

XV. TANNIS OF THE FLATS

Few people in Avonlea could understand why Elinor Blair had never married. She had been one of the most beautiful girls in our part of the Island and, as a woman of fifty, she was still very attractive. In her youth she had had ever so many beaux, as we of our generation well remembered; but, after her return from visiting her brother Tom in the Canadian Northwest, more than twenty-five years ago, she had seemed to withdraw within herself, keeping all men at a safe, though friendly, distance. She had been a gay, laughing girl when she went West; she came back quiet and serious, with a shadowed look in her eyes which time could not quite succeed in blotting out.

Elinor had never talked much about her visit, except to describe the scenery and the life, which in that day was rough indeed. Not even to me, who had grown up next door to her and who had always seemed more a sister than a friend, did she speak of other than the merest commonplaces. But when Tom Blair made a flying trip back home, some ten years later, there were one or two of us to whom he related the story of Jerome Carey,--a story revealing only too well the reason for Elinor's sad eyes and utter indifference to masculine attentions. I can recall almost his exact words and the inflections of his voice, and I remember, too, that it seemed to me a far cry from the tranquil, pleasant scene before us, on that lovely summer day, to the elemental life

of the Flats.

The Flats was a forlorn little trading station fifteen miles up the river from Prince Albert, with a scanty population of half-breeds and three white men. When Jerome Carey was sent to take charge of the telegraph office there, he cursed his fate in the picturesque language permissible in the far Northwest.

Not that Carey was a profane man, even as men go in the West. He was an English gentleman, and he kept both his life and his vocabulary pretty clean. But--the Flats!

Outside of the ragged cluster of log shacks, which comprised the settlement, there was always a shifting fringe of teepees where the Indians, who drifted down from the Reservation, camped with their dogs and squaws and papooses. There are standpoints from which Indians are interesting, but they cannot be said to offer congenial social attractions. For three weeks after Carey went to the Flats he was lonelier than he had ever imagined it possible to be, even in the Great Lone Land. If it had not been for teaching Paul Dumont the telegraphic code, Carey believed he would have been driven to suicide in self-defense.

The telegraphic importance of the Flats consisted in the fact that it was the starting point of three telegraph lines to remote trading posts up North. Not many messages came therefrom, but

the few that did come generally amounted to something worth while. Days and even weeks would pass without a single one being clicked to the Flats. Carey was debarred from talking over the wires to the Prince Albert man for the reason that they were on officially bad terms. He blamed the latter for his transfer to the Flats.

Carey slept in a loft over the office, and got his meals as Joe Esquint's, across the "street." Joe Esquint's wife was a good cook, as cooks go among the breeds, and Carey soon became a great pet of hers. Carey had a habit of becoming a pet with women. He had the "way" that has to be born in a man and can never be acquired. Besides, he was as handsome as clean-cut features, deep-set, dark-blue eyes, fair curls and six feet of muscle could make him. Mrs. Joe Esquint thought that his mustache was the most wonderfully beautiful thing, in its line, that she had ever seen.

Fortunately, Mrs. Joe was so old and fat and ugly that even the malicious and inveterate gossip of skulking breeds and Indians, squatting over teepee fires, could not hint at anything questionable in the relations between her and Carey. But it was a different matter with Tannis Dumont.

Tannis came home from the academy at Prince Albert early in July, when Carey had been at the Flats a month and had exhausted all

the few novelties of his position. Paul Dumont had already become so expert at the code that his mistakes no longer afforded Carey any fun, and the latter was getting desperate. He had serious intentions of throwing up the business altogether, and betaking himself to an Alberta ranch, where at least one would have the excitement of roping horses. When he saw Tannis Dumont he thought he would hang on awhile longer, anyway.

Tannis was the daughter of old Auguste Dumont, who kept the one small store at the Flats, lived in the one frame house that the place boasted, and was reputed to be worth an amount of money which, in half-breed eyes, was a colossal fortune. Old Auguste was black and ugly and notoriously bad-tempered. But Tannis was a beauty.

Tannis' great-grandmother had been a Cree squaw who married a French trapper. The son of this union became in due time the father of Auguste Dumont. Auguste married a woman whose mother was a French half-breed and whose father was a pure-bred Highland Scotchman. The result of this atrocious mixture was its justification--Tannis of the Flats--who looked as if all the blood of all the Howards might be running in her veins.

But, after all, the dominant current in those same veins was from the race of plain and prairie. The practiced eye detected it in the slender stateliness of carriage, in the graceful, yet

voluptuous, curves of the lithe body, in the smallness and delicacy of hand and foot, in the purple sheen on straight-falling masses of blue-black hair, and, more than all else, in the long, dark eye, full and soft, yet alight with a slumbering fire. France, too, was responsible for somewhat in Tannis. It gave her a light step in place of the stealthy half-breed shuffle, it arched her red upper lip into a more tremulous bow, it lent a note of laughter to her voice and a sprightlier wit to her tongue. As for her red-headed Scotch grandfather, he had bequeathed her a somewhat whiter skin and ruddier bloom than is usually found in the breeds.

Old Auguste was mightily proud of Tannis. He sent her to school for four years in Prince Albert, bound that his girl should have the best. A High School course and considerable mingling in the social life of the town--for old Auguste was a man to be conciliated by astute politicians, since he controlled some two or three hundred half-breed votes--sent Tannis home to the Flats with a very thin, but very deceptive, veneer of culture and civilization overlying the primitive passions and ideas of her nature.

Carey saw only the beauty and the veneer. He made the mistake of thinking that Tannis was what she seemed to be--a fairly well-educated, up-to-date young woman with whom a friendly flirtation was just what it was with white womankind--the

pleasant amusement of an hour or season. It was a mistake--a very big mistake. Tannis understood something of piano playing, something less of grammar and Latin, and something less still of social prevarications. But she understood absolutely nothing of flirtation. You can never get an Indian to see the sense of Platonics.

Carey found the Flats quite tolerable after the homecoming of Tannis. He soon fell into the habit of dropping into the Dumont house to spend the evening, talking with Tannis in the parlor--which apartment was amazingly well done for a place like the Flats--Tannis had not studied Prince Albert parlors four years for nothing--or playing violin and piano duets with her. When music and conversation palled, they went for long gallops over the prairies together. Tannis rode to perfection, and managed her bad-tempered brute of a pony with a skill and grace that made Carey applaud her. She was glorious on horseback.

Sometimes he grew tired of the prairies and then he and Tannis paddled themselves over the river in Nitchie Joe's dug-out, and landed on the old trail that struck straight into the wooded belt of the Saskatchewan valley, leading north to trading posts on the frontier of civilization. There they rambled under huge pines, hoary with the age of centuries, and Carey talked to Tannis about England and quoted poetry to her. Tannis liked poetry; she had studied it at school, and understood it fairly well. But once

she told Carey that she thought it a long, round-about way of saying what you could say just as well in about a dozen plain words. Carey laughed. He liked to evoke those little speeches of hers. They sounded very clever, dropping from such arched, ripely-tinted lips.

If you had told Carey that he was playing with fire he would have laughed at you. In the first place he was not in the slightest degree in love with Tannis--he merely admired and liked her. In the second place, it never occurred to him that Tannis might be in love with him. Why, he had never attempted any love-making with her! And, above all, he was obsessed with that aforesaid fatal idea that Tannis was like the women he had associated with all his life, in reality as well as in appearance. He did not know enough of the racial characteristics to understand.

But, if Carey thought his relationship with Tannis was that of friendship merely, he was the only one at the Flats who did think so. All the half-breeds and quarter-breeds and any-fractional breeds there believed that he meant to marry Tannis. There would have been nothing surprising to them in that. They did not know that Carey's second cousin was a baronet, and they would not have understood that it need make any difference, if they had. They thought that rich old Auguste's heiress, who had been to school for four years in Prince Albert, was a catch for anybody.

Old Auguste himself shrugged his shoulders over it and was well-pleased enough. An Englishman was a prize by way of a husband for a half-breed girl, even if he were only a telegraph operator. Young Paul Dumont worshipped Carey, and the half-Scotch mother, who might have understood, was dead. In all the Flats there were but two people who disapproved of the match they thought an assured thing. One of these was the little priest, Father Gabriel. He liked Tannis, and he liked Carey; but he shook his head dubiously when he heard the gossip of the shacks and teepees. Religions might mingle, but the different bloods--ah, it was not the right thing! Tannis was a good girl, and a beautiful one; but she was no fit mate for the fair, thorough-bred Englishman. Father Gabriel wished fervently that Jerome Carey might soon be transferred elsewhere. He even went to Prince Albert and did a little wire-pulling on his own account, but nothing came of it. He was on the wrong side of politics.

The other malcontent was Lazarre M^{er}rim^e, a lazy, besotted French half-breed, who was, after his fashion, in love with Tannis. He could never have got her, and he knew it--old Auguste and young Paul would have incontinently riddled him with bullets had he ventured near the house as a suitor,--but he hated Carey none the less, and watched for a chance to do him an ill-turn. There is no worse enemy in all the world than a half-breed. Your true Indian is bad enough, but his diluted

descendant is ten times worse.

As for Tannis, she loved Carey with all her heart, and that was all there was about it.

If Elinor Blair had never gone to Prince Albert there is no knowing what might have happened, after all. Carey, so powerful in propinquity, might even have ended by learning to love Tannis and marrying her, to his own worldly undoing. But Elinor did go to Prince Albert, and her going ended all things for Tannis of the Flats.

Carey met her one evening in September, when he had ridden into town to attend a dance, leaving Paul Dumont in charge of the telegraph office. Elinor had just arrived in Prince Albert on a visit to Tom, to which she had been looking forward during the five years since he had married and moved out West from Avonlea. As I have already said, she was very beautiful at that time, and Carey fell in love with her at the first moment of their meeting.

During the next three weeks he went to town nine times and called at the Dumonts' only once. There were no more rides and walks with Tannis. This was not intentional neglect on his part. He had simply forgotten all about her. The breeds surmised a lover's quarrel, but Tannis understood. There was another woman back there in town.

It would be quite impossible to put on paper any adequate idea of her emotions at this stage. One night, she followed Carey when he went to Prince Albert, riding out of earshot, behind him on her plains pony, but keeping him in sight. Lazarre, in a fit of jealousy, had followed Tannis, spying on her until she started back to the Flats. After that he watched both Carey and Tannis incessantly, and months later had told Tom all he had learned through his low sneaking.

Tannis trailed Carey to the Blair house, on the bluffs above the town, and saw him tie his horse at the gate and enter. She, too, tied her pony to a poplar, lower down, and then crept stealthily through the willows at the side of the house until she was close to the windows. Through one of them she could see Carey and Elinor. The half-breed girl crouched down in the shadow and glared at her rival. She saw the pretty, fair-tinted face, the fluffy coronal of golden hair, the blue, laughing eyes of the woman whom Jerome Carey loved, and she realized very plainly that there was nothing left to hope for. She, Tannis of the Flats, could never compete with that other. It was well to know so much, at least.

After a time, she crept softly away, loosed her pony, and lashed him mercilessly with her whip through the streets of the town and out the long, dusty river trail. A man turned and looked after

her as she tore past a brightly lighted store on Water Street.

"That was Tannis of the Flats," he said to a companion. "She was in town last winter, going to school--a beauty and a bit of the devil, like all those breed girls. What in thunder is she riding like that for?"

One day, a fortnight later, Carey went over the river alone for a ramble up the northern trail, and an undisturbed dream of Elinor. When he came back Tannis was standing at the canoe landing, under a pine tree, in a rain of finely sifted sunlight. She was waiting for him and she said, with any preface:

"Mr. Carey, why do you never come to see me, now?"

Carey flushed like any girl. Her tone and look made him feel very uncomfortable. He remembered, self-reproachfully, that he must have seemed very neglectful, and he stammered something about having been busy.

"Not very busy," said Tannis, with her terrible directness. "It is not that. It is because you are going to Prince Albert to see a white woman!"

Even in his embarrassment Carey noted that this was the first time he had ever heard Tannis use the expression, "a white

woman," or any other that would indicate her sense of a difference between herself and the dominant race. He understood, at the same moment, that this girl was not to be trifled with--that she would have the truth out of him, first or last. But he felt indescribably foolish.

"I suppose so," he answered lamely.

"And what about me?" asked Tannis.

When you come to think of it, this was an embarrassing question, especially for Carey, who had believed that Tannis understood the game, and played it for its own sake, as he did.

"I don't understand you, Tannis," he said hurriedly.

"You have made me love you," said Tannis.

The words sound flat enough on paper. They did not sound flat to Tom, as repeated by Lazarre, and they sounded anything but flat to Carey, hurled at him as they were by a woman trembling with all the passions of her savage ancestry. Tannis had justified her criticism of poetry. She had said her half-dozen words, instinct with all the despair and pain and wild appeal that all the poetry in the world had ever expressed.

They made Carey feel like a scoundrel. All at once he realized how impossible it would be to explain matters to Tannis, and that he would make a still bigger fool of himself, if he tried.

"I am very sorry," he stammered, like a whipped schoolboy.

"It is no matter," interrupted Tannis violently. "What difference does it make about me--a half-breed girl? We breed girls are only born to amuse the white men. That is so--is it not? Then, when they are tired of us, they push us aside and go back to their own kind. Oh, it is very well. But I will not forget--my father and brother will not forget. They will make you sorry to some purpose!"

She turned, and stalked away to her canoe. He waited under the pines until she crossed the river; then he, too, went miserably home. What a mess he had contrived to make of things! Poor Tannis! How handsome she had looked in her fury--and how much like a squaw! The racial marks always come out plainly under the stress of emotion, as Tom noted later.

Her threat did not disturb him. If young Paul and old Auguste made things unpleasant for him, he thought himself more than a match for them. It was the thought of the suffering he had brought upon Tannis that worried him. He had not, to be sure, been a villain; but he had been a fool, and that is almost as

bad, under some circumstances.

The Dumonts, however, did not trouble him. After all, Tannis' four years in Prince Albert had not been altogether wasted. She knew that white girls did not mix their male relatives up in a vendetta when a man ceased calling on them--and she had nothing else to complain of that could be put in words. After some reflection she concluded to hold her tongue. She even laughed when old Auguste asked her what was up between her and her fellow, and said she had grown tired of him. Old Auguste shrugged his shoulders resignedly. It was just as well, maybe. Those English sons-in-law sometimes gave themselves too many airs.

So Carey rode often to town and Tannis bided her time, and plotted futile schemes of revenge, and Lazarre Merimee scowled and got drunk--and life went on at the Flats as usual, until the last week in October, when a big wind and rainstorm swept over the northland.

It was a bad night. The wires were down between the Flats and Prince Albert and all communication with the outside world was cut off. Over at Joe Esquint's the breeds were having a carouse in honor of Joe's birthday. Paul Dumont had gone over, and Carey was alone in the office, smoking lazily and dreaming of Elinor.

Suddenly, above the plash of rain and whistle of wind, he heard outcries in the street. Running to the door he was met by Mrs. Joe Esquint, who grasped him breathlessly.

"Meestair Carey--come quick! Lazarre, he kill Paul--they fight!"

Carey, with a smothered oath, rushed across the street. He had been afraid of something of the sort, and had advised Paul not to go, for those half-breed carouses almost always ended in a free fight. He burst into the kitchen at Joe Esquint's, to find a circle of mute spectators ranged around the room and Paul and Lazarre in a clinch in the center. Carey was relieved to find it was only an affair of fists. He promptly hurled himself at the combatants and dragged Paul away, while Mrs. Joe Esquint--Joe himself being dead-drunk in a corner--flung her fat arms about Lazarre and held him back.

"Stop this," said Carey sternly.

"Let me get at him," foamed Paul. "He insulted my sister. He said that you--let me get at him!"

He could not writhe free from Carey's iron grip. Lazarre, with a snarl like a wolf, sent Mrs. Joe spinning, and rushed at Paul. Carey struck out as best he could, and Lazarre went reeling back against the table. It went over with a crash and the light went

out!

Mrs. Joe's shrieks might have brought the roof down. In the confusion that ensued, two pistol shots rang out sharply. There was a cry, a groan, a fall--then a rush for the door. When Mrs. Joe Esquint's sister-in-law, Marie, dashed in with another lamp, Mrs. Joe was still shrieking, Paul Dumont was leaning sickly against the wall with a dangling arm, and Carey lay face downward on the floor, with blood trickling from under him.

Marie Esquint was a woman of nerve. She told Mrs. Joe to shut up, and she turned Carey over. He was conscious, but seemed dazed and could not help himself. Marie put a coat under his head, told Paul to lie down on the bench, ordered Mrs. Joe to get a bed ready, and went for the doctor. It happened that there was a doctor at the Flats that night--a Prince Albert man who had been up at the Reservation, fixing up some sick Indians, and had been stormstaid at old Auguste's on his way back.

Marie soon returned with the doctor, old Auguste, and Tannis. Carey was carried in and laid on Mrs. Esquint's bed. The doctor made a brief examination, while Mrs. Joe sat on the floor and howled at the top of her lungs. Then he shook his head.

"Shot in the back," he said briefly.

"How long?" asked Carey, understanding.

"Perhaps till morning," answered the doctor. Mrs. Joe gave a louder howl than ever at this, and Tannis came and stood by the bed. The doctor, knowing that he could do nothing for Carey, hurried into the kitchen to attend to Paul, who had a badly shattered arm, and Marie went with him.

Carey looked stupidly at Tannis.

"Send for her," he said.

Tannis smiled cruelly.

"There is no way. The wires are down, and there is no man at the Flats who will go to town to-night," she answered.

"My God, I MUST see her before I die," burst out Carey pleadingly. "Where is Father Gabriel? HE will go."

"The priest went to town last night and has not come back," said Tannis.

Carey groaned and shut his eyes. If Father Gabriel was away, there was indeed no one to go. Old Auguste and the doctor could not leave Paul and he knew well that no breed of them all at the

Flats would turn out on such a night, even if they were not, one and all, mortally scared of being mixed up in the law and justice that would be sure to follow the affair. He must die without seeing Elinor.

Tannis looked inscrutably down on the pale face on Mrs. Joe Esquint's dirty pillows. Her immobile features gave no sign of the conflict raging within her. After a short space she turned and went out, shutting the door softly on the wounded man and Mrs. Joe, whose howls had now simmered down to whines. In the next room, Paul was crying out with pain as the doctor worked on his arm, but Tannis did not go to him. Instead, she slipped out and hurried down the stormy street to old Auguste's stable. Five minutes later she was galloping down the black, wind-lashed river trail, on her way to town, to bring Elinor Blair to her lover's deathbed.

I hold that no woman ever did anything more unselfish than this deed of Tannis! For the sake of love she put under her feet the jealousy and hatred that had clamored at her heart. She held, not only revenge, but the dearer joy of watching by Carey to the last, in the hollow of her hand, and she cast both away that the man she loved might draw his dying breath somewhat easier. In a white woman the deed would have been merely commendable. In Tannis of the Flats, with her ancestry and tradition, it was lofty self-sacrifice.

It was eight o'clock when Tannis left the Flats; it was ten when she drew bridle before the house on the bluff. Elinor was regaling Tom and his wife with Avonlea gossip when the maid came to the door.

"Pleas'm, there's a breed girl out on the verandah and she's asking for Miss Blair."

Elinor went out wonderingly, followed by Tom. Tannis, whip in hand, stood by the open door, with the stormy night behind her, and the warm ruby light of the hall lamp showering over her white face and the long rope of drenched hair that fell from her bare head. She looked wild enough.

"Jerome Carey was shot in a quarrel at Joe Esquint's to-night," she said. "He is dying--he wants you--I have come for you."

Elinor gave a little cry, and steadied herself on Tom's shoulder. Tom said he knew he made some exclamation of horror. He had never approved of Carey's attentions to Elinor, but such news was enough to shock anybody. He was determined, however, that Elinor should not go out in such a night and to such a scene, and told Tannis so in no uncertain terms.

"I came through the storm," said Tannis, contemptuously. "Cannot

she do as much for him as I can?"

The good, old Island blood in Elinor's veins showed to some purpose. "Yes," she answered firmly. "No, Tom, don't object--I must go. Get my horse--and your own."

Ten minutes later three riders galloped down the bluff road and took the river trail. Fortunately the wind was at their backs and the worst of the storm was over. Still, it was a wild, black ride enough. Tom rode, cursing softly under his breath. He did not like the whole thing--Carey done to death in some low half-breed shack, this handsome, sullen girl coming as his messenger, this nightmare ride, through wind and rain. It all savored too much of melodrama, even for the Northland, where people still did things in a primitive way. He heartily wished Elinor had never left Avonlea.

It was past twelve when they reached the Flats. Tannis was the only one who seemed to be able to think coherently. It was she who told Tom where to take the horses and then led Elinor to the room where Carey was dying. The doctor was sitting by the bedside and Mrs. Joe was curled up in a corner, sniffing to herself. Tannis took her by the shoulder and turned her, none too gently, out of the room. The doctor, understanding, left at once. As Tannis shut the door she saw Elinor sink on her knees by the bed, and Carey's trembling hand go out to her head.

Tannis sat down on the floor outside of the door and wrapped herself up in a shawl Marie Esquint had dropped. In that attitude she looked exactly like a squaw, and all comers and goers, even old Auguste, who was hunting for her, thought she was one, and left her undisturbed. She watched there until dawn came whitely up over the prairies and Jerome Carey died. She knew when it happened by Elinor's cry.

Tannis sprang up and rushed in. She was too late for even a parting look.

The girl took Carey's hand in hers, and turned to the weeping Elinor with a cold dignity.

"Now go," she said. "You had him in life to the very last. He is mine now."

"There must be some arrangements made," faltered Elinor.

"My father and brother will make all arrangements, as you call them," said Tannis steadily. "He had no near relatives in the world--none at all in Canada--he told me so. You may send out a Protestant minister from town, if you like; but he will be buried here at the Flats and his grave with be mine--all mine! Go!"

And Elinor, reluctant, sorrowful, yet swayed by a will and an emotion stronger than her own, went slowly out, leaving Tannis of the Flats alone with her dead.