



(Continued from last week)

For the first time in their married life she doubted his word absolutely. He strode along towards the tent. She hurried at his side. Cim trotted to keep up with her, his hand in hers.

"What did you mean when you said there were people who would set fire to the house? I never heard of such . . . Did you really mean that some one . . . or was it an excuse to send Isaiah back because of the way he looked?"

"That was it."

For the second time she doubted him. "I don't believe you. There's something going on—something you haven't told me. Yancey, tell me."

"I haven't time now. Don't be foolish. I just don't like the complexion of—I just thought that maybe this meeting was the idea of somebody who isn't altogether inspired by a desire for a closer communion with God. Just occurred to me. I don't know why. Good joke on me, if it's true."

"I'm not going to the meeting. I'm going back to the house." She was desperate. Her house was burning up, Isaiah was being murdered.

"You're coming with me." He rarely used this tone toward her. "Yancey! Yancey, I'm afraid to have you stand up there, before all those people. I'm afraid. Let's go back. Tell them you're sick. Tell them—"

They had reached the tent. The flap was open. A roar of talk came to them from within. The entrance was packed with lean figures smoking and spitting. "Hi, Yancey! How's the preacher? Where's your Bible, Yancey?"

"Right here, boys." And Yancey reached into the capacious skirt of his Prince Albert to produce in triumph the Word of God. "Come in or stay out, boys. No loafing in the doorway." With Sabra on his arm he marched through the close-packed tent. They've raved two seats for you and Cim down front—or should have. Yes, there they are."

Sabra felt faint. She had seen the foxlike face of Lon Yountis in the doorway. "That man," she whispered to Yancey. "He was there. He looked at you as you passed by—he looked at you so—"

"That's fine, honey. Better than I hoped for. Nothing I like better than to have members of my flock right under my eye."

CHAPTER V

Ranged along the rear of the tent were the Indians. Osages, Poncas, Cherokees, Creeks. They viewed the proceedings impassively, their faces bronze masks in which only the eyes moved. Later, on their reservations, with no white man to see and hear, they would gossip like fishwives; they would shake with laughter; they would reject this or that absurdity which, with their own eyes, they had seen the white man perform. They would slap their knees and rock with mirth.

"Great jokers, the Indians," Yancey had once said, offhand, to Sabra. She had felt sure that he was mistaken. They were sullen, taciturn, grave. They did not speak; they grunted. They never laughed.

Holding Cim's hand tightly in her own, Sabra, escorted by Yancey, found that two chairs had been placed for them, Sabra glanced shyly about her. Men—hundreds of men. They were strangely alike, all those faces; young-old, weather-beaten, deeply scarred, and, for the most part, beardless. The Plains had taken them early, had scorched them with her sun, parched them with her drought, buffeted them with her wind, stung them with her dust. Sabra had grown accustomed to these faces during the past two weeks. But the women—she was not prepared for the women. Calico and sunbonnets there were in plenty, but the ways of Osage's citizenry had taken this first opportunity to show what they had in the way of finery. Near Sabra, and occupying one of the seats evidently reserved for persons of distinction, was a woman who must be, Sabra thought, about her own age; perhaps twenty

or twenty-one, fair, blue eyed, almost childlike in her girlish slenderness and purity of contour. She was very well dressed in a wine-color silk-wrap henrietta, bustled, very tightly basqued, and elaborate with fluting on sleeves and collar. Dress and bonnet were city made and very modish. From Denver, Sabra thought, or Kansas City, or even Chicago. Sabra further decided that the man beside her, who looked old enough to be her father, must be, after all, her husband. It was in the way he spoke to her, gazed at her, touched her. Yancey had pointed him out one day. She remembered his name because it had amused her at the time: Waltz, Evergreen Waltz. He was a notorious Southwest gambler, earned his living by the cards. The girl looked unhappy; and beneath that, rebellious.

Still, the sight of this lovely face, and of the other feminine faces looking out from at least fairly modish and decent straw bonnets and toques, gave Sabra a glow of reassurance. Immediately this was quenched by the late, showy, and dramatic entrance, just before Yancey took his place, of a group of women of whom Sabra had actually been unaware. As a matter of fact, the leader of this spectacular group had arrived in Osage only the day before, accompanied by a bevy of six young ladies.

Osage, since that first mad day of its beginning, had had its quota of shady ladies, but these had been raddled creatures, driftwood from this or that deserted mining camp or abandoned town site, middle-aged, unsavory, and doubtless slightly subnormal mentally.

These were different. The leader, a handsome black-haired woman of not more than twenty-two or three, had taken for herself and her companions such rooms as they could get in the town. Within an hour it was known that the woman claimed the name of Dixie Lee. That she was a descendant of decayed southern aristocracy. That her blooming companions boasted such fancy nomenclature as Cherry de St. Maurice, Carmen Brown, Belle Mansero, and the like. That the woman, shrewd as a man and sharp as a knife, had driven a bargain whereby she was to come into possession, at a stiff price, of the building known as the Elite Rooming House and Cafe, situated at the far end of Pawhuska avenue, near the gambling tent; and that she contemplated building a house of her own, planned for her own peculiar needs, if business warranted. Thus harlotry, heretofore sordid enough in a wrapper and curling pins, came to Osage in silks and plumes, with a brain behind it and a promise of prosperity in its gaudy train.

Dixie Lee, shrewd saleswoman had been quick to learn of Sunday's meeting, and quicker still to see the advantage of this opportunity for a public advertisement of her business. So now, at Osage's first church meeting, she marched the six, with Dixie Lee at their head means a seventh. They rustled in silks. The air of the close-packed tent became as suffocating with scent as a Persian garden at sunset. The hard-working worthy wives of Osage, in their chevrons and their faded bonnets, and cotton gloves, suddenly turned sallow, scrawny, and almost spectacularly unimpressive.

All this Sabra beheld in a single glance, as did the entire congregation. Yancey, having lifted Cim into the chair next his mother, looked up at the entrance of this splendid procession.

"God Almighty!" he said. His tone was as irreverent as the words were sacred. A dull flush suffused his face, a thing to see in him as to startle Sabra more than the words he had uttered or the tone on which he had said them.

"What is it, Yancey! What's wrong?"

"That's the girl."

"What girl?"

"That one—Dixie Lee—she's the girl in the black tights and the skull-cap . . . in the Run . . . on the thoroughbred . . ." he was whispering.

"Oh, no!" cried Sabra, aloud. It was wrong from her. Those near by stared.

So this was the church meeting toward which she had looked with such hope, such happy assurance, Harlots, Indians, heat, glare, her horse probably blazing at this moment, Isaiah weltering in his own gore, Lon Yountis' sinister face sneering in the tent entrance. And now this woman, unscrupulous, evil, who had stolen Yancey's quarter section from him by a trick.

Yancey made his way through the close-packed crowd, leaped to the top of the roulette table which was to be his platform and, lifting the great lolling head, swept the expectant congregation with his hysterical, his magnetic eyes.

Probably never in the history of the Christian religion had the Word of God been preached by so romantic and dashing a figure. His long black locks curled on his shoulders; the fine eyes glowed; the Prince Albert swayed with his graceful movements; his six-shooters, one on each side, bulged reassuringly in their holsters.

His thrilling voice sounded through the tent, stilling its buzz and movement.

"Friends and fellow citizens, I have been called on to conduct this opening meeting of the Osage First Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, Catholic, Unitarian church. In the course of my career as a lawyer and an editor I have been required to speak on varied occasions and on many subjects. I have spoken in defense of my country and in criticism of it; I have been called on to defend and to convict horse thieves, harlots, murderers, samples of which professions could doubtless be found in any large gathering in the Indian territory today. I name no names. I point no finger. Whether for good or for evil, the fact remains that any man or woman, for whatever purpose, found in this great Oklahoma country today is

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here because in his or her veins, actuated by motives lofty or base, there is the spirit of adventure. Though I know the Bible from cover to cover, and while many of its passages and precepts are graven on my heart and in my memory, this, fellow citizens of Osage, is the first time that I have been required to speak the Word of God in His temple." He glanced around the gaudy, glaring tent. "For any shelter, however sordid, however humble—no offense, Gray—becomes, while his word is spoken within it, his temple. Suppose, then, that we unite in spirit by uniting in song. We have, you will notice, no hymn books. We will therefore open this auspicious occasion in the brief but inevitably glorious history of the city of Osage by singing—uh—what do you all know boys, anyway?"

There was a moment's slightly embarrassing pause. Yancey raised an arm in encouragement. "Come on, boys! Name it! Any suggestions, ladies and gentlemen?"

"How about 'Who Were You at Home?' just for a starter," called out a voice belonging to a man with a shining dome-shaped bald head and a flowing silky beard, reddish in color. It was Shanghai Wiley, up from Texas; owner of more than one hundred thousand longhorn cattle and of the Rancho Palacios, on Tres Palacios creek. He was the most famous cattle singer in the whole Southwest, besides being one of its richest cattle and land owners. Possessed of a remarkably high sweet tenor voice that just escaped being a clear soprano, he had been known to quiet a whole herd of restless cattle on the verge of a mad stampede. It was an art he had learned when a cowboy on the range.

Yancey acknowledged this suggestion with a grateful wave of the hand.

"That's right, Shanghai. Thanks for speaking up. A good song, though a little secular for the occasion, perhaps. But anyway, you all know it, and that's the main thing. Kindly favor us with the pitch, will you, Shanghai? Will the ladies kindly join in with their sweet soprano voices? Now, then, all together!"

It was a well known song in the territory where, on coming to this new and wild country, so many settlers with a checkered—not to say plaid—past had found it convenient to change their names.

The congregation took it up feelingly, almost solemnly. Somebody in the rear suddenly produced an accordion, and from the crowd perched on the saloon bar came the sound of jew's harp. The chorus now swelled with all the fervor of song's ecstasy. They might have been singing "Onward Christian Soldiers." Through it all, high and clear, sounded Shanghai Wiley's piercing tenor, like brasses in a band, and sustaining it from the roulette table platform the cello of Yancey Cravat's powerful, rich baritone.

Sabra had joined in the singing, not a first, but later, timidly. It had seemed, somehow, to relieve her. This, she thought, was better. Perhaps, after all, this new community was about to make a proper beginning. She began to feel prim and good and settled at last.

"Now, then," said Yancey, all aglow, "the next thing in order is to take up collection before the sermon."

"What for?" yelled Pete De Vargas.

Yancey fixed him with a pitying gray eye. "Because, you Spanish infidel, part of a church service is taking up a collection. Southwest Davis, I appoint you to work this side of the house. Ike Bixler, you take that side. The collection, fel-

low citizens, ladies and gentlemen—and you, too, Pete—is for the new church organ."

"Why, h—l, Yancey, we ain't got a church!" bawled Pete again, aggravated.

"That's all right, Pete. Once we buy an organ we'll have to build a church to put it in. Stands to reason. Members of the congre-

gation, anybody putting in less than two bits will be thrown out of the tent by me. Indians not included."

(Continued next week)

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