

# THE WAY OF A MAN

By EMERSON HOUGH

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## CHAPTER X.

### The Test.

I AWOKE, I knew not how much later, into a world which at first had a certain warm comfort and languid luxury about it. Then I felt a sharp, searing pain and a great pain in my right leg, which I recognized as my right leg, after all, returned. I looked into the face of Auberry. He stood frowning, holding in his hand a feathered arrow shaft of willow, grooved along its sides to let the blood run free, sinew wrapped to hold its feathers tight—a typical arrow of the Buffalo tribes. But, as I joined Auberry's gaze, I saw the arrow was leaden. Daily I argued that, therefore, this head must be somewhere in my neck.

Ellen Meriwether sat on the sand, gently stroking my forehead. "They have gone," said she. "We whipped them." Her hand again lightly pressed my forehead.

I heard someone else say, behind me. "But we have nothing in the world—not even opium."

"True," another voice, which I recognized as that of Orme, "but that's his one chance."

"What do you know about surgery?" asked the first voice, which I knew now was Belknap's.

"More than most doctors," was the answer, "with a laugh. Their voices grew less distinguishable, but presently I heard Orme say, 'Yes, I'm game to do it. If the man says so.' Then he came and stooped down beside me.

"Mr. Cowles," said he, "you're rather badly off. That arrow head ought to come out, but the risk of doing after it is very great. I am willing to do what you say. If you decide that you would like me to operate for it, I will do so. It's only right for me to tell you that it lies very close to the carotid artery and that it will be an extraordinarily nice operation to get it out without—well, you know."

I looked up into that strange face—the face of my enemy. I knew it was the face of a murderer, a man who would have no compunction at taking a human life. My mind then was strangely clear. I saw his glance at the girl. I saw, as clearly as though he had told me, that this man was as deeply in love with Ellen Meriwether as I myself; that he would win her if he could; that his chance was as good as mine, even if we were both at our best. I knew there was nothing at which he would hesitate, unless some strange freak in his nature might influence him. Remember, never, pity. I knew did not exist for him. But with a flash it came to my mind that this was all the better, if he must now serve as my surgeon.

He looked into my eyes, and I returned his gaze, striving to ask him not to take advantage of me, now that I was fallen. His own eye changed. It asked of me, as though he spoke: "Shall I, then, come to the cure? Shall I admire you and give you another chance, or shall I kill you now?" I say that I saw, felt, read all this in his mind. I looked up into his face and said:

"You cannot kill me. I am not going to die. Go on. Soon, then."

A sort of sigh broke from his lips, as though he felt content. I do not think it was because he found his foe a worthy one. I do not think he considered me either as his foe or his friend or his patient. He was simply about to do something which would test his own nerve, his own resources, something which, if successful, would allow him to approve his own belief in himself. I said to myself that I would pay him if he brought me through—pay him in some way.

I heard them on the sand again, and I saw him come again and bend over me. All the instruments were over him; and all they could secure to staunch the blood was some water, nearly boiling. For forceps Orme had a pair of bullet molds, and these he cleaned as best he could by dipping them into the hot water.

"Cowles," he said, in a matter of fact voice, "I'm going after it. But now I tell you one thing frankly, it's life or death, and if you move your head it may mean death at once. That iron's lying against the big carotid artery. If it hasn't broken the artery wall yet, a ghost of a chance we can get it out safely, in which case you would probably pull through. I've got to open the neck and reach in. I'll do it as fast as I can. Now, I'm not going to think of you, and, god—if you can help it, please don't think of me."

Ellen Meriwether still held my head in her lap.

"Are you game—can you do this, Miss Meriwether?" I heard Orme ask. I felt her hands press my head more tightly. I turned my face down and kissed her hand. "I will not move," I said.

I saw Orme's slender, naked wrist pass by my face and gently turn me into the position desired, with my face down and a little to one side, resting in his lap along her knee. Her skirt was already wet with the blood of the wound, and where my head lay it was damp with blood. Belknap took my hands and pulled them above my head, squinting beyond me. Unknown to the girl, I kissed the hem of her garment, and then I said a short appeal to the Mystery.

I felt the entrance of the knife or razor blade, felt keenly the pain when the edge lifted and stretched the skin tight before the tough hide of my neck parted smoothly in a long line. Then I felt something warm settle under my cheek as I lay, and I felt a low shiver, whether of my body or that of the girl who held me I could not tell, but her hands were steady. I felt about me an infinite kindness and carefulness and pitying—oh, then I learned that life, after all, is not wholly war—that there is such a thing as fellow suffering and loving kindness and a wish to not others to survive in this hard fight of living. I knew that very well. But I did not gain it from the touch of my surgeon's hands.

The immediate pain of this long cutting, which laid open my neck for some inches along the side muscles, was less after the point of the blade went through and ceased to push forward. Looper down I did not feel so much until finally a gentle searching movement produced a jar strangely large, something that grated and nearly sent all the world black again. I knew then that the knife was on the base of the arrow head; then I could feel it move softly and gently along the side of the arrow head. I could almost see it creep along in this delicate part of the work.

Then all at once I felt one hand removed from my neck. Orme, half rising from his stooping posture, but with the fingers of his left hand still at the

strange contrast to the snowy white of her neck, now exposed by the low neck aperture of the Indian tunic.

"You stand all this nobly," I commented presently.

"Ah, you men—I love you, you men!" She said it suddenly and with perfect sincerity. "I love you all—you are so strong, so full of the desire to live, to win. It is wonderful, wonderful! Just look at those poor boys there—some of them are dying, almost, but they don't whimper. It is wonderful."

"It is the pains," I said. "They have simply learned how little a thing is life."

"Yet it is sweet," she said. "You were four different women," I mused, "and now you are another, quite another."

At this she frowned a bit and rose. "You are not to talk," she said, "nor think that you are well. I must see the others."

I lay back against the wagon bed, wondering in which garb she had been most beautiful—the filmy ball dress and the mocking mask, the gray gown and veil of the day after, the thin drapery of her hasty flight in the night, her half conventional costume of the day before—or this, the garb of some primeval woman. I knew I could never forget her again. The thought gave me pain, and perhaps this showed on my face, for my eyes followed her so that presently she turned and came back to me.

"Does the wound hurt you?" she asked. "Are you in pain?"

"Yes, Ellen Meriwether," I said. "I am in pain. I am in very great pain."

"Oh," she cried, "I am sorry. What can we do? But perhaps it will not be so bad after awhile. It will be over soon."

"No, Ellen Meriwether," I said, "it will not be over soon. It will not get away at all."

## CHAPTER XI.

### Gordon Orme, Magician.

WE lay in our hot camp on the sandy valley for some days and buried two more of our men, who finally succumbed to their wounds. Gloom sat on us all, for fever now raged among our wounded. The sun blistered us, the night froze us. Still not a sign of any white topped wagon from the east nor any cloud of troopers from the west served to break the monotony of the shimmering waste that lay about us on every hand. We were growing gaunt now and haggard, but still we lay waiting for our men to grow strong enough to travel or to lose all strength and so be laid away.

"Injuns is strange critters. A few of us has married among Injuns and lived among them, and we have seen things you wouldn't believe if I told you." Thus spoke Auberry.

"Tell some of them," said Orme. "I, for one, might believe them."

"Well, now," said the plainsman, "I will tell you some things I have seen their medicine men do, and ye can believe me or not, the way ye feel about it."

"I have seen 'em hold a powwow for two or three days at a time, some of 'em settin' 'round dreamin', as they call it, all of 'em starvin', whole camp howlin', everybody eatin' medicine herbs. Then after while they all come and set down just like it was right over naked in the open. Somebody pulls a naked Injun boy right out in the middle of them. Old Mr. Medicine Man, he stands up in the plain daylight, and he draws his bow and shoots an arrow plumb through that boy. Boy squirms a heap and Mr. Medicine Man socks another arrow through him, cool as you please—I have seen that done. Then the medicine man steps up, cuts off the boy's head with his knife—holds it up plain so everybody can see it. That looked pretty hard to me first time I ever seen it. But now the old medicine man takes a blanket and throws it over this dead boy. He lifts up a corner of the blanket, clucks the boy's head under it and pulls down the edges of the blanket and puts rocks on them. Then he begins to sing, and the whole bunch gets up and dances 'round the blanket. After awhile, say a few minutes, medicine man pulls off the blanket and thar gets up the boy, good as new, his head grown on good and tight as ever and not a sign of an arrow on him 'cept the scars where the wounds has plumb healed up."

Belknap laughed long and hard at this old trapper's yarn, and, weak as I was myself, I was disposed to join him. Orme was the only one who did get riled over the story. Auberry himself was disgusted at the merriest. "I knowed you wouldn't believe it," he said. "There is no use tellin' a parcel of tenderfoot anything they can't see for themselves. But I could tell you a heap more things. Why, I have seen their buffalo killers call a thousand buffalo right in from the plains and over the edge of a cut bank where they'd pitch down and bust themselves to pieces. I can show you bones of a hundred such places. Buffalo don't do that when they are alone—they have got to be called, I tell you."

"Injuns can talk with other animals—they can call them others too. I have seen an old medicine man right out on the plain ground in the middle of the village go to dancein', and I have seen him call three full sized beavers right up out'n the ground—seed them with my own eyes, I tell you! Yes, and I have seen them three old beavers standin' right there turn into full grown old men, gray haired. I have seen 'em sit down at a fire and smoke, too, and finally get up when they got through and clean out—just disappear back into the ground. Now, how you all explain them things I don't pretend to say, but there can't no man call me a liar, for I seed 'em and seed 'em unmistakable."

Belknap and the others only smiled, but Orme turned soberly toward Auberry. "I don't call you a liar, my man," said he. "On the contrary, what you say is very interesting. I quite believe it, although I never knew before that your natives in this country were possessed of these powers."

"It ain't all of 'em can do it," said Auberry, "only a few men of a few tribes can do them things, but them that can shore can, and that's all I know about it."

"Quite so," said Orme. "Now, as it chances, I have traveled a bit in my time in the old countries of the east. I have seen some wonderful things done there."

"I have read about the East Indian jugglers," said Belknap, interested. "Tell me, have you seen those feats? And are they feats or simply lies?"

"They are actual occurrences," said Orme. "I have seen them with my own eyes, just as Auberry has seen the things he describes, and it is no more difficult to accuse the one than the other of us of untruthfulness."

"For instance, I have seen an Indian juggler take a plain bowl, such as they use for rice, and hold it out in his hand in the open sunlight, and then I have seen a little bamboo tree start in it and grow two feet high, right in the middle of the bowl, within the space of a minute or so."

"You'll talk about the old story of 'Jack and the Beanstalk'—I have seen an old folk take a bamboo stick no thicker than his finger and thrust it down in the ground and start and climb up, as if it were a tree, and keep on climbing till he was out of sight, and then there would come falling down out of the sky legs and arms, his head, pieces of his body. When these struck the ground they would resemble and make the man all over again—just like Auberry's dead boy, you know."

"These tricks are so common in Asia that they do not excite any wonder. As to tribal telegraph, they have got it there. Time and again when our forces were marching against the hill tribes of northwestern India we found they knew all of our plans a hundred miles ahead of us—how, none of us could tell—only the fact was there, plain and unmistakable."

"They never do tell," broke in Auberry. "You couldn't get a red to explain any of this to you—not even a squaw who have lived with you for years. They certainly do stand pat for keeps."

"Yet once in awhile," smiled Orme in his easy way, "a white man does pick up some of these tricks. I believe I could do a few of them myself if I liked—in fact, I have sometimes learned some of the simpler ones for my own amusement."

General exclamations of surprise and doubt greeted him from our little circle, and this seemed to nettles him somewhat. "By Jove," he went on, "if you doubt it I don't mind trying a hand at it right now. Perhaps I have forgotten something of my old skill, but we'll see. Come, then."

All arose now and gathered about him on the ground there in the full sunlight. He eyed us no uneasily or surprise, and he employed no mechanism or deception which we could detect.

"My good man," said he to Auberry, "let me take your knife." Auberry tossed the long hunting knife at his feet and handed it to him. Taking it, Orme seated himself cross-legged on a white blanket, which he spread out on the sandy soil.

All at once Orme looked up with an expression of surprise on his face. "This was not the knife I wanted," he said. "I asked for a plain American hunting knife, not this one. See, you have given me a Malay kris! I have not the slightest idea where you got it."

We all looked intently at him. There, held up in his hand, was full proof of what he had said—a long blade of wavy steel, with a little crooked, carved handle. From what I had read I saw this to be a kris, a wavy bladed knife of the Malays. It did not shine or gleam in the sun, but threw back a dull reflection from its gray steel as though lead and silver mingled in its make. The blade was about thirty inches long, whereas that of Auberry's knife could not have exceeded eight inches at the most.

"We did not know you had that thing around you," exclaimed Belknap. "That is only sleight of hand."

"Is it, indeed?" said Orme, smiling. "I tell you I did not have it with me. After all, you see it is the same knife."

We all gaped curiously and there, as I am a living man, we saw that wavy kris, extended in his hand, turn back into the form of the plainsman's hunting knife! A gasp of wonder and half terror came from the circle. Some of the men drew back. I heard an Irish private swear and saw him cross himself. I do not explain these things. I only say I saw them.

"I was mistaken," said Orme politely, "in offering so simple a test as this, but now, if you still think I had the kris in my clothing, how that could be, I don't know, I'm sure, and if you still wish to call my little performance sleight of hand, then I'll do something to prove what I have said and make it quite plain that all my friend here has said is true and more than true. Watch now and you will see blood drip from the point of this blade—every drop of blood it ever drew of man or animal. Look now—watch it closely."

We looked and again, as I am a living man and an honest one, I hope, I saw, as the others did, running from the point of the steel blade, a little trickling stream of red blood! It dropped in a stream, I say, and fell on the white blanket upon which Orme was sitting. It stained the blanket entirely red. At this sight the entire

group broke apart, only a few remaining to witness the rest of the scene. I do not attempt to explain this illusion or whatever it was. I do not know how long it lasted, but presently, as I may testify, I saw Orme rise and kick at the wetted blood stained blanket. He lifted it, heavy with dripping blood. I saw the blood fall from its corners upon the ground.

"Ah," he remarked calmly, "it's getting dry now. Here is your knife, my good fellow."

I looked about me, almost disposed to rub my eyes, as were perhaps the others of our party. The same great plains were there, the same wide shimmering stream, rippling in the sunlight, the same groups of animals grazing on the bluff, the same sentinels outlined against the sky. Over all shone the blinding light of the western midday sun. Yet as Orme straightened out this blanket it was as white as it had been before. Auberry looked at his knife blade as though he would have preferred to throw it away, but he sheathed it and it fitted the sheath as before.

Orme smiled at us all pleasantly. "Do you believe in the Indian telegraph now?" he inquired.

I have told you many things of this strange man, Gordon Orme, and I shall need to tell yet others. Sometimes my friends smile at me even yet over these things. But since that day I have not doubted the tales old Auberry told me of our own Indians. Since then, too, I have better understood Gordon Orme and his strange personality, the like of which I never knew in any land.

How long it was I hardly knew, for I had sunk into a sort of dull apathy in which one day was much like another. But at last we gathered our crippled party together and broke camp, and so slowly passed on westward, up the trail. We supposed, what later proved to be true, that the Sioux had raided in the valley on both sides of us and that the scattered portions of the army had all they could do, while the freight trains were held back until the road was clear.

I wearied of the monotony of wagon travel and without council with any finally, weak as I was, called for my horse and rode on slowly with the sand behind me.

"Guess who it is," called a voice. "Don't turn your head."

"I can't turn," I answered, "but I know who it is."

She rode up alongside, where I could see her, and fair enough she was to look upon, and glad enough I was to look. She was thinner now with this prairie life, and browner, and the ends of her hair were still yellowing, like that of outdoors men. She still was booted and gloved after the fashion of civilization, and still elsewhere garbed in the aboriginal costume, which she filled and honored graciously. The metal cylinders on her leggings rattled as she rode.

"You ought not to ride," she said. "You are pale."

"You are beautiful," said I; "and I ride because you are beautiful."

Her eyes were busy with her gloves.

"Let me take your knife," Auberry tossed the long hunting knife at his feet and handed it to him. Taking it, Orme seated himself cross-legged on a white blanket, which he spread out on the sandy soil.

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We all gaped curiously and there, as I am a living man, we saw that wavy kris, extended in his hand, turn back into the form of the plainsman's hunting knife! A gasp of wonder and half terror came from the circle. Some of the men drew back. I heard an Irish private swear and saw him cross himself. I do not explain these things. I only say I saw them.

"I was mistaken," said Orme politely, "in offering so simple a test as this, but now, if you still think I had the kris in my clothing, how that could be, I don't know, I'm sure, and if you still wish to call my little performance sleight of hand, then I'll do something to prove what I have said and make it quite plain that all my friend here has said is true and more than true. Watch now and you will see blood drip from the point of this blade—every drop of blood it ever drew of man or animal. Look now—watch it closely."

We looked and again, as I am a living man and an honest one, I hope, I saw, as the others did, running from the point of the steel blade, a little trickling stream of red blood! It dropped in a stream, I say, and