

and the tiny life that was some day to be a man. And then suddenly a sob broke across the laughter, and Blake, looking up quickly, surprised a wave of tears across her heavy lidded eyes.

He straightened himself to attention. "You are thinking—if his father could play so with him?" he asked gently.

Winunla nodded. "And so the tears come," she said apologetically. "There is such foolishness in woman. Next week he will come. On Tuesday we will go up to the town to meet him—the child and I. Will we not, O Small One?"

The tears were dried on the pink frock as she held her child against her face.

"But if he should not come?" Blake demanded brutally.

She looked at him quickly. "That will be a year that he is gone," she said. "He would not stay longer than a year."

"But if he should?" persisted Blake. Winunla bent her face again against the baby and there was silence in the little room.

Then she lifted her eyes to Blake, and the savage woke in them and blazed at him.

"You are an evil man!" she quivered. "You wake sadness in us—the child and me—and you are glad!"

And then her eyes softened.

"Ah, no, ah, no," she said crooningly, as if she comforted the child. "It is only that he thinks foolishly, this friend of thy father, Small One!"

And Blake smiled reassuringly. "He will come," he said gently—and his

heart was hot against this friend of his. And that night a letter went out to the Hon. Fred.

"At least," thought Blake, as he sealed it with a mighty thump of a heavy fist, "he shall know what decent men think of him."

On Tuesday Winunla and the child and old Asawunta went across the river to the town.

On Tuesday the town was gay with blankets and with grim, bronze faces.

"For though she forgot her people and believed foolishly in a white man, it is not good that her people forget her when there is trouble upon her," said old Ookiye, the chief. "After the hope comes sorrow, and then we will go back with her across the river, and she shall be one with us—her people."

And Winunla read their hearts.

And she held her head very high—higher than she had held it when from all the maidens of her tribe the Hon. Fred had chosen her. But there was in her eyes a plea that made Blake clench his hands fiercely, and the doctor clear his throat savagely. So they waited until the train drew up at the station.

She made a pretty picture, Winunla, as she stood in the station door. The gaily striped blanket had slipped back from the dusky oval of her face, and the gorgeous abandon of its loosened folds fell about her like a frame. High up against her face she held the much swathed baby in her strong young arms, and a sudden reverence grew in the hearts of those who saw her. So that whenever thereafter they looked at a picture of the Holy Motherhood, they saw again this Madonna of the plains.

But what she was saying in the baby's ear was only, "You will know him, Dear One. Big and strong and full of laughter. And his eyes—his eyes are so blue—not ugly like mine and thine, poor Little Owl!"

The train made but an unappreciable stop at the station, but today it seemed a long, long time before its four passengers stepped from it—a couple of commercial travelers, a priest, and a gaunt woman with a mission. Then there was the clank and jar of moving wheels and a low moan in the baby's ear as Winunla turned back to the gloomy waiting room. Without, her friends stood awkwardly waiting until some one should feel an inspiration to comfort her.

It was then, as the last car lurched past the platform, that the Hon. Fred, grip laden and radiant, sprang from it.

The very blue eyes took in the waiting groups, the doctor and the missionary, the blue coats from the fort—the friends—the motionless blanketed figures—his people. A delighted surprise ran across his face before he greeted them exuberantly. "Upon my soul, all of you here! How did you know I was coming today?"

He was shaking hands furiously, wringing the missionary's fingers cruelly, clapping old Ookiye rapturously on the back. And beyond them his eyes devoured the great, good solitude of the prairies, the arid, yawning spaces that a man's homesick heart fills and vivifies with longing.

"A year away from it all—just a year! But now I've got the strings all tied. I'm home to stay!"

He shook hands all over again and his big personality radiated delight.

"The girl doesn't happen to be in town, does she?" he asked.

And then he saw her where she had come again to the station door—saw her waiting, radiant and proud, and with a bundle that stirred in her arms.

The group of Winunla's friends moved discreetly away. For the Hon. Fred, head of an ancient English line, had come into his own again, and there are joys in life which it is not even for a man's friends to look upon.

But as he rode back to the Fort that afternoon, Blake reined up at the little house where the Hon. Fred and his wife sat in the waning light and looked into each other's eyes. They sprang up to greet him.

"Come in, old chap, come in!" the Englishman shouted. And against Blake's declining he set the privileged protestations of a returned wanderer. "Oh, come in, man! Think of all I've got to tell you—I who have spent a year within the borders of civilization! I who have worn starched collars and made after dinner speeches to my mother's tenants! I who have been bored exceedingly and am home! Think how long it is since you have listened to my voice—and I did not write, that it might be the pleasant in your ears. Wini tells me that my last and only letter did not reach you. Come in!"

But Blake stuck his thick cavalry boot deeper in the stirrup.

"Not now," he said. "I only stopped to warn you. You will get a letter in a week or so—it's the kind of a letter that no power on earth would lose. You will get a blank fool letter that at first you won't understand. And when you do—well, when you do I shall be at the Fort waiting to be kicked. Kid all right. Wini? Here's a new breed of rattle I found over in the town."



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