

CHAPTER I

THE HALF-BREED

A TOURIST of to-day, peering from the window of his vestibule train at the electric-lit vision of Three Rivers, as it stars the banks of the Missouri like a constellation against the blackness of the night, would never recognize, in the trim little modern town, the old Three Rivers of the early seventies.

To restore the latter, he should first of all sweep the ground bare of the buildings which now adorn it, leaving, perhaps, here and there an isolated old shanty of boards far advanced towards dissolution. He would be called upon to substitute, in place of the brick stores and dwellings of to-day, a motley collection of lean-tos, dug-outs, tents, and shacks, scattered broadcast over the virgin prairie without the slightest semblance of order. Where the Oriole furniture factory now stands, he must be prepared to see—and hear—a great drove of horses and oxen feeding on bottomland grass. And for the latter-day citizens, whose police record is so discouraging to the ambitious chief, and so creditable to themselves, he must imagine a multitude more heterogeneous, perhaps, than could be gathered anywhere else in the world—tenderfeet from the East; mountaineers from Tennessee and Kentucky, bearing their historic long pea rifles; soft-voiced Virginians; keen, alert woodsmen from the North; wiry, silent trappers and scouts from the West; and here and there a straight Indian, stalking solemnly towards some one of the numerous “whisky joints.” The court-house site he would find crowded with canvas wagons, noisy with the shrill calling of women and children. Where Judge Ogleshorpe has recently erected his stone mansion, Frank Byers would be running a well-patronized saloon. Were he to complete the picture by placing himself mentally at the exact period of our story’s opening, he would find the whole town, if such it might be called, seething, turbulent, eager, and—it must be confessed—ready for trouble.