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THE MAJOR'S STORY.

Some one threw a fresh log on the fire, and tiny sparks, catching the dry cottonwood bark, crackled, flashed, wavered, and then shot up in a broad flame that lighted up the weather-beaten faces around the fire—flashed from their buttons and gilt braid, turned into a shimmering sheet of flame the bayonet of the sentinel lagging up and down in the background, showed for a moment the cluster of white tents standing up against the moonless, starless night, the mules and tethered horses, the wagons and the restless figures flitting about among them, and then subsided into a steady glow and a cheerful crackle that was pleasant enough to hear on a chilly night in November, after a hard day's march.

Vanderlyn had been singing, and, as the faint echoes of his ravishing tenor died away among the bluffs under which we were encamped, a silence fell on the group, only broken by the snapping of the fire.

Hamilton spoke at last, taking his pipe from his lips long enough to say: "Somebody tell a story."

"Yes, yes—a story!" chimed in two or three voices.

"Who will tell it? Major, it is your turn. You have never told one yet," Hamilton went on.

"My turn?" said the major, with a growl and a shake of his broad, square shoulders. "Man alive! what story can I have to tell? It was school and West Point when I was a lad, and Indians, war and Indians, ever since. There, I've told you my story!" settling back in a more comfortable position with the air of a man who had performed an unpleasant duty to his own satisfaction.

"But you are not going to get off so easily. A man don't live to be your age, major—and you confessed to the wrong side of fifty only the other day—with his eyes wide open, and not hear or see something worth telling. Come, tell us about some bewitching senora you have flirted with in Texas, or one of the pretty Minneha-has as they used to look before they took to overskirts and flirtations with the sutler's clerks. It's our duty to stand by the officer of the day until twelve o'clock," Hamilton added; "so do the obliging."

"There is a story," the major said, slowly, shaking the ashes from his meerschaum, and glancing doubtfully around the little group—"there is a story I might tell you of a good black horse—a friend of mine once owned, and of a terrible race he ran one day. Every one that knew about it when it happened must have forgotten all about that horse by this time, but I shouldn't care to have you repeat the story, my—my friend might not like it, you know."

The major looked thoughtfully into the fire for a few moments, and then began:

"It was the year before the war that the old Third, the regiment to which my friend, as well as myself, belonged, was stationed along the old Salt Lake trail. Headquarters were at Fort Benton, and both of us were there too, for my friend—well, he was in my company, and we were great chums.

"All of you fellows have been on the plains long enough to know what life is at a frontier post, and except that there were more Indians, and, consequently, more fighting, no railroad, and the excitement of looking for the mail-rider, and making bets as to how many Indians would chase him to the fort on the next trip, it was much the same in '60 that it is at any of the out-of-the-way posts now. However, two very pleasant things happened at headquarters that Summer.

"One was the return of the colonel's wife with her pretty daughter, who had been at school in the East for several years, and the other was the arrival of a fine black horse—a present to my friend from his father—which had come out in charge of the wagon master of the same train that brought out the Hardings.

"Now, you all know a Morgan horse's good points as well as I do myself, so there's no use of going into particulars, beyond telling you that the new arrival was a handsome animal, black, except a small white star on his forehead, with plenty of spirit and courage and good staying power, as events proved. He was a knowing beast, too, tame as a kitten and as fond of being petted.

"Miss Harding had made friends with him on the journey out, and it was clever enough to see him untie his halter with his teeth and trot after her for sugar or a cracker, if she crossed the parade ground and he was tied near it.

"No boy, in his first feathered cap and epaulets, ever enjoyed playing soldier as well as that black horse did, and at dress parade he curveted, pranced and strutted in a way that was the amusement of all beholders, and would have soon upset a man less firm in the saddle than an old cavalry rider.

"As for Elsie Harding, the colonel's daughter, there are no such girls nowadays. Since the war, at least, I have never seen one like her. So frank and true, with a sweet, winsome face, and color that came and went with every change of mood. Such hair, too! None of your braided-in stuff, but hair that waved and rippled in the sunshine like a mass of spun gold.

"Of course, in a week every unmarried man at the post was at her feet, but she treated us always in a frank, sisterly way, and her rich color never deepened at tender looks or words from any of us, unless, perhaps, for the adjutant, a sleepy-looking, good-natured fellow, and I used to think, possibly—for the black horse's master.

"Now he—the man, I mean—ought to have a name, and I'll call him Allen, if nobody minds; it isn't his own, of course. He was a long, quiet, brown fellow, whom the subs called 'Daddy,' and who had a rare faculty, when an unhappy chance threw him in ladies' society, of getting out of their way, behind tables and chairs.

"He would stammer and stumble and blush up to his eyes whenever Miss Harding spoke to him, which she seemed just a little afraid to do. But he loved her—yes, he loved her, and his battered old heart is hers yet.

"There had been talk all Summer of a 'Pow-wow' to be held at Fort Benton some time in the Fall, and early in September the order came. Half-breed scouts and friendly Indians, that had been hanging about the fort more or less all Summer, were sent out to call in the chiefs of the hostile Sioux, and a large tent was pitched outside, but in plain sight of the fort, to shield the pow-wowers from the sun.

"Nearly every one in the fort that was not on duty, made his way, sooner or later that morning, to join the motley crowd around the council tent.

"It was a picturesque enough sight too. The broad, brown, sullen river; the plain, gray sage bushes; the high sand bluffs at the right, and at the left a flag streaming high over the heterogeneous collection of buildings called a fort.

"The centre of the picture was the tent, and about it were copper-colored figures in blue and scarlet blankets, buffalo robes, glittering silver and tin ornaments and feathers. Indian ponies, cavalrymen, in their gaudy uniform of blue and yellow, officers, in undress uniforms: stolid squaws, curious and quarrelling, and crying papooses, and in all, through all, and about all—dogs!

"In the midst of this picture, more strikingly beautiful by contrast, was the slight, girlish figure in the dark riding dress, mounted on a spirited brown mare. For Elsie had ridden down with her father and General Harney—colonel he was in those days—to see for herself the heroes of Cooper's novels and so many other romances; and very much disappointed she was, I remember, with the greasy, sullen faced crowd, and all her pretty, girlish illusions of stalwart Hiawathas were destroyed for ever, when one—I think he was as unpleasant a looking savage as it has ever been my misfortune to meet, and that is saying a good deal—came up to stare at the pretty white squaw.

"Yellow Bird, his name was; quite a famous Sioux chief in his day. His leggings were fringed with long brown hair, and from his belt there hung more scalps of unmistakably white men's hair than any of us cared to count.

"Elsie did not see his admiring stare, and was startled enough when, coming up to the side of her horse, he held out two greasy fingers and said, in pretty good English: "How, squaw? And waxing enthusiastic, 'Heap of pretty squaw'—oh, so much of pretty squaw," and tretched his flat mouth in a grin he

undoubtedly thought particularly fascinating.

"Allen ranged his black horse up by the side of the little brown one just then, for the mare was getting fidgety at the peculiar Indian odor and the snapping dogs about her heels, while Elsie herself, though she carried a brave enough face, gave a little gasp of relief as Yellow Bird moved away, and said:

"I wasn't exactly afraid with so many people around me, but oh, isn't that a dreadful Indian!"

"Next to Elsie herself, nothing attracted quite so much attention from the gentle savage that morning as the black horse. He was patted and felt over and admired whenever he would stand still long enough to allow it. He had a way of clearing a wide circle with those active heels of his, that the Indians only seemed to admire, and many were the lavish offers of buffalo robes, ponies and squaws in exchange for his handsome horse that my friend had pressed upon him that morning.

"Riding back from the pow-wow, Harney began joking his pretty companion about her new admirer. I was near enough to hear what he said.

"I've had an offer for you this morning, Miss Elsie—quite a tempting one for a poor military man like myself, but unfortunately, as I told Yellow Bird, you are none of my property, and I had not the disposing."

"Yellow Bird?"

"Yes; the chief who spent so much time admiring you. I heard Allen say he paid you some compliments this morning. Well, he offered me no less than five ponies for the pretty white squaw—quite a fortune, you see; and, when I refused, pressed two, three, more upon me, and even offered to throw in a yellow dog."

"Miss Elsie had to endure a good deal of joking about her remarkable offer; but no one looked upon it otherwise than a joke except poor Mrs. Harding, to whom life on the Plains was a serious enough matter at best; she heard an Indian war-whoop in every howl of the wind, and had spent the day of the pow-wow in barricading herself in her own room, until it took no little time and some exertion of strength to get her out again.

"From the moment General Harney told her about Yellow Bird, it was he who flattened his nose against the window in the shape of every Indian hanger on about the post, who walked about on tiptoe at unexpected times in the form of the colonel's orderly shook the windows, slammed the blinds, and moved in the dark corners of the room.

"I'm sure the colonel, steady going churchman that he was, must have sworn softly under his breath both at the swain for adorning and General Harney for telling, so often were his well earned slumbers rudely broken by Mrs. Harding's fears.

"But the Autumn wore on and nothing came of them, for Yellow Bird had taken himself off with his own particular band, and there had not been more than the average number of depredations.

"Miss Elsie went quietly on in her sweet and gracious way, hemming her ruffles, waiting on her mother, visiting the sick in the hospital, playing on her piano and taking lessons in shooting at a mark, and all with the gentle, gracious manner that set even the wisest heads among us spinning.

"As for Allen, you may be sure time did not mend his case at all, and he spent his days alternating from the lowest depths of despair and disgust with himself for having any hopes at all, to the seventh heaven of ecstasy from a smile or a few words from him self alone.

"Love-making in a crowded garrison, unless you are willing to take the whole community in your confidence, is extremely unsatisfactory business.

"Miss Elsie, whenever visible, was sure to be surrounded by all the unemployed officers at the post; and whoever else was missing, by any favorable dispensation of duties, the adjutant was always sure to be on the field.

"He nearly screwed himself up to the point of putting his long legs on paper, when a chance fell in his way—which was as good a one as any man could ask for—to play the brave knight and win a lady's heart, if she had one to win.

"It was one morning late in November, and Allen's turn on detail to visit the wood camp and report progress, for at Benton there was, in those days an unusually good tree crop, and we supplied the two forts above with Winter firing.

"Just as he turned out of the stockade gate—not very cheerfully, for half a day's absence, even, was more than he could face complacently—whom should he see before him but the pretty lady of his thoughts herself, apparently out for a morning's ride, and greatest wonder of all, alone, with only an orderly behind her.

"The good black horse and the pretty brown one were great friends themselves—their boxes were side by side in the officers' stable—so it was not at all unwillingly that Black Felix paced up to the side of the pretty Fantina; and no doubt he said 'Good-morning' to her, and 'What happy chance has brought us together' with a toss of his glossy head and a glance from his kind eye.

"Good-morning, Miss Elsie?" his master found courage to say. "Going riding? And all alone?"

"Yes," she laughed. "Every one but yourself seems to be on the court-martial."

"I am going to the wood camp. Would you care to let me have the pleasure of your company?"

"He said it awkwardly, as usual, almost hoping, yet dreading, to be refused; slid down in the depths at her look of indecision, and leaped at once to the other extreme, when, with a sweet smile, she accepted, and the orderly was sent back on his rejoicing way to the quarters.

"The two trotted briskly up the river road, and at the foot of a low hill, round which the road wound, turned to look back. They were about two miles from the post. On their right was the river, broad just there, and at that season shallow; between them and the fort the ground lay almost level as a house floor, and was covered with sage bushes and cactus.

"The fort was in plain sight, even the sentinel on the stockade, and the flash of his bayonet in the sun, caught the eye, and the children about the 'tepees' by the river stood out clearly, as silhouettes against a white background, in the wonderfully clear air. Before them, as they turned the bluffs, the ground grew more broken for a mile or more, though the road still was level with the river, fringed here and there by a few willows and rank grasses.

"After that the ridges sloped away from the river, the road rose and the bank grew steep, the bluffs were higher and higher, and a mile further on, when the two drew rain in the wood-camp, they stood in a large grove of cottonwood trees, and up the bluff side crowded the pine-trees that no amount of chopping seemed to thin.

"I've been descriptive because you must bear in mind how the ground lay to understand what followed, and how that, at certain points, as the road wound in and out among the bluffs, the riders were equally hidden from both the fort and the wood-camp.

"What they talked about on that ride I don't believe Allen ever rightly remembered; there was a confused sense in his mind of feasting on smiles having no one to share the glances from the beautiful eyes, or the sweet tones of her voice, and being in heaven generally, that must in some way have affected the black horse, for never, in all the days of his military life, did he step more proudly or daintily than when, that morning, he kept pace with the brown mare, and cast sidelong looks at her, while she threw them back again with a toss of her pretty head.

"The camp was reached before Allen had mustered up courage to speak his love, and there was such a whirlwind in heart and brain that he never quite knew what the orders were he gave to the sergeant in charge of the detail, but they must have been something remarkable, for over the wooden face there came such a look of wonder and uncertainty that even thirty years of military training could not conceal. This brought him back to his senses, the orders were correct-

ed, and Allen threw himself into his saddle with the determination to say his say on the way home.

"The two started back leisurely enough, the reins lying on their horses' necks. That part of the road was considered safe, no Indians had been seen near it all Summer, and it was more habit than thought of danger that had made Allen drop a pistol into his saddle holster.

"The flap of the case started loose just then, and he was bending down to fasten it, and was beginning 'May I tell you something?' when a dull thud, thud, telling of the quick gallop of some heavy body, came faintly borne on the wind, and grew louder and louder, together with yells and cries that could only come from the lungs of a Sioux.

"Indians! both exclaimed at once, and the already startled horses were instantly urged to their utmost speed, in hopes that among the bluffs as they were, the Indians might not see them.

"Allen glanced at his companion as he settled down in his stirrups and loosened the revolver in its case.

"All her pretty color was gone, and the broad hat flapping back from her face in the wind, showed it, white and set after the first look of horror and fright was gone; but she was riding bravely, and even found a way smile to meet his eye with.

"They were not to get off without being seen, they found, even if the hunting-party was as Allen tried to assure Elsie, made up of Indians that hung about the post, for they were driving the buffaloes straight for the water; they came in sight charging directly down the bluff side, with the Indians after them.

"Fresh yells told the two that they had been discovered. They were some shouting and the Indians divided, part keeping on after the buffalo, and the rest leaving the main body, raced after the new prey, who had, owing to the distance down the bluff side, about a good five minutes' start. As the sound of the ponies' hoofs on the road reached their ears, Allen said, quietly as he could: 'They shall not catch us. Don't faint! Hold your horse up well, and we'll soon be in sight of the fort.'

"Then he drew out his revolver, and urged on the horses with voice and whip; but they needed no urging, and flew over the ground, Fatima keeping neck and neck with Black Felix, and trample, trample, louder and louder came the hurrying hoofs behind.

"The air cut their faces as they rushed through it; and the roaring of the wind in their ears as they swept along seemed like the thunder of the surf, and Elsie felt herself growing numb.

"Don't turn your head. You must have eyes in front for both," was the hurried order.

"But the roaring grew louder in her ears, stilling almost the shouts of the Indians. She had to shut her eyes again and again to keep down the white mist that would rise before them; her hands were ice, and if she thought at all, perhaps, it was to wonder what her father would say now that her mother's fears were coming to pass.

"But nothing seemed to matter much if only the numbness would pass away, and it seemed to the pair as if they had been riding on in this way for ever, with something unreal and horrible close behind. It seemed to Elsie as if she must be dead already; but with a sharp cry she came back out of death into life when Allen caught her by the shoulder and forced her down level with the horse's neck as an arrow whistled over her head and fell harmlessly in the dust beyond them.

"Then Allen turned and fired at the nearest Indian, and he fell from his horse, shot through the brain. The shock cleared away the mist and the deadness, and as Elsie rose in her saddle, she saw straight before them the flag at the fort waving in the sunshine.

"They had turned the last bluff and were on the open plain, and here things looked particularly black for them, for when they were in the narrow road, there was no danger of their being surrounded; now there was every chance of it.

"Allen thought of this, but he only urged on the horses, saying, 'They must see us from the fort now,' while

several arrows fell, as the first had done, harmlessly in front of them.

"The wind tore the fastenings out of Elsie's hair—her hat had fallen off long before. As she turned her head, at last, it blinded her, beating cruelly against her face; but she managed to see the Indians close behind, but deploying off to the left, and there was no doubt, in the one look, she had recognized Yellow Bird as the Indian nearest them, and a moan—the first sound—broke from her white lips.

"Eyes in front! Faster! faster! They must have seen us from the fort! Allen shouted. 'Oh, for a few of my own men to punish these red devils!'

"At the post, in the meanwhile, Ogilvie, the adjutant, after business was over, had sauntered, as usual, to the colonel's quarters, and was met with the damper:

"Miss Elsie's gone riding with Captain Allen."

"The dickens she has!" he probably said, and then his eyes may have opened a trifle wide, as he wondered over the unlucky chance that had made him a martyr to military red tape, and Allen so fortunate in his detail, and he says he was wondering if the road was really safe between the wood-camp and the fort. A saunter to the gate was interrupted by a shout for the corporal of the guard from the sentinel on the stockade, followed by the firing of guns, and the cry of 'Indians! Indians!'

"Three strides brought Ogilvie to where he could look up the plain, but the sight made his blood stand still for a second, as he saw the two straining horses side by side, and Indians behind. A shout to the nearest bugler, a rush to the nearest gunner for a carbine, a hurried, 'For God's sake, follow me!' to the loungers in front of the sutler's store, and he flung himself on to a horse tied near and was rushing up the road.

"After him, at intervals of a few yards, came the ranch-men, wagon-men, 'bull-whackers,' hangers about the post, and half-breed Indian scouts, only too ready for a fight and a scalp; two, and behind them, stringing along over the plains as they could saddle and mount, officers and soldiers, all determined to save the two at any cost.

"Just after the alarm had sounded, the Indians finding that they must speedily be seen from the fort, if they had not been already, fired a volley of arrows. Allen reeled in his saddle and could not suppress a groan.

"You are hit!" Elsie gasped.

"Only a trifle, we shall have help soon. I'm sure they have seen us from the post."

"He spoke carelessly, but his heart sank, for his right arm hung useless from the elbow, pierced by an arrow, but fortunately he did not drop the revolver.

"I believe my arm has been struck," he went on. "You must take my revolver; I know you can use it."

"Yes, thanks to the lessons by the river she could, and perhaps it all came back to the poor child in that awful moment, the merry lessons on those early Summer mornings, with the man she loved bending over her, and now, perhaps it all rested on her skill whether she and Allen were saved from a horrible death. But poor Fatima was done for, and after struggling on for a few hundred yards, her pace visibly slackened, and Elsie felt her trembling under her.

"You must leave me," she said.

"Fatima is stumbling. You can get in—tell them all about it! Ride on—don't stop! Oh, we shall both be killed!" she sobbed.

"My darling," he said, 'do you think I would leave you? Loosen your foot from the stirrup. Now!'

"His left arm swept her from the saddle and held her before him, while the black horse was urged on again. Just in time, for as Allen lifted her, Fatima, with a groan that was almost human, stumbled and fell to the ground.

"It had only taken a moment, but the Indians, seeing the turn things were taking, and losing their fear of the revolver in a measure, and gaining ground by the slackening pace of the horses, redoubled their efforts, and a horse's head crept nearer and nearer the flank of the black horse. Evidently their intention was to take all three alive.

thought of dying with the woman he loved best pressed close against his heart, for die they must; he had long ago made up his mind. Turning his head then, he saw the Indian so close upon them that he said to Elsie:

"You must shoot him. Aim for his heart. Steady, now!"

"The face turned toward the Indian was white enough for a dead woman, but the slender wrist did not tremble, and Yellow Bird fell—another victim to the fatal passion of love.

"The next instant, before she could lower the revolver, an arrow tore away the sleeve from her wrist, just piercing the delicate white flesh.

"The long hair blown in his face and the growing sickness from his wounds, for there was an arrow in Allen's side as well as his arm, prevented his seeing that help was coming, and he muttered: 'There are only two shots more, my love. Can you use them? One for each of us. I cannot hold up many minutes.'

"As Elsie turned to look at him, she saw Ogilvie, who was near enough by this time to be heard when he shouted, 'Courage! Hold up! Here we are!' and a crack from his carbine finished the sentence.

"The Indians, cowardly always, halted, turned, hesitated like wolves driven away from a nearly captured feast, and hovered just beyond rifle-range with yells of disappointment, while Yellow Bird who had only been stunned and had managed to sit up, seemed urging them to keep up the chase, but the ranchmen coming up, and the cavalrymen behind, turned the battle, and they made off, carrying their chief with them.

"Just in time, for, as the men rode up, Allen's hold loosened, and but for Ogilvie's would have fallen, as Allen reeled out of his saddle into one of the men's arms in dead faint.

"The good black horse himself, trembling in every limb and gray with foam and dust, come in for no small share of the welcome at the fort, you may believe, on account of the burden he had carried, and the race he had run so pluckily.

"The fire snapped, the shadows danced on the white tents, a breath of air came down from the hills and swept moaning over the plain, the line of sentinels took up the cry of 'Twelve o'clock, and all's well!' and echoed it around the camp, and the major began filling his meerschaum.

"But go on, go on, Major, half a dozen voices urged. 'Tell us the rest! Why do you stop in such an interesting place?'

"Tell us about the wedding, for, of course, Allen married his lady love amid general rejoicing as the newspapers say. Vanderlyn went on. 'Did the black horse go to the wedding, decked out in white ribbons? Of course, there could only be one ending to that romance.'

"Do you think so?" answered the major, hunting about for a match. "That's the way they end in my books, I know, but real life is not so smooth."

"Miss Elsie married the adjutant that very Winter. Allen was asked to be best man, but he would have had to appear at the wedding with his arm in a sling, so he staid at home. It was no disloyalty on her part, God blessed her. He never said anything more about his love to her than the few hurried words on that awful ride. She never knew how much he loved her. And Ogilvie left her asleep among the myrtles by the Guadalquivir when the regiment came up from Texas ten years ago last June.

"As for the black horse, he met a fate, the best he or his master could have hoped for after the light of their eyes was gone—he died in battle, in a glorious charge on the enemy's guns before Port Royal, and his master envies him.

"The major lighted his pipe, and after a moment's silence walked away, and no one spoke until the rattling of the saluting sentinel's gun told us he had crossed the line, and was safe in his tent.

Collingwood, the officer of the day, had not spoken before, but now he leaned forward, traced some lines in the sand with the point of his sabre, and, looking up, said:

"I've heard that story before by snatches. It's the major's own. He rode that terrible race on the black horse himself, but I don't believe any of the fellows in the Third knew how hard he was hit, or the reason why he exchanged into our regiment. Well, the least we can do for him is to keep his secret."

"And so we did; but now, that he is dead and gone, there can be no harm in my telling it.

"The editor of a paper in describing the effects of a squall upon a canal boat, says that "when the gale was at its highest the unfortunate craft keeled to leeward and the captain and another cask of whiskey rolled overboard."