

BLACK FEATHER

By HAROLD TITUS

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WNU Service

SYNOPSIS

Rodney Shaw, independent trader, arrives in Michilimackinac in 1818, determined to fight the trade monopoly established by the John Jacob Astor company in the Northwest territory. He is met by Conrad Rich, an elderly clerk, Ramsay Crooks, Astor's dominant figure, and Annette Leclere, local beauty and inspiration to all the traders, especially to Burke Rickman, a ruthless trader who is the instrument of destruction to traders refusing to amalgamate with the Astor company. Rousel, the town bully, wearing the black feather, symbol of invincibility, knocks down Shaw's head oarsman, Basile, and Shaw in return throws Rousel into the water. Ramsay Crooks presents the symbolic black feather to Shaw. Later, at a conference, Shaw scorns Astor's proposal virtually to surrender his independence, announces his readiness to fight the amalgamation, and prepares to depart the following day. At a ball that evening Shaw recognizes Burke Rickman as the Astor agent who had previously robbed him of his partner and his trade, and as a dangerous rival for Annette, with whom he is infatuated. There is an exchange of bitter words. Annette is chosen queen of the dance, and after flirting with both Rickman and Shaw, chooses Shaw as king for the following evening. Basile warns Shaw to hasten his departure and tells him an old man awaits him at his tent. Shaw finds Leslie, an old free-trader.

CHAPTER II—Continued

"Ay! Who's not heard of them? Far up the Mississippi; good hunters and in rich country. But others are there."

"Others was! Gone, now. Nor'-westers 're gone by law. Th' lone independent who opposed 'em 's gone . . . Sioux driven him out. Rich country. Waitin' to be took. By me. With you. I got . . . trade goods. You got th' feet 'nd wind. 'Look!' he said. 'Astor figures to step in. He's sendin' Rickman. We'll fix a su'prise for 'm!'"

He fumbled in the buckskin pouch which hung from his girdle. "Here!" he said and drew out a map, crudely etched on parchment, and pointed to the winding course of the Mississippi and to a lake indicated well towards its headwaters. "Yon!" he said. "Rich country waitin' . . . to be took!"

Again he fumbled in the pouch and this time produced an Indian ceremonial stone of green, shaped like a butterfly, polished to satiny smoothness.

"More powerful nor Astor! More valuable nor a ton o' trade goods! Like a key to a lock . . . Key to Pillager lock! Give to me by Standin' Cloud. Pillager chief. Saved his hide three year back. Brothers! Me 'nd Standin' Cloud brothers! He passed th' stone 'nd tells me to send it, if ever I need . . . a brother! No use, then. Two forts a'ready amongst 'em. Trade won't stand another split. But now . . . it's different."

He choked and gasped then and after a struggle gave up and once more reverted to signs. Rodney had strength and agility, he indicated. Rodney could direct the march and pass the credits and see that they were collected.

"Just two of us . . . old free-traders left," he whispered. "Just two as won't belly-crawl to . . . Astor. Do we deal?"

Rodney, stirred though he was at the prospect, demurred. It was not fair, he declared.

"Gabble!" the other cut in. "I got goods . . . Goods 're no use less'n strong legs 'nd hearts go . . . with 'em. You got legs 'nd heart . . . Do we deal? . . . Don't we?" he asked again and in his eyes was pleading which warmed Shaw with something else than the prospect of being able to make good his boast and satisfy his impulse to stand against the great company.

They talked, then, until dawn silvered the east. Then Rodney half led, half carried the old trader to the camp he had made at the eastern end of the island and left him with word that he would return and give his answer.

"They'll watch ye!" Leslie muttered as Rodney lowered him to his couch of buffalo robes. "They'll watch ye like a lynx watches prey . . . Come late . . . I don't sleep nights . . ."

Rodney slept until the sun was full an hour high. He had gone to sleep with his heart still fast at thought of the opportunity to establish himself again.

And he awakened with his heart going fit to choke him; gasping to himself a name. Over and over he repeated it, sitting there in his robes, blinking at the new day.

"Annette!" he said. "Annette . . . Annette . . . Annette Leclere!"

Basile cooked breakfast for him and Shaw ate alone before his tent, the old man eyeing him with ill-concealed curiosity. Finally, he could no longer restrain himself and put the question in French:

"Do we put out with the old one?" Shaw smiled. "Does one pass by rare opportunity? Does one, Basile? Of course we put out. But not too hastily. Leslie is a sick man, Basile,"—sincerely. "Perhaps even with a heavier sickness than one comprehends. He is unfit for a march. Today, we must make gestures at occupying ourselves. Tonight, during the dance at which I'm to be king,—with a reminiscent grin—"I slip away and go to him. In the meantime . . ."

The sound of shod wheels rolling on gravel checked him and he looked up to see Annette in her gig, careening down the narrow street. But she could not help giving him notice as he leaped outward, flinging up an arm to make the leading black shy wide, grasping the filly's rein.

"Impudence!" she cried, feigning pique. "You will have me upset, Rodney Shaw. Stay back!"

"I stay here. I defy you!"—as he vaulted the wheel to the seat beside her.

"But you were to be gone from Mackinac! All have heard the brave things you said to Mr. Astor. Did you not mean them? That you'd be gone in defiance to him?"

"Not until those ripe lips hunger as mine hunger!"

"Nonsense, sire!"

So he drove with her that morning and strolled with her that afternoon. He wooed roughly, madly until, late in the afternoon, Annette fled his avid arms and hungry lips and sought sanctuary from his determination in the house of the old aunt which was her home.

He went back to his tent, walking lightly, head high. Men turned to watch him because, between sun and sun, he had become famous. He had defied Astor and he had flaunted his trespassing in romance upon grounds which, that spring, at least, had been admittedly Burke Rick-



"We'll Sting Astor and Claw Back at Rickman."

man's. Others wondered what manifestation Rickman's resentment might take. But Burke Rickman was not to manifest his resentment. Not openly. Donald MacIver, the shrewd Scot and loyal servant, had seen to that.

He and Rickman were together when Annette drove past that bright forenoon with the pugnacious young Shaw on the gig seat beside her, and MacIver had seen the chill of threat show in the other's eye and the heat of jealousy creep into his cheek.

"Don't, lad," MacIver muttered while his eyes twinkled. "'Tis a passing thing. No challenge to ye, is yon upstart. Let him go on. Let him spend, mayhap, hours wi' th' lass. He'll gi' us what we need quicker so than by any other means. He's not Meester Astor's mon. 'Nd he must be so if we discharge our duty. He made his boasts last night that he'd trade again, 'nd in th' territory. It's our obligation to detain where, to follow, to crush th' juice o' resistance from his very bones, if need be. Would he gi' us a hint as to where he'll trade? Not But will a lad tell th' innermost secrets of his heart to a lass? Ay! From her we'll learn."

Rodney gestured as king at the dance in the company headquarters that night and told himself that he was only waiting for the hour to grow late before slipping away to join Leslie.

But when the hour grew late he put it off. Multiple joy and achievement were there. Annette, first of all, was there, challenging and tantalizing him. And Rickman was there, his resentment badly under control.

But depart at last he did, and found Leslie waiting.

"Well? Do ye take my offer?" the old trader asked.

"I do, pardner."

"Good! We'll sting 'im, th' two on us! We'll sting Astor and claw back at Rickman for what he done to ye . . . Look, pardner!"

He led Shaw to the stores of trade goods, snug under their oilcloths, and by the light of a blazing torch Rodney beheld the valuables piled neatly there.

"Ought to be spy," Leslie whispered. "My men tell on hearin' Rickman puts out afore long. We'd best be weeks . . . ahead on him."

"Few days . . . rest'll fix . . ."

So, for a week, while he waited for Leslie to gain strength, Rodney Shaw reveled in the pretense that feminine charms held him at Mackinac. Despite the truth that courtship served as a blind to confound the watch he knew must be kept on him, he was emmeshed, as many another had been caught in this half decade since Annette Leclere, done with Montreal schooling, had come back to live with her old aunt.

A forbidding woman, this aunt, a grim, forbidding woman, sprung from metif stock, a fixture in the place, midwife and seeress, speaking a jargon of Ojibway and patois and seemed to take pride that so few understood her well.

Shaw disturbed the old lady and she stormed at Annette for having him about, but it did no good. The girl laughed at her.

Then, from pan to fire, Rickman was banished, tossed aside, snubbed, it would seem, and now it was Shaw who came hammering on doors before dew was dry.

CHAPTER III

Rodney Shaw changed his approach to Annette, scarce knowing that he changed. The light of amused combat left his eyes for minutes; his voice pleaded softly. He lost poise, lost years; he would boast to her of what he had done, of what he could do; he would plead, almost seriously, as others had pleaded. Almost seriously . . . not quite, and not for long.

And at those times, the girl was not so ready of tongue. She listened, denying his half-reverent pleas by her silence—but still she listened.

Today, he was in such a mood, stupefied by her intoxicating beauty, pleading with her to go inland with him. And she put him off and when he wheeled for reasons she listed his shortcomings. She was in play, but he failed to realize her words were not full-meant.

"Presumptuous, reckless, audacious, foolhardy—"

"To desire one so lovely?"

"To risk further the ill will of the company!"

"Hol!" he laughed. "Why should I fear?"

"But they have stripped you of your trade! They will crush you, if you persist!"

"They will try, yes. But they do not guess the card hidden in my sleeve!"

"Card? You possess some secret? Or is this only an idle boast?"

He had been toying with that same black ostrich plume which had reposed these days in his waistcoat pocket and now he waved the symbol of superior strength in a dismissing gesture.

"Listen!" he said, halting in their walk and leaning close. "They think me a pauper, and that is well. But here under their nose I've acquired a share in goods beyond my wildest dream! And with these goods I march to the richest ground untended, a ground they plan to work!"

They were on a forest trail on the heights of the island. Dappled sunlight fell upon them, scents of balsam and cedar were in their nostrils.

"Ah, Annette!" he breathed, taking her hands. "I never dreamed, in the years I've lived, that such a desirable person as you pressed foot to earth! . . ." She was in his arms, then, yielding gently and he felt her quick and irregular breathing against him.

"Dear Annette! Sweet Annette! And I've wasted years thinking of trade, when it's love I want! I've wasted my life, holding freedom as a goal, when it's enslavement in your heart I need!"

"Enslavement, Rodney?"

"Enslavement!" He repeated the

word aloud and looked away from her and at his manner alarm swept into the girl's face. "Of course, it's what I want!" he cried, laughing hungrily to cover his confusion. "You're sweet! You set me on fire!" he muttered, grasping her so roughly that, half frightened, she sought escape.

They returned to the village, Shaw's tongue losing its ease. He tried to pass off that unguarded moment, those impetuous words, and conduct himself as he had at other times, but fright persisted. Let lips seduce him from that objective which was the breath of his life? Ah, no! He'd gone far enough along this course.

At the gate he told her he could not be with her this night. He had affairs to attend, he said. He was brusque and absorbed, having been frightened by the strength of his own emotions. He left her, impelled to run in flight and she stared after him with the mingled feelings of one who has been rebuffed.

So that night the girl sat alone, hurt and outraged. And Burke Rickman, prowling the places of merriment in his role of spy, saw neither her nor Shaw. But Shaw, he discovered, was at his tent. Annette, then, might be alone and the time he had awaited, and the mood which had been so long in shaping, might have arrived. So he rapped on the aunt's door and found her there, with signs of tears on her cheeks and high temper in her eyes.

Sly, this Rickman, in playing on tempers. He questioned adroitly and probed and prodded to no avail. And he kept on, belittling Rodney, scoffing at him, predicting his dire future until Annette went white again with provoked loyalty and boasted of Shaw's strength and courage and possessions and plans; her thoughts and impulses were all ajumble, hating and loving Rodney in the same moment, defending him while she longed to hurt him.

She achieved both. Her boasts were the things Rickman had waited to hear; that was all he needed, to know Shaw had a partnership and planned to march to a rich ground unclaimed by traders.

So, at midnight, when Rodney slipped along the trail to Leslie's tent another followed furtively and when Shaw heard from his partner's lips the thing he had suspected and feared, this other listened, prone behind a boulder . . .

Leslie no longer deceived himself. The hand of death lay heavily upon him. Giles, his clerk, was holding a cup of water to his lips as Rodney appeared. The old man smiled weakly.

"I've held ye . . . back . . . Delayed ye . . . thinkin' I . . . might git . . . strength . . . No good," he whispered. "Jist one thing . . . I want. It's to . . . see th' Pillager trade . . . out of yon hands. You go," he said and weak though he was, the order came imperiously.

Rodney knelt beside him in the entry to the tent. He could not hear the light scruff-scruff of a body worming closer, could not know that alien ears heard those rasping words, spoken at the cost of such torture.

"You take th' . . . goods. Iffen I . . . don't follow they're . . . yourn . . ." he added and his suffering eyes gleamed with stalwart friendliness. "No strings . . . to 'em . . . Yourn," he said and looked at Giles as if to adjure the man to bear witness to the agreement.

He fumbled, then, in his pouch and drew out the map and butterfly ornament.

"Take 'em," he gasped. "Use 'em . . . Standin' Cloud . . . 'll treat ye like . . . brother."

"I'll go," Rodney said. "I'll give them such opposition they've never dreamed of! I'll be gone before the sun shows," he promised.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Pumpkin, Squash Used to Produce Many Fruits; Over 100 Cross Pollinations

The production of about a dozen fruits from more than a hundred cross pollinations between different varieties of pumpkins and squash made at the state experiment station at Geneva, N. Y., says the Scientific American, has thrown considerable light on the botanical relationships of these groups and, incidentally, has given rise to several new forms that seem to be either immune or highly resistant to squash mosaic. Many unsuccessful attempts to hybridize these two vegetables have been made during the last century, hence the success attending the station trials is being watched with considerable interest because of the many possibilities it holds for developing new and better varieties.

Cucurbita is the technical name for pumpkins and squashes of which three annual species are more or less commonly grown, explains Professor Van Eseltine, station botanist. These species are known as

maxima which includes the winter squashes, such as Hubbard, Boston marrow and related types; moschata, also known as the grammas and best illustrated by the Japanese pie, winter crookneck, and the like, and pepo, or the pumpkins, the fall squashes and the summer squashes or scallops, vegetable marrows, and similar forms.

In each case the forms within these groups crossed readily, but the groups would not cross with each other. This seemed to establish the specific identity of the three groups. In 1930 an attempt was again made to cross these different groups in a study of the origin of the annual cucurbits. About a dozen fruits have been obtained from these crosses and while they present many interesting possibilities, including evidence of marked resistance to squash mosaic, much further study will be required before any very definite conclusions can come from these investigations.

Ask Me? Another?

A Quiz With Answers Offering Information on Various Subjects

1. What causes leaves to change color in autumn?
2. Who said, "It is much easier to be critical than to be correct"?
3. Which are the lightest birds in proportion to their size that fly?
4. There were how many signers of the Declaration of Independence?
5. What is the total number of war medals that have been given to soldiers? Which medal was most widely distributed?
6. Are car colors restricted in Japan?

2. The expression was used by Benjamin Disraeli in the house of commons on January 24, 1860.
3. The birds with great powers of flight, such as the sea-gull, are the lightest birds to fly. The common gull weighs only a quarter of a pound. Its bones are hollow and filled with air.
4. There were 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence.
5. The total of medals on record at the War department is 1,543,721. The Victory medal, issued after the World war, is the most widely distributed.
6. In Japan only imperial household cars may be painted maroon, and no cars except hearses may be painted yellow, which to the natives signifies mourning.

Answers

1. Gradual formation of cells at the stem of the leaf finally shuts off the supply of chlorophyll, or green coloring matter, and starts the formation of the gaudy autumnal colors.

Smiles

In Line of Duty
Jones had occasion to reprimand his wife.
"I think," he said, soothingly, "that you fib a little occasionally."
"Well, I think it's a wife's duty. I spoke well of you."

Called upon at the wedding supper, the happy groom arose and said: "I'm—er—happy to say we've never—er—had a cross word in all our—er—married life."

Noble Cause
"Father," said Willie, "will you give me a penny for a poor man who is crying outside?"
"Certainly," replied father.
"What is he crying for?"
"He's crying: 'Ice cream—a penny each,'" said Willie, having got the penny.



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