

The Quarterbreed

A Modern Indian Reservation Story by Robert Ames Bennet

Capt. Floyd Hardy, U. S. A., coming to take charge of the agency at Lakotah Indian reservation, following the murder of Agent Nogen, rescues a quarterbreed girl and two men from an Indian attack. They are Reginald Vandervyn, agency clerk and nephew of Senator Clemmer; Jacques Dupont, post trader, and his daughter Marie. Hardy learns that Vandervyn had been promised the agency position, discovers that the Indians are disaffected because they have been cheated in a tribal mine which Vandervyn and Dupont have been working, is puzzled when his friendly speech to tribesmen, interpreted by Vandervyn's tool, angers the Indians, and determines to make further investigation. New influences arising at this point make his position difficult. How his life and honor are endangered through dark plotting is graphically described in this installment.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

Vandervyn had arranged to be gone a week. There was no cause to discuss the time of his return, and as Marie seldom mentioned him, Hardy was not often annoyed by the vision of the handsome young fellow interposing between himself and the girl.

From day to day it could plainly be seen how the rides in the pure mountain air and the delight of the girl's companionship were bringing back strength and vigor to the officer's tropic-weakened body. Soon a healthy red appeared under the tan of his cheeks. The lines of severity and repressed grief began to smooth away.

On the morning of the seventh day, when he rode over to join Marie for a ride out to the butte on Wolf river, ten years seemed to have dropped from him. Even when he lifted his hat to the girl and exposed the silvered hair at his temples, he looked nearer twenty-five than thirty. He had shaved off his bristly mustache!

"Positively, captain," she bantered, "you startle me. You are growing so young! First thing I know, I shall be feeling myself a grandmother in contrast."

"Impossible," he gallantly replied. "You are the Spirit of Youth. Being with you is what makes me seem so much younger than I am. Yet I shall never see thirty-two again."

"You're barely of age this morning!" she said, smiling at his shapely clean-shaven lip.

"In that case you must humor my callowness by pretending you need my aid to mount."

She put one small boot foot in his hand, rose with the lightness of a feather and perched herself sideways on her man's saddle. Unused to such strange behavior, the pony began to buck. Hardy sprang to seize the beast by the head. Marie waved him aside, and proceeded to give an impromptu exhibition of her skill as a horsewoman.

With one knee crooked under the horn of her saddle, she kept her difficult seat like a circus rider, until the pony subsided.

"You've ridden to hounds," stated Hardy as the girl swung astride and they started off down the valley.

She smiled with gratification. "Reggie never notices such things; but you—The first time I saw a side-saddle I thought it ridiculous."

On their way down the valley they met no one, for the families of the police had moved back to their old camp site opposite the agency. Marie suggested that they climb the butte. With subtle coquetry, she gave Hardy the privilege of assisting her up the ledges, though, had she chosen, she could have outclimbed him. They mounted to the top of the highest crag, where they sat down on the bare rock to view the plains and mountains through Hardy's glasses. The utter stillness and solitude, the immensity of the cloudless blue dome above them, the great sweep of the landscape—all tended to quiet the excitement of their lively ascent. A hush fell upon them. Marie let the hand that held the glasses sink into her lap. She gazed off up the river, dreamy-eyed.

After a prolonged silence Hardy murmured in a half-whisper: "How alone we are! The world is young—it is the beginning of time. And in all the new, young world, you and I are alone—Marie."

It was the first time that he had ever used her given name in speaking to her. She started from her day-dream, the color deepening in her cheeks. In the same moment she became aware that she had been looking at a moving object.

"Look!" she said, lifting the glasses to her eyes. "That must be the head and shoulders of a man. He is riding along on the far side of the ridge—an Indian; his head is muffled in a blanket."

"Marie!" she softly repeated Hardy.

The girl sprang to her feet. "He has disappeared—but we are no longer alone in the world, Captain Hardy. Let us go down."

With instant repression of his disappointment, Hardy took the glasses and offered his hand to assist her down the first ledge. She ignored the offer. Nor did she permit him to help her at all during the descent.

Her pony leaped away with the usual jumping start of a brooco. The mare stepped clear of the low scrub near the rill edge, out upon the sandy level of the coulee bottom. She was in the act of breaking into a trot when her

ride's hat whirled from his head and he pitched sideways out of the saddle as if struck by lightning.

A moment later the report of the shot reached Marie. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Hardy outstretched on the ground, flaccid and inert. With a suddenness that almost threw her pony off his nimble feet, she wrenched him around. The mare had stopped within two strides, and twisted her head about to look at her fallen master. The manner in which he had fallen showed that the shot had come from up the coulee. Flinging herself from her pony, she plucked Hardy's rifle out of its sheath and leveled it across the saddle. But she could see no sign of the assassin, and no second bullet came whirling across the coulee. Without a second look up the coulee, she bent over to rip the hem from her underskirt. This gave her a bandage. Her own and Hardy's handkerchiefs served for a compress. Swiftly she bound them on the long wound above his temple and stopped the bleeding.

When at last he opened his eyes, his head was in her lap. He gazed up into her down-bent face, his mind still in a daze. A frown of pain creased his forehead. He murmured, in the querulous tone of a sick child: "Mother—mother!"

Instinctively her soft hand began to smooth away the frown with a gentle, caressing touch. His eyes closed in restless contentment. The girl continued to stroke his forehead. Suddenly his eyelids lifted, and he looked up with the clear, bright gaze of full consciousness. He saw the womanly compassion in her beautiful face. Her eyes were tender and lustrous with sympathy for his suffering.

"Marie!" he murmured. "It is you! I—I thought my mother—"

"Hush!" she said. "You have been shot in the head. I do not know how serious it is."

"Shot? In the head?" He lay still, considering this. Her look had not altered under his gaze. From her utter lack of self-consciousness he divined that she thought him dangerously if not fatally wounded. After a pause, he began to speak with the calmness that sometimes masks the most profound feeling:

"You scarcely know me—but, in the circumstances, I trust you will pardon me for—not waiting. I love you. From the first I thought you the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Now I know

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few months ago. She was all I had. Now I shall always have the thought of your goodness in addition to the dear memory of her."

The girl turned her face still farther away from him. "I cannot endure—You shall not think of me that way!"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Dupont," he apologized. "It is most inconsiderate and ungenerous of me to lie here claiming your sympathy on false pretenses. I feel my strength coming back. It must be that the bullet merely grazed my head."

Before she could prevent him, he twisted about and raised himself on his elbow.

"Oh!" she remonstrated, "You should not move."

He forced a laugh between his clenched teeth.

"No, it's what I thought—only a scratch. All right now, except for a little dizziness. I have been imposing on your sympathy—Did you see where the shot came from? I must go and rout out the rascal."

The girl grasped his rifle and sprang up away from him.

"You shall not go," she declared. "I'm sure he ran away the moment you fell."

Hardy straightened on his knees and rose unsteadily to his feet. His voice was as firm as his pose was tottery: "Be so kind as to help me to mount."

Hardy turned his mare down the coulee. Marie, despite his protests, rode between him and the ridge behind which she had seen the blanketed man.

CHAPTER IX.

The Coquette.

Unable to endure the jar of a trot or gallop, Hardy urged the mare to her fastest walk. They had gone less than a mile when a horseman came loping up the slope from Sioux creek.

"It is Mr. Vandervyn," said Hardy in an even tone.

"Yes," she replied. She looked back the glasses, but did not hand at him until Vandervyn rode up.

The young man's face was flushed, as if he had been drinking. When he pulled up before them, he was seemingly so struck with Hardy's appearance that he scarcely heeded Marie's joyful greeting.

"What's the matter, captain?" he exclaimed. "You're as white as a ghost—and your head tied up! You must have come a nasty cropper."

"Bit of an accident. Not serious," replied Hardy.

"It could not well have been closer," said Marie. "Captain Hardy has been shot."

"Shot?" cried Vandervyn. "The bullet grazed the bone above the temple. Had it been half an inch lower or farther back, it must have killed him."

"Half an inch," repeated Vandervyn. His face crimsoned, and the veins of his forehead began to swell. "Where is the fellow? Did he get away? How long ago was it? Lonn me the mare, Hardy. I'll run him down."

"Very good of you to offer," said Hardy. "But the rascal might ambush you. We'll order out a squad of police. Besides, I wish your report on your trip. I presume Redbear is at the agency."

"No," Vandervyn turned a scowling face towards the butte, as if angrily eager to be off in pursuit of the would-be assassin. "Charlie went back to Thunderbolt's camp to see if his sister was getting along all right with the old chief. I told him that if he was welcomed, he had better stay a few days. If he and the girl make themselves agreeable, we shall have a better chance to quiet the tribe."

"You found conditions still unfavorable?"

"Yes. All the chiefs took a violent dislike to you; and they had stirred up the whole tribe. Charlie and I talked and talked. You know a white man can talk Indians into anything, if he keeps at it."

"What reason?" snapped Hardy.

Vandervyn shrugged. "I know we made some impression, especially on old Thunderbolt. The chiefs no doubt would be willing to let you visit the camps on safe conduct, so to speak; but I doubt if they could keep the wildness of the young bucks in hand. This shooting proves it. I tell you, captain, none of us here would think any the less of you if you cut the whole business."

"I shall start for the mountains tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" remonstrated Marie. "Your wound—you must wait at least until it has begun to heal. And in the meantime Redbear and Onna will be talking Ti-wa-konza and his camp into a milder mood."

"That last is a most excellent argument," said Hardy, and his firmly compressed lips curved in a smile at the girl. "I shall take your advice, Miss Dupont."

Vandervyn had frowned over the concern in Marie's voice. Hardy's response started the veins of his forehead swelling. He looked off away from the two, and remarked in a casual voice: "I'll ride in ahead and or-

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At last Marie and Hardy reached the agency. With the assistance of Vandervyn, who came out of the Dupont house to meet them, he was helped down from his mare to a cot in the shady porch. Here in the open air Marie washed the wound and took several stitches to draw the edges together.

During the operation, which Hardy endured without a groan, Vandervyn stood by, watching Marie's face with sullen jealousy. The moment she had rebanded the wound, he suggested that it would be well to leave Hardy quiet. In reply she asked him to go for ice. When he returned, he found her sitting beside the cot, fan in hand. Hardy had fallen asleep. She rose and went into the house, and Vandervyn followed her.

The young man made no attempt to conceal his anger. He closed the parlor door and turned upon her accusingly. "So that's what you've been up to all the time I've been away?"

"Up to what, pray?"

"Coquetting with that old fossil of a tin soldier."

"Am I not a dutiful daughter?" the girl parried. "Mon pere said I must make myself agreeable to the agent."

"He did?"

"Why not go and ask him, if you doubt what I say?"

"I don't. That's just it—damn it all!"

The girl's eyes flashed with resentment, but her voice was sweetly mocking: "Oh, Mr. Vandervyn, how can you? Captain Hardy never swore once during all our delightful rides."

"You've been riding with him every day?"

"All except one. I've been sorry ever since that I missed that one. He was invariably courteous. He is a gentleman."

"You infer that I am not!" exclaimed Vandervyn. "So he's courteous and smooth and slick, is he? One might know that you've been raised in the backwoods."

"You forget I spent four years at the capital of Canada."

"In a convent! No wonder you've let him play you."

The girl met the jeer with a tantalizing smile.

"It has been a most amusing game. He treats me with as much respect as if I were a young lady of his own set."

"There's no one else here for him to flirt with."

"That is an advantage, is it not?" The girl dropped into her English manner. "I dressy he will forget me as soon as he gets back to civilization—unless I decide to accept his proposal."

Vandervyn stared at her cynically. "You needn't try to rag me, Marie."

She smiled. "So you do doubt what I say. Yet it is true. Captain Hardy did me the honor of declaring that he wished to marry me."

"Hardy asked you?—he, a captain in the regular army?"

"And I a quarterbreed, the daughter of my father. Amazing, is it not?"

Vandervyn caught himself up as he saw the proud humility of her expression. It was a new look to him. He had often seen her proud, but never humble. His jealousy flared: "How did you answer him? You didn't accept—you refused the old board-bank!"

"Yes and no, that is, not yet," the girl teased.

Vandervyn stepped close and grasped her arm.

"Be so kind as to release me, Mr. Vandervyn."

"You coquette! You're trying to play me against him."

"So that is what you think of me?" The girl wrenched herself free and turned from him haughtily.

He stepped forward, and again grasped her arm. His voice shook with jealous anger: "You shall have nothing to do with him! He shall not have you!"

"Indeed! May I ask what right you have to dictate?"

"You love me, that is why," he flung back at her. "You love me, Marie. You can't deny it." His voice sank to a deep, ardent, golden note that sent a tremor through her. "You are mine—mine! You know it. Your arm quivers—that look in your eyes! You cannot hide your love, Marie—sweetheart!"

He sought to embrace her. But again she wrenched herself free from him. She could no longer feign hauteur. Her face was rosy with blushes; her bosom heaved; her eyes, behind their veiling lashes, glowed with tender passion. Yet she kept her head despite the intoxicating ardor of his look. Unlike Onna, she was not so

unsophisticated as he persisted in thinking her.

"You take a good deal for granted, Mr. Vandervyn," she attempted a mocking tone. "I am not yet your sweetheart, nor am I so sure I shall be."

He came nearer to her, his eyes the color of violets and sparkling with tiny golden gleams. He held out his arms. His voice was low and enticing: "Sweetheart—sweetheart!"

She swayed toward him, checked herself in the act of yielding, and eluded his grasp.

"No!" she cried. "You're a bit too sure. I've no mother, halfbreed or otherwise, to advise me, my dear Reggie. I must be my own chaperon. You charge Captain Hardy with trying to play me. Yet when he spoke to me of his love he also spoke of marriage."

Vandervyn's eyes narrowed and as quickly widened in their most childlike stare.

"How can you, Marie?" he reproached. "You say that as if you think I have been trifling with you all these months, when you know as well as I—But of course, if you do not trust me, I have no show against him."

"I'm sure he ran away the moment you fell."

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