

Brand of the Red Warrior

By Ike Boone

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Many scalps of the enemy once graced Cheyenne coup-sticks. But now Two Bears' people were beset by sickness. They were tired and hungry . . . and even Two Bears himself, once the proudest of warriors, felt his courage wavering at the advance of the swift-charging Long-Knives.

TWO BEARS DUCKED out the flap of his lodge and stood a moment, feeling the bite of the cold wind, sharp and bitter to his old bones. He shrugged the blanket about his

shoulders as he turned toward the river. Two of the women came up over the rise of the bank with a kettle of water between them, and they moved slowly, showing their tiredness. The snow came to



the knees of his fringed leggins as he stepped out of the single trampled trail to the watering place.

And slowly and insidiously the thought formed in his protesting mind, *The Spirit has turned his face from my people.*

His eyes searched the sky with unconscious wisdom, and told him that the end of the snow and the cold was not yet, and he turned back toward the camp. It was a poor camp. Eighteen lodges, huddled in a rough circle, with snow banked about their feet; poor lodges, for they were patched and laced with rawhide, but there had been no buffalo for hides to renew them, and not enough hunters, if there had been buffalo, for the Spotted Death had run through the tribe like a great blind knife.

He trudged back through the heavy, hampering snow to the trail, and then feet thudded behind him, and an excited voice shouted his name. He turned, and saw his grandson, Little Knife, a lad of 14 summers, who came plunging through the deep snow where the trail curved.

Almost instantly that Two Bear's eyes came on him, Little Knife slowed his pace to a sedate walk, but the words burst from the hard breath of his running.

"The Long Knives, my grandfather! The Long Knives come in blue coats! Just beyond the ridge!"

And almost on the heels of his words, they did come, first a single rider, who loomed up, sharp-cut and black, against the dull gray of the threatening sky, and then a file of them, pulling up along the line of the ridge, halting their mounts, to sit stiff and square in their saddles, with a dull gleaming of buttons.

Then one rider broke from the group and came down the slope, slouching easily in the saddle as his pony kicked a spray of snow ahead of its sliding hooves.

Two Bears turned and walked slowly to the outer circle of the lodges, then stopped and turned again to face the rider, who took the shallow ford of the river in plunging leaps, the horny hooves of the pony making a great crashing in the ice of the edges. He knew the rider now, Burden Frazee, and the uneasiness inside him subsided.

BURDEN HELD his pipe out before him with one hand. He rode up within ten feet of Two Bears before he pulled up and slid out of the

saddle. Two Bears reached his own pipe, which hung on a thong around his neck, inside the blanket, and held it out toward Burden who grinned and stepped forward.

"My brother, Buffalo Man, is welcome to my lodge," said Two Bears formally, using Burden's Indian name.

Burden Frazee grunted polite acknowledgement, and followed Two Bears to the lodge, his keen blue eyes missing nothing of the patched and tattered poverty of the camp. One side of his mouth quirked under his wiry sandy beard, though he made no sound. But Two Bears knew he saw, and inside his chest a shamed anger grew that his white blood-brother should see him thus.

But he made no sign of this, and when Burden was seated at his left in the lodge, and the pipe had been lighted and smoked, Two Bears waited.

Burden Frazee—Buffalo Man—spoke with a blunt voice that was near anger. "My heart is heavy," he said. "The Long Knives come with peace in their mouths and war in their hands." His blue eyes flicked at Two Bears and then away. The edge was sharp in his voice now. "They come for the young men who stole the horses of the black trader."

"They were our horses," replied Two Bears calmly.

Frazee did not dispute this; did not even say "maybe," for that would be calling Two Bears a liar. He said instead, "The black trader died, and the Long Knives have come for the young men."

"The black trader fought them," said Two Bears. "When a man fights he must expect to die. Else why does a man fight? Besides, what will the Long Knives do with the young men?"

Burden shrugged, as Two Bears might have done, for he was as much red as white. "Perhaps they will lock them up for a time," he said, but his voice did not carry much conviction.

"They will hang them by their necks," said Two Bears. He did not say it as if he disputed Burden. It was simply that Two Bears remembered what had happened once before.

"No," said Two Bears. "The young men are needed here." For the first time a little of his inner bitterness came out.

"We are poor," he said simply, shaming

himself before Buffalo Man who was his brother, "we have not enough hunters to feed us now. If the young men go, we die."

Frazees looked down and his blue eyes were cloudy. Then he lifted his head and pointed with his chin at the line of cavalry on the ridge.

"They have come for the young men," he said bitterly. "Believe me, my brother, I did not know it was my brothers they sought when I joined with them."

His eyes fell away from Two Bears', and looked at his crossed knees. "If the young men do not go with me, the Long Knives will come after them. They carry war in their hands. There will be wailing in the lodge of my brother."

Two Bears digested this in silence. He knew the bitterness and anger in Buffalo Man's voice was not for him. Buffalo Man was his brother. They had hunted together in the old days when only the mountain men knew this land. Burden's woman had been Two Bear's sister, and they had shared their meat and their fires. But even when the beaver went away, and the mountain men had quit trapping, more white men came, and the Spotted Death came with them, and the buffalo went away, and still the white men came.

Now Two Bear's people were only eighteen lodges, and they were hungry. And Two Bears knew, deep inside him, that he was old, and tired, and afraid. The cold was inside him, drying up his courage. Twenty years ago—ten—and he would have given them their answer straight. He would have ridden at these arrogant Long Knives, chanting his war song, with the young men at his back, and if he died, he died like a man, in battle.

So all he had left was stubbornness, and he said slowly, "The young men will not go with you."

Burden did not argue. He shrugged, and rose. "My heart is heavy for my brother," he said "I will tell the leader of the Long Knives."

He ducked out of the lodge and swung into his saddle, and rode out without looking back.

Little Knife sprang up from the side of the lodge where he had been sitting, forbidden to take part in the talk because he was not yet a man, and he cried, "Do we fight the Long Knives then, my grandfather?"

Two Bears stared at the flickering of the tiny fire before him, and he felt the old heat coming

inside him. The heat that had been in him years back when he had led his men against the Crows and the Arapahoes; but he knew dismally that his muscles were old and weak now, and a doubt he had never had before was coming, along with the heat. He sighed, hating the age that hampered his body, and he spoke slowly.

"Tell the women to make bundles of the robes and skins and food. Tell them not to touch the lodges. Tell the boys to move the horses back into the trees—but slowly, slowly, so the Long Knives will not think they are running. And bring Yellow Ear and Bright Wolf here, I would speak to them."

BURDEN FRAZEE pulled up and slouched in his saddle before Captain Quarles. His face was blank under the wiry whiskers as he said quietly, "The chief says he can't let the men go, Cap'n."

Captain Quarles' obstinate reddened face tightened. His voice was as solid and unbending as his body when he spoke.

"I told you this palaver was wasted, Frazee. You don't argue with animals like that. They understand only one thing, and that is a better man or superior arms."

His head jerked curtly right and left checking his file of cavalry. "We'll go down after them," he said.

He twisted in his McClellan saddle and snapped over his shoulder, "Sergeant! We'll move in on them now. Skirmish line. Trumpeter! At the first shot, and on command, you will blow Close Ranks and Charge. A clean sweep of the village, and if we don't find the men we want, take hostages. They can dicker for them later at the fort. For—'ar-rd, ho!"

The file surged over the crest of the ridge, and made a ragged line down the slope. Frazee twisted his pony aside and let them pass him, and he cursed silently into his sandy beard. An impotent anger filled him for there was nothing he could do. He knew Captain Quarles' reasoning.

Indians were stupid animals. Frazee, who was a mountain man, and as much Indian as white, was almost as bad, though he was useful as a guide. Other than that, the captain's world did not include such people. The Army was his life, and Duty his god, and in just a few minutes hell

was going to pop.

TWO BEARS WAS stripped to the waist. His high leggings were hooked to his belt, and his blanket was kilted about his waist. A streak of red paint ran across his cheek, over the high bridge of his nose, and across the other cheek. He wore a first-coup feather proudly erect at the back of his head.

He looked down now at the battered old Pomeroy flintlock musket for which he had perhaps six short charges of powder. His bare, veined, skinny old arms made the gun look tremendously heavy. His elkhorn bow was hung across his back, with a quiver of iron-tipped arrows, and his knife was in its sheath on his belt. He stooped to duck out of the lodge, and saw the solid line of the troopers coming down the slope to the ford. For an instant, his resolve almost wavered, and then his fingers touched the medicine bag hung on his chest, and he began a soft, almost inaudible chanting of his war song.

Yellow Ear and Bright Wolf stepped out of their own lodges at almost the same moment, both old men, nearly his own age, both comrades of the days that were gone.

“The Long Knives come,” said Yellow Ear softly.

“Hai!” said Bright Wolf, “Now we die like men.” His lips formed his own war song. Two Bears looked back through the camp, glad that the young men were all away, hunting. The horses were gone, drifted back into the timber. The boys should keep them moving now, and perhaps they could keep them away from the Long Knives. He breathed deeply and turned back.

The Long Knife troopers were crashing the ice of the ford under the hooves of their horses now. They towered against the wintry sky, solid and fat with good eating, dully gleaming with buttons and ready guns, the clatter and jingle and clinking of their spurs and sabers and saddle fittings coming over the solid trampling of hooves in the crusty snow. But their guns were silent, and they kept their horses in that steady, remorseless walk. Two Bears sighed, and as the first horse touched on the trampled trail to water, he reared back the heavy hammer of the Pomeroy and pulled the trigger.

The vise-jaw of the hammer slammed the

flint forward, scraping on the pan lid, lifting it and throwing sparks. The musket bellowed, pointed straight up—a warning shot.

Swiftly, Two Bears lowered the butt to the ground, poured powder from his tipped powder horn, slapped another ball on a square of greased buckskin, rammed it home. He had to prime the pan with the same course powder he used in barrel. He had no priming powder. But even as he did these things with deft speed, he heard the bugle send its clear brass voice at them, and the troopers were suddenly crowding stirrup to stirrup, and the drumming of charging hooves made a dull thunder on the frozen earth.

The guns of the Long Knives were coming alive now, shattering the air of the camp with their harsh barking voices. The one who rode a pace ahead, the one with gold braid marking his shoulders, carried a short gun balanced in his right hand, and his reddened, square face twisted as he bellowed commands to his troopers. Two Bears brought the Pomeroy onto this man and pulled the trigger.

Sparks flared from the flint, but the coarse powder did not catch. Two Bears snatched the hammer back again, and now a trooper was riding at him, coming at him with his mouth gaping in a soundless yell, and Two Bears thrust the muzzle almost against the man’s side and pulled off the shot. The Pomeroy bellowed, and almost leaped from his hands, and the man piled out of the other side of the saddle.

Two Bears automatically slapped the driving horse on the shoulder with the flat of his hand, claiming it for his own, and then another trooper came at him, and the trooper swung his saber high and brought it down.

Two Bears threw up the Pomeroy, holding it with both hands, and the blade clanged against it. But Two Bears’ muscles would not take the violence of the blow. The barrel deflected the blow, but the blade drove it down, and the driving steel caught him alongside the head, and Two Bears was suddenly falling into a great blackness that grew out of the snow and swallowed him up. The charging shoulder of the cavalry mount caught him and spun him away, and one iron-shod hoof caught his ribs as he fell, but he felt none of it.

CAPTAIN QUARLES sat squarely and stolidly in the saddle of his heaving mount, and took his sergeant's report.

"One dead, three wounded," said the sergeant. "Corporal Allen and Troopers Odlick and Franz captured four women, with packs on their backs, in the underbrush on the far side of the village. Three of the skulkers who fought among the tipi's, killed. The rest got out into the brush. Mostly half-grown boys, I'd say, sir. Otherwise, the village is now deserted, sir."

The captain returned the sergeant's salute, and said briskly, "Burn this mess of rags and hides. Half an hour for rations and checking equipment. Detail two men to guard the hostages. The rest of the troop ready to take the trail in thirty minutes. That's all, Sergeant."

Burden Frazee kned his pony around to come alongside the captain. "Cap'n Quarles, you ain't figgerin' to burn their lodges, are you?"

The captain gave the guide an impatient flick of his icy eyes. "I am," he said shortly.

"But hang it all, man, it don't shine," Frazee blurted. "They can't make out the winter without lodges."

Captain Quarles retorted stiffly, "Frazee, rid your mind of the thought that this is a tea party. I am here to arrest four murderers. Their people fired upon the United States Army. May I remind you that no one fires upon the Army except its enemies. Therefore, this detail will be carried out to its conclusion. We shall follow them and attack them. Resistance will be put down with a firm hand, and we shall take in the murderers. Failing that, we shall take what hostages come to our hand. Anyone firing upon us will be considered a hostile, and dealt with as such. Is that clear?"

"Clear enough, Cap'n," said Frazee roughly. "A half-breed trader cheats a bunch of Injuns out of their horses, and gets his mark rubbed out when they get 'em back. So the Yewnited States Army wipes out a whole village of starvin' women and kids and old men just to show 'em who's boss. I reckon it's clear enough, Cap'n."

Quarles flushed a deeper red under his wind-burned cheeks, and snapped, "Sergeant, this man is under open arrest. When he scouts, detail a man to accompany him. I will take up his case when we return to the fort."

"What do you mean, arrest?" demanded

Frazee truculently.

"Just what I said, Frazee." The captain's voice was icy. "If open arrest does not suit you, you will be disarmed and put under guard. Now, you will take up the trail, with an escort, five minutes before the troop. You will fire signal shots at any sign of resistance, and await the troop. The troop will move at route speed, so keep moving. I intend to wind this thing up by dark. That's all, Frazee."

For just a moment, a fire that should have warned the captain showed in Frazee's frosty blue eyes. Then his mouth quirked in a sardonic grimace, and he turned away without another word. He mounted and rode out, at the word, with a trooper a length behind, carrying a carbine unsheathed across the pommel of his McClellan saddle. Frazee cut a slant eye at the trooper, and grunted contemptuously. He got out a strip of jerky and chewed the tough stringy stuff as he followed the trail.

TWO BEARS CAME awake with the cold biting deep inside him. He moved his head, and an icy cake of frozen snow raked his cheek. For a moment, he could not move; his arms and legs seemed to have turned into clumsy sticks, but finally he managed to roll over and twist his legs enough to bend his knees. Then pain came, and brought him fully awake, and he knew where he was.

He lay where he had fallen, half-buried in a bank of crusted snow, and his nostrils were filled with the stink of burnt cloth and hides. He raised his head, and the camp was no more. Smouldering heaps marked where the lodges had been, and one fire burned, where two of the blue-coated Long Knives guarded four of the women. The rest of the troopers were gone.

First, he searched for the gun, with the snow bank hiding him, but the gun was broken. The shearing blade that had struck him down had broken the brittle metal of the hammer, and the Pomeroy could not be fired. He left it, and crawled away, still keeping the ridge of trampled snow between him and the fire.

When he was far enough away, he stood up, and instantly fell again. Again he got up, with a dull, consuming pain tearing at his shoulder, water in his trembling legs, but he got up. He pulled his

blanket up to cover his throbbing shoulder, and took up a staggering walk, plowing through the snow, moving back into the timber.

He crossed a small ridge, descended into the canyon beyond, finally spotted a trail where the boys had driven the horses. He sheered away from that and mounted the cross slope, keeping to the brush, but heading in the general direction of the horse trail. His feet were like blocks of wood. His leggins were soaked, from the time he had lain unconscious, and now they were frozen stiff, rasping at his legs where the action of his knees had broken the icing to make them bend.

Again he came across the horse trail, and moved away, and then he heard the muffled thudding of walking horses.

He dropped back into the shelter of the crowding brush, and carefully worked his elkhorn bow out from under the blanket ...then found his numbed and stiffened muscles could not string it. He dropped down into the snow, with the branches of the bush behind him to break up the outline of his head.

It was Burden Frazee with a trooper behind him. The trooper was not watching the trail, but kept his eyes on Frazee's back. Two Bears had a sudden numb wonder at how he had gotten ahead of Frazee. Frazee must have left the campsite long before Two Bears came alive, but here he plodded on the trail, and Two Bears had gone by him.

He saw the eyes of his blood-brother flicking restlessly through the timber, watching everything with a quick intentness, and then Frazee's icy blue eyes came on Two Bears...as somehow he had known they would. He had come too close to the horse trail back there. Burden would never miss that. And now Burden Frazee had found him, and Two Bears did not have strength enough to string his bow.

Then Frazee's eyes went on but not before one blue eye had winked quickly. And Frazee was singing a little monotone song, in the Indian tongue of Two Bears. It was very soft, the sort of thing a man might croon absently to himself, but Two Bears caught the words: *My brother, the night is coming. The hunters go southward...*

Then the scout and the Long Knife trooper were gone; the wind began to rise a little, and snow began to fall. Within a minute, the trail was a dim thing seen through a thick curtain, and Two

Bears started to rise.

Then he caught a clumping and jingling and thudding of hooves, and the troop came by, with the big man, the one with gold on his shoulders, sitting thick and heavy in the saddle, his broad, reddened face stubbornly straight ahead, ignoring even the icy pelting of the snow on his cheek. A flanker came by Two Bears, passing behind the very bush that sheltered him. But the trooper, from his seat in the saddle, saw nothing but the thick mushroom of snow that covered the bush, and rode on. The light was dulling, when Two Bears crawled out and staggered to his feet.

BY THE TIME he reached the rendezvous, his moccasins were falling apart. The sinew lacings were wet, and the seams were gaping open, and he knew dully that his feet were bleeding, but he kept moving. Then a shadow rose up out of the snow and said softly, "Grandfather?"

"Ai."

It was Little Knife, shivering with the cold, but with his bow strung, and an arrow on the string.

Two Bears asked, "The horses?"

Little Knife pointed with his chin. "Across the draw."

"And the young men?"

"They are here. With-Two-Tails killed a deer. They saw the camp, and wanted to fight the Long Knives, but Bright Wolf made them wait. Have you seen Yellow Ear?"

Two Bears said stolidly, "Yellow Ear is dead. The Long Knives have captured four of the women." He turned away from his grandson and trudged on to the little fire, which did not show ten feet away, for the women had built a screen of boughs around it.

As he came out of the darkness of blowing snow, the rest of them pulled aside to give him room to hunker down by the fire. One of the women silently brought him a piece of meat, and another pulled the split moccasins from his feet and put on another pair from the pack of goods she had saved. They were too big, but that was all right. His feet swelled almost visibly as the warmth of the fire touched them. He moved back a little, and pulled a corner of his worn blanket to cover them from the heat. He wolfed the meat down quickly.

The young men drifted over from other tiny, hidden fires and when he was finished eating, one of them said almost harshly, "Uncle, we take the war-trail against the Long Knives at daylight."

"No," said Two Bears. "We will stay hidden from the Long Knives until they go away. We can have no more killing. It was the killing of the black trader that brought them here."

The young man, Eager Hunter, said quickly, "The black trader made us drunk and stole our horses. He is the one who fired the first shot. We took back our horses. We are not children, Uncle. We are men."

"There will be no more killing," repeated Two Bears. "We are too weak. If you are killed or captured, your families will die. And there are not many left. No, we will not fight."

Eager Hunter spun on his heel, and walked lithely away. Two Bears watched his strong young shoulders, proud and square under the deer-hide robe, and sighed. He knew. He remembered his own vaunting strength of youth. He remembered the time when the Crows and the Arapahoes frightened their children with the name of Two Bears. The gripping of shamed anger was in him, for he knew it was better that a man die in battle, with his face turned to the enemy, than to die of hunger. But the old days were gone.

If the buffalo came back.... If the Long Knives stayed to their forts and left the Indian in peace.... He did not sleep well.

There was no meat left in the morning. A few scraps for the youngest of the children, a scant handful of hoarded pemmican for the young men. One of the women brought Two Bears a horn of soup, the liquid in which the meat had been boiled for the children. It was warm, and made a strengthening glow in his stomach, for all it was a mouthful.

The young men, six of them, ranging in years from 18 summers to 30, were catching up their ponies, making ready for the day's hunt. Two Bears walked out to them.

"Hunt into the hills," he said. "Do not shoot your guns. The Long Knives will hear. We will meet across Broken Leg Woman creek. We will make many trails for the Long Knives to follow. Perhaps they will go back." He wondered how long Burden Frazee could fool the leader of the Long Knives...then dismissed the thought. His

brother Burden Frazee—Buffalo Man—must conduct himself as a man with the Long Knives. He could not expect too much help from him.

And even as he turned away from the young men, the shot cracked in the brush across from the camp. A sharp, barking shot, from a cavalry carbine. Two Bears broke into a shambling trot toward the sound, fighting the hampering depth of the snow.

CAPTAIN QUARLES hadn't put an end to it by night. Burden Frazee scouted conscientiously, following always the heaviest trail of the horse herd, it being obvious even to the red-necked recruit that escorted him that he could not follow the single trails that split off at intervals. And, as Burden knew it would, the horse trail suddenly fanned out as dusk approached, and when the troop caught up to them there were twelve different trails, fanning out in as many directions. Captain Quarles, tight-lipped, surveyed it in silence, then ordered night camp made.

He called Burden over to his fire after dark and demanded gruffly, "Any idea where they are, Frazee?"

Frazee put his two thumb's together and put both hands out before, him with the fingers spread like spokes of a wheel. "Sure," he said dryly. "They went thataway. Take your pick."

The captain stared at him hotly for a long moment. "You'll have something to answer to when we end this," he said, then dismissed the scout abruptly.

The troopers moved stiffly and slowly for reveille. They were numbed and sullen from the cold, and their fingers made hard work of working their stiff leather in saddling. Some of them hadn't slept at all, and even with night-long tending, some of them had trouble keeping a fire.

Frazee, who had spent a quite comfortable night with one small bull robe and a blanket, and no fire at all, cut a sardonic eye at their slow fumbling efforts and grinned faintly under his grizzled beard.

Captain Quarles was sharp with the sergeant, who blistered the troopers, but even so, it was a drooping troop that finally lined out, and Frazee knew that this troop, outfitted as they were with the best of heavy winter woolens, had put in a

harder night than the ragged, ill-fed Indians with Two Bears. Somehow, that gave him satisfaction.

Frazeer rode ahead, cutting a wide sweeping circle, taking the lashing of the snow-laden wind with fatalistic patience, almost enjoying the obvious misery of his escort, who, though he was outfitted much better and was at least twenty years younger than the scout, was obviously suffering from the vicious weather.

His first circle netted him nothing. The trails showed no signs of gathering again. He looked back once, and saw that Quarles was putting outriders out on the flank, and then Frazeer took another wide swing out through the brush, and the wind really opened up, and cut visibility down to mere feet. The trails were disappearing under the shifting snow. Then, far off to the side, he heard the flat, businesslike crack of an Army carbine, and a second later, the deep bellowing answer of a smoothbore musket, loaded with coarse trade powder and an ill fitting ball. He kicked his mount around and rode at the sound, with his escort floundering in his wake. With a dismal certainty, he knew that Captain Quarles had blundered into contact with the Indians.

TWO BEARS RAN, hampered by the snow, and then one of the young men, Eager Hunter, came by him on a plunging pony, his belted blanket billowing behind, and even as Eager Hunter was hidden by the swirling wind-borne snow, his ancient musket bellowed out at the unseen Long Knife.

Two Bears plunged on, pausing only to string his sinew-backed elkhorn bow. and then suddenly his grandson Little Knife was beside him, riding one horse and leading another.

"Here, Grandfather," cried Little Knife, tossing the lead rope to Two Bears, and he too was swallowed up in the snow.

Two Bears swung up, saw the other young men come driving up, their ponies taking the snow in plunging leaps, and then he put his own mount at the firing ahead. He passed the women, scrambling with their packs, and yelled at them to fall back to where the ponies had been held, and heard the firing pick up. He unconsciously started his war song, heard Bright Wolf's shrill gobbling yell ahead, and rode into battle—and felt years sliding off his back as he rode.

The Long Knives were in a clumsy tangle, the bundled-up troopers fighting their mounts, swinging their heads wildly, as the young men drove out of the snow-curtain to fire and to dodge again into invisibility. Bright Wolf loomed up alongside Two Bears, and his cracked voice screamed, "With me, young men, with me!" And he leaned over his pony's neck and started a headlong charge straight into the troopers.

Two Bears clamped his teeth on the single thong that directed his mount, fitted an arrow to the bow string, and rode with Bright Wolf, shoulder to shoulder. A trooper loomed out of the shifting haze, high and square in the saddle, his mouth gaping as he yelled, and Two Bears loosed his shaft, saw it straighten him up, saw the trooper reel half out of the saddle, and then he saw the big man, the one with the markings on his shoulders.

He was yelling commands, in a great roaring voice, a short gun balanced in his right hand, and troopers were gathering on him, a hard, compact knot, a tough nut to crack if they got set, and Two Bears altered his course to ride straight at them. He rode between two troopers, felt his pony lurch as it struck shoulders with one of the big bay cavalry mounts, and then the big leader loomed up before him, and Two Bears felt the scorch of exploded gunpowder on his face, and he swung the bow to count coup, striking with the bow as if it were a stick; not to kill the man, but to count a first coup. To strike an enemy in battle, without wounding or killing him, was a greater honor than a man could gain in any other way.

The bow struck the man across the face, with the wiry strength of Two Bears' arm behind it, and he saw the man spill out of the saddle, caught a quick frozen glimpse of the man's gaping mouth, his nose queerly askew where the elkhorn bow had struck; but he saw no fear in the man. Amazement, yes, and anger, and a bulldog determination, but no fear; and Two Bears knew he had found an enemy worthy of the battle. Then his pony had carried him through and past the knot of troopers, and the blanket of snow was swinging to hide him.

The young men and Bright Wolf were looming up around him, their faces set, eyes glittering with the heat of battle, the ponies breathing hard, with little spurting clouds of moisture springing from their nostrils, and Two

Bears yelled again, whirled his pony and led them back into the milling throng of troopers.

The big leader was swinging back into the saddle, and the troopers were pulled into a semblance of line now, and their carbines made a sudden unanimous roaring. Bright Wolf pitched off at Two Bears' elbow, and his place was taken by Little Knife, who rode clinging low to his pony's neck, his shrill young piping sounding above the deadly voices of the trooper's guns. He straightened up suddenly, whipped an arrow back to the limit of the bow, and turned it loose. A trooper surged up high in his saddle and toppled over, the arrow thrust out stiffly from his chest. Then the carbines roared in unison again, and a somersaulting pony tumbled against Two Bears' mount, drove it staggering to the side and the charge was suddenly broken. Two Bears swung wide and into the sheltering curtain of snow with the ragged remnants of his little band.

They split up then, every man for himself, darting out into visibility long enough to fire a shot or an arrow, wheeling back, out of sight. They had to make a longer run of it soon, for the troopers were falling back, not in retreat, but withdrawing slowly, keeping up a shattering fire, making them pay for every shot. Two Bears made one sally, felt the numbing shock of lead hitting him, the ripping tear of the slug as it tore a finger-wide furrow across his back as he turned, and when they gathered again, not a man of them was without his mark.

His anxious eyes saw Little Knife, his grandson, with a double wound in his upper arm, where a bullet had gone completely through. It was not bleeding much. The blood froze almost as soon as it welled out. Then he caught sight of his blood brother, Burden Frazee.

The scout came plunging out of the snow veil to join the troopers as Two Bears made another drive at them. He saw Buffalo Man riding short-stirruped like an Indian, his buckskins covered with a blanket that had a hole cut in the center so that his head came through it, and the ends belted to his waist like a poncho, and he saw him swing up his long deadly rifle.

With essential Indian fatalism, Two Bears knew that it was his time. Frazee was his brother—but he was a white man. He was a warrior with the Long Knives—and a man must

fight with his own people. And as the black mouth of the gun came on him, Two Bears had a suddenly tired thought, "It is a brave one that kills me for he is my brother."

He straightened himself in that instant, to face death as bravely as it was sent, and then the gaping mouth of the rifle swept by him, even as it spat its long tongue of flame, and the pony suddenly went down under him, and somersaulted, and threw him so hard that even the cushioning snow did not save him. A great fiery pinwheel spun before his eyes, and then was blotted out.

He came awake as someone lifted his head, and for an instant he almost groaned at the knife-like stab of pain as the movement pulled the frozen wound open on his back. Then he struggled up to a sitting position. Little Knife was standing before him with the lead rope of his pony in one hand, the other arm dangling stiffly from the double wound.

"My Grandfather," said Little Knife, "the Long Knives are going away." Two Bears shook his head. It felt thick and heavy.

"What did you say, my son?"

Little Knife's young face was smiling. "They go, Grandfather! The young men are following, but they are going back on their own trail. We beat them, Grandfather!"

Two Bears staggered to his feet. He slowly tramped through the beaten snow to the trampled area of the fight. The wind had stopped, and the heavy feathery flakes drifted down silently. His pony lay yonder, with a little steam rising as the snow struck its still warm hide. Yonder lay Bright Wolf, already filmed over with the white veil, Eager Hunter lay a few feet away, half under his dead pony, neither of them ever to move again. Another of the young men sat braced against a sapling, methodically and stoically binding a bandage of moss and buckskin about a gashed thigh. Another dead pony lay back-to-back with a big cavalry horse on the far side of the trampled spot.

Two Bears took a long breath, and let it out.

"Yes, my grandson," he said quietly and bitterly, "we have beaten them—for now."

But he knew how little they had won. They would have to move—all of them. The women, and the young ones; the wounded and the sick and

the hungry. The snow was piling up, but they would have to go higher; through the pass, across the mountains, on into the dubious shelter of the high valleys beyond. Perhaps they would find game, perhaps not. Only the Spirit above could say.

But the Long Knives would be back—they always came back. Perhaps not this winter; perhaps not next summer—but they would be back. He sighed, and the age came on him again.

“Yes, my grandson,” he said, “we have beaten them for now.”

FAR DOWN HIS own back-trail, Captain Quarles reformed his troop. Burden Frazee came in out of the hampering snow and reported, “They’ve give it up, Cap’n. I don’t think they’ll tackle us again.”

Captain Quarles’ smoldering anger roared out of him.

“A dirty, stinking bunch of savages!” he roared. “A miserable, stinking bunch of half-starved animals drove us back!” His eyes glinted savagely from their blackened and swollen sockets, past the flattened bridge of his smashed nose. He touched it, and the broken bones gritted, and he swore violently. His eyes glared a baleful promise at the sergeant. “This troop will be more than a bunch of left-handed clowns when they take the field again, Sergeant,” he said. Then he wheeled on Frazee.

“And as for you....” he began.

Frazee kned his pony around to face the captain. He grinned as a wolf grins and his eyes came hard and icy blue on Quarles. Somehow, in the movement, his gun muzzle came to bear on the captain’s belt buckle.

“What about me, Cap’n?”

Quarles mouth opened to roar an order to his sergeant and then something in those icy eyes closed his lips without a sound.

“That’s fine,” said Frazee, still so softly that the captain alone caught his words. “Let me make my talk, and then you kin yell iff’n you want.”

“Now let’s size this thing up and see how the stick floats. Yer tail’s in a sling, Cap’n. You got wounded men, and sick men, and you’re about out of supplies. You got damn nigh two weeks’ hard marchin’ to git back to the fort. If I ride a hundred feet out’n this camp, your whole damn army’ll

never ketch me in your natcherl lives. An’ I’m not sure you kin even find your way back to the fort.”

Quarles started as if to wheel away, but a twitch of the gun muzzle halted him, glowering.

“Open your ears, Cap’n, let a little of this soak in. Two Bears had you whipped. You know why? Cause he ain’t fightin’ for no uniform, and no book of rules, he’s fightin’ for his life, and his people’s life. Iff’n I hadn’t shot his horse out from under him, there’d have been a lot of blue-coats to bury back there. He’s off your back, for now, Cap’n, and he’ll stay off, unless he’s jumped again. I done you a good turn, this day, and I don’t aim to take no dirt off’n your stick about it.

“Now, I’m layin’ it right in your hands, Cap’n. Iff’n you want to take your lickin’, and go home, I’ll stick with you, and git you through. But iff’n you don’t, I’m ridin’ out of here, and to hell with you. Take your pick.”

Captain Quarles eyes blazed for a moment, and his hand went unconsciously to his broken nose, then fell away. His eyes bored into Frazee’s, and he studied the mountain man for a long minute. He read the brutal truth in the man’s eyes.

“You think I’m a fool, don’t you?”

The guide’s mouth quirked slightly. “Not beyond savin’, Cap’n,” he said quietly. “You’re green. You’re too full of the Army. But you ain’t no coward, and you ain’t a fool, really. When you learn somethin’ besides regulations and squads right and left, you’ll be plenty man. But you’re still workin’ with the idee that them Cheyennes ain’t men. Git that out of your head, and let it soak in that they’ve got feelin’s and pride like a natcherl man, and you’ll do. Old Two Bears seen it in you. He never would have struck coup on a coward. He’d have killed you, first shot, and hung your scalp out for the jaybirds.

“You do your job, and that means takin’ your lickin’ now, and next time, maybe you’ll come out top dog. Two Bears wouldn’t hold it agin you. But he’ll fight—he’ll always fight, and the only way you’ll ever take him is dead. So what’s your play?”

Captain Quarles looked up at Frazee, and his blotched face showed no more emotion than a wooden mask. Then he said suddenly, “You’re right, of course. I can’t carry on a campaign under these conditions. I rescind all arrest orders against you. I will return to the fort and refit for another

expedition. I should like to have you as my guide.”

For an instant, Burden Frazee’s craggy features split in a genuine smile. Then he shook his head.

“No, Cap’n,” he said slowly, “I can’t see my way to do it. Me and Two Bears—well, you’d better git another guide. I’ll point out a good man for you. I’ll take you back to the fort, and then I’m goin’ to quit. Reckon that’s the way my stick floats.”

Quarles nodded stiffly.

Frazee turned his pony and rode back along the trail they had trampled in their retreat. He pulled up short of the battleground, pulled down a limb, and stuck it across the trail. From around his neck, he took his pipe, and hung it on the branch by its thong.

The young men would be scouting here, he knew, and they’d take this pipe to Two Bears. Two Bears would understand, he knew. He kicked his pony around and rode back to the troopers’ camp.

