

# A Flower of the Prairies

*On the Frontiers With a Mysterious Baby, a Pack of Wild Indians and a Burning House*

By MARGARET ERSKINE

TANNIS drew her hands out of the dough, walked over to the window and looked out, a sullen frown on her brow; just as she expected, it was young Mrs. Wilson. Tannis hated the little English woman, who had come with her husband to the ranch next to theirs, for Mrs. Wilson stood for all that Tannis was not, but longed to be. The feeling was evidently not shared by Mrs. Wilson, for she ran over to see Tannis on any excuse or no excuse at all; Tannis returned to her bread and began sullenly kneading the dough.

Mrs. Wilson rode round the house till she reached the kitchen window. She drew up in front of it. "Good morning," she cried, gaily, peeping in at Tannis, "only making your bread now? Why, mine has been reposing in baked loaves on the kitchen table these two hours or more."

"Good morning, Mrs. Wilson," Tannis picked up a large carving knife and slashed the dough into small portions, using the knife in a manner that sent cold shivers up and down Mrs. Wilson's spine.

"Oh, don't cut your dough in that way, it reminds me of those dreadful Indians out scalping people."

Tannis's eyes glowed with a sudden deep, angry fire. "The Indians are not dreadful people, at least they are not more dreadful than the English or any other nation; they were law-abiding people till you English came and stole what was theirs. Can you blame them trying to get it back in the only way they know?"

"You English people," laughed Mrs. Wilson; "you'd think you weren't an English woman yourself to hear you."

"I'm not English, I am—I am a Canadian," Tannis finished, sullenly. She picked up some pans of bread, walked over to the stove and shoved them into the oven.

"Well, Mr. Courtney is English," retorted Mrs. Wilson; "but don't let's quarrel over the Indians. Do come out into the garden. It's too lovely to stay in the house." She dismounted from her horse, led him round to the front, and tied him to a post. Tannis put the rest of her loaves in the oven, closed the door, then going to the foot of the stairs called up them: "Marie, Marie."

An old Indian woman shuffled down the stairs in answer to the summons.

"Watch the bread, Marie," she said in Indian. "I am going into the garden with Mrs. Wilson."

With a grunt the old woman squatted down on the floor in front of the oven, and Tannis walked out of the kitchen into the garden; if long, straggling beds with a few wild flowers and some tame flowers growing anyhow, some stunted shrubs, and a single maple tree, could be called a garden. Some chairs made by the Indians of bent boughs of pine were scattered about. Tannis drew up two of these under the maple tree.

There was a few moments silence, then Marian Wilson spoke:

"It's appalling, when you come to think of it, this country of yours; these endless prairies, that seemed to stretch on and on with no beginning and no ending and eternity of distance, and the silence of them, the horrible, horrible whispering silence; don't you hear it, it just whispers, whispers to me the whole time, I—"

TANNIS leant over and gripped Marian's arm tightly. "Haven't you been here long enough," she said, harshly, "to know that you mustn't talk that way—talk that way; if you do, you know what it means."

"I know," Marian cowed back in her seat, a white, shivering woman. "I try, but I can't help it. I can't; it's being so much alone. Jack's out on the ranch all day and there's so little to do in the house, and when it's done the silence begins to call me and whisper to me, and I am afraid to be alone; that's why I come over here so much. I know I'm in your way, am I not?"

"Oh, I don't mind," answered Tannis, ungraciously. Once again there was a silence, then Marian asked, as if following some train of thought:

"What do you do for a doctor or nurse in case of sudden illness? I told Jack we really ought to have

one near here. Think of having to drive all those miles and miles and perhaps be too late. What do you do when you are ill?"

"I'm never ill," answered Tannis, "and if I were, the Indians are very good doctors, and nurses, too."

"Indians!" exclaimed Marian, in tones of deep disgust. "Oh, I never could bear to have an Indian doctor or nurse. I'd rather die. Fancy owing your life perhaps to an Indian."

Tannis glanced obliquely at her. "You may owe

Elizabeth. The Indians gave it to me; Tannis means Prairie Flower."

"Oh, how lovely! I wish the Indians would give me a name like that. How quaint and appropriate, for you do look like a prairie flower. You're so little and slight, your red hair makes you look like one of those dear, little scarlet flowers, and your big, dark eyes, their centre. You don't mind my calling your hair red, do you?"

"No," answered Tannis, "for it is red."

Marian laughed. "Are you always so solemn, you so seldom smile?"

Tannis looked across the prairies, a curious wistfulness, stamping out the usual sullen glance that had lately grown in her eyes. "There is so little to smile at in the prairies," she said, simply.

Marian rose and shook out her skirts. "I'd better be getting home. I think Jack will be in soon now."

When the sound of Marian's horse's hoofs had died away in the distance, Tannis turned and walked into the house. As she entered the kitchen a smell of burning met her. The Indian woman still squatted on the floor watching the oven door; with a hopeless gesture, Tannis threw open the door. The bread was a black, smoking chip.

LATE summer and short autumn quickly gave place to early winter; for winter comes early and stays late in that prairie country. For two days the snow had fallen with a steady persistency, covering forest and prairies with a white blanket. On the third day it stopped as suddenly as it had commenced. At a window in the front of the house Tannis stood, her eyes fixed on the prints of a horse's hoofs; irregular prints, as if the rider had not been sure of his going. The horse prints traveled onwards and onwards, always going forward, never turning back, till they lost themselves in the distance. So it had come at last, the dreaded thing that had stalked her steps ever since she had married, and had overtaken her at last. There was now nothing more to fear. She knew the worst and life was over, for her at least. Suddenly a shadow fell across the prints, blotting them out for the moment. Tannis looked up, then drew back from the window; she glanced hastily round, and signed to the Indian woman, "Marie," she said, "take my son upstairs."

Marie picked up the rude wicker cradle and disappeared with it. The echo of her shuffling feet was still upon the stairs, when the sound of a knock made by the butt of a riding whip sounded on the door. Tannis walked over to it and opened it.

"How is—good heavens!" gasped Mrs. Wilson, "you downstairs? Don't you think that is rather risky?" While she was speaking she followed Tannis in to the parlour.

"Why?" asked Tannis.

"Why?" answered Marian, "why, because—because—no one ever comes down for two weeks at the very earliest and your baby is only—only—"

"Three days old. I could have come down the first day."

"The first day!" Marian gazed at her in amazement. "What doctor did you have, and nurse?"

"Marie nursed me, and Thunder Bird doctored me; there was no time to send to town and he was in the neighbourhood."

MARIAN WILSON gasped. The whole thing was beyond her. For once in her life she was speechless.

"May I see the baby?" Marian asked, when the silence was growing painful.

"No, oh no," cried Tannis, shrinking back. "I couldn't think of it."

"Why, oh I see. But I wouldn't mind a bit," smiled Mrs. Wilson, indulgently.

"Mind!" cried Tannis, angrily, "what do you mean by saying you wouldn't mind? What are my son's looks to you?"

"Nothing, nothing," replied Mrs. Wilson, hastily. She began to be the least little bit afraid of her hostess; for Tannis glared at her like some untamed

(Continued on page 22.)



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Again silence reigned. Marian thought it was more uphill work than usual making conversation. She asked herself for the thousandth time why she came. The Dentons were as near neighbours, and Mrs. Denton was a fellow countrywoman, and by all the laws of civilization should be her friend. They thought alike, spoke alike, did alike; while Tannis Courtney's thoughts, speech, doings, were as different as day from night to hers. She was a mystery and Marian Wilson was an intensely curious woman. It hurt her, actually hurt her not to know all about everything; and therein lay, if she had known it, her desire for Tannis's company. On first meeting, she had told Tannis all about herself, her people, her life, and Tannis had told her nothing in return as to who and what her parents were; she looked like a Scottish woman, with her head of red hair, yet denied being one; said she was a Canadian, which Marian interpreted to mean that she was not to be enlightened. In Marian's school-book, Canadian spelt Indian. Marian felt she must solve the mystery if she was ever to know a moment's peace.

"What a curious name yours is," she said. "Is it an Egyptian one?"

"No, Indian."

"Indian!" cried Marian, in amazement. "How strange of your parents to give you an Indian name."

"My parents didn't give it to me. They called me