

The Talking Medicine

By
Talmage Powell



Singing Waters gasped and tried to hide herself

AS THE FIRST arrow whispered past his scalp to *thunk* into the side of his wagon, Sam Tucker decided the major's warning had been sensible. Action and mental cogitation went hand in hand for a man who had lived for some time by his wits. Sam kicked his coffee pot over the campfire and rolled to one side as a second arrow hissed at him.

The fire died with a quick sizzle. Lying in the shadows with six-shooter in hand and heart pounding so hard they must have

heard it in China, Sam scanned the night before him. How many Indians there were or where they had come from were questions to be answered later. Doubtless it was a small party, perhaps a single scout, who had seen his fire.

The major in command of the fort had warned him. "Somebody has been getting rifles into Crow hands. Not healthy for a lone white man to wander up those back-trails alone. We're doing everything we can to avoid incidents, while trying to get

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at the bottom of this rifle running. We've got to stop it soon or it'll mean the massacre of outlying settlers, a small war with the Crow Indians. I don't want any fool medicine pedlars touching off the powder keg."

That had been final.

Sam had stalked from the major's office. He had promised to meet Buffalo Biddix, the herb gatherer, on Macklin's Branch. The old man was depending on it. If there was Indian trouble in the air, it was good reason to be at the appointed spot. Old Buffalo was just the kind to take root at the meeting place, come hell or high danger. Biddix would stay put, depending on Sam, worrying about him, until food was gone—or until marauding Crow braves had spotted him and combed his hair with a scalping knife.

Sam had therefore gone up the branch. He had waited now for two days, the cloud of worry about Buffalo gathering ever heavier in his mind. Now he wondered if the silent treachery of the arrows was a clue to Buffalo's fate.

Sam inched forward, eyes straining into the velvet of the star-studded night. He had a yen to say: "Look, you characters, I'm one-quarter Cherokee myself, from my mother's father. Couldn't we pow-wow over this thing?"

He saw a flicker of movement at the edge of the clearing. He followed it with the six-shooter; then he squeezed the trigger. He heard the scream of a wounded man, and experienced quick amazement at his marksmanship.

He was already rolling to one side, and a rifle was cracking down near the creek.

He could hear the slugs beeing around his head and wondered if attack from this new quarter meant there was a whole party of them.

He clamped his teeth to keep them from rattling like a pair of wild castanets, and made his way on his belly toward the creek.

THE RIFLE was still now. Only the gurgling water broke the silence of the night. Then a twig snapped. Sam began shooting, and the rifle talked back.

Again silence, followed by the thud of light, running feet. A horse whickered; then its hoofbeats crossed the creek and the silence dissolved that noise too.

Sam reloaded his gun, gulping for breath; sweat was streaming down his face, and he thought with some respect of the man who'd occupied his skin a few minutes ago.

Cautious, he moved to the creek. The moon rode free of clouds and spilled cool silver on him. No more warriors threatened his life, and he breathed easier.

In the soft bank of the creek, he found a moccasin print. He bent and examined it closely. He wouldn't forget it in a hurry. The Indian had been big-footed, and he had left a distinct mark. At some time in the past, the moccasin had been cut across the sole, perhaps on a sharp rock. It had been laced back together with a fine rawhide thong, leaving a faint ridge across the sole which had imprinted itself in the soft earth.

Sam moved from the creek to prowl toward the warrior who had screamed in reply to the pistol's bark. He held his gun

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at full cock, his nerves so tense the whisper of a leaf might have caused him to squeeze the trigger. He found the warrior two dozen yards from the camp site. The buck was tall, lithe, and bronze. A Crow. Sam knew that from the paint markings and sensed it from the odor.

His lucky slug had caught the Crow squarely in the chest. Bright crimson shone against the duller red of the Indian's flesh, and a thread of blood crawled from the corner of the wide, thin-lipped mouth.

Sam knelt beside the Indian, and the brave opened his eyes. They were already glazing in death. The brave tried to spit in Sam's face.

"The other white man," Sam demanded. "The old one with the jacket of buffalo hide."

"He will die," the Indian made it sound like a satisfied curse. "Running Elk will kill him."

With that, the brave died.

Sam sat back on his haunches. He thumbed his wide-brimmed hat back. He tried to reconcile the two statements. "He will die." That meant Buffalo was in the hands of the Indians, but still alive. Still a chance for him, if his young partner could get to him.

Then his mind came back to the second statement. "Running Elk will kill him." But Running Elk was a Sioux chief, and the Sioux hated the Crow.

Sam was not a man who experienced any great yen for danger, violence, or hard labor. But the task was clearly before him. Seek out Running Elk; then if Buffalo was there, bring him out to safety.

Sam considered the warrior, who

possessed one thing that might be very handy in powwowing with the Sioux. With a grimace and gulping effort to keep his stomach in place, Sam unsheathed his knife and lifted the Crow's scalp.

BATHING in the crystal clear waters of T'yehkeela were three Indian maids. Each was beautiful as they splashed and shouted laughter. But one, Singing Waters, was of a perfection to reduce the other two to beggary. She was tall, lithe, straight as the arrow of a chieftain. The water and sunlight made satin of the deep rose of her naked shoulders. Her hair was long, gleaming black, falling about the delicate planes of her face, a glinting cloud free of its braid at the moment.

Then one of the girls saw the horseman come over the rise, uttered a shriek, and the three covered themselves to their necks with water and stared fearfully.

They saw a heavy, big-hocked horse that would have been more in place before a wagon than under a saddle. They saw a rangy, big-boned young man astride the animal. He was handsome, with a square face, deeply weathered, and dark brown eyes. He wore a black mustache and his hair long in the fashion of the buffalo hunters, curling from under his hat about his neck.

He wore a rather dandified suit of black, dusty now from the trail. And the girls did not miss the fact that he was heavily armed, with a knife and two sixguns showing under his open coat, and a carbine in his saddle boot.

Singing Waters gasped. From the stranger's saddle hung a gory hank of

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black hair—a scalp.

The stranger saw the girls and endured a moment of confusion before a slow smile lighted his face. Singing Waters felt the fascination of the smile. Even through her fear, she found herself thinking the smile was nice.

The stranger swept off his wide-brimmed hat and bowed in the saddle. In the most imperfect Sioux Singing Waters had ever heard, he said, “My spirit is suddenly refreshed and weariness drops from me.”

That, Singing Waters thought grimly as she got control of her fear, is exactly what we’re afraid of.

In English learned at the mission school, she said, “Go away!”

The stranger’s eyes rested on her. She felt warm color come into her cheeks. Strangely, her fear took wings on the afternoon breeze. Then she glanced guiltily, as if fearful her companions could read the unbidden thoughts the stranger’s smile tricked into her mind.

Grinning, the stranger said, “I come as a friend, seeking the great chief Running Elk.”

“His camp is down the vale,” Singing Waters said. “His braves will spit you over their fires if you do not go away.”

“A horrible fate,” he managed in his mutilated Sioux, “but one to which I might readily resign myself with the image of creation’s masterpiece fresh in my mind.”

Before Singing Waters could reply, he had gallantly turned his horse, his back toward the creek as he waited. The girls scrambled out of the creek. As she dressed in the shelter of a bush, Singing Waters

decided the young white man was to be trusted. Not once did he steal a glance over his shoulder.

SAM TUCKER was aware of the lissom Indian girl all the way to the village. Every time he happened to catch her eye, he felt a jolt. He wondered if she felt it too. He thought of her marrying some buck and having to do the work and carry the water until the young proud shoulders had grown slumped and old. The thought disturbed him strangely; but even more disturbing was the possibility of her being married already.

His face darkened. Misbegotten fool, he thought, you came here to find Buffalo Biddix, as loyal a sidekick as a man ever had. Is your purpose so weakling in nature that it dissipates at the mere sight of a perfectly sculptured face and a long, easy stride that means she has trim ankles and slender legs?

They came upon a group of near-naked children, who shrieked and ran. And before them a silence settled as they reached the edge of the camp.

The site was a niche of paradise, nestled alongside the flashing creek, sheltered by tall poplar and oaks, kissed by the softest breeze from the mountains in the north; but there was hell in the camp, too, for the white man who dared enter. Sam could feel the grimness in the silence, the pressure of eyes masked with stolidity. The Sioux were at peace, but this was not the welcome of peace. Rifles were already in the hands of a few of the Crow. Sioux trouble next? Sam felt his forehead ice with beady sweat as he thought of settlers

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in the remote coves. He had seen massacre once; that was enough to last a lifetime.

Why it should be so, he did not know. He tried to tell himself he was wrong, letting his imagination run away with him. But he had studied Indian faces far too long to fool himself. The Sioux would fight, like any proud people, only if they thought they were being wronged. And their eyes told Sam that wrong had been done them.

A tall buck detached himself from the crowd lined up before the tipis. He was tall, powerfully built, with flat muscles rippling across his shoulders, chest, and down his arms. He had the chiseled face of a fighting man and eyes capable of great anger.

The buck grasped Singing Waters by the wrist and jerked her toward him. He stood blocking Sam's path. He said to Singing Waters: "Has this sputum of a sick fox spoken to you?"

Sam understood the words. But he remained loose and relaxed in the saddle, his hands crossed on saddlehorn, ready to reach for both guns at once.

"It was a chance meeting," Singing Waters said. "He acted with only respect. Let him pass, Strong Boy."

Strong Boy made no move. The girl jerked her wrist from his grip. Anger was in her face; but she seemed to realize that she would seal the white man's doom if she shamed the warrior. She said beseechingly, "He is but a lone man who acted with humility, coming in peace. It would not be honorable to block his path longer, and certainly not worthy of Strong Boy."

Strong Boy stood aside. Sam hoped his effort to swallow his heart back into place was not visible.

Usually gangs of screeching urchins would plague his stirrups, but they were held quiet now behind their mothers' skirts as he moved across the compound.

He brought his horse to rest before Running Elk. He wondered if the old chief remembered him. Then he decided an Indian never forgets.

RUNNING ELK, as a warrior, had killed the great bear. He still stood tall, proud, and fierce. Yet age had taken the flesh from his strong bones, leaving him gaunt, with the face of an eagle.

Sam dismounted with an assurance he did not feel. "Is this the welcome of Running Elk?"

The old chief remained silent, his eyes like live coals under his hanging brows.

"Perhaps you don't remember the great medicine of Tucker."

"I remember," Running Elk conceded. "You came to my tribe with your bitter brew when the great aches came to our bellies, making the strongest man roll upon the earth with great moans."

"I cured many of your warriors."

"True."

"I cured you."

"And for that reason, your life is not forfeit now. You may dwell in peace until the sun comes from his resting place with the morning. Then you must go, Tucker."

Sam faced the chief squarely with contempt edging his face. "Are these the words of Running Elk, the killer of the great bear? He would turn aside his friend

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who comes in peace?"

"Your own kind has turned you aside, Tucker, by giving guns to the Crow. Again the white man conspires against the Sioux. Your kind would set Crow against Sioux and use that as the excuse to bring in soldiers with the great thunder guns that roll on wheels. You would burn our camps and kill our people."

"Has Running Elk been touched with the tongue of the serpent?" Sam asked. And the darkening of the chief's face made his heart lurch with the certainty that he had pushed his words too far. Running Elk stepped once pace toward him, hands clenching as his sides. Tucker's every muscle wanted to retreat, but instead he stepped one pace toward the Indian. They were close enough for their breathing to mingle.

Running Elk said, "We know you are as many as the sands of the sea. We know we cannot win. We can only die as men should die. Unbroken, unconquered. Now you try my patience, Tucker."

"And you mine," Sam said. He moved to his horse, removed the Crow scalp. "By this scalp I swear that the whites wish to live in peace with the great Sioux people."

"Then why sell guns to the Crow?"

"There are evil persons in any race."

"True."

"And this scalp has spoken to me. It tells me you have in your power a man, a wearer of a buffalo jacket, and the scalp says this man is innocent of any wrongdoing and must be permitted to go with me."

Running Elk regarded Sam and then the scalp with narrowed eyes. "You know

a scalp cannot speak," he said, but there was uncertainty in his voice. He had seen many powerful things of his own medicine man. And this white man had once showed them the most powerful medicine of all, rabbits coming from high silk hats, scarves ripped in shreds only to reappear whole. And the bitter brew that chased the great ache from the belly.

Sam shook the scalp. Distinctly, it said, "Release the wearer of the buffalo jacket."

THERE was a gasp from the assembled men of the council at Running Elk's back. Women muttered and hid their children and covered their own heads.

Even the warrior, surly-faced, sullen-lipped Strong Boy took a step back from his position where he could threaten the white man who had brought Singing Waters into camp.

"I lifted this scalp from the head of a hated Crow," Sam said, "and rode far to present it to my good friend Running Elk. But he must do as the scalp commands."

Running Elk turned to his council members. There was the buzz of discourse among them.

Running Elk turned back to Sam. There was greed in his eyes as he regarded the scalp. Then he spread his hands. "The council says the scalp does not know the truth. The wearer of the buffalo jacket was caught breaking open a case of guns." He reached out. Trying to appear nonchalant, he suggested, "I will accept the gift of my friend Tucker."

Sam glanced at the scalp, raised his brows, and then leaned his ear close to the

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gory hank. “The scalp will not change owners until I have been permitted to talk with the buffalo jacket.”

Running Elk’s lips thinned; he deliberated. But he was unable to keep his eyes from the talking scalp. “This you may do. You may speak as long as this twig burns in the fire.” He tossed a small branch on the glowing embers off to one side.

Sam tucked the scalp in his belt and turned to follow Running Elk.

He saw the girl Singing Waters watching him. She gave him a smile, and he had to gulp. Then Strong Boy moved to her side, glaring.

When they had passed, Sam asked Running Elk: “Her husband?”

“No. He fevers for her, but her father demands many ponies, and he is poor, the son of One Who Turns Men’s Heads and a brave who died of disease.”

Sam for some reason felt better, though he was plagued by the thought that he had years enough and more on him. Twenty-seven, last spring. High time he had a wife. And then the inevitable thought: Indian wife? Well, why not? She had been to mission school. Her English showed that. She knew the ways of his people. She could take her place among them.

Running Elk stopped before a tipi at which two braves stood guard, erect as the war lances held at their sides.

Sam pushed into the gloom behind Running Elk. There was the smell of earth and fresh sleeping boughs cut from the pines and firs. A gentle snore broke the silence.

Sam followed the snore to its source. Buffalo Biddix lay on his side, lips fluttering with each outgoing breath. With his bulk in repose, Buffalo looked like a peaceful, chubby child. His face was round, his hair a spare, limp silver, his nose a red button.

Sam nudged him with his toe. Buffalo suspiciously opened one eye, and then the other. He sat up quickly.

“Thought they had to come to put me through the ordeal,” he said. “How are you, boy?” He drew on his boots, stood up.

Running Elk said, “Until the twig burns,” and went out of the tipi.

“You old galoot,” Sam said, “can’t you stay out of trouble when my back is turned?”

“Just naturally follows me,” Buffalo said in resignation. “I am coming out of the mountain with a burro loaded with herbs when I make camp and find this case of guns stashed in a hollow beside the creek. Naturally I am surprised by this find, and I am breaking the case open to make sure, when I am set upon by three Sioux braves. Must have been tracking me. Nothing I say convinces them I am innocent as a baby. They bring me here. Out of past friendship, Running Elk tells me that I am to have a chance to tell them who left the guns there for me. No talk, and I’ll be put to the test by fire. Hell of a thought. They treat me pretty well, but they’re getting out of patience. Thought sure they was coming for me this time.”

IT SOUNDED about as bad as it could get, Sam decided. He gripped Buffalo’s

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shoulder. "When you didn't show on Macklin Branch, I set out. Now I've found you, we'll figure some way out of this."

Buffalo scratched under his armpits. "We better figure fast. I ain't hankering to carry on a conversation with their fire god."

Sam went out, found Running Elk, and gave him the scalp. Running Elk clutched it close, assigned a warrior to show Sam to a tipi which would be his for the night, and hurried to his own tipi to converse with the Crow scalp. Sam watched the old chief's departure with pursed lips.

Sam was in the tipi only a few moments when an old crone of a woman slipped in and let the flap of deerskin fall behind her.

She stood with lowered head, thin-bodied, her face a mass of wrinkles. She raised her face a little and when she spoke Sam glimpsed broken, yellow teeth. "I am One Who Turns Men's Heads. Strong Boy is my son. I see the way you and the girl look at each other. You must take her away, white medicine man. She is bad for Strong Boy. He pants much for her, but her father demands many ponies."

Sam studied the old woman intently. "You have not stated everything?"

"That I cannot do," she said. "Enough to say that what a man yearns for he sometimes goes to great extents to get."

"And your son does evil to gain the ponies with which to wed Singing Waters."

"I do not say as much." The old woman was uncomfortable, as if sorry now she had come. "You look at me strangely," she said. "You think perhaps I

am misnamed. But many years ago I bore my name well. I could turn any man's head. My beauty could bewitch all men." Her shoulders straightened somewhat in pride, then sagged again. "But it was a curse. I wanted what I could not have. I was never happy again. Far better had I been born ugly, as age has made me now. I want my Strong Boy to be safe and happy, not as I was."

She slipped from the tipi silently as a shadow. Sam watched her shuffle across the compound. He saw the way she held her head down like a beaten cur dog, the way her people glanced aside as she passed. Some of them spat upon her shadow.

For a moment, Sam was gripped with pity for One Who Turns Men's Heads. In his imagination, he saw down her years, to a time when her beauty had been a flashing thing, a smug weapon. What a reputation the old girl must have earned for herself!

SAM was prepared for the advent of a warrior sent by Running Elk. He stood before the warrior and placed his fingertips on the Indian's chest near his heart.

"Wait," Sam ordered, "I will read what is in your heart without it coming from your lips."

He threw back his head, closed his eyes. "Running Elk has sent you to bring me to his tipi because the scalp of the Crow will not speak."

The warrior nodded dumbly.

"Running Elk is impatient, but the scalp will not speak because Running Elk is holding an innocent man prisoner. The

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scalp can only tell Running Elk of the fire that will sear his eyes from their sockets when he harms the wearer of the buffalo jacket, and the scalp will not speak of that for it will anger Running Elk and cause him to destroy the scalp. The scalp will speak only when it can bring good tidings to the great chief, after he has released and sent the innocent man away with gifts.”

Sam pointed imperiously. “Go now to your chief and speak what I have spoken.”

The warrior dashed out. Sam wiped his forehead.

He ate antelope that night from the cooking pots of the Sioux, and it was handed him by an image from a dream, light as a thistle upon her dainty feet, her face lowered but not too low for him to see the flash of her smile. Running Elk watched him with narrowed eyes and Strong Boy with open hate.

Sam knew things were coming to a head. He could feel it in the air, sense it in the tribal council members who flanked their chief. Buffalo would either be released or put to the torture of fire to make him speak. If they decided Buffalo was guilty, then the white medicine man must be guilty as well. For an instant, the savory game almost curled in Sam’s stomach.

He kept his air and attitude aloof, but his eyes and face suggested friendship when he happened to glance at Running Elk. He harbored no ill will, but Running Elk was the one who must right a wrong. Sam hoped he got this feeling across without it being misconstrued.

He strolled toward the creek with the first light of the moon. His mind was

heavy with the problem. Even if Buffalo was released and they rode from the camp in safety, there remained much. The rifle-running; the impending war clouds between Crow and Sioux, which would bring troops in, lead to war, and cost white scalps and red ones as well. Sam flinched from the prospect, being a peaceable man and believing that the country needed all the good, strong citizens it had, without killing any of them off.

THEN HE SAW Singing Waters standing beside the creek, like a doe about to take flight. He walked slowly toward her. Strong Boy and I have one thing in common, he thought.

She stood warm and near in the darkness and he could hear her breathing and see the glint of teeth behind parted lips.

“You make strong medicine, Sam Tucker,” she said softly. “It changes the beat of my heart and makes me dizzy here.” She touched her temple.

“You are frank and honest, as a child.”

“But no child. A woman worth many ponies. Can you make ponies speak, Sam?”

“Now you’re laughing at me.”

“I went to mission school, and I know scalps cannot talk.”

“You heard the Crow scalp speak.”

“And did I not say you make strong medicine?”

“Still laughing at me,” he said. He caught her wrists. He pulled her toward him. She struggled enough for decorum; then their faces were almost touching.

“There is a custom among the white

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people which makes the strongest medicine of all," he said. "Would you like to learn its secret?"

"I think so."

He bent his head and kissed her. It was unreal, the touch of lips so soft.

She gasped. "You do speak truly. I think it's a very pleasant custom."

"A little more practice," he suggested, "and you'd be tops at it."

"Tops?"

"The best. Nothing to equal you."

"You speak with poetry. Like the singing brook." She became serious, studying his face. "And like the brook you will run away. I must go now, or like One Who Turns Men's Heads I will be made the fool."

Strong Boy came out of the shadows. His lips were peeled back until his gums showed like curdled blood about his teeth.

He hurled himself on Sam and bore Sam to the ground. Moonlight glinted on a knife. Sam grabbed the descending arm. It was strong as a hickory bough. Sam brought the arm to a halt when the knife nipped the flesh of his throat. He tried to squirm from beneath Strong Boy. The Indian gripped his throat with his other hand.

Sam grabbed the Indian's scalp. He pulled Strong Boy's head down, trying to bash it against the ground.

Dimly Sam heard shouting, Singing Waters' rising voice. Then the tramp of many feet. And Strong Boy was pulled off him.

Running Elk pushed through the warriors Singing Waters had summoned. Strong Boy writhed against the hands

gripping him. "He comes to cheat us of a rascal and despoil our women!"

"Is this true, Tucker?" Running Elk asked.

"No. I come to free an innocent man, and there is only sweet music in my heart for Singing Waters."

"You will give many ponies for her?" a middle-aged Indian asked. Her father, Sam guessed.

"I will have the ponies, greedy man!" Strong Boy broke in. "Singing Waters shall be mine, and my knife will taste the blood of this offspring of a goat!"

"He has challenged you, Tucker," Running Elk said.

"He sure as hell has," Sam said glumly.

At a nod from Running Elk, Sam was herded back into the village. There was a brief council; then Running Elk gestured and warriors drew back and one took a stick to make a large circle on the ground.

STRONG BOY laughed and began stripping to his waist. Sam swallowed the cotton in his throat and did likewise.

"You will fight in the manner of our people," Running Elk commanded. Sam's hardware, including his knife, were taken from him. Strong Boy tossed his knife away and flexed his hands before him, showing silently how he would break the white neck.

Strong Boy pranced into the circle. Sam sighed and shuffled in behind the Indian. Strong Boy launched his attack as he had beside the creek, with the full force of his body.

Sam was prepared this time. He caught

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the Indian's arm, hit him across the back of the neck with the flat of his hand. He hit him so hard the hand went numb, and Strong Boy fell on the ground. Sam looked at him in some surprise. He felt a little better. Maybe some of the starch was knocked out of the buck now.

It did not seem so. Strong Boy backed to get his breath, grinning evilly. He returned to the attack, strong as ever, but more wary.

He circled in a crouch and feinted. The movement failed to throw Sam off guard, but it threw Strong Boy out of position. Sam put a bear hug about Strong Boy and poured all his strength into his arms. He felt the ribs giving like hickory saplings. Strong Boy screeched with pain.

They stood swaying, the flickering campfires playing over their straining, half-naked bodies, while the village watched from outside the circle.

Strong Boy brought a knee up, and Sam staggered away, reeling. Strong Boy hit him with the full force of his body and they went down. Strong Boy threw a quick scissor-hold around Sam's middle and now Sam could feel his own ribs giving under the pressure.

He grabbed and caught a moccasin. With set teeth, sweat streaming down his face, he brought the foot up and around, twisting it, eyes bugging as he stared at the foot and wondered if it were going to be pulled free. Then he saw the sole of the moccasin, and almost let go.

Strong Boy had been the rifleman who'd fled from Macklin's Branch. Sure as sin, it had to be so. Across the sole of the moccasin was an old slit, repaired with

fine thong. This very moccasin had left that footprint on the bank of the branch.

The knowledge brought a new surge of strength. With a bellow, Sam brought the foot up hard. Tendons snapped. Strong Boy screeched. Sam scrambled from the reach of Strong Boy's hands and gained his feet.

The Indian tried to get up. Sam helped him, to an extent. He whirled Strong Boy around and around over his head until gasps of amazement rose from the village. Then Sam aimed Strong Boy at the hard earth and let fly. Strong Boy struck with a thud that shook the ground. The night became perfectly silent, and Sam stood gasping in the circle, the victor, with sweat and dirt caking his face and chest and fire running through his lungs as he tried to get air into them after Strong Boy's squeezing.

Sam stood tall and straight and raised his head high. He glanced at the faces about him only long enough to locate Singing Waters.

She was weeping softly, and Sam knew thanksgiving when he saw it.

HE GAVE her a wink; then his face became stony. In a thunderous voice, he spoke to Running Elk, "Disbeliever who has almost brought the wrath of the speaking scalp upon his own head, will you listen to the scalp now?"

"I will," Running Elk said.

"Then fetch the scalp. Quickly! Move not as an old woman."

One Who Turns Men's Heads ventured to her son's side, rubbed his forehead, but the ministrations did not return him to consciousness.

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The scalp was handed to Sam. He held it at arm's-length, began shaking it, staring at it with impassive face. The Indians' eyes all followed his stare. When every eye was focused on the shaking scalp, the tossing hair began to fling out words: "Fools, in your own midst is the traitor! It is Strong Boy who has conveyed the guns to the Crow."

A gasp, a chorus of "How can it be?" rose from the village.

"Must I tell you everything?" the scalp demanded. "Are you not wise enough to ferret out Strong Boy's motives yourselves? Perhaps he wanted money for many ponies. His own mother knew he was indulging in evil. But whatever his motive, he was with the Crow from whose head I was taken. You will find the corpse and Strong Boy's footprints near each other on Macklin Branch. Together—Crow and Sioux—they tried to kill the white medicine man, but he, in his strength, courage, and great wisdom, thwarted them and came to you with truth!"

Strong Boy was trying to stumble to his feet. His mother helped him, a wrinkled old crone standing at his side as the men of the village moved toward them, Running Elk in the van. A change took place in the old, time-destroyed features of One Who Turns Men's Heads. Her shoulders straightened. A light came to her eyes. Some of the wrinkles seemed to disappear.

She looked at the Sioux with all the venom and hate distilled through years of being despised and cast out and having her shadow spat upon.

Her voice quivered with feeling. "It was not only ponies he wanted, though that was in his mind. He is not one of you. He has never been! My husband knew and told the boy from his death bed to torture his young years. He did not cast me out, my husband, knowing the shame it would bring upon him, but he hated me and he made me what I am, old, ugly, and worked to death! Strong Boy was not his son. Strong Boy is the son of a Crow chieftain who fell under the spell of One Who Turns Men's Head when she had the beauty to bewitch all men! So great was her bewitchment that this warrior of warriors dared death to come to her side in secret meeting places. He would have made her queen of the Crow had he not died in battle.

"And now Strong Boy stands unbowed and unconquered. You will kill—but he will die as his father!"

"Wait!" The scalp began shaking again in Sam's hand. "Strong Boy must not die. He must go to the white authorities, for he could not run the guns alone. He could only act as carrier and messenger. Somewhere there are white men who supplied him, who he will name, and who deserve the punishment they shall get. Prove your honor and friendship by helping the white men find and punish the evildoers in their midst."

"Be it so ordered," Running Elk said.

SAM TUCKER and Buffalo rode away with the dawn. The trail was dim and the air cold, for in Sam's mind lingered the vision of a face and the touch of ruby warm lips. Sam ate nothing and talked

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little.

When they reached the wagon on Macklin Branch, Buffalo Biddix snorted. “If you’re low on cash, I might loan enough to buy many ponies.”

Sam looked up at him. “She will forget in time. She will find a warrior.”

“I hear a jackass braying,” Buffalo said.

So they drove the wagon over terrain where no wagon was meant to go. And when they reached the Sioux village, the Indians turned out to meet them with much shouting and children chasing alongside.

Sam jumped from the wagon. Running Elk stopped him with news that the scalp had stopped talking again. “It will speak to your dreams,” Sam assured him, “as you sleep.”

And perhaps if Running Elk carried the thought firmly enough in mind, it would be so. But Sam had little thought for Running Elk. Sam burst into a tipi and flung gold coins at a middle-aged father. “To buy many ponies,” he said. “Now go buy them.”

When the man went out, Sam led Singing Waters outside. She looked

thinner; there were signs of weeping on her face, but her smile was radiant.

“I have come back,” he stated.

“I can see,” she said rather tartly.

“Say, what was your name at the mission school?”

“Beulah.”

“I think I like Singing Waters better.”

She linked her arm with his. “We travel in the wagon, Sam?”

“We sure do.”

“It’s a nice wagon. But I can’t make out all the words in the big signs plastered across the side of the wagon.”

“Well, the sign says: ‘Magic Snake Root Oil to cure ills from lumbago to hay fever, presented by the one and only Dr. Sam Tucker, magician and ventriloquist extraordinary.’ ”

“What’s a ventriloquist, Sam?”

“A man who can talk back to his wife without moving his lips. Now pipe down. It’s about time I was showing you more of that custom we were being introduced to down on the creek when Strong Boy jumped me.”

“A beautiful custom, Sam,” she sighed, “of which I am eager to learn much more.”