

Cimarron

by Edna Ferber



Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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FOREWORD

Only the more fantastic and improbable events contained in this book are true. There is no attempt to set down a literal history of Oklahoma. All the characters, the towns, and many of the happenings contained herein are imaginary. But through reading the scant, available records, documents, and histories (including the Oklahoma State Historical library collection) and through many talks with men and women who have lived in Oklahoma since the day of the Opening, something of the spirit, the color, the movement, the life of that incredible commonwealth has, I hope, been caught. Certainly the Run, the Sunday service in the gambling tent, the death of Isaiah and of Arta Red Feather, the catching of the can of nitroglycerin, many of the shooting affairs, most descriptive passages, all of the oil phase, and the Osage Indian material—complete—these are based on actual happenings. In many cases material entirely true was discarded as unfit for use because it was so melodramatic, so absurd as to be too strange for the realm of fiction.

There is no city of Osage, Oklahoma. It is a composite, of perhaps, five existent Oklahoma cities. The Kid is not meant to be the notorious Billy the Kid of an earlier day. There was no Yancey Cravat—he is a blending of a number of dashing Oklahoma figures of a past and present day. There is no Sabra Cravat, but she exists in a score of bright-eyed, white-haired, intensely interesting women of sixty-five or thereabouts who told me many strange things as we talked and rocked on an Oklahoma front porch (tree-shaded now).

Anything can have happened in Oklahoma. Practically everything has.

EDNA FERBER.

CHAPTER I

All the Venables sat at Sunday dinner. All those handsome inbred Venable faces were turned, enthralled, toward Yancey Cravat, who was talking. The combined effect was almost blinding, as of incandescence; but Yancey Cravat was not bedazzled. A sun surrounded by lesser planets, he gave out a radiance so powerful as to dim the luminous circle about him. The Venables, dining, strangely resembled one of those fertile and dramatic family groups portrayed loling unconventionally at meat in

the less spiritual of those Biblical canvases that glow richly down at one from the great gallery walls of Europe. Though their garb was sober enough, being characteristic of the time—1889—and the place—Kansas—it yet conveyed an impression as of purple and scarlet robes enveloping these graceful shoulders. You would not have been surprised to see, moving silently about this board, Nubian blacks in loincloths, bearing aloft golden vessels piled with exotic fruits or steaming with strange pasties in which nightingales' tongues figured prominently. Blacks, as a matter of fact, did move about the Venable table, but these, too, wore the conventional garb of the servant.

This branch of the Venable family tree had been transplanted from Mississippi to Kansas more than two decades before, but the Midwest had failed to set her bourgeois stamp upon them. Straighted though it was, there still obtained in that household, by some genealogical miracle, many of those charming ways, remotely oriental, that were of the South whence they had sprung. Unwilling emigrants, war ruined, Lewis Venable and his wife Felice had brought their dear customs with them into exile, as well as the superb mahogany oval at which they now sat, and the war-salvaged silver which gave elegance to the Wichita, Kansas, board.

As the family sat at its noonday meal it was plain that while two decades of living in the Middle West had done little to quicken the speech or hasten the movements of Lewis Venable and his wife Felice (they still "you-allded"; they declared to goodness; the eighteenth letter of the alphabet would forever be ah to them) it had made a noticeable difference in the younger generation. Up and down the long table they ranged, sons and daughters, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law; grandchildren; remoter kin such as visiting nieces and nephews and cousins, offshoots of this far-flung family. As the more northern-bred members of the company exclaimed at the tale they now were hearing you noted that their vowels were shorter, their diction more clipped, the turn of the head, the lift of the hand less leisurely. In all those faces there was a resemblance, one to the other. Perhaps the listening look which all of them now wore served to accentuate this.

Yancey Cravat was talking. He had been talking for the better part of an hour. This very morning he had returned from the Okla-

homa country—the newly opened Indian territory where he had made the Run that marked the settling of this vast tract of virgin land known colloquially as the Nation. Now, as he talked, the faces of the others had the rapt look of those who listen to a saga.

The men leaned forward, their hands clasped rather loosely between their knees or on the cloth before them, their plates pushed away, their chairs shoved back. Now and then the sudden white ridge of a hard-set muscle showed along the line of a masculine jaw. Their eyes were those of men who follow a game in which they would fain take part. Sometimes a woman's hand reached out possessively, remindingly, and was laid on the arm or the hand of the man seated beside her. "I am here," the hand's pressure said. "Your place is with me. Don't listen to him like that. Don't believe him. I am your wife. I am safety. I am security. I am comfort. I am habit. I am convention. Don't listen like that. Don't look like that."

But the man would shake off the hand, no roughly, but with absent-minded resentment.

Of all that circle of faces, linked by the enchantment of the tale now being unfolded before them, there stood out lambent as a flame the face of Sabra Cravat as she sat there at table, her child Cim in her lap. Though she, like her mother, Felice Venable, was definitely of the olive-skinned type, her face seemed luminously white as she listened to the amazing, incredible, and slightly ridiculous story now being unfolded by her husband. It was plain, too, that in her, as in her mother, the strain of the pioneering French Marceys, her ancestors, was strong. Her abundant hair was as black, and her eyes; and the strong brows arched with a swooping curve like the twin scimitars that hung above the fireplace in the company room. There was something more New England than southern in the directness of her glance, the quick turn of her head, the briskness of her speech and manner. Twenty-one now, married at sixteen, mother of a four-year-old boy, and still in love with her picturesque giant of a husband, there was about Sabra Cravat a bloom, a glow, sometimes seen at that exquisite and transitory time in a woman's life when her chemical, emotional, and physical make-up attains its highest point and fuses.

Lewis Venable, in his armchair at the head of the table, was spellbound. Curiously enough, even the boy Cim had listened, or seemed to listen, as he sat in his mother's lap. Perhaps it was the curiously musical quality of the story-teller's voice that lulled him. Sabra Venable's disgruntled suitors had said when she married Yancey Cravat, a stranger, mysterious, out of Texas and the Cimarron, that it was his voice that had bewitched her. They were in a measure right, for though Yancey Cravat was verbose, frequently even windy, and though much that he said was dry enough in actual content, he had those priceless gifts of the born orator, a vibrant and flexible voice, great sweetness and charm of manner, a hypnotic eye, and the power of making each listener feel that what was being said was intended for his ear alone. Something of the charlatan was in him, much of the actor, a dash of the fanatic.

No room seemed big enough for his gigantic frame; no chair but

dwindled beneath the breadth of his shoulders. He seemed actually to loom more than his six feet two. His black locks he wore overlong, so that they curled a little about his neck in the manner of Booth. His cheeks and forehead were, in places, deeply pitted, as with the pox. Women, perversely enough, found that attractive.

His mouth, full and sensual, had still an expression of great sweetness. His eyelashes were long and curling, like a beautiful girl's, and when he raised his heavy head to look at you, beneath the long black locks and the dark lashes you saw with something of bewilderment that his eyes were a deep and untamable ocean gray.

Now, in the course of his story, and under the excitement of it, he left the table and sprang to his feet, striding about and talking as he strode. His step was amazingly light and graceful for a man of his powerful frame. His costume was a Prince Albert of fine black broadcloth whose skirts swooped and spread with the vigor of his movements; a plicated white shirt, soft and of exquisite material; a black string tie; trousers tucked into the gay boot-tops; and, always, a white felt hat, broad-brimmed and rolling. On occasion



Yancey Cravat

he simply blubbed Shakespeare, the Old Testament, the Odyssey, the Iliad. His speech was spattered with bits of Latin, and with occasional Spanish phrases, relic of his Texas days. He flattered you with his fine eyes; he bewitched you with his voice; he mesmerized you with his hands. He drank a quart of whisky a day; was almost never drunk, but on rare occasions when the liquor fumes bested him he would invariably select a hapless victim and, whipping out the pair of mother-of-pearl-handled six-shooters he always wore at his belt, would force him to dance by shooting at his feet—a pleasing fancy brought with him from Texas and the Cimarron. Afterward, sobered, he was always filled with shame. Wine, he quoted sadly, is a mocker, strong drink is raging. Yancey Cravat could have been (in fact was, though most of America never knew it) the greatest criminal lawyer of his day. It was said that he hypnotized a jury with his eyes and his hands and his voice. His law practice yielded him nothing, or less than that, for being sentimental and melodramatic he usually found himself out of pocket following his brilliant and successful defense of some Dodge City dance-hall girl or

roistering cowboy whose six-shooter had been pointed the wrong way.

His past, before his coming to Wichita, was clouded with myths and surmises. Gossip said this, slander whispered that. Rumor, romantic, unsavory, fantastic, shifting and changing like clouds on a mountain peak, floated about the head of Yancey Cravat. They say he has Indian blood in him. They say he has an Indian wife somewhere, and a lot of papooses, Cherokee. They say he used to be known as "Cimarron" Cravat, hence his son's name, corrupted to Cim. They say his real name is Cimarron Seven, of the Choctaw Indian family of Sevens; he was raised in a tepee; a wickiup had been his bedroom, a blanket his robe. It was known he had been one of the early boomers who followed the banner of the picturesque and splendidly mad David Payne in the first wild dash of that adventurer into Indian territory. He had dwelt, others whispered, in that sinister strip, thirty-four miles wide and almost two hundred miles long, called No-Man's-Land as early as 1854, and, later, known as the Cimarron, a Spanish word meaning wild or unruly. Here, in this strange unowned empire without laws and without a government, a paradise for horse thieves, murderers, desperadoes it was rumored he had spent at least a year (and for good reason). They said the evidences of his Indian blood were plain; look at his skin, his hair, manner of walking. And why did he protest in his newspaper against the government's treatment of those dirty, thieving, lazy, good-for-nothing wards of a beneficent country!

As for his newspaper—its very name was a scandal: The Wichita Wigwag. And just below this: All the News. Any Scandal Not Libelous. Published Once a Week If Convenient. Wichita, professing scorn of the Wigwag, read it. Wichita perused his maiden editorial entitled, "Shall the Blue Blood of the Decayed South Poison the Red Blood of the Great Middle West?" and saw him, two months later, carry off in triumph as his bride Sabra Venable, daughter of that same Decay. Sabra Venable, at sixteen, might have had her pick of the red-blooded lads of Kansas, all the way from Salina to Winfield. Not to mention more legitimate suitors of blue-blooded stock up from the South, such as Dabney Venable himself, Sabra's cousin, who resembled at once Lafayette and old Lewis, even to the premature silver of his hair, the length of the fine, dolichocephalic, slightly decadent head, and the black stock at sight of which Wichita gasped. When, from among all these eligibles, Sabra had chosen the romantic but mysterious Cravat, Wichita mothers of marriageable daughters felt themselves revenged of the Venable airs. Strangely enough, the marriageable daughters seemed more resentful than ever, and there was a noticeable falling off in the number of young ladies who had been wont to drop round at the Wigwag office with notices of this or that meeting or social event to be inserted in the columns of the paper.

During the course of the bountiful meal with which the Venable table was spread Yancey Cravat had eaten almost nothing. Here was an audience to his liking. Here was a tale to his taste. His story, wild, unbelievable, yet true, was of the opening of the Oklahoma country; of a wilder-

ness made populous in an hour; of cities numbering thousands literally sprung up overnight, where the day before had been only prairie, coyotes, rattlesnakes, red clay, scrub oak, and an occasional nester hidden in the security of a weedy draw.

Coat tails swishing, eyes flashing, arms waving, voice soaring. "Folks, there's never been anything like it since Creation! H—H! That took six days. This was done in one. It was history made in an hour—and I helped make it. Thousands and thousands of people from all over this vast commonwealth of ours (he talked like that) "traveled hundreds of miles to get a bare piece of land for nothing. But what land! Virgin, except when the Indians had roamed it. 'Lands of lost gods, and godlike men!' They came like a procession—a crazy procession all the way to the border, covering the ground as fast as they could, by any means at hand—scrambling over the ground, pushing and shoving each other into the ditches to get there first.

"They came from Texas, and Arkansas and Colorado and Missouri. They came on foot, by G—d, all the way from Iowa and Nebraska! They came in buggies and wagons and on horseback and muleback. In prairie schooners and ox carts and carriages. I met up with one old homesteader by the roadside—a face dried and wrinkled as a nutmeg—who told me he had started weeks and weeks before and had made the

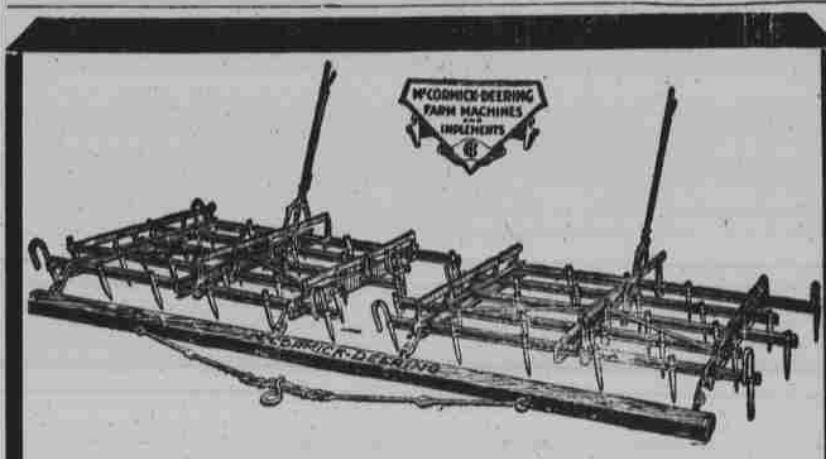
trip as best he could, on foot or by rail and boat and wagon, just as kind-hearted people along the way would pick him up. I wonder if he ever got his piece of land in that savage rush—poor old devil."

He passed a moment, perhaps in retrospect, perhaps cunningly to whet the appetites of his listeners. He wrung a breathless, "Oh, Yancey, go on! Go on!" from Sabra.

"Well, the border at last, and it was like a Fourth of July celebration on Judgment day. The militia was lined up at the boundary. No one was allowed to set foot on the new land until noon next day, at the firing of the guns. Two millions acres of land were to be given away for the grabbing. Noon was the time. They all knew it by heart. April 22, at noon. It takes generations of people hundreds of years to settle a new land. This was going to be made livable territory over night—was made—like a miracle out of the Old Testament. Compared to this, the Loaves and the Fishes and the parting of the Red sea were nothing—mere tricks."

Pausing only a moment at the sideboard to toss off three fingers of Spanish brandy, like burning liquid amber, Yancey patted his lips with his fine linen handkerchief. "I've tasted nothing like that in a month, I can tell you. Raw corn whisky fit to tear your throat out. And as for the water! Red mud. There wasn't a drink!

Continued on next page



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