

A Tale of the Vanishing People

By REX BEACH

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UP from the valley below came the throb of war drums, the faint rattle of shots and the distant cries of painted horsemen charging. From my hard vantage on the ridge I had an unobstructed view of the encampment, a great circle of tepees and tents three miles in circumference, cradled in a sag of the timberless hills.

Five thousand Sioux were here in all their martial splendor, painted and decked and trapped for war, living anew their tales of might and repeating in mimicry their greatest battles. Five days the feasting had continued. Five mornings had I been awakened at dawn to see a thousand ochered, feathered horsemen pour out of the gullies upon the camp, their horses rearing and plunging, their rifles snapping and spitting, while the valley rocked to their battlecries and to the answering clamor of the army which met them. The odors of a savage people had begun to pall on me, the sound of a strange language had begun to annoy me, and I longed for another white man or a word in my own tongue. Next to my tent was another one which had been erected during my absence, and through the flap was thrust the head of my friend, the government doctor.

"Gee, I'm glad to see you!" I said as I shook his hand. "I'm as lonesome as a deaf mule at a song recital."

"What's the matter? Won't the Indians talk to you?"

"I guess they would if they could, but they can't. Out of these 5,000 Sioux I haven't found one who can understand a word I say, and I've tried some 4,980 of them."

The old gentleman laughed.

"Your government schools have gone back in the betting with me, doc. You must keep your graduates under lock and key."

"They can all speak English if they want to—that is, the younger ones can. Some few of the old people are too proud to try, but the others can talk as well as we can until they forget."

"Do you mean to say these aborigines have been fooling me? I don't believe it," said I. "There is one that can't talk English, and I'll make a bet on it." I indicated a passing brave with an eagle feather headdress reaching far down his naked legs. He was a magnificent animal—young, lithe and as tall and straight as a sapling—and was decked from head to feet in his gorgeous panoply. "I've tried him twice, and he simply doesn't understand."

My friend called to the warrior: "Hey, Tom! Come here a minute." The Indian came, and the doctor continued: "When do you hold the horse races, Thomas?"

"Tomorrow, 4 o'clock, unless it rains," said the fellow.

"Are you going to ride?"

"No. My race horse is sick."

As the other daubed figure vanished into the dusk the old man turned to me, saying: "Yale."

"What?"

"Yale; B. A. He's a graduate."

"Impossible!" I declared. "Why, I could hardly understand him. He talks like a foreigner or as if he was just learning the language."

"Exactly. That halting unfamiliarity with English marks the death and decay of his learning. In three years more he'll be an Indian again through and through. Oh, the reservation is full of fellows like that." The doctor continued, with a sigh: "It's a melancholy acknowledgment to make, but our work seems to count for nearly nothing. It's their blood."

"I've heard a graduating class read these from a platform, sing cantatas in chorus and deliver orations. Then I have seen those same young fellows three months later squatting in tepees, grunting in their native tongues and eating with their fingers."

"Some years ago I felt I was well on my way to success, for I found a youth who offered every promise of great manhood. I studied him until I knew his every trait and his every strength. He did not seem to have any weakness. I raised him under my own supervision into a tall, straight fellow as handsome as figured bronze and with a mind far in advance of his people and his years. He had the best blood of the nation in him, being the son of a war chief, and they called him Thomas Running Elk. He was educated at the agency school under me, and he went through his college course like a stag at the head of a great herd, a silent, dignified, shyward figure, unapproachable and mysterious to his fellow students. In all things he excelled, but he was best perhaps in athletics, the credit for which I also took, feeling a godlike satisfaction in my work."

"News came to me of his victories on track and field and gridiron, for his professors kept me posted, being likewise interested in my experiment, but as for him he never wrote. It was not his nature, nor did he communicate with his people."

"It was in my protegee's senior year

that the great thing entered his life, the thing I had craftily built upon from the start and had well nigh despised of. The girl entered, but instead of Running Elk being drawn to the woman, as I had planned, the woman went to him.

"You've heard of old Henry Harman? Yes, the railroad king. It was his daughter Alicia."

"In order to understand the story you'll have to know something about old Henry and believe in heredity, as I do. He is a self made man. He came into the middle west as a poor boy and by force of his indomitable pluck, ability and doggedness became a captain of industry. He is the same as when he was a section boss, and his daughter Alicia is another Henry Harman feminized. Her mother was a pampered child of Fifth avenue, born to money and a slave to her own whims, and Alicia grew up more effectively spoiled than her mother, combining the traits of both parents."

"Well, when I got a panicky letter from one of Running Elk's professors, coupling her name vaguely with that of my Indian, I wavered in my determination to see this experiment out. But the mind of the analyst is unshifting, and one who sets out to untangle the skein of the gods must pay the price, so I waited."

"As if fate had really taken a part in the affair, I found a long distance call from old Henry Harman when I returned to my hotel. He had wired me here at the agency and, finding I was in Washington, had called me from New York. He didn't tell me much over the phone, except that he must see me at once, and as my work was finished I took the train in the morning, going straight to his office."

"Doc, I'm in an awful hole," he declared, "and you're the only man who can pull me out. It's about Alicia and that savage of yours."

"I know something about it," said I, "and I feel rather to blame, for it was I who sent him to college."

"I won't be defied by my own flesh and blood! I won't! I won't! I'm the master of my own family! Why, the thing's so absurd it's almost unbelievable, and yet it's terrible—terrible! Heavens! What would her mother say if she were alive?"

"Have you talked with Alicia?"

"Not with her, to her. She's like a mule. Yes, sir, just like a mule. I never saw such a will in a woman. I—I've fought her until I'm as weak as a cat. I don't know where she got her temper! He collapsed feebly, and I had to smile, for there's only one thing strong and stubborn enough to overcome a Harman's resistance, and that is a Harman's desire."

"What does she say? My interest in the affair was increasing."

"Nothing, except to agree that I'm right in the abstract, and then to inform me that the abstract problems go to pieces once in awhile. She says this—this Galloping Moose, this yelping ghost dancer of yours, is the only real man she ever met."

"What does he have to say?"

"Humph!" grunted Harman. "All he does is to listen."

"How old is Alicia?"

"Nineteen. Oh, I've burlied that at her, too, but she says she'll wait! You know she has her own money from her mother."

"Does Running Elk come to your house?"

"At this my old friend roared so fiercely that I hastened to say: 'I'll see him at once. I have more influence than anybody else with him.'"

"I hope you can show him how impossible law criminals it is to ruin my girl's life. Yes, and mine too. Suppose the yellow papers got hold of this thing? Harman shuddered. 'Doc, I love that girl so well I'd kill her with my own hands rather than face her disgrace and see her ridiculed.'"

"She could marry a duke if one happened to come along, and I'd buy her one, too, if she wanted him, but I won't stand for this dirty, low browed Injun."

"He's not dirty," I declared, "and he's not as low browed as some degenerate foreigner you'd be glad to pick out for her."

"Well, he's an Injun," retorted Harman, "and it'll come out on him. We've both seen 'em tried. They all drop back where they started from. You know that as well as I do."

"I don't know it," said I, thinking of my experiment, which had gone so badly askew, "but we've got to put a stop to this affair in one way or another. I'll see the young man right away."

"Tomorrow is Thanksgiving," said Henry. "Wait over and go up with us and see the Yale-Princeton football game. I understand Running Elk plays football. We'll pick you up at your hotel in the morning and drive up in the car. It's the big game of the year, and you'll enjoy it. I don't expect to, however."

"You have seen similar games, so there is no need of my describing this one, even if I could. As it was my first experience it impressed me greatly. When the teams appeared I recognized Running Elk at a distance, as did the hordes of madmen behind us, and I began to understand what the old man in the seat next mine was combating."

"A dancing dervish in front of the grand stand said something through a megaphone, then waved a cane, whereupon a tremendous barking 'Rah! Rah! Rah!' broke out, ending with my Sioux boy's name. They bellowed and roared over him until I wished that the old chief back in Dakota were there to see his son and witness the honor he had won among the whites."

"Quite as impressive to me as this demonstration was the deathlike silence which settled when the teams

scattered out in readiness. Princeton kicked off, and the ball sailed high and far. As it settled in its downward flight I saw a lithe, gaunt shadow of a man racing toward it and recognized my boy. I had lost his position for the moment, but I knew that hungry, predatory stride which devoured the fleeting yards as if he were a thing of the wind. He was off with the ball in the hollow of his arm, back into the heart of his enemies, dodging, darting, leaping, twisting, always advancing. They tore his interferences from him, and yet he penetrated their ranks like an elusive, quivering beam of light which none of them might lay hands upon. He was running free when tackled, and his assailant launched himself with such savage violence that the sound of their impact came to us distinctly. As he fell I heard Alicia Harman gasp as if some hand had been removed from her throat. And then the crowd gave tongue.

"From that time on to the finish of the game my eyes seldom left Running Elk and then only to shoot quick glances at my companions."

"Although the skill of the young Sioux overtopped that of all the others, the opposing team played as one man, as a wonderful, well oiled piece of machinery, and they scored. All through the first half Yale struggled to retaliate, but at the intermission had not succeeded."

"In the second half of the game the son of a Sioux chief led the men of Eli as Hannibal led his Carthaginian cohorts to the walls of Rome with the same irresistible progress, showing within the military genius of a Chief Joseph. He was indefatigable, magnificent, and he tied the score."

"It was a grand exhibition of coolness and courage, for he was everywhere, always alert and ready, and it was he who won the game finally."

"There came some sort of fumble, too fast for the eye to follow, and then the ball rolled out of the scrimmage. Before we knew what had happened Running Elk was away with it, a scattered field ahead of him."

"I dare say you have heard about that run, for it occurred in the last three minutes of play and is famous in football annals to this day. It was a spectacular thing, apparently devised by fate to make more difficult the labors of old Henry and me. Every living soul on those high banked bleachers was on his feet at the finish, a senseless, screaming demon. I saw Alicia straining forward, her face like chalk, her very lips blanched, her whole high strung body a quiver. Her eyes were distended, and in them I saw a look which told me that this was no mere childish whim, that this was more than the animal call of youth and sex. Running Elk had become a fetish to her."

"The father must likewise have recognized this, for as we passed out he stammered into my ear: 'You see, Doc, the girl's mad. It's awful—awful! I don't know what to do.'"

"The press had separated her from us a bit, so I answered: 'Get her away, quick, no matter how or where. Use force if you have to, but get her away and keep her away. I'll see him tonight.'"

"I guess it's our only chance," mumbled the old fellow. "I'll kidnap her and take her to Europe. It's awful!"

"I didn't go back to the city with them, but said goodby to the running board of their machine, finding next morning that the father had taken my advice and that they had sailed unexpectedly for an indefinite stay abroad."

"I spent that evening with Running Elk, who seemed glad to see me. He asked all about his people, told me of his progress and spoke lightly of his victory that day. Sound him as I would, I could elicit no mention of Alicia Harman's name. He wasn't much of a talker anyhow, and at last I was forced to bring up the subject myself, whereupon the silence of his forefathers fell upon him, and all he did was listen. I told him forcibly that any thoughts of her were ridiculous and impossible."

"Why?" said he.

"I told him a thousand reasons why, recounted them cruelly, unfeelingly, but he made no sign to me. As a matter of fact, I don't think he understood them any more than he understood the affair itself. He appeared to be blinded and confused by the splendor of it all. She was so glorious, so different, so mysterious to him that he had lost all perspective. Recognizing this, I descended to material things which I knew he could grasp."

"I paid for your education," said I, "and it is almost over with. In a few months you'll be turned out to make your living, and then you'll encounter this race prejudice I speak of in a way to affect your stomach and your body. You're a poor man, Running Elk, and you've got to earn your way. Your blood will bar you from a good many means of doing it, and when your color begins to affect your earning capacity you'll have all you can do to take care of yourself alone. Life isn't played on a gridiron, and the first thing you've got to do is make a man of yourself. You've got no right to fill your head with insane fancies of this sort."

"Yes, sir," said he. And that was about all I could get out of him. His reticence was very annoying."

"I didn't see him again for two years. I had barely reached the reservation when the stage from the railroad brought two women, two strange women, who came straight to my office—Alicia Harman and her French maid."

"Well, I was fairly knocked endwise. But she was as well poised and self contained as en that Thanksgiving morning in New York when she and old Henry had picked me up in their automobile—a trifle more stunning and

a bit more determined perhaps. Oh, she was a splendid creature, in the first glory of her womanhood, a perfectly groomed, pulsating, spoiled goddess. She greeted me graciously, with that queenly air of all great ladies.

"Where is your father?" I asked as I laid off her dust coat.

"He is in New York," said she. "I am traveling alone."

"Why have you come out here, Alicia?" I inquired slowly, being far more ill at ease than she.

"Do you need to ask?" she answered. "I respected father's wishes when I was in my minority. I traveled and studied and did all the tiresome things he wished me to as long as he had the right to ask them of me. But when I became my own mistress I took my full freedom. He made his life to suit himself, and I am very sorry I cannot build mine to suit him. But we don't seem to see things the same, and I dare say he has accepted the inevitable."

"Then you consider this inevitable?"

"She lifted her dainty brows. 'Inevitable is not a good word. I wish it. I have wished it from the first. I have never ceased to wish it for an instant. I feel I must have it. Therefore, to all intents and purposes, it is inevitable. I suppose...'

"You have—been in communication with—"

"Never. Father did not wish it."

"Then how did you know he is here?"

"He wrote me when he left Yale that he was coming here. I have heard nothing since. He is here, is he not?"

"So I believe. I haven't seen him yet. You know I've been away myself."

"Will you take me to him at once? If you are too busy I will ask—"

"Very well," said I. "We'll drive out to the encampment." And I telephoned for my buckboard.

"There was little said on our fifteen mile drive, for I was apprehensive, and she was oddly torn between fear and exultation. We left the French maid behind. I don't know that any woman ever went to her lover under stranger circumstances or in greater perturbation than did this girl, behind whom lay the selfishness of spoiled womanhood and a generation of unrestraint."

"It was well along in the evening when we came over the ridge and saw the encampment below us. You can imagine the fairy picture it made, with its myriad of twinkling fires, the soft effulgence of a thousand glowing tents and the wonderful magic of the night ever all. As we drove nearer the unusual sounds of a strange merrymaking came to us, the soft thudding of drums, the weird melody of the dances, the stir and confusion of dense animal life. In the daylight it would have been picturesque, but under the wizard hand of the darkness it became ten times more so."

"When I finally tied my horses and led the girl into the heart of it I think she became a bit frightened, for these Indians were the Sioux of a bygone day, all barbaric and primitive in habit ever all. As we drove nearer the unusual sounds of a strange merrymaking came to us, the soft thudding of drums, the weird melody of the dances, the stir and confusion of dense animal life. In the daylight it would have been picturesque, but under the wizard hand of the darkness it became ten times more so."

"I guided her through the tangle of canvas habitations, through glaring fire lit circles and through black voids, where we stumbled and felt our way, rubbing shoulders with fierce warriors or sullen squaws. At every group I asked for Running Elk, but he was one of the shifting thousands, and nobody knew his whereabouts."

"At one time we came upon a sight I would gladly have spared her, the spectacle of some wrinkled hags strangling a dog. The girl at my side stifled a cry at the vision."

"What are they doing?" she gasped.

"Preparing the feast," I told her.

"Do they—really?"

"Yes," said I. "They eat them. Come!" I tried to force her onward, but she would not stir until the sacrifice had been dragged to the flames, where other carcasses were singeing among the pots and kettles. From every side came the smell of cooking mingled with the odor of burning hair and flesh. I could hear Miss Harman panting as we went on."

"After an endless search, during which we circled half the great hoop, we came upon the trail of our man and were directed to a nearby tepee. I lifted the flap and peered within, clearing a view for Miss Harman."

"We beheld a circle of half naked braves in full regalia, squatting haunch to haunch, listening to a story teller. In front of them was a confusion of blackened palls and vessels filled with something steaming, into which they dipped their naked fingers. Their faces were streaked and foul with traces of the dish; the air of the place was dead and reeking from their breaths. My eyes were slower than Alicia's, and so I did not distinguish our quarry at first, although a slow sigh at my ear and a convulsive clutch at my arm told me that he was there."

"And then I, too, saw him. He leaned forward and, scrutinizing the litter of sooty pots, plunged his hand into the mess."

"Miss Harman stumbled back into the crowd a pace or two, and her place was taken by a squaw."

"Running Elk!" I called over the heads of those next the entrance, and, seeing my face against the night, he arose and came out, stepping over the others.

"How do you do?" I said. "You haven't forgotten me, have you?"

"He towered head and shoulders above me, his feather headdress adding to his stature, the banded patterns of his war harness bright in the light."

"No, no! I will never forget you, doctor. You—you have been sick?"

The change in his speech was as marked as in his body and habits. He halted over his words and mouthed them hesitatingly.

"Yes, pretty sick. And you—what are you doing?"

"I do what the rest do," said he—nothing. I have horses and a few head of cattle; that is all."

"Are you satisfied with that sort of life?" I demanded sharply, at which he hesitated an instant before answering.

"Yes, I am satisfied. I am an Indian."

"And so your education didn't do you any good after all?"

"This time he paused a long while before answering."

"I have dreams," said he, "many dreams. But I am a Sioux, and you told me that dreams are out of place in an Indian, so I hope to forget them again with all the rest."

"A woman's voice which I did not recognize called to me sharply, and as I went Running Elk bowed his head and slunk back through the tepee door into the heart of his people—into the past—and with him went my experiment. Since then I have never meddled with the gods or given these cause to laugh at me."

"What became of him?" I inquired.

"That was he I asked about the horse races, the man whom you couldn't talk to!" the old man answered.

"Good Lord!" said I.

"Why don't you ask about the girl?" said he. "Haven't you any sympathy for her?"

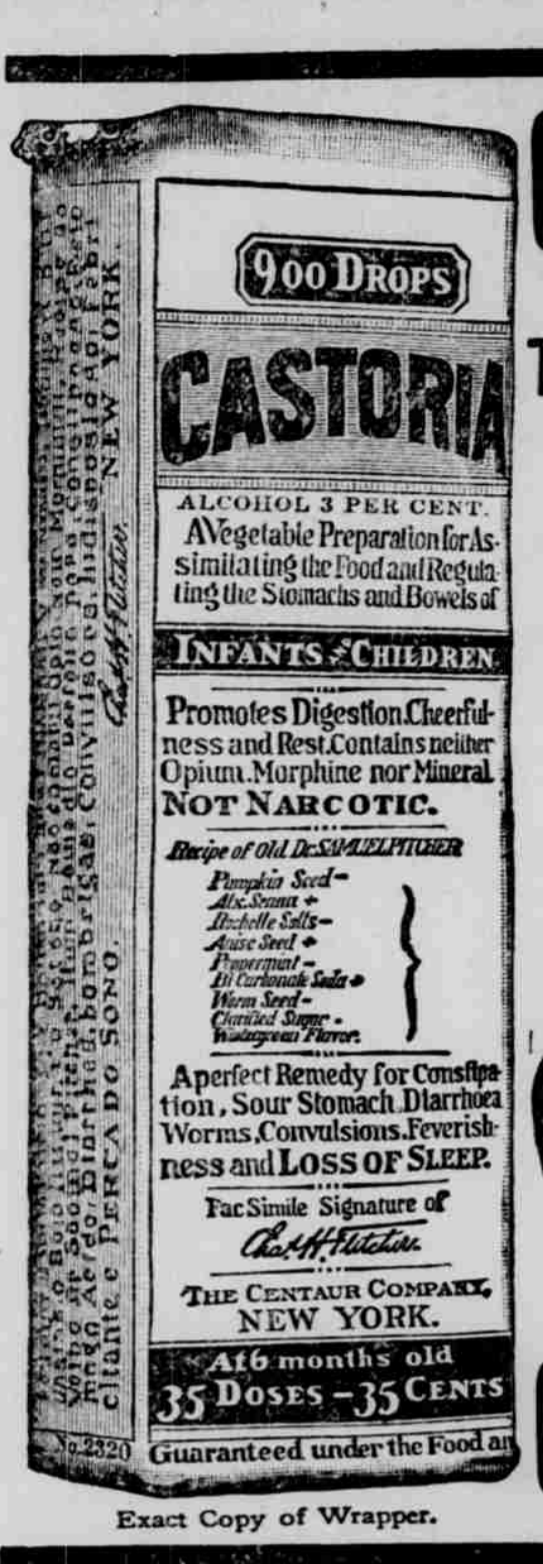
"Not much," I replied slowly. "For her course was obvious. I seem to see a more pathetic figure by far. It is that of a youth from whose eyes the bandages of tradition and training and heredity had been suddenly whipped—a youth forced out from the darkness of all the ages into a dazzling, incomprehensible world. I seem to see him, awestruck and timid, groping forward till he laid his hand upon a still more miraculous thing, but a real and tangible thing which he could understand and which made a god of him. Then I see that thing snatched away and see his only guide desert him, leaving him utterly naked and alone in the center of a universe which had no place for him. Can you wonder that he went back whence he had come, where he had fitted in, where he understood and was understood?"

"Then you don't think my experiment failed, after all?" inquired the doctor.

"You haven't proved that it did," I maintained. "For I would have done just what Running Elk did if I had been in his place, and so would you."

The old fellow looked out grimly into the night.

"Perhaps," said he.



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