

THE QUARTERBREED

A Tale of Adventures on
An Indian Reservation

By
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The two preceding installments described the rescue of a quarter-breed girl and two men from an Indian attack at the edge of Lakota Indian reservation, by Capt. Floyd Hardy, U. S. A., the new Indian agent. The rescued ones are Reginald Vandervyn, nephew of United States Senator Clemmer and agency clerk, Jacques Dupont, post trader, and his daughter, Marie. Vandervyn tells Hardy of disaffection among the Indians, of the murder of Nogen, the last agent, and of his having been promised the agency. Hardy calls a council of chiefs at the agency. Redbear, the halfbreed interpreter, brings his sister, Oinna, to the valley. Captain Hardy accepts a dinner invitation from the Duponts and learns something which amazes him and causes all sorts of trouble.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

The hostess signed her Indian boy to take the box into the parlor, together with the ice bucket, in which was still left a bottle of champagne. As he obeyed, she bowed her dismissal of the guests from the table.

"I shall now permit myself to be fatigued," she said. "Good evening, Mr. Vandervyn. Good evening, Captain Hardy."

Vandervyn nodded, and followed Dupont with a nonchalant bearing that drew attention from the slight uncertainty of his step. Hardy lingered for a word of appreciation: "This has been a most enjoyable evening, Miss Dupont."

He chose to disregard the sincerity and warmth behind the formal phrase. "You are very kind, Captain Hardy. But pray do not overestimate. Where all else is off-color, three-quarters white seems dazzling."

"Believe me, it is not a question of contrast or comparison," he protested. "Not even in New York or Washington."

"You flatter me. And now, as I am tired—"

He bowed and left her, concealing the sting of her polite rebuff under his grave smile. The Indian boy, who was standing at the parlor door, closed it behind the guest at a sign from Marie.

Dupont took the drink that he had poured out for himself and undertook the perilous operation of opening the champagne. He fumbled the bottle and would have dropped it had not Vandervyn jumped up and taken it from him. Thrust aside by the younger man, he lurched and sat down in a chair near Hardy.

"Shelby's been in ice," he explained with solemn emphasis. He threw back his head and burst into an uproarious laugh. "Shelby's like that gobe-mouche Redbear. Him trying to smooth me down—zif that'd give him a show with M'rie! An' me the squarest trader in the U. S.! Why, lash time I got goods on credit, they shent me a skeshule to light my 'll-bil'ties, 'n' I just took my pen in han' n' wrote 'cross the shere lish; 'I don't owe no man nushing.'" He again drew back his head and let out a hoarse laugh.

"Poor grammar, but rich rhetoric, Jake," remarked Vandervyn as he filled the champagne glasses. "You told me they gave you the credit you asked for."

"I got the goods," said Dupont, pulling himself together and sobering his tongue with an effort. "Nothing like being on the square. That's what makes me sore at them there chiefs, Cap. Won't let me help out the bucks—good pay in trade goods, and us taking all risks on the ore smelting out N. G. What'll the tribe do after they git their last issue next spring? That's what I'd like to know."

"Yes, captain," said Vandervyn. "Next spring will come the last issue of goods that is provided for in the government treaty with this tribe. They will be in a bad fix if something is not done to get them used to white ways."

"How about a new treaty, to partition the reservation and give land in severality to each head of a family?" suggested Hardy.

"That would take a long time to bring about, and meantime the young bucks should be taught to work. Why wouldn't it be a good idea for us to take charge of the mine—pay all who want to work at fair wages, and take the risk of getting our money back out of the ore shipments?"

As Vandervyn made the suggestion, he smiled ingenuously, and his handsome, flushed face shone with philanthropic enthusiasm. Hardy's face lighted with a responsive glow. He smiled into the boyish blue eyes.

"The proposal does you credit," he responded. "You may count on me to contribute my share."

"You will, will you, Cap?" exclaimed Dupont. He reached out his thick-fingered hand. "You're in, hey? Put it there, old pard! Just you make them damn ki-yis savvy—they've got to hustle for what we give 'em, like Nogen done, and we'll round up fifty thousand apiece before snow flies."

"What's that?" demanded Hardy, instantly stiffening to stern rigidity.

He failed to catch the furious glance from Vandervyn that sent their half-fuddled host lurching over to the whisky bottle. When he did turn, the chief clerk met his hard glance with a knowing wink and a chuckling comment: "Spoiled!"

Hardy did not smile. "Explain," he ordered.

"Oh—you mean Jake's pipe dream that this low-grade stuff may some time turn into a streak of solid gold. But of course you wouldn't stand for the three of us dividing up the proceeds, even if it did turn out a bonanza?"

"Certainly not."

"Your idea would be to give all the profits to the tribe, even if we had bought the ore and taken the risk of its turning out worthless?"

"I am the acting agent, not a trader." "Nom'chien!" muttered Dupont.

"That ain't no way to treat a white man, Cap. Won't you let 'em trade me no more ore?"

"I shall investigate before I decide," said Hardy, and he rose to leave. "Good evening. Good evening, Mr. Vandervyn."

He went out. Dupont gaped after him, and grunted incredulously: "Fifty thousand—made it fifty thousand, and he didn't jump at it!"

"Told you so," snapped Vandervyn.

"But we'll fix him yet—two more cards up our sleeve. If one fails to take the trick, we'll play the other. We're not going to be bluffed out at this stage of the game."

Dupont caught at the whisky bottle with a shaking hand. "No, by Gar," he protested. "We don't play that other card, Mr. Van. I quit first."

"Oh, well," replied Vandervyn. "You're going to throw down, I shall not try to play it alone. But you're in on the next play."

Dupont grunted, and poured himself a full glass of whisky.

CHAPTER V.

By-Play.

Sunrise found Vandervyn riding down the valley on his nimble-footed pinto. He left the road and cantered across into the bend where Redbear had pointed out his new house to Hardy. When Vandervyn rode up, Redbear was shoveling clay upon the uncovered brush thatch at one corner of the roof. The halfbreed did not stop work until his visitor drew rein almost within arm's reach. Vandervyn met his civil greeting with a cynical smile.

"So you've bullded you a home, Charlie. How's your sister Winnie? That's the name, isn't it?"

"No, we say it O-ee-nah. The school people made her get up at four to have her to sleep all day, if she liked."

"Come up the creek. I want to tell you something," replied Vandervyn. When they had gone beyond earshot of the cabin, he stopped his pony and faced the uneasy halfbreed with a look of sympathetic concern. "Charlie, it's all up."

Redbear's face turned a mottled gray.

"All—all up?" he gasped.

"Amounts to the same thing," answered Vandervyn. "We sounded him last night. He won't sit in to the game—the board-backed fool! No chance

Redbear responded with an eager nod, and started off at a jog trot. Vandervyn smiled, turned his pony about, and rode back to the cabin. Without dismounting, he reached down and knocked, the door opened a scant inch and Oinna peeped out at the visitor.

"Lo," he said in an indifferent tone.

"I brought word to your brother that he was wanted at once. Told him I would let you know. He will not be home until after the council."

"Thank you, sir," murmured the girl.

"No trouble at all," replied Vandervyn.

"You don't happen to have a drink of good water handy, do you?"

Instinctive hospitality overcame the girl's shyness. Her tall young figure and handsome face appeared as the door swung open.

"I'll boil the water. Do you like tea?" she asked in a flutelike voice.

"All right."

When she returned to the door, he was tightening his saddle girth. He kept her waiting several moments before he turned to take the cup of tea.

The hand that held the cup was rough from hard work, but the girl's cheap

calico dress was neat and clean and it covered a form as supple and erect as a reed. Unlike her brother, she had inherited only the good features of her

parents. The blend of types apparent in her face was far from unpleasing.

She kept her soft brown eyes shyly downcast. Yet she must have watched him covertly through her long lashes. The tea was hot. He sipped it slowly and gawked on the girl's confusion. Unable longer to endure the strain, Oinna at last faltered in timid desperation: "You—you are Mr. Van. Charlie—he said you and he are partners."

"Partners?" repeated Vandervyn with a quick frown.

"He said that?"

The girl shrank back. "Please, sir, he didn't mean anything wrong."

"What more did he say?"

"Nothing—only that. Please, it's only his way of talking."

"That's all right. Don't be afraid," Vandervyn reassured her with a quick change to smiling friendliness. "I am Charlie's best friend."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! He is my only brother. We have nobody else; only ourselves."

In her gratitude the girl forgot her self-consciousness. She raised her soft eyes and looked full at Vandervyn. He smiled and bent nearer. Though she blushed scarlet, she was unable to turn her gaze away from his ardent blue eyes.

"Oo-e-nah," he drew out her name in the caressing tone that he would have used in fondling a pet dog.

She smiled even as she trembled. He came closer. Her gaze wavered and sank before the look in his glowing eyes, and she shrank back. He sought to put his arm about her, but she sprang clear with the agility of a starved doe.

"Oh, come now!" he urged. "Just a kiss. What's the harm of a kiss?"

The girl had retreated into the cabin. He blocked the door. There was no way for her to elude him if he wished to press his vantage.

"No, no, please!" she begged. "At school they told me only bad girls let men kiss them."

"Bah!" he scoffed. "What do those old fossils know about it?" His voice deepened to an alluring richness. "Come. I will not hurt you, Oinna. Give me a kiss."

"Let me—let me out!" she panted.

"Not unless you pay toll."

She looked around for some way of escape. There was none. She stared wildly out through the window and then looked at him over her shoulder. The sudden stillness of her pose checked and disquieted him. Was it possible that she had seen her brother returning?

He sprang outside and around to the corner of the cabin. A short distance away he saw Marie Dupont riding across from the road at a smart canter. He waved his hat to her and faced about just as Oinna was gliding from the door.

"Stop!" he called in a tone that forced the girl to obey. "Don't be silly, Oinna. You have my word for it I meant no harm. If you run now, Miss Dupont will think we have been doing something wrong."

"Oh, I don't want her to. She was good to me. Don't let her think bad of me," implored the girl.

"Then go in and get her a cup of tea. Quick—here she comes."

The girl disappeared as Marie's pony swung around the corner of the cabin. Vandervyn stooped to fiddle with his stirrup leather. He straightened, and looked over his pony's back. Marie had pulled up a few feet away, and was staring past him toward the door of the cabin, her cheeks ablaze and her eyes flashing with anger.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, glancing over his shoulder with well-forged surprise. "What's the matter?"

"You ask that?" she cried. "I met Charlie half way to the agency. He said you were riding out of the valley."

"Yes. Stopped here to get a drink from his sister. They have only creek water. I've had to wait while she boiled some for tea. But it was a lucky delay—you're here. You'll ride with me?"

"I wish to speak to that girl," replied Marie.

"Going to hire her for a kitchen maid?" he asked, and he called over his shoulder in a rough tone: "Hurry up in there. You're keeping Miss Dupont waiting."

"You should not speak that way to Oinna. She is not a dog," reproved Marie.

"See, you have frightened her—It's all right, Oinna. Mr. Van didn't mean to be cross."

The girl's eyes sparkled. "I wouldn't mind a day or two of fighting. What fun it must have been in the old days!"

"Fun?" exclaimed Vandervyn.

"I have no doubt we could defend the house," remarked Hardy. "We could hold out until the arrival of troops. But there will be no uprising, no trouble."

"Oh, captain!" protested Marie.

They passed on into the dining room, where the silent Indian boy at once served dinner. It was a plain family meal. But the chin and plated ware were artistic; the table linen was clean, and the food very well cooked.

Dupont was still gormandizing when Redbear came with the news that Ti-owa-konza had at last reached the agency. The halfbreed looked so worried that Vandervyn rose from the table as quickly as Hardy. Dupont paused with a slice of pumpkin pie upraised in his hand.

"What's the rumpus, Charlie?" he asked. "Old Thunderbolt ain't gone on the warpath, has he?"

"No, he looks quiet now. But one of the headmen told me he said he would wipe out the agency if the new agent didn't do what he wanted."

Dupont muttered one of the two

man kept his eyes to the front. But Oinna soon glanced about.

"Look!" she said.

He turned and saw Oinna with the big granite-ware cup to her uplifted lips, draining the moist sugar from the bottom. The action was laughably childish, but the girl's attitude was the perfession of grace. Marie caught the look that flitted across Vandervyn's face, and her eyes flashed.

"So I was right!" she exclaimed.

"You were flirting with her."

"I—flirting with her?" he wonderingly queried, and he turned sideways in his saddle, to stare wide-eyed at his companion, from the tip of her dainty riding boot up to the feathered hat on her coal-black hair.

Under that prolonged scrutiny the scarlet of the girl's anger changed to rose, and her eyes sank as coyly as had Oinna's. He smiled. The girl was good to look upon.

Mid-morning was past when they walked their ponies up the slope of the terrace. The bare level, back of the warehouse, was dotted with groups of stolid, half-naked Indians.

"Look!" exclaimed the girl.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Don't you see? There is not a woman or child among them. Let us go and find out what Pere thinks of it."

CHAPTER VI.

Thunderbolt.

But Dupont was not at home. When they failed to find him either in the store or the living room, Marie stepped to the door for another look at the Indians, and then calmly went in to prepare a noon dinner.

Vandervyn sauntered over to the office. On the way back he observed Redbear, out back of the warehouse, drifting unobtrusively from one group of Indians to another. Hardy was at his desk in the office, intent on the government treaty with the tribe.

At noon, as the head chief of the tribe had not yet arrived, Hardy and Vandervyn started to go for their midday meal. As they rounded Hardy's cabin, they were overtaken by Dupont, who came from the direction of the stable. His face was as stolid as the faces of the chiefs and headmen among whom he had passed.

"Well, Jake, what's the good word?" inquired Vandervyn.

The trader gloomily shook his head. "Ain't none, Mr. Van. No women, no children, no old men—just bucks. No trading—I been over to the p'lece camp. Ponies all in; tepees down. They're gitting ready to slip down creek."

"Do you mean they expect trouble?" asked Hardy.

"Well, it kind of looks that way," answered Dupont.

"Explain," ordered Hardy.

"You remember I told you there was a lot of bad blood stirred up.