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THE PRAIRIE

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《THE PRAIRIE》

By J. Fenimore Cooper

(三)

Chapter 18

*My visor is Philemons roof; within the house is
Jove.*

Shakspeare.

The trapper, who had meditated no violence, dropped his rifle again, and laughing at the success of his experiment, with great seeming self-complacency, he drew the astounded gaze of the naturalist from the person of the savage to himself, by saying

The imps will lie for hours, like sleeping alligators, brooding their deviltries in dreams and other craftiness, until such time as they see some real danger is at hand, and then they look to themselves the same as other mortals. But this is a scouter in his war-paint! There should be more of his tribe at no great distance. Let us draw the truth out of him; for an unlucky war-party may prove more dangerous to us than a visit from the whole family of the squatter.

It is truly a desperate and a dangerous species! said the Doctor, relieving his amazement by a breath that seemed to exhaust his lungs of air; a violent race, and one that it is difficult to define or class, within the usual boundaries of definitions. Speak to him, therefore; but let thy words be strong in amity.

The old man cast a keen eye on every side of him, to ascertain the important particular whether the stranger was supported by any associates, and then making the usual signs of peace, by exhibiting the palm of his naked hand, he boldly advanced. In the mean time, the Indian betrayed no evidence of uneasiness. He suffered the trapper to draw nigh, maintaining by his own mien and attitude a striking air of dignity and fearlessness. Perhaps the wary warrior also knew that, owing to the difference in their weapons, he should be placed more on an equality, by being brought nearer to the strangers.

As a description of this individual may furnish some idea of the personal appearance of a whole race, it may be well to detain the narrative, in order to present it to the reader, in our hasty and imperfect manner. Would the truant eyes of Alston or Greenough turn, but for a

time, from their gaze at the models of antiquity, to contemplate this wronged and humbled people, little would be left for such inferior artists as ourselves to delineate.

The Indian in question was in every particular a warrior of fine stature and admirable proportions. As he cast aside his mask, composed of such party-coloured leaves, as he had hurriedly collected, his countenance appeared in all the gravity, the dignity, and, it may be added, in the terror of his profession. The outlines of his lineaments were strikingly noble, and nearly approaching to Roman, though the secondary features of his face were slightly marked with the well-known traces of his Asiatic origin. The peculiar tint of the skin, which in itself is so well designed to aid the effect of a martial expression, had received an additional aspect of wild ferocity from the colours of the war-paint. But, as if he disdained the usual artifices of his people, he bore none of those strange and horrid devices, with which the children of the forest are accustomed, like the more civilised heroes of the moustache, to back their reputation for courage, contenting himself with a broad

and deep shadowing of black, that served as a sufficient and an admirable foil to the brighter gleamings of his native swarthiness. His head was as usual shaved to the crown, where a large and gallant scalp-lock seemed to challenge the grasp of his enemies. The ornaments that were ordinarily pendant from the cartilages of his ears had been removed, on account of his present pursuit. His body, notwithstanding the lateness of the season, was nearly naked, and the portion which was clad bore a vestment no warmer than a light robe of the finest dressed deer-skin, beautifully stained with the rude design of some daring exploit, and which was carelessly worn, as if more in pride than from any unmanly regard to comfort. His leggings were of bright scarlet cloth, the only evidence about his person that he had held communion with the traders of the Pale-faces. But as if to furnish some offset to this solitary submission to a womanish vanity, they were fearfully fringed, from the gartered knee to the bottom of the moccasin, with the hair of human scalps. He leaned lightly with one hand on a short hickory bow, while the other rather touched than sought support, from the long, delicate handle of an

ashen lance. A quiver made of the cougar skin, from which the tail of the animal depended, as a characteristic ornament, was slung at his back, and a shield of hides, quaintly emblazoned with another of his warlike deeds, was suspended from his neck by a thong of sinews.

As the trapper approached, this warrior maintained his calm upright attitude, discovering neither an eagerness to ascertain the character of those who advanced upon him, nor the smallest wish to avoid a scrutiny in his own person. An eye, that was darker and more shining than that of the stag, was incessantly glancing, however, from one to another of the stranger party, seemingly never knowing rest for an instant.

Is my brother far from his village? demanded the old man, in the Pawnee language, after examining the paint, and those other little signs by which a practised eye knows the tribe of the warrior he encounters in the American deserts, with the same readiness, and by the same sort of mysterious observation, as that by which the seaman knows the distant sail.

It is farther to the towns of the Big-knives, was the laconic reply.

Why is a Pawnee-Loup so far from the fork of his own river, without a horse to journey on, and in a spot empty as this?

Can the women and children of a Pale-face live without the meat of the bison? There was hunger in my lodge.

My brother is very young to be already the master of a lodge, returned the trapper, looking steadily into the unmoved countenance of the youthful warrior; but I dare say he is brave, and that many a chief has offered him his daughters for wives. But he has been mistaken, pointing to the arrow, which was dangling from the hand that held the bow, in bringing a loose and barbed arrow-head to kill the buffalo. Do the Pawnees wish the wounds they give their game to rankle?

It is good to be ready for the Sioux. Though not in sight, a bush may hide him.

The man is a living proof of the truth of his words, muttered the trapper in English, and a close-jointed and gallant looking lad he is; but far too young for a chief of any importance. It is wise, however, to speak him fair, for a single arm thrown into either party, if we come to

blows with the squatter and his brood, may turn the day. You see my children are weary, he continued in the dialect of the prairies, pointing, as he spoke, to the rest of the party, who, by this time, were also approaching. We wish to camp and eat. Does my brother claim this spot?

The runners from the people on the Big-river, tell us that your nation have traded with the Tawney-faces who live beyond the salt-lake, and that the prairies are now the hunting grounds of the Big-knives!

It is true, as I hear, also, from the hunters and trappers on La Platte. Though it is with the Frenchers, and not with the men who claim to own the Mexicos, that my people have bargained.

And warriors are going up the Long-river, to see that they have not been cheated, in what they have bought?

Ay, that is partly true, too, I fear; and it will not be long before an accursed band of choppers and loggers will be following on their heels, to humble the wilderness which lies so broad and rich on the western banks of the Mississippi, and then the land will be a

peopled desert, from the shores of the main sea to the foot of the Rocky Mountains; filled with all the abominations and craft of man, and stripped of the comforts and loveliness it received from the hands of the Lord!

And where were the chiefs of the Pawnee-Loups, when this bargain was made? suddenly demanded the youthful warrior, a look of startling fierceness gleaming, at the same instant, athwart his dark visage. Is a nation to be sold like the skin of a beaver?

Right enoughright enough, and where were truth and honesty, also? But might is right, according to the fashions of the earth; and what the strong choose to do, the weak must call justice. If the law of the Wahcondah was as much hearkened to, Pawnee, as the laws of the Long-knives, your right to the prairies would be as good as that of the greatest chief in the settlements to the house which covers his head.

The skin of the traveller is white, said the young native, laying a finger impressively on the hard and wrinkled hand of the trapper. Does his heart say one thing and his tongue another?

The Wahcondah of a white man has ears, and he shuts them to a lie. Look at my head; it is like a frosted pine, and must soon be laid in the ground. Why then should I wish to meet the Great Spirit, face to face, while his countenance is dark upon me.

The Pawnee gracefully threw his shield over one shoulder, and placing a hand on his chest, he bent his head, in deference to the grey locks exhibited by the trapper; after which his eye became more steady, and his countenance less fierce. Still he maintained every appearance of a distrust and watchfulness that were rather tempered and subdued, than forgotten. When this equivocal species of amity was established between the warrior of the prairies and the experienced old trapper, the latter proceeded to give his directions to Paul, concerning the arrangements of the contemplated halt. While Inez and Ellen were dismounting, and Middleton and the bee-hunter were attending to their comforts, the discourse was continued, sometimes in the language of the natives, but often, as Paul and the Doctor mingled their opinions with the two principal speakers, in the English tongue. There was a keen and subtle trial of skill

between the Pawnee and the trapper, in which each endeavoured to discover the objects of the other, without betraying his own interest in the investigation. As might be expected, when the struggle was between adversaries so equal, the result of the encounter answered the expectations of neither. The latter had put all the interrogatories his ingenuity and practice could suggest, concerning the state of the tribe of the Loups, their crops, their store of provisions for the ensuing winter, and their relations with their different warlike neighbours without extorting any answer, which, in the slightest degree, elucidated the cause of his finding a solitary warrior so far from his people. On the other hand, while the questions of the Indian were far more dignified and delicate, they were equally ingenious. He commented on the state of the trade in peltries, spoke of the good or ill success of many white hunters, whom he had either encountered, or heard named, and even alluded to the steady march, which the nation of his great father, as he cautiously termed the government of the States, was making towards the hunting-grounds of his tribe. It was apparent, however, by the singular mixture of interest,

contempt, and indignation, that were occasionally gleaming through the reserved manner of this warrior, that he knew the strange people, who were thus trespassing on his native rights, much more by report than by any actual intercourse. This personal ignorance of the whites was as much betrayed by the manner in which he regarded the females, as by the brief, but energetic, expressions which occasionally escaped him.

While speaking to the trapper he suffered his wandering glances to stray towards the intellectual and nearly infantile beauty of Inez, as one might be supposed to gaze upon the loveliness of an ethereal being. It was very evident that he now saw, for the first time, one of those females, of whom the fathers of his tribe so often spoke, and who were considered of such rare excellence as to equal all that savage ingenuity could imagine in the way of loveliness. His observation of Ellen was less marked, but notwithstanding the warlike and chastened expression of his eye, there was much of the homage, which man is made to pay to woman, even in the more cursory look he sometimes

turned on her maturer and perhaps more animated beauty. This admiration, however, was so tempered by his habits, and so smothered in the pride of a warrior, as completely to elude every eye but that of the trapper, who was too well skilled in Indian customs, and was too well instructed in the importance of rightly conceiving, the character of the stranger, to let the smallest trait, or the most trifling of his movements, escape him. In the mean time, the unconscious Ellen herself moved about the feeble and less resolute Inez, with her accustomed assiduity and tenderness, exhibiting in her frank features those changing emotions of joy and regret which occasionally beset her, as her active mind dwelt on the decided step she had just taken, with the contending doubts and hopes, and possibly with some of the mental vacillation, that was natural to her situation and sex.

Not so Paul; conceiving himself to have obtained the two things dearest to his heart, the possession of Ellen and a triumph over the sons of Ishmael, he now enacted his part, in the business of the moment, with as much coolness as though he was already leading his willing bride, from solemnising their nuptials before a

border magistrate, to the security of his own dwelling. He had hovered around the moving family, during the tedious period of their weary march, concealing himself by day, and seeking interviews with his betrothed as opportunities offered, in the manner already described, until fortune and his own intrepidity had united to render him successful, at the very moment when he was beginning to despair, and he now cared neither for distance, nor violence, nor hardships. To his sanguine fancy and determined resolution all the rest was easily to be achieved. Such were his feelings, and such in truth they seemed to be. With his cap cast on one side, and whistling a low air, he thrashed among the bushes, in order to make a place suitable for the females to repose on, while, from time to time, he cast an approving glance at the agile form of Ellen, as she tripped past him, engaged in her own share of the duty.

And so the Wolf-tribe of the Pawnees have buried the hatchet with their neighbours, the Konzas? said the trapper, pursuing a discourse which he had scarcely permitted to flag, though it had been occasionally interrupted by the different directions with which he