

In Blood and Longing

A Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Clinging to the flanks of his mustang with thighs ridged and calloused from a life on horseback Peta Nocona rode, in deference to his youth, at the rear of the band of some four score warriors. As the eastern sky showed a faint trace of day the war party trotted down stream from the camp in Palo Duro canyon and thence up and out and on to the vast prairie. It was the boy's first raid and though he rode erect his bearing belied his unease. Once on the vast tablelands that they called home the Comanches turned south and east and heeled their ponies into the loping gait that would take them relentlessly across their known territories and into lands over which they had once held sway but were now usurped by the 'taibos' and where the tribe would avenge this loss.

They rode the sun up to its meridian with yet not a rest. Many of the braves had danced the night previous till the moonlight shafted aslant from the west, and many nodded now and then as they rode. But like the children of the nomadic tribes of the great grassland steppes of Eurasia, Mongol and Turk, Cossack and Hun, a Comanche boy was as soon at ease in the saddle as he was upon his feet. Three centuries since the Spaniards had come forth from Mexico expecting to sweep all before them as they had throughout much of the new world. They had reckoned without the resilience of the tribe that would become the most dominant, most feared and the most brilliant and brutal exponents of war of the northern landmass. The conquistadors were fortunate to escape with their lives and the plains Indians were fortunate they left the horse, which thrived in the limitless tracts of buffalo grass prairie. The Comanche prospered with them. A brave's wealth was counted by the size of his herd; his standing in the tribe by his skill and ferocity from a rawhide saddle.

The band coursed the prairie swales shadowed and abetted toward their mayhem by one steepling, roiling cloud that rose alone into the flawless sky as if called forth from the bile of the earth like some long suckled pestilent infant and now loosed upon the crust. Jagged creases of light darted amongst the billows while sinister filigrees of rain baptized chosen folds of prairie and a spiraling maelstrom reached down like a malign limb from the cloud's black base to flail a path of ruin. The twain, cloud and galloping host, swarmed forth, in their yoked purpose, to lay waste.

Finally the chief called a halt and posted watches and the young brave and the sum of the band flung themselves down on their horse blankets to rest. Once the bloated moon crested the east they set forth once more and rode the night down. For four nights under that swelling moon they swallowed the prairie swales till the boy was so bone weary he expected to topple from his mount and he marveled at the hardiness of the older warriors. Scouts returned that evening with news of a settlement ahead so that night they danced and slept and rode on at dawn.

Tense as a startled rattlesnake, Peta Nocona clutched the huge war lance to his flank as they galloped down on the fort and met the white man outside the gates and the head men of both parties argued an issue of counterfeit bills, which the war chief claimed to have received from one of the man's relatives in requital for a string of Comanche ponies. Denial and recrimination rose to a pitch and when the first lance was lunged into the man he, Peta, felt his nerve harden and he kneed his horse between the throng of ponies and plunged his lance into the man's guts. The warriors now fell upon the man and stabbed and clubbed him down, till a brave scalped him and held the dripping pate aloft and flung his chin up and filled the morning with a triumphant shout, while the Baptist thrashed and whimpered in the throes of his quietus.

Peta turned his pony through the gates of the wooden fort and charged a knot of men who struggled to muzzle load their long Kentucky rifles as women and children screamed and wept and ran without design. Shots cracked through the still morning as he bore down on the men and the breastbone of his pony sent one man staggering back and down. He leapt from the saddle and as he stooped to belabor his enemy he had suffered a surge of longing and lust, a fervor he had not till then known, a zeal which had welled in him from some primal origin born amongst his forebears, and which had galvanized those forebears since they had first trampled afoot through the northern plains and had first grappled with hostile tribes for supremacy of those lands, and which since their diaspora south and their mastery of the horse that fervor had been the Comanche enlightenment and their answer to that fervor marked them as men.

Like a player at sport he gamboled in the shift of his limbs, the arc of his body, the nicety of the execution of his weapons, and he felt during that first battle and all later conflicts be they against white or Mexican or rival band, he felt as if time itself were laggard and he foresaw the lunge of his enemy and weapons moved ponderously and predictably in space, and that he held sway over those actions.

He brought the obsidian point of his lance down through the man's throat and impaled him to the packed dirt and the man's face contorted in a rictus with the horror of the blow and the man had grasped the lance shaft as if to wrest it clear but with one tempered blow of his war club the young Comanche split the man's skull and spilt his brains across the courtyard.

He wrenched the lance from the stricken fellow and fell upon him as blood throbbed from the much severed neck and he slashed his knife about the man's temples and slapped the dying man's feeble hands away and pinned his arms with his knees and snatched his hair up and sawed across the skull and roared with ardor and felt a stir in his loins as he held his first scalp high. Behind him a passel of braves had cut down the other two defenders and were finishing them in like manner. Peta leapt to the saddle and charged through the main gate and saw the posse of warriors in pursuit of a group of fleeing settlers and he urged his pony on. When he caught the group they had overrun the

old man and woman and few children and had stripped the adults of their clothes. Several braves set about the old man, disemboweling and dismembering and emasculating, while others pinned the old woman with a lance through her shoulder and lifted their breech clouts and by turns ravished her and Peta Nocona the young warrior destined to be chief of the Quahadis felt his own readiness and fell upon her in his turn and filled the land with a chilling salute as he met his release.

As they rode away from the fort that noon he had savored the grunted approval from the seasoned warriors for his actions, and the lingering pleasure from the heat of the fray, and he had stared into the jutting blue eyes of the lovely, nine year old, pale and terrified girl lashed painfully to the croup of a brave's horse with no notion that she, Cynthia Ann Parker, would, within a few years, be his wife, and who would bear him a son and that that boy would become the most famed and feted of all Comanches, Quanah Parker.

CHAPTER TWO

Rain and sleet lashed aslant across the prairie. Streams of run-off sluiced every swale. Tormented by the blue norther the tall prairie grasses shivered and thrashed like demented spirits. No man in his right mind would venture out in such a storm, but James W. Parker's right mind had long deserted him. His journeys across the breadth of central Texas year after year alone and often afoot had clouded the judgment of the fierce Baptist. Canting into the shrieking wind, thrusting his staff forward with every labored step, and mumbling verses from the Second Epistle of John he stumbled over the sodden land, a deranged anchorite seeking redemption in solitude and suffering.

Since the brutal attack on the Parker Fort James W. Parker, had spent many of the intervening years searching Indian country for his missing relatives, a son, a daughter, a grandson, and a niece, Cynthia Ann Parker. Driven by guilt and by stolid Christian conviction that his relatives were enduring lives of unmitigated misery under the yoke of their heathen captors, Parker responded to the vaguest reports of white captives being discovered in far flung outposts of the frontier by setting off alone on bitter quests invariably to discover that the trail had turned cold.

Undeterred he would return to the halls of power in San Antonio to badger and entreat the legislators and the governor's office for more federal troops or more of the irregular rangers to combat the 'incursions of the savages'. Occasionally the powers that be were forced to answer his implacable obduracy and troops sallied forth often in token efforts to punish the Comanche raiders; some returned chastened and fortunate to escape with their lives, bearing chilling tales of the fate of those of the party whose lives had ended on those barren plains. Made of sterner stuff Parker crossed the prairie alone; his miraculous record of survival serving only to bolster his conviction that his Maker was unequivocally on his side.

Incanting the pious lines, and guided by only the vaguest sense of direction, he strove forward into the tempest. By nightfall, soaked to the bone, shuddering and cowed,

the realization penetrated even his addled brain that if he failed to warm himself he might not survive the night. He cast about and spied a wash hemmed by a copse of stunted trees.

In the lea of the trees the wind fell from a shriek to a high pitched whine. Parker gathered kindling from the lower branches and crouched over his tinder; but it was damp and he could not spark a fire. He huddled low, blowing on his palms and slapping his hands against his chest in a vain effort to get his blood flowing. In a final act of desperation he tore strips from his shirt, stuffed them into the muzzle of his Collier flintlock pistol, and fired it into the pile of kindling. Seeing a few sparks amongst the twigs he flung himself down, blowing furiously and feeding more threads of cotton into the tiny flame. Soon he had a roaring blaze and he crouched close, his tenuous grip on life and reality assured for another night.

At dawn he set off again into the abated rain. The prairie swelled and fell before him. Clouds, pewter and leaden, raced across the firmament, indeterminate beings as lost on the land as he. Three days he staggered forward, his grasp on reality fading with his strength; three nights he shuddered through the dark, swaddled in a damp blanket, sustained only by a mumbled dirge from the scriptures, and a chew of jerked meat. On the fourth, lurching ahead, step by tortured step, into the dusk, he stumbled against a palisaded fence and reeled back, his path across the untrammelled land having met no such impediment since the start of his journey.

Peering over the fence he made out the sod hovel set into a rise in the land, the low timbered lean-to, the pigs and goats and a slat-ribbed horse huddled against the weather. He passed through a skewed gate and helloed the house. Twice and thrice he bellowed into the gale. A dog howled. At last a shutter cracked open, a rifle muzzle slid into view and a voice rang out.

“Who ventures abroad in such a tempest?” The voice was loud but failed to disguise the anxiety; outlying settlers such as these seldom saw visitors and seldom did their visitors bring cheer, be they Comanche or white.

“Pastor Parker. Crossing the prairie in search of kin.” He held his palms wide to show he bore no arms; the pistol holstered at the small of his back.

“Parker of Parker’s fort?”

“Aye, the same.”

“Come forth.” The rifle swung from the casement, the shutter slammed. Moments later the door creaked ajar and a bearded, drawn face studied the pastor as he approached.

“Pastor James W. Parker.” He held his hand out.

“Whitey Nordvelt.” His calloused hand had the farmer’s might; shrewd eyes, shrouded with sockets furrowed from weather and strain, studied this wretch of the plains. “Best step by the stove Pastor. Shed them soaked vetments.”

“I surely will, Brother Nordvelt.” He swung his gaze round the room, noting the few items of worth in the sparse homestead, and approached the woodstove with a whimper, hands outstretched to the heat, a pilgrim to an icon.

“I’ve heard tell of you Parker, and your wanderings. You have gained some renown as the searcher.”

“No renown I have sought.” Parker swung his leather satchel from his shoulder, and slumped into a chair, arms held wide to the warmth. “But indeed I have traveled wide to bring my lost kinfolk back from the clutches of these barbarous savages.”

“A noble cause sir.” Nordvelt stepped to the stove and took a blackened pot from its top. “Reckon you’ll be ready for some hot vittels.”

“That you can say.”

Nordvelt stirred the pot and set it on the small table. Both men scraped chairs in and set to the meal; Parker ate ravenously, Nordvelt ladled till Parker finally held his palm high and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“A fine appetite you have Pastor.”

“That’s the first hot grub I’ve had pass my lips this last week.” Parker thumbed his bowl back. “Have ye seen any of them red devils hereabouts, these recent days?”

“Sure haven’t, thank the lord.” Nordvelt leant back in his chair, studying his guest. “And pray I don’t for a long while. Hard enough scratching a living from this dirt alone without having to fend off them brutes.”

“You ain’t got no kinfolk with ye?”

“Not no more. Wife and child carried off with the pox these three year since.”

“Ye have my blessings.” Parker rose and stretched. “Happen I’ll be resting up here shortly.”

“You’re welcome to lay down inside.” Nordvelt cleared the table.

“No need of that thank ye. I’ll be jes fine in the barn. It’ll be grand accommodations after where I been laying my head of a night.” Parker toted his bag and made to leave.

“Here. At least take this dry cover.” Nordvelt handed him a coarse and faded horse blanket. “Leave your bedding by the stove. T’will be dry come morning.”

Parker hesitated a moment before swinging the blanket to his shoulder. “Awful kindly of you sir.”

He went through the door and crossed the yard passing the pens where hogs grunted in the mud and reached the barn and swung open the heavy door. The barn walls were slabbed and the wind blew through where the planks had shrunk and canted and shafts from a bloated moon fell twisted along the dirt floor. He kicked straw into a pile against the far wall and threw down the blanket and went to the stall where a poor specimen of horse-flesh stared down at him.

“You’s a sorry creature no doubt, but you’ll spare my legs awhile.” He patted the roan’s lean neck and took from the wall peg a worn bridle and hung it on the stall latch.

“But first some rest.” He yawned and walked back and lay in the straw and drew the blanket about him and slept.

By the time he awoke the moon had set. He stirred himself with a douse of rye whisky from his flask and rose and shook the exhaustion from his head as the raw liquor bit into his throat and he went to the stall and took the bridle and opened the door and led the horse out. Hastily he slid the bit home and latched the crown strap and flung the blanket across its withers and took the saddle from a wooden rail and heaved it on to the horse’s back and reached low and cinched the buckle. He crept from the barn and stalked to the house, a grey hint of dawn worrying the eastern brink of the world. Leaning at the shuttered casement he listened a while to the farmer’s steady snores. He hurried back to the barn and led the horse out and dallied the reins to the rail of the pigpen, calming the animal with a low soothing voice the while. He entered the pen and chose a shoat from the wheezing huddle that lay against the sod bank. He pulled his clasp knife from his belt and bared the blade and flung himself across the hog’s back and clenched its snout tight

and hauled its head back and quirted the knife-edge back and forth across its throat. But still it managed a shrill squeal and he cursed and grabbed it by both fore and hind trotters a hand apiece and draped it about his neck and stumbled across the pen, warm gouts of blood pulsing from the stricken animal's throat and basting his face and shoulders while the hog offered a plaintive and broken keen to that grim dawn. He climbed to the top rail of the fence and made to mount but the bony roan shied and skittered and he fell across the horse's neck knocking the breath from his chest. But he gained his seat and reached to unhitch the reins as the house door rattled back against the jamb and the farmer tottered forth in his drawers desperately fumbling a round into his breechloader. Parker sawed the horse's head about and heeled it forward and horse and rider pounded toward the house and with his free hand the Pastor lunged to the small of his back for his pistol. But mired in its own gore the pig slid from his shoulders and he snatched back and found the fore knuckle in mid air by mere good fortune. Like a vaquero closing on a stray he wheeled the still thrashing and guttering pig over his shoulder its life blood spouting a bright arc into the gloom like a woman's locks as she rises from water and flings her head back, and roaring the vitriol of a pulpit tirade, he bore down on Nordvelt as the farmer swung the rifle up and a shot cracked into the night and Parker swung the pig's hind quarters into the man's chin jackknifing him back into the door frame where his skull struck and cracked asunder and he slumped over the threshold while Parker and the roan thundered across the yard and slammed through the pickets with barely an essay at hurdling the fence.

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