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Athletic "front"

# The Cheyenne Athlete

By Glenn Hays

Victor could almost put his hand on the tension, pluck it and hear the music. The day of a game was a volatile time. Harmless though, to root for the White Horse Warriors in the last basketball game of their season; and the school activities were bonding agents for the community spirit, said Mayor Arthur Boole. The game would be played in the hole, a pit eight feet deep, with its bottom of tongue-in-groove boards and painted stripes and circles. Standing two feet outside the south end of the court was a black fat stove, its pipe running unbraced up through the high ceiling. The stove would hold no fire during play; it would nevertheless be guarded by a strong volunteer, who might well receive many congratulations for heading off a lost and frenzied player dashing for the basket. At the other end was the stage with its donated curtain covered by merchants' advertising. The curtain would be rolled up tight tonight and the tiny floor covered by chairs.

Lester Spyrene had the deal, but he didn't pick up the cards. He didn't want to play anymore. "Get me a pint, Red," he said. "Gotta be ready to celebrate tonight." Lester Spyrene was one of the town's independent businessmen. He didn't own a store. He was a trader, a swapper the townsmen called him. Mainly he listened. He'd learn what a man wanted, and then he'd learn who had it. He could arrange the swap or the sale so that neither the buyer nor the seller knew about the other. Sometimes he was more of an arranger than a trader. He was engaged in a wholesale, retail, cash and credit business that didn't require high capital outlays. Lester didn't hire a bookkeeper; he kept the books in his head and his pocket. Lester was gifted. Sometimes he'd put a deal together

that involved a whiskey still, a car, and a horse, and four or five men. He was friendly, and he had a reputation for honesty. Lester supported the basketball team. He'd bet five dollars on every game. His nephew, Sugar Spyrene, played on the team.

When he was away from his family, Victor was accustomed to the name Lester had called him. In his travels west nobody had ever asked his real name, just looked at his hair and called him Red. Its color was not far from blood bay, somebody had said one time, and kind of pretty. But it wouldn't cling to the contours of Victor's head in shapely waves like the hair of other men. It sprouted tough and springy like wild wire and blew about in the faintest wind.

Luther and Comfort Miles, whose back yard bordered the railroad right-of-way, operated a warehouse for the product of the Sandon stills. It was Comfort as usual, wearing a flesh-pink silken thing around her, who answered the door. She stepped back, struck a posture on her high heels, and gestured Victor inside, holding her red lips loosely parted like a voluptuary about to surrender to a ferment of passion. Comfort was an older woman, forty maybe, whose charms made Victor dream of nestling against her motherly flesh, then waiting while she instructed him what to do next.

"Mornin', Comfort," he said. "Three pints to start with, I reckon. Got one sold already."

Comfort disappeared into the kitchen, made some clinking sounds, and brought the flat amber bottles to Victor. He slipped each bottle under the bib of his overalls and fitted it into a tight pocket of his whiskey belt. Then he made sure the tail of his blue shirt would hide it all. Some folks knew what was there,

but they'd never tell. Not if they wanted to keep on drinking good Sandon whiskey.

Victor stood as wide as he could among the jostlers on the narrow balcony. They took no notice of him, neither the scholars of White Horse High nor the dry-mouthed parents of the players. In sweaty and emulous agitation they screamed against his eardrums and stepped on his feet. He had soon been separated from sisters Melody, Maissie, and Trina. They now stood pinned against the safety rail, cheering the warriors in their mad sprints down the floor and their fights for the round leather ball.

Victor, whose education had ended with the sixth grade reader, never had touched a basketball. It was only with a detached and tolerant approval that he watched the players in their furious exercise. He approved the behavior of the spectators not at all; often in fact he wanted to kick some sense into them, especially when they cursed the ball for not falling through the circle. And poor Asa Peterman, who was running frantically after the boys and blowing desperately on his whistle — these feverish people were always yelling out how blind, unfair, and insane Asa was. But Victor attended these public gatherings to sell whiskey, and it wouldn't do to kick his customers. The anxious antics of Lester Spyrene, Victor could comprehend. As usual, Lester had placed a five-dollar bet on the White Horse Warriors.

Even as a spectator of basketball, Melody Sandon went her own way. She watched only one player, crying her agony if he pushed up a ball that didn't swish through the net, screaming a passionate jubilation when he succeeded in some heroic effort. One time she appeared not to draw enough

breath. She placed the back of her hand on her brow, fell back against a support post, and closed her eyes. Maisie and Trina went to her. When Melody could talk again, she repeated what she had already said a dozen times: "Oh, Damon my prince, be resolute!"

Damon was a lithe, long-muscled Cheyenne with spring steel in his bowed legs. He was the only Indian in the twelfth grade. He could jump higher, run faster, and shoot straighter than any other boy on the team. Mister Perth, given a sports book when he arrived in town and told he had to teach basketball in addition to mathematics and geography, had been telling around that Damon was the greatest player he ever coached. Even betting men such as Lester Spyrene, when they could quit lamenting the diminishing skills of white players, said if Damon's pigeon feet could be pointed straight ahead, he would be greater than Jim Thorpe. Damon bought his haircuts from a white barber. He wore Khaki pants and real shoes. He was a long distance down the white man's road. He was the grandson of Chief Crow Talking.

Asa Peterman blew his whistle. Both coaches jumped up swinging their closed fists above their heads. The players on the benches swept onto the court. Lester Spyrene swore several times in a single breath. A dozen men from Canadian City, huddled for protection at the north end of the balcony, were protesting the violence done to their player by number five. Their faces grew splotchy with indignant rage as they predicted an unfair ruling by the no-account referee.

What Victor had seen was a vigorous disagreement over the ball and the risen ire of Sugar Spyrene. Sugar plastered his fist on the Canadian City player's nose, causing him to fall down bleeding. The problem for Asa was dreadful. The score was now twenty-two to twenty-one, and playing time was shrinking so rapidly that Professor Galsby was keeping anxious eyes on his stop watch all the time.

Asa pulled his handkerchief and swabbed the fallen player's face, and when he had reduced the blood to red smears, he held up two fingers. The injured boy made a correct count. Asa held off the visiting coach and encircled each player with an arm. The peace council began, and it lasted so long that somebody yelled at last, "Play ball, else we goin' ahead without no referee."

Sugar shook hands with his victim. Both players stayed in the game. Wonderful sportsmanship, said Lester and all the White Horse folks. A plain evasion of the game's rules, screamed the visitors in their tantrum, and they questioned Asa's parentage in several harsh but colorful ways. Professor Galsby got his watch in position.

The teams exchanged a rush of field goals in the game's ebbing time. Canadian City led the boys in green twenty-six to twenty-five. "Oh, Damon my prince," cried Melody with shallow breathing, "rally your warriors!" Lester clenched his fists and pleaded with Sugar to "do somethin'!" The floors creaked under stomping feet. The shrieking pleas rebounded off the walls, charging the space with chest-wrenching moans of impending defeat. Even Victor, uneasy in the presence of all that suffering, was breathing through a parched and open mouth. He said, "Do somethin', Damon, do somethin'!"

Professor Galsby was on his feet, the whistle in his mouth; his face revealed the distress of a man who all next week must command a school defeated in its last game.

Damon lunged, body horizontal, and clawed the ball, clung, and flung his tenacious opponent to the floor. Asa leaped forward blowing his whistle and held his arms high. The two players must jump for possession of the ball.

Asa tossed up. Damon sprang out of his crouch, followed the ball to the summit, and touched it with his fingers. He hung there treading air and flicked the ball spinning on a lofty arc. It fell to the bottom of the net, whapping the woven cords and whipping them upward through the hoop where they tangled into a knot.

Struck mute, the people were. The ball slapping down on the floor and dribbling itself to a roll occupied them altogether. The players became a tableau of stilled motion. Damon turned his head away from the basket, looked at the balcony, back at the basket, and on to the scoring table. The boy with the chalk wouldn't write down the new score. The professor wouldn't take his eyes off the watch. Damon peered with suspicion from under his brows. Maybe he was wondering what the people wanted him to do next. But maybe he suspected these whites were going to do something crazy. Professor Galsby blew his whistle and then fell back on his chair, sprawled, breathing.

Then came the roar of voices that would be forever beyond the descriptive powers of witnesses to that game. Victor did hear somebody swear he saw the walls of the building move. Mysteriously, Melody brought such intensity to her own shrieks that Victor heard her above all other sound, and yet she didn't rupture anything. She was climbing over the rail all the while, her skirt flung so high on her that someone might well have seen her white underwear. She hung down and dropped into the pit. She sprinted for Damon, who now stood hands on knees, sucking air into his heaving chest. She straightened him, embraced him, and soaked up the sweat on him. Damon braced himself for Melody's assault and peered this way and that. Then his teammates, unable to expend their sudden charge of jubilation, cornered into delirium, dragged him away, pounding and pulling. Damon wrapped his arms around his head.

Five shirts were torn off the backs of their owners that night. The board members went into emergency session right there in the pit, re-elected Coach Perth to his job for the following year and raised his annual salary fifty dollars. Then they re-hired Professor Galsby, raised him seventy-five dollars, and instructed him to see to renewal contracts for all the other teachers.

The Indians who attended the game, though grinning pleasantly when they realized that Damon had covered himself with glory, couldn't equal the enthusiasm of their white friends. Some of them might not have known who won the victory. They had observed the spectators and their agonies with more pleasure than they had watched the players. Chief Crow Talking had sat in a chair on the stage, and after the game he received many congratulatory handshakes. His heart was glad, he said. He had smiled through the whole game.

Leo Trant, city marshal for the past thirteen months, saw to the safety of the visitors from Canadian City. He escorted them to their cars and gravely shook their hands. He tried to make them feel welcome to come for another visit; but their departure was solemn, even morose, he later told the mayor and all who would listen. Leo declined to take full credit for the escape operation. He was helped considerably by the White Horse men, who in their charity had volunteered not to start a fight. Having an official escort to their cars made a strong impression on the

visitors from Canadian City, Leo said. Lester Spyrene pumped the water used by Damon and his teammates to slosh off their sweat. Victor sold thirteen pints of whiskey. He never did hear how many the other salesmen sold.

Victor delivered the first seven bottles across the road from the schoolhouse, now dark inside but still the place of magic echoes for the young folks in the school yard. They couldn't leave, couldn't let their greatest victory escape into the past, couldn't go home to dim lamplight and crawl between their blankets, not with this new glow of legendry still on their skins.

Stuffing the seven dollars into his pocket, Victor crossed over to the school yard. He could hear the excited babble of players and girls, his sisters among them. Off by themselves were the boys from last year and the year before, waiting, then leaping in to spin their own tales of courage and acrobatics in the pit. Melody stood close to Damon straightening his collar. She moved to his other side and brushed something from his jumper. Even now Damon was peeking one way and another from under his brows. Not likely would he ever again receive so many blows and scratches and dangerous embraces, no matter what valorous deed he might perform.

Victor invited his sisters to meet him later in the drugstore where he would treat them to Coca Colas. "Bring Damon," he added.

Dell Sandon must have spent the whole evening with Luther and Comfort. He had been there when Victor went after the first seven bottles, and here he was, still visiting with them. Victor got his whiskey, and Dell opened the door for his exit and followed him outside. "Victor, you're doin' real good tonight," he said.

"I guess Damon Crow Talking had somethin' to do with it," Victor answered, and told him how the game had ended. "You know. The old chief's grandson."

"I might've sold some myself," Dell said, "but Luther had a fit of coughin'. I thought I ought to stay and help. My, but that poor man does suffer!"

Luther Miles was a war hero. He had been a soldier against the Huns, had volunteered in fact, and had sailed across the ocean in a big ship. It was while the Americans were helping out the French in one of those killing battles that Luther found three Germans out of their trench. He killed them with

his rifle. In a ceremony with other heroes he received a medal for bravery under fire and a kiss from a French general with a mustachio.

Luther would show his medals to anybody, but he wore them only when he attended his veterans' conventions.

Not long after Luther got his medal, his division was the target for a mustard gas attack. Luther's gas mask didn't fit his face. Temporarily blinded, he had a long stay in the hospital, and the army sent him home a disabled veteran. He lived on his pension and the little commissions he got for warehousing the whiskey. Luther considered himself a retired man of means, and except for his occasional day in bed he dressed in his brown suit and matching tie. Lately, though, the suit had begun to look almost like an unfilled sack on him. Luther was losing weight.

"Business gonna pick up soon," Dell was saying. "What we need, I reckon, is a corner on the Indian trade." He put his hand on the door knob. "Anyhow, soon as I git caught up on my sugar bill, I'm gonna start payin' you some money."

"All right, Papa." "Some money" would be a start, and welcome. As matters were now, Victor could make more money milking cows for a farmer than he could selling whiskey for Dell. He went directly through Kendall's Castle and delivered the whiskey in the darkness behind the building. Then he headed toward the drugstore.

All the notions and edibles in the White Horse Drugstore had their elegant smells. The dominant smell, though, was of vanilla, the sweet currents of vanilla drifting into his nostrils. He took a long breath and went where Damon, Melody and her sisters were gathered in their wire-backed chairs at the little round table. In motion around them were basketball players living their game again, each telling the others of his own clash with his opponents from Canadian City. When they walked behind Damon, they let their hands rest on his shoulder. Then Damon would lift his face of light bronze and golden glints, let them see his tentative grin, and peek from under his brows. But most of his attention he gave to Melody.

When the drinks came, Damon tilted his glass, drained it, and took a mouthful of ice. Victor went to the fountain for another, and while he was waiting for it to be concocted, he thought again about their business problem, how to advertise their illegal merchandise.

Greedy men with small thoughts about immediate profits might not even consider what Victor had thought of doing.

First, Papa had said, they must distill a superior product. No maggots nor snakes in the mash. Neither lead nor lye nor tobacco juice in the whiskey. Made by a tender recipe, aged in oak, and bottled by Dell Sandon, whose word was his bond. Quality was to the good, certainly. But now they had to find a way to tell all the drinkers how good the Sandon whiskey really was.

Leo Trant came by on his last inspection of the town, looking for drunk men lying in doorways, assuring himself that the town's merchandise lay secure behind locked doors. He peered through the glass, entered smiling, went directly to Damon and made a congratulatory slap on his back. "You done a good job out there tonight," said Leo. "We're mighty proud of you and the boys here." Leo stayed in touch with the folks in his town. He bragged on them when they did good deeds. He told Mayor Boole every once in a while that he was not the town's boss, after all, but the town's friend. Leo pulled his shoulders back, and his little paunch went forward. He looked at Victor, nodded curtly, and left the drugstore.

Midnight came. Maisie and Trina were nodding off. The drugstore was about to be closed. If Victor didn't get these girls home now, Mama would be in a sulk with them all day tomorrow, and at the table he'd be barely welcome.

Worked hard by excessive juices and terrible tensions during the game, they were drained now, ready to lie down. They shambled yawning west past Greasy Dean's and then turned south. They had taken from their special night all that it could give them. Now it was a memory. Now it was a story to tell.

They strolled to the beginning of the curve where the narrow driveway diverged on its way up the Sandon hill. Melody took Damon's hand and brushed her cheek against his. "Remember what all we talked about tonight, my true friend, and thank you for the most thrilling game we'll ever, ever see."

His face a puzzled quirk still, Damon affirmed his agreeableness with a quick nod. He watched as Melody swung away with all her grace, and strode with diverting motions up the hill.

"I'll walk around the curve with



you," Victor said. "Start you home." They strolled on, stepping wide, their wobbles the kind that little boys mimic when they strut like grown men. "You don't talk much, Damon."

"White people like quiet Ind'ns."

"And basketball players. Your grandpa left the school-house laughin' tonight. He was proud."

"Grandfather remembers you, Sandon. Your knots wus hard."

"Reckon you like school pretty good," Victor said.

"Melody reads th' stories to me. I draw pitchers of th' animals and people and houses. Th' teachers give hunnerds on all my pitchers."

Fifty steps past the graveyard Victor said, "Wait here. I'll just be a few minutes." He went into the timber, found the cache, and was soon on the road again. "Here," he said holding the whiskey bottle forward. "A present for your grandpa." Damon took the bottle, nodded, and walked away. Victor watched until he couldn't see the pigeon-footed stride in the darkness; then he turned and walked back past the graveyard. ■

*GLENN HAYS is a free-lance short-story writer and novelist from Bend, Oregon.*

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