to you that you may be a bit [illegible] too sure of me? The mine may pinch [illegible] out after the first few hundred thousands. I'm in on another deal that stands to net a cool million. When I get that in bank, I can have any girl I choose to go after."

"If I had ten times a million, and could buy you a character like his, I would gladly pay it all—all!"

The slash of a whip in his face would have stung him far less. He stared at her a long moment, while the full meaning of the words cut through the armor of his self-esteem. Mortification, anger, furious chagrin flamed in his face. He raised his hand as if to strike her, and instead, whirled about and rushed out through the porch.

The girl sank on her knees, and pressed her hands to her lips to stifle the cry that would have called him back. When she looked up, her face was white and drawn with anguish. But she had conquered.

"He shall not—shall not know my weakness!" she whispered with fierce determination. "If only it has offended him beyond forgiveness! If only he may go away—forever! I might be able to forget him—in time!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

Pleasant Little Surprises.

Too furious to heed what he was about, Vandervyn struck off up a rugged gulley behind the Dupont house. An hour passed before he came back down the mountain-side. He was changing his clothes when Dupont brought him an impatient summons from the office: "Hurry up, Mr. Van. They want you. Where you been all this time?"

"Went for a stroll," drawled Vandervyn. "They can wait." His voice became harsh and incisive. "I want to speak to you about something. You've been letting Marie get in thick with him."

"Who? You mean Cap?" sparred Dupont. "You didn't say you wanted me to keep 'em from running together."

"You should have seen the danger. I take it, she has been alone with him most of the time."

"Well, what of it?" muttered Dupont.

"What of it?" echoed Vandervyn. "Don't you know enough about army officers to realize that he would never marry—a quarterbreed?"

Dupont's crafty eyes narrowed. "I'm not so all-fired sure of that. There's lots of 'em has married even half-breeds. I've seen 'em."

"Years ago, when the frontier was months away from civilization."

"Mebbe, and m[illegible] be them breed girls wasn't a ten[illegible] good lookers as Marie. Sh[illegible]

Vande[illegible] [illegible] must have th[illegible] self? [illegible] law [illegible] him [illegible]

[illegible] (CONCLUDED.)

[illegible] set.

[illegible] wom[illegible] [illegible]sville, Pa., laughed [illegible] self to d[illegible] but we are willing [illegible] wager that it wasn't over one of her husband's jokes.—*Detroit Times*