

THE QUARTERBREED

The Story of an Army Officer on an Indian Reservation
By ROBERT AMES BENNET

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

Hardy at once addressed Vandervyn: "Be so kind as to open the safe and lay before these commissioners every public paper in the office. They decline to show me their authority for an inspection of my accounts. Therefore I have declined to make an official presentation to them of agency affairs. There is nothing to conceal from any inquirer. You may hand every document to these persons—in my presence."

Vandervyn nonchalantly shrugged, and went over to open the safe. One of the commissioners remarked in an officious tone: "Where is the issue clerk? He ought to be present to explain his accounts."

"That's Charlie Redbear, gentleman—the interpreter," explained Dupont. "He lit out with his sister, down the creek to his house, when we was eating. Want me to send for him? You'll need him to make your official talk to the chiefs."

"You will do as well for that, Jake," interposed Vandervyn. "Besides, I believe the commissioners will wish to put off the powwowing until tomorrow. It's a tiresome trip across from the railroad. No doubt they will glance through the agency papers, and then go over to your house to plan the opening of the mineral lands."

The big, bear-eyed man who had ridden in the front seat of the car, nodded and replied in an oily tone: "If you assure us the accounts are correct, Mr. Vandervyn, I think it is needless trouble at this time to make further investigation."

"Still, oughtn't we to—" One of the commissioners began a querulous objection. But his fellows were rising to leave the office, and he bent to the will of the majority.

Hardy bowed them out with punctilious courtesy. He was still working when Marie's Indian boy brought word that she wished him to come to dinner without fail. He hesitated, but at last sent back the reply that he would be present.

Having in mind the cold and almost insulting manner of the visitors, he cut his arrival as close as possible. This proved to be a tactful move. Though the newcomers were all mellow with whisky, a chilling silence followed the entrance of the acting agent. Even Dupont turned his thick shoulder and poured himself another drink without a word of greeting.

Only Vandervyn raised his empty glass to the last guest, and called ironically: "Just in time, captain. Here's to your quick progress along the course of your career."

Hardy did not reply. He was bowing to Marie, who had that moment appeared in the dining room doorway.

"Dinner is served, gentlemen," she said, and she bowed in her most grande dame manner. "Captain Hardy, you may take me in."

Vandervyn sprang up, angry-eyed. Marie did not seem to perceive him. She stepped in beside Hardy, and waited with perfect composure while the other guests passed out after her father. Vandervyn's face was far from pleasant as he followed the others. The girl did not look at him. Hardy escorted her to the head of the table, and she gave him the seat of honor. The chairman of the commission was graciously assigned to the seat on her left.

Hardy was deeply gratified, but he failed to realize the full meaning of his preference as the most distinguished gentleman present. Vandervyn alone was fully aware of the motives that had prompted Marie to honor his rival. He bent over his plate, his lip between his teeth. For a time he could neither eat nor talk. Then he called and, for a while, sat staring into the bubbling amber of his champagne, his lips curved in an odd smile. At last a merry quip from Marie stirred him to action. He rose and bowed to her.

"Lady—and gentlemen," he smilingly remarked. "I have two very pleasant little announcements to make. It is my fond expectation that you will relish this quite as much as you have relished this delicious little dinner."

He looked at Marie, smiled, and continued: "My first announcement relates to our martial fellow-guest, the gallant and distinguished Captain Floyd Hardy. The privilege and pleasure are mine to inform the distinguished officer that the war department has been pleased to relieve him of this irksome detail to grant him permission immediately to join his regiment, which is at Vancouver barracks, Washington, under orders to sail for Alaska."

All eyes turned upon Hardy. Some glinted with malice; others were cold. Marie's alone were sympathetic. Hardy glanced around the table with an imperturbable look, and bowed to Vandervyn.

"Pray accept my acknowledgment of the kindness with which you make the announcement," he said, and he turned to smile gravely into Marie's troubled face. "I could have asked for time to carry out our irrigation plans. But, doubtless, the bureau will

find some one more competent than myself."

"Will you not remonstrate against this unjust order?" she exclaimed.

"You forget that I am a soldier," he replied. "Army life is a life of service. You will now understand why most army women are army girls before they are army wives."

"Ah—but if a woman loves!" murmured Marie, and her gaze sank with the drooping of her silken lids. "Alaska must be a magnificent land to visit."

Vandervyn was bending to seat himself. He straightened as if struck. The suddenness of the movement drew all eyes back to him. His wine-flushed face had gone white. He met the wondering look of the man opposite, and forced a smile.

"I have still another announcement to make," he said, "one that you will all admit to be still more pleasant than the delightful news of our gallant friend's summons to wider fields of service. Gentlemen—and lady—permit me to remind you that all the world loves a lover. This being true, it follows that all the world must doubt-

less love a pair of lovers. It is my privilege and delight to be able to announce that, as I am not at present free to engage myself, the other member of the pair, our charming hostess, has graciously given her promise to wait for me."

He caught up his champagne glass, which the Indian boy had just refilled. "Gentlemen, here's to the loveliest girl in the world, the lady who has given me her true promise!"

The commissioners rose—Dupont rose. Hardy sat as if stunned, his eyes fixed upon Marie's face in a strained, half-incredulous stare. She was very pale. She seemed to shrink. Yet she made no attempt to deny Vandervyn's statements. Hardy stood up with the other men and, for the first time that evening, he emptied his champagne glass.

"Youth to youth!" he murmured. Meeting Vandervyn's exultant smile, he drew in a deep breath, and his voice rang clear and steady: "You are to be congratulated, sir. I wish you the great good fortune that you may in all things prove worthy of the lady's trust."

Vandervyn's flushed face crimsoned, but whether with shame or anger could not be told. Marie had risen, and her tactfulness diverted attention from the rivals.

"The coffee and cigars will be served in the parlor," she announced. Vandervyn somewhat hastily led the way to the other room. Hardy, being the farthest away, followed behind the others. When he came to the door he coolly closed and bolted it.

"Captain!" breathlessly exclaimed Marie. "What will they think?"

"Most of them are beyond thinking, and they have the whisky bottle," he replied. He faced about, and came back to her.

She shrank before the look in his eyes.

"You—you have no right!" she murmured. "I will go—"

"Not until you have heard me. There may be no other opportunity for me to see you alone before I go away," he said. "I do not wish to reproach you. Yet you must realize that your failure to tell me of your promise to him led me to believe I had a fighting chance."

"You—do not—ask me to explain," she faltered.

"What is there to explain?" he rejoined. "You knew that I trusted your sincerity utterly, and you were willing to amuse yourself with me while he was away."

"I—you have no right," she sought to defend herself. "I never led you to believe—"

"You told me nothing of that promise to him. I thought you—what you knew I thought you; and all these weeks, every day—How can a woman look so beautiful—seem so true and loving in every word and act—and toy with the deepest feelings of a man as you have amused yourself with mine?"

As he neared the foot of the valley, he saw Redbear and Olnna riding up the creek from the road crossing. The girl drooped in her saddle as if ill. A nearer view confirmed his suspicions.

No, do not attempt to deny the facts, please. It will only add to the bitterness. I am trying to keep from saying harsher things. I cannot hide the fact that you have struck me a severe blow. It would be easier if you had not insisted upon my coming here tonight to be made the butt of his mockery."

Marie threw up her head, her eyes blazing with indignant scorn.

"You can believe that of me? I thought you a gentleman!" Her voice hardened. "You have been served as you deserve. And now I am glad—glad!"

He turned about and went out through the parlor. The other men were clinking glasses in jolly good-fellowship. Dupont waveringly offered him the whisky bottle. He thrust it back and left the house.

CHAPTER XIX.

In Self-Defense.

Rather early the next morning the big, red-faced, bear-eyed man came alone to the office. He found Hardy making out a final report as acting agent.

"Getting ready to turn over?" he asked.

"I am prepared to do so the moment the new agent arrives and has checked the lists of agency property," was Hardy's curt reply.

"All right. I'll O. K. your report. Don't need to check the lists of an officer and gentleman," the man purred in his oiliest tone. He handed over a packet. "Here are the papers relieving you, and my appointment. I'm the new agent. I held them back to give young Vandervyn the chance to spring his pleasant little surprises on you."

"Very considerate," said Hardy. He opened and read the official document with care, pocketed his own, and handed the other back to the new agent.

"Very good. Now, if you will examine the accounts of the chief clerk and the issue clerk. I have brought them down to date, together with my report."

The new agent glanced at the papers and took up a pen. "You've certified their correctness. That's enough for me. I'll give you my O. K. of the turnover."

"You would oblige me by checking the property in the warehouse."

"Waste of time, captain. You'll want to be starting for the railroad. We made a night of it. Commissioners' heads are sore this morning. They want to get to work, and this is the best place. I can loan you my touring-car to take you over to the railroad."

"Thank you. I prefer to ride my mare," said Hardy. "I shall ask you, however, to send one of the police with my trunk in Dupont's buckboard."

"I'll send it in the motor. There's a lot more of our own baggage to be brought out from the railroad," insisted the new agent.

He receipted Hardy's papers, and went to hunt up the chauffeur of the second car. Hardy took his private papers and the reports that he wished to mail, and went over to his quarters to pack his baggage. Dupont sent a policeman to fetch Hardy's mare and came in to offer his big hand.

"Hope you ain't going off with no hard feelings, Cap," he said.

Hardy gravely shook hands with him.

"None, this morning," he assured. "A man cannot afford to cherish enmity. I shall ask you to go with me to the top of the head chief."

Dupont hesitated, and ended by complying with the request. They found old Ti-owa-konza seated in his tepee, waiting for the white chiefs to call a council. When, with Dupont's aid, Hardy explained that he must go away, the noble old chief's stolidity fell from him like a mask, and he rose to cry out in impassioned speech against the departure of the tribe's true friend. Hardy could only express his deep regret, and repeat that he had to obey the orders of his own head chief. When he had explained the report on irrigation that he was mailing to the Indian bureau, he exchanged trifling gifts of friendship with the chief and tore himself away.

The policeman was waiting with the mare. Hardy gave him a coin and swung into the saddle.

"One last word, Dupont," he said. "Kindly tell your daughter what I said about not cherishing enmity."

"How about Mr. Van?" questioned Dupont.

"You need say nothing to him from me. But—" Hardy bent over in the saddle to bring his stern face near the trader's—"I advise you to watch that young man."

Dupont stood for some time staring after the officer. When he started for his store, before which a crowd of Indians were waiting, his shrewd eyes were narrow with calculation, and his stubby forefinger was rubbing the grizzled hair under the brim of his hat.

Hardy permitted the mare to choose her own pace.

Redbear was intoxicated, and he was abusing his sister in the foulest of language. When Hardy approached, the girl averted her shame-reddened face, and drooped still lower over her pony's withers. Redbear leered insolently at the intruder and burst into a drunken laugh. Though his body was reeling, he had almost perfect control of his tongue—

"Look at him, Weena; the— Here followed a number of obscene epithets. "That man of yours lost no time. The tin soldier is on the run. Told you we had fixed him."

"You drunken dog!" said Hardy. "Keep quiet and go home."

"Who's going to make me?" challenged the halfbreed, his bloodshot eyes flaring with vicious anger. "I don't take any more orders from you. You'd try to put the killing of Nogen on me—try to make out it was me shot him, and tried to shoot you those two times! But Van fixed you. He promised to keep you from putting me in jail. That's why I let him have Weena when we went into the mountains."

"You cur!" cried Hardy. "So you permitted him?"

Olnna threw up her head with the courage of outraged innocence.

"Why should he stop him from taking me?" she shrieked. "I am only a breed girl, but my man loves me, me only! I had a right to be his wife if I wanted to."

"His wife?" incredulously exclaimed Hardy. "A man of his stamp never could have married you."

"He did! he did!" insisted Olnna. "I thought you too kind to think I would be a bad girl. He married me by tribal custom and the common-law way of white people."

Hardy's sharp gaze softened with pity. "You poor young innocent! Tribal custom is not binding on a white man."

"But common-law marriage!" triumphantly rejoined the girl in the faith of her unquestioning love. "He said white people often get married that way."

Hardy burst out between pity and indignation: "The scoundrel!—You poor child! Common-law marriage is only half-marriage at best. To make it even that much of a tie, it is necessary that a man and woman should live together as husband and wife openly. He kept this matter secret; he persuaded you and your brother to tell no one—the scoundrel!"

Stricken with grief and shame, Olnna uttered a moan and crouched down over her pony's withers, with her face in her hands. But the drink-crazed brain of Redbear comprehended only that Hardy was berating his sister's husband. He made an effort to straighten in the saddle, and his right hand fumbled eagerly for the hilt of his revolver. Hardy swerved his mare alongside and reached out. Redbear slumped from his saddle like a sack of grain.

Olnna slipped down to run to her brother. But Hardy was quicker. He threw himself on the half-dazed drunkard. A skillful wrench loosened the stubborn clutch of the other's fingers on the gun. Disarmed and perhaps partly sobered by the shock, Redbear stretched out on the dusty road.

"Oh, he is hurt!" gasped Olnna.

Hardy rolled the drunkard away from her and, spoke sternly: "He is not hurt. Redbear, stand up!"

Redbear gathered himself together and, aided by Olnna, staggered to his feet. The ponies had cantered away. Hardy led his mare around beside Redbear, and he and Olnna, between them, managed to lift the almost helpless man into the saddle. While they were going the half-mile to the cabin, Hardy led the mare, and Olnna walked beside her brother to steady him in his seat. Neither saw the rider who rode up out of the creek bed beyond the cabin and wheeled from view behind the end wall.

When they reached the house, Hardy helped Redbear dismount before the door and handed him his unloaded revolver. He then lifted his hat to Olnna with utmost respectfulness.

"Miss Redbear," he said, "you have been wronged in a most despicable manner. He has lied to you. You must keep away from him. Go back into the mountains with your grandfather. I believe the rascal will soon leave the reservation, and then you will be free from him."

"Thanks for the prophecy, captain," came a jeer from the end of the cabin. They stared about, and saw Vandervyn standing at the corner, his face set in a cynical smile.

"So you've quit soldiering and taken to preaching," he sneered.

"O-o-oh!" sighed Olnna, and she crept toward the mocker, her hands imploringly outstretched, her soft eyes brimming over with tears of pitiful entreaty. "Tell him—tell him it isn't true! Tell him our marriage is a real marriage!"

"What a fuss over a little thing like that!" he rallied.

The girl cringed back, and sank down, in silent anguish to hide her face.

"For shame, sir!" cried Hardy. "Have you no shred of decency?"

Vandervyn laughed. Redbear started staggering toward him, the empty revolver concealed behind his back with drunken cunning.

"You think it's funny," he muttered, "funny joke! You own up that marriage with her wasn't real like you said it was."

"What if it wasn't?" bantered Vandervyn. "It was good enough for a halfbreed squaw." He smiled at Hardy. "Yes, good enough for any halfbreed or—quarterbreed. I'll have Marie next."

Hardy tensed, yet instantly checked the wrath that would have impelled him to hurl himself at the throat of the mocker. Redbear lacked such iron self-mastery, and liquor had numbed his sense of subservience to Vandervyn. At Marie's name his fury burst out.

"You liar! You thief!" he yelled. "She's mine! You promised! I'll show you, you—" Cursing wildly, he flourished his revolver, and brought it down in a wavering attempt to take aim.

"Stop! Stop!" Hardy cried to Vandervyn. "It's not loaded! Stop!"

But Vandervyn had already whipped out his revolver. From the muzzle leaped a sheet of flame. Redbear flung up his arms and pitched backward. Swiftly Vandervyn recoiled his revolver and aimed it at Hardy.

"Put up your hands! Keep them away from your coat!" he shouted in fierce menace.

Hardy did not put up his hands. He bent down to feel the heart of the halfbreed. Shrieking with horror, Olnna fell fainting across the body of her brother. Hardy looked up, grim and quiet.

"I hope you are satisfied," he said. "You have killed him."

Vandervyn kept his revolver pointed at Hardy.

"I shot in self-defense," he snarled. "Don't you make a move. He had his gun on me—"

"It was empty. I called to you."

"You didn't—not till I had fired. I shot him down to save my life. I'll shoot you, too, if you try to draw."

"Get out of here!" ordered Hardy, heedless of the threat. "You've caused trouble enough. Send the new agent. You can tell him that I admit you seem to have been justified."

Vandervyn's menacing attitude relaxed. He half lowered his revolver, but kept a wary watch on Hardy as he backed away around the corner of the cabin, and ran to jump on his pony and gallop away. Hardy had sprung up. But it was only to hasten into the house for water. He came out with a half-filled bucket, drew Olnna over on her back, and dashed water into her face. She opened her eyes, saw him, and, reddening with shame, turned her face aside. It happened to be toward her brother. Suddenly she drew herself up on her elbow to bend over the gray face.

"He—is not—dead!" she gasped.

Redbear's lips were moving. Hardy knelt to lift him up to a half-sitting position. He knew by grim experience that with such a wound there was no hope, but he also knew that it would ease the agony to raise the injured man. Olnna dampened her brother's forehead. He muttered a curse.

"Not that, boy," warned Hardy. "You have only a few minutes."

Redbear seemingly did not hear him. He repeated the curse: "The—! I'd 'a' got him—way I got Nogen—if you hadn't unloaded—my gun."

"You shot Nogen?" queried Hardy. "Speak out! You say you shot Nogen?"

"He—wanted her—Marie—same way as Van—same way as—Van said you—wanted her. We—I—tried to get you—twice—because he, Van, told me you wanted Marie—that way. The liar—the— Ah-r-rh!"

From between the lips that had parted to utter the curse there gushed a scarlet stream.

Hardy laid the body on the ground and drew the distracted girl away by main force.

"Come into the house," he ordered. "You must not look at him."

She offered only passive resistance. When he had put her in a chair, she sat motionless, as if dazed, her eyes fixed on vacancy.

"This won't do," he said. "You must go to your grandfather. I cannot take you with me, and besides—"

He checked himself, caught up a blanket, and went outdoors. When presently he returned, she had not moved. He fastened her scant wardrobe and few trinkets in a blanket roll, and led her out around the house, carefully keeping himself between her and the blanket-covered form on the ground near the door. He had brought her own and her brother's ponies to the back of the house. He lashed the bundle on the dead man's saddle, lifted the girl upon her pony, and mounted his mare.

Before she had finished she was weeping in the arms of her grandfather.

Notwithstanding the delay, Hardy again permitted the mare to choose her own pace. Though she went at a steady trot, a messenger in the remaining automobile easily could have overtaken him at any time before dark. But no messenger was sent.

Mid-afternoon Hardy met the car that had taken his baggage to town. It was piled high with the baggage of the new agent and the commissioners. The chauffeur, with the indifference of a city man, whirled past him without so much as slackening speed.

CHAPTER XX.

The Registration.

At noon the following day the commissioners came out to the butte, and announced the conditions of the land opening. All entrymen were to start from the coulee at a given signal, to be made at ten o'clock in the morning of the second day following. Any person who started before the signal would be disqualified.

A tent was set up for the commissioners in the coulee bottom, on the reservation side of the dwindled stream, and the chairman and secretary proceeded to take the signatures, thumb prints and descriptions of the waiting colony of prospectors and cowboys.

Since Hardy and Marie had first come upon the camp, the number of men had twice doubled. Yet, owing to the obscure manner in which the proposed opening had been advertised, there were absurdly few of them, all told, compared to the multitudes at other governmental land openings. Perhaps with a view toward covering this discrepancy, the commissioners had ordered full descriptions of every contestant, and so managed to cover many sheets of paper and to consume much time.

The recording was well under way when Vandervyn and Dupont came down to the camp. Neither made any attempt to push into the line of entrymen. But Dupont read the posted notice of the conditions of the contest, frowned, and remarked to Vandervyn that he wished to show him something over at the butte. The young man looked bored, yet borrowed a pony, and rode across with him to the deserted camp.

"What is it?" he asked. "Have you found a mare's nest that is hatching out a horse good enough to outrun triplets?"

Dupont shook his head. "Don't you let nobody hear that joke around here, Mr. Van. Them there prospectors and punchers all lug guns, and they ain't the kind to stand for no funny business."

"They'll have to stand for it, if they don't understand it," punned Vandervyn. "In this game three of a kind beat all the jacks in the pack."

"You best keep your head shut, just the same. Them punchers'll ride the hardest, and they're mighty sharp to see the difference between horses."

"I told you I shall rush them off their feet. They'll think me a fool, and drop behind, to overhaul me later. Now, if that's all you have to tell me—"

He wheeled his borrowed pony to ride back.

"Hold on!" replied Dupont, frowning uneasily. "I want to talk over fixing up about the way we share the mine."

Vandervyn lifted his eyebrows. "Aren't you satisfied? Now that Redbear is—out of the way, there will be none to question our sharing of the mine between us."

"It's between us, all right," sullenly replied Dupont. "Tain't in writing though. According to them conditions, if I don't register today, I don't get



Redbear Pitched Backwards.

ne right to enter no claim. What's to keep you from turning round and telling me to whistle for my half, soon's you git title to the mine?"

"Why, Jake!" exclaimed Vandervyn in an aggrieved tone. "How can you think I could throw you down that way? Even if we weren't friends, you know I want Marie."

Dupont's eyes narrowed, and his jaw set obstinately. "That's all right; but them that want to remain friends want to remember that business is business."

Vandervyn frowned, considered the matter a few moments, smiled, and drew a folded paper from an inner pocket.

"Very well. I expected to wait until I reached the mine. But since you insist, here it is—my deed to you of a full half-interest. You've been hinting and looking so confounded uneasy ever since the accident to Redbear, that I thought I'd be ready for you."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)