

The Free Press Short Story

AN APACHE CAPTIVE

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THE LONE RIDER sat quietly in the saddle, and from the summit of the ridge, cautiously surveyed the vale below. He was dressed in beaded deerskin, and his brown curly hair hung to his shoulders. Over his sun-browned countenance came a look of perplexity and uneasiness while he watched the Pima village, whose cluster of lodges and shelters dotted the east bank of the Gila.

"I wonder what could be keeping her and Swift Foot?" muttered the rider. He had been waiting for an hour.

Though it was a winter afternoon, in the late fifties, a warm sun glowed from the blue Arizona skies. Down in the vale, swarthy, half-naked children romped in happy abandon on the open meadow. Squaws pattered around huge kettles and kept slow fires burning. A half dozen Indian girls mounted their pintos and rode off over the trail that wound along the east bank of the river. None of them was Nawassa.

Frequently, during the last six weeks, Roger Drannan had ridden up here from the trader's camp, three miles down the Gila, and waited for the girl and her brother to join him. By the custom of the tribe, Nawassa could not accompany a "paleface," even for a short ride, without her brother. Such an arrangement had a measure of companionship for young Drannan. Nawassa was an unusual, as well as an attractive Indian girl. She spoke Spanish fluently, and knew Apache almost as well as she knew her own tribal tongue.

The sound of muffled footsteps, and the snapping of a dry twig, caused the rider to look around with a start. There, under a drooping pine tree, not six paces off, stood Nawassa. She was afoot and had approached without his hearing her. Before he could speak a greeting, she put her fingers to her lips. He waited till she drew alongside his horse, then asked in a subdued tone, "What's wrong, Nawassa? Where is Swift Foot?"

"My brother waits for you!" she replied in Spanish. She pointed to a dense copse of mesquite, farther along the ridge. "You'll find him there. Go at once!"

"Drannan could not believe a trap had been set for him; yet he realized the value of caution. He bent lower from the saddle. "When will I see you again?"

"On another day, Senor! Buenos!" In a moment she had vanished as she came.

Reaching the mesquite thicket, Drannan dismounted, tied his horse and stealthily pushed into the sticky tangle. He carried no other weapon than his hunting knife. He had gone but a few yards when he came upon the young Pima concealed in the brush. Swift Foot also, was unarmed save for the long bladed knife carried in his snake-skin girdle.

When they were seated close together, the young Indian muttered: "Be not afraid, my friend. I have a great truth—and a secret to reveal. No others must hear. His jet black eyes searched the thicket before he said another word. "You no longer can be in the company of Nawassa. The chief has spoken. It is the law of the tribe; but Nawassa and I have a secret to reveal—Again the Pima's dark orbs scanned the bushes and trees. He listened a while before he resumed.

"Seven years ago the Apaches, whose lands spread into the red hills beyond the Gila, attacked a lone emigrant wagon on the Santa Fe trail. They thought it was the wagon of a Long Knife, or trader. Not till they had slain the bearded driver, his wife and his son, did they know they had killed a missionary."

"A cruel and terrible thing!"

"Even for the Apache it was a terrible mistake," said the Pima. "But there were two little girls in the wagon whom they spared. The captives were taken to a village on the upper Gila. The oldest still lives. The Apaches gave her the name of Night Bird, because she can sing to the stars of a God who loves all people, and of a Saviour who came from Heaven long ago."

Roger Drannan was deeply stirred by the Pima's low-spoken revelation. "How far is it to the village where this white girl is held a captive?"

"Six hours ride," answered Swift Foot. "She makes her home in the lodge of the chief. I have seen her here. Nawassa knows her well. Three days from now she will come with the Apache women to gather pinyon nuts. Nawassa will meet her near their camp, and arrange for you to see her."

Drannan gasped his surprise. "You mean I am to talk to her?"

"Not at first," explained the Pima. "But you can see her from a distance. Nawassa will bring her under a big pine, at sunset. You will see her hair, shining like pure gold, and hear the music of her voice."

Swift Foot changed from guttural Pima to broken Spanish, and dropped his voice lower. "After you have seen Night Bird, you will know I have told you the truth; that she is lovely to behold. She is too beautiful and too good to be sold into slavery, as the Apache chief intends. So, Nawassa and I have arranged

The Apache camp is on the river, just below.

Once more Roger grasped the Pima's hand. He could not be sure that they would ever meet again. "Good-bye, Swift Foot! I'll be on my way. All shall be done as you have said!"

The Indian spoke no farewell. "Go! My brave friend! Happy am I to have known you. Nawassa will be with Night Bird at the big pine!"

An hour's leisurely ride brought Drannan to the red rock under a towering bronze bluff on the bank of the Gila. He took a slow gait, to spare his horse for the grueling test of stamina and speed that later would come. He had no difficulty locating the tall pine.

The upper benches and ridges seemed devoid of any living things. Leaving his horse concealed in a convenient thicket, Drannan carefully surveyed the surrounding wilds and patiently waited. The sun was already low in the west.

While his eyes were riveted on the tall pine, two figures emerged from the darker shadows of the pines. One was an Indian girl he recognized as Nawassa. She led another girl into the subdued twilight glow. Drannan held his breath, and his heart pounded violently. For the first time in six years, since he was a small boy of thirteen—he beheld a white woman! Her wealth of blond hair did seem a golden glory as it fluttered in the light breeze around her shoulders. Her dress was no different from that of the Apache women. Her face he could not see. He soon caught the silvery notes of her voice as she started singing an old hymn:

"There is a hand of pure delight,
Where saints immortal reign,
Eternal day excludes the night,
And pleasures banish pain."

Night's velvet mantle lowered about the hills when the final notes of the old song faded out. The two figures under the pine could no longer be seen. Drannan arched, and stood in a tense, listening attitude, when an Indian call floated up from below. The Apaches would soon be looking for their captive. They did not long allow her out of their sight.

Mounting his horse, Drannan descended to the bottom of the deep gulch where he waited a few minutes longer in the thickening gloom. When he reached the pine, it was quite dark. The place, silent as a sanctuary, was empty. He wondered if Nawassa and the white girl, frightened by the Indian call, had fled. While he sat motionless in the saddle, he heard the soft-treading of moccasined feet on the dry ground; then a subdued cautious murmur.

Two stealthy figures crept out of the growth. Nawassa, who was leading the other girl, spoke to the plainsman, "Here she is! Night Bird—you will take! Quick you must go! The Apaches come! Alerta—Senor!"

A strange emotion swept through Roger Drannan when he helped the captured girl to a place behind him on his horse. She hung her head, and seemed reluctant and fearful. "Don't be afraid," he said with quiet assurance. "I am your friend as Nawassa is your friend. We must hurry—if we escape!"

She continued to hang back as she kept her head bowed dejected. "I'm not afraid," she sobbed in broken English. "You are most kind to help me. But you do not know—"

She turned then so that her features, for the first time, were revealed to Drannan. Even in the starlight he could see how ghostly white was her face. He saw, too, on her forehead the tribal tattoo of the sun and the lightning, indelibly

put there by an Apache medicine man.

Roger turned and took her trembling hand. "It's all right!" he told her in a subdued tone of infinite kindness. "I understand! I will take you to people of your own blood and kind! You will be protected and cared for—"

"The senator speaks truly, Night Bird!" brought in Nawassa. "You can trust him—I know! Alerta! You should be on your way! The Apaches, soon come!" She clung to the white girl's hand for a moment, sobbing. "Adios—Night Bird! Senor! Adios!"

Drannan felt the warm pressure of her fingers. He passed another second to touch his palm to her cheek. "Good-bye, Nawassa, brave one!" His horse leaped off into the gloom. Five miles the fleet mustang raced with scarcely a pause, mainly through the pines and dwarfed pines that fringed the east bank of the Gila. All the while the rider could feel the girl's trembling grasp, as she clung to him behind the saddle.

He swung out of the timber into an open prairie, whose low hills were covered with bunch grass and clumps of prickly pear. Here the panting horse was allowed to take a slower pace. Drannan knew he had twenty more miles to go to reach Yuma. He hoped to satisfy cover the distance by early morning, and was congratulating himself on having safely eluded the Apaches, when he distinctly caught the distant drumming of hoofs on the hard ground.

"They're coming! They will overtake us!" Night Bird fearfully gasped.

"No, they won't overtake us!" Drannan answered. "Hold on—and don't be frightened!" He leaned over in the saddle and spoke to his horse, patting the animal's hot neck.

On, at swifter pace, the animal sped a mile after mile, dodging the clumps of prickly pear, leaping over boulders dashing across rock-strewn coulees. The animal's gait began to tell upon the animal's wonderful endurance. Never in all his years on the plains had Roger Drannan ridden any horse so hard. He knew this

second, when the Pima lifted her up behind.

Roger Drannan realized the motive and the courage that prompted this helpful act. He understood, also, what it

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