Little Friend Coyote

George Bird Grinnell

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IT was in the summer when the Blackfoot and Piegan tribes were camped together that the Blackfoot, Front Wolf, first noticed Su−ye−sai−pi, a Piegan girl, and liked her, and determined to make her his wife. She was young and handsome and of good family, and her parents were well−to−do, for her father was a leading warrior of his tribe. Front Wolf was himself a noted warrior, and had grown rich from his forays on the camps of the enemy, so when he asked for the young woman her parents were pleased pleased to give their daughter to such a strong young man, and pleased to accept the thirty horses he sent them with the request.

In those days, in the long ago, such intertribal marriages were common, for the two great camps often travelled together in quest of the buffalo, sometimes for a whole winter and summer, and thus the young people became acquainted with each other. Again they would be separated by hundreds of miles of rolling plain.

After their marriage the young couple continued to live in the Piegan camp, for Front Wolf had many friends there of his own age, who begged him to remain with them. They liked to go on raids under his leadership better than with any one else. It seemed to his wife as if he were always away on some expedition, so seldom was he at home, and as she had learned to respect and love him, she was very lonely during these long absences. One summer, only two or three days after his return from a successful war−journey against the Crows, he said to his wife: "It is a long time since I have seen my parents. Now I think it time for me to visit them and give them some horses. If you have any little things you wish to send them, hurry and make them ready, so that I may take them."

"I have some pretty moccasins for your father," said Su−ye−sai−pi, "and a fine buckskin dress for your mother; but I am not going to send them. I want to go with you and present them myself. It seems as if you do not care at all for me. Here you are just home from a long journey, and yet you would start right out again, without thinking about me at all."

"No," Front Wolf replied, "it is not that I do not love you; you may go with me if you insist on it. I did not like to ask you to make the trip, for the distance is great and there is danger on the way."

Su−ye−sai−pi was happy. She began her preparations at once, and only laughed at her parents when they urged her to remain with them, telling her that the plains swarmed with war parties in search of scalps and plunder, and that she would surely be killed.

At this time the Piegans were hunting on the Lower Milk River, but the morning that Front Wolf and his wife started away, the whole camp moved too, for the chiefs wished to pass the hot season along the foot−hills of the great mountains. At the last moment five young Blackfeet, visitors in the camp, decided that they too would return home, so they set forth with the couple, and helped drive the little herd of horses that Front Wolf intended to give his relatives. The northern tribe was thought to be summering on the Red Deer River, and a course was roughly taken for the place where it joins the Saskatchewan. This brought the little party, after three or four days' travel, to the Cypress Hills, or, as they were named by the Indians, the Gap−in−the−middle Hills. They reached the southern slopes of the low buttes one morning, after being without water all the preceding day, and prepared to camp and rest at the edge of a little grove, close to which a large clear spring bubbled up from a pile of sunken bowlders. They did not know that a large camp of Kutenais was just behind the hill where they stopped, and that

one of their hunters, seeing them coming, had hurried home and spread the news. Su−ye−sai−pi had scarcely started a fire when the warriors from the camp were seen to be approaching the little party from all directions, completely hemming them in. Although these two tribes, the Blackfeet and Kutenais, had once been very friendly to each other, they were now at war. When the strangers approached, one of them, the chief, who had learned Blackfoot in other days, called out, "Don't fire; we are friends; we will not harm you."

Front Wolf and his friends had drawn the covers from their guns, prepared to fight and to sell their lives dearly, but when Front Wolf heard this, and saw that the strangers made no motions to shoot, he lowered his rifle and said: "They intend to make peace with us; I guess they are tired of being at war with our people. Do not be afraid; they will not harm us."

The chief came up first, and shook hands with Front Wolf and the rest, saying: "I am glad to meet you. Our camp is near. Come over to my lodge, and we will feast and smoke."

These were kind words. The little party of Blackfeet did not doubt that they were sincere. They packed up again, mounted their horses, and rode around the hill to the lodges. The chief invited them to stop with him, and they rode toward the big lodge in the centre of the village, where many people were gathered. There they dismounted, when suddenly their arms were taken from them by the surrounding crowd, and they were pushed into the big lodge. It was a very hot day, and all around the skin lodge−covering had been raised for several feet to allow the cool breeze to pass beneath it, so the prisoners could see all that was happening without. Their little band of horses was quickly divided and led away; and then the chief and all the men had a long talk.

Presently the chief came inside, and sat down in his accustomed place at the back of the lodge. Following him four warriors entered, and seizing the young Blackfoot who sat nearest the door, led him out some little distance from the lodge, where one of them brained him with a war−club, and then every one tried to get a piece of his scalp, or to plunge a knife into his body. In a moment his hands, feet, and head were severed, and women were pushing and kicking and pounding the mutilated parts here and there, singing as they did so the shrill song of revenge. The Blackfeet looked on at this terrible butchery of their friend with horror, but in stolid silence, all save Su−ye−sai−pi, who gave a frightened cry when she saw the poor fellow struck down, and clasping her husband by the arm, buried her face in his breast. The chief smiled but did not speak. Presently another one of the young Blackfeet was led out, and met the fate of the first one. One after another, when his turn came, each arose and accompanied his captors without struggle or cry, and met his death as a true warrior should.

At last all had been killed except Front Wolf and his wife, and presently they came for him. Su−ye−sai−pi clung to him and cried and begged, but her husband himself put her from him and went out, saying to her a last kind word. "Do not cry," he said. "Take courage. Take courage." As he neared the place of butchery he began to sing his war−song, and the poor wife, looking on, saw him smile as the great stone club descended, and he fell forward lifeless to the ground. The woman now thought that her turn had come, but the executioners did not return. She wished that they would not delay; she wished to have the dreadful ordeal over with, so that her shadow might overtake her husband's as it travelled along on the road to the Sandhills home of the departed Blackfeet. All the Kutenais, even the women and children, had now painted their faces black, and were dancing the scalp−dance, carrying before them the scalps, stretched on long forked willows.

"Come," said the chief to Su−ye−sai−pi, offering her the scalp from Front Wolf's head "come, join us in this dance and be happy."

"You may kill me," the woman replied, "but you cannot make me dance. I beg you to kill me, so I may join my husband."

The Kutenai laughed. "You are too young to die yet," he said, "and besides, we do not kill women. Before long we are going to make peace with the Blackfeet and Piegans, and when that time comes we will give you back to

your people."

Of course it was a lie, for he had no thought of making peace, but intended to keep the woman.

Su−ye−sai−pi was very sad. If she sat in the lodge, the scalp−song rang in her ears; if she stepped outside, the bodies of her husband and friends greeted her eyes. She could do nothing but cry and wish for death to take her.

Several days passed and the rejoicings of the camp still continued. One afternoon an old widow woman called her into a poor little lodge and said: "I have great pity for you, and will do what I can to help you. I do not know what the chief has decided to do with you, but whatever it is, I would save you from it. Your only chance is to try to get away from here in the night and seek your people. I will fill a good big pouch with dried meat and pemmican, and some moccasins, and as soon as it is dark I will place it out behind my lodge. When the people are all asleep, and the evening fire has died out, leave your bed as quietly as you can, pick up the pouch, and hurry away in the direction from which you came."

Su−ye−sai−pi burst out crying. No one had been kind to her before, and kindness made her cry. She kissed her new friend, and when she could speak she said that she would try to get away that night. It seemed as if night would never come, and then as if the people would never stop talking and feasting and go to bed. But at last everything was quiet in the camp, and in the chief's lodge the fire of small willows had died down, and the deep breathing of the occupants showed that they were asleep. The captive cautiously arose from her couch near the door and stole outside. She stood and listened a moment, and then coughed once or twice. No one moved inside; so, feeling quite sure that no one was watching her, or had noticed her come out, she went to the widow's lodge, and found the pouch behind it, and quickly but noiselessly left the camp.

The sky was overcast, and presently heavy rain, with thunder and lightning, came up, but she walked swiftly, steadily on, not knowing nor caring whither, so long as it was away from her enemies. The shower passed and the moon came out, and then the poor woman heard shouts and calls, and the rushing tread of horses; the whole camp was aroused, and they were searching for her. She crouched in the shadow of a bowlder, and heard horsemen go by on either side. Once two or three of them rode by in plain sight. She remained there a long time, until everything was still again, and then hurried on. In a little while she approached a small lake, and saw three horses by its edge.

"Here," she said to herself, "would be a good chance if I only had a rope. Perhaps they are hobbled; if so, the thongs will do for a bridle." She walked carefully nearer, when suddenly she saw three dim figures on the ground and heard a loud snore. She almost fainted with fright, knowing that these were some of her pursuers waiting for daylight to resume their search. Quick as a flash she stooped among the low brush, crawled slowly back, and then rising, hurried away in another direction.

In a little while day began to break, and she found herself on a wide plain south of the hills. In a little ravine near by there was an old wolf or coyote den; she crawled down into it, feet foremost, first carefully obliterating her footsteps in the soft loose earth about it. There she remained all day, eating none of her little store of food, for she was so thirsty it choked her. Several times during the day she heard the distant tramp of horses, but she did not look out, much as she wished to see what was going on.

When darkness came once more, she climbed out and started in search of water, not knowing which way to look for it, or whether she would ever find any. She travelled on, and on, and on, and when daylight again brightened the sky, found herself at the place where her husband lay. Yes, there were the bodies of him and his friends, now shapeless and terrible objects. And the Kutenais were gone. Fearing that she might find her people, dreading the awful vengeance that would overtake them if she did, they were no doubt already fleeing toward the pine−covered slopes of the great mountains. Worn out from her long tramp, and nearly crazed from thirst, the poor woman had barely strength to go on to the spring, where she drank long of the cool water, and then fell asleep.

The sun was hot, but Su−ye−sai−pi slept on. Well on in the afternoon she was awakened by something nudging her side. "They have found me," she said to herself, shivering with terror, "and when I move, a knife will be thrust in my side." She lay motionless a little while, and then could bear the suspense no longer; slowly rising up and turning back her robe, what should she find lying by her side but a coyote, looking up into her face and wagging his tail!

"Oh, little wolf!" she cried. "Oh, little brother! Have pity on me. You know the wide plains; lead me to my people, for my husband is killed and I am lost."

The little animal kept wagging his tail, and when she arose and went again to the spring, he followed her. She drank, and then ate a little dried meat, not forgetting to give him some, which he hastily devoured. She talked to him all the time, telling him what had happened, and what she wished to do; and he seemed to understand, for when she started to leave the spring he bounded on ahead, often stopping and looking back, as much as to say, "Come on; this is the way."

They were passing through the broken hills, and the coyote, quite a long way ahead, had climbed to the top of a low butte and looked cautiously over it, when he turned, ran back part way, and then circled off to the right. Su−ye−sai−pi was frightened, thinking he had sighted the Kutenais, and she ran after him as fast as she could go. He led her to the top of another hill, and then, looking away along the ridge, she saw that he had led her around a band of grizzly−bears, feeding and playing on the steep slope. Then she knew for certain that he was to be trusted, and she told him to keep a long way ahead, to look over the country from every rise of ground, and to warn her if he saw anything suspicious. This he did; and sometimes he would wait for her at the top of a ridge or hill, where they would sit and rest awhile, and as soon as she was ready to go on, he would run to the top of the next rise before she had taken fifty steps. If thirsty, she would tell him, and he would always take her in a little while to some water. Sometimes it would be a small trickling stream in a coulee; sometimes a soft damp gravel bed, where she was obliged to scoop out a hole; sometimes it was a muddy buffalo−wallow, and it was always strong with alkali but it was the best there was.

In this way, after many days, they came to the Little Milk River. The pouch had long been empty, and Su−ye−sai−pi was weak from hunger, and her weary feet were swollen and blistered, for the last pair of moccasins had been worn out. Here by the river were plenty of berries and some roots that are often eaten good to fill the belly, but not strength−making food. Of them she ate all she could, and frequently bathed her feet, and kept on up the valley; but every day she went more slowly. The stops for rest were more frequent now, and the coyote showed that he was beginning to feel uneasy. When he thought she had sat still too long, he would whine and paw at her dress, and look away up the stream, urging her to go on. He himself fared well on the ground−squirrels and prairie−dogs he managed to catch, and often he brought one to her; but she could not bring herself to eat it raw, and she had no way of building a fire to roast it.

One day, while the sun was hottest, the two stopped to rest in a thick patch of brush. They were near the mountains now, and the valley was wide, with low, sloping hills on either side. The woman had been telling her companion she talked to him now as she would have talked to a person that her feet were swollen so badly she could go no farther, and then she fell asleep. She was awakened by the coyote jerking her gown and whining, and she sat up and listened. Pretty soon she heard people talking; they were some distance away, but the murmur of their voices seemed familiar; they came nearer, and she heard one say, in her own language, "Let's cross the river here."

She hobbled out to the edge of the brush and called to them, and when they rode up to where she stood they did not know her at first, she was so worn and thin. She told them her story, and pointed to the coyote by her side, telling them how it had helped her, and begging them not to kill it. They told her that the camp was only a little way above on the river, and offered her a horse to ride, but she asked them to go on and tell her mother to come after her with a travois, for she felt too sore to ride. Presently her mother came, and her father, and a great throng

of the people, and when she saw them approaching she put her arms around the coyote and kissed him.

"You have saved my life," she said; "and much as I grieve to, we must part now, for while I might prevent the people from harming you, I could not stop the camp dogs from tearing you to pieces. But do not go far away. Every time we move camp my father's lodge shall be the last to go; and when the rest and the dogs have all left, we will leave food for you where our lodge stood. We will always do that."

The coyote seemed to understand. He licked her face and whined, and as her mother and father approached, he slowly moved away, looking back many, many times.

Su−ye−sai−pi cried cried at parting with her faithful guide, and because at sight of her mother all her trials and sufferings came back to her mind. They placed her on the travois and drew her to camp, where all the people came to sympathize with her, bringing something from their store of choice food as presents.

The coyote was not forgotten; food was always left at the camp site, as she had promised, and often as Su−ye−sai−pi and her people started on after the others, they saw him standing on a near hill, watching them out of sight.

"OH, LITTLE WOLF!" SHE CRIED