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## The Heathen

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# THE HEATHEN

— by James Beaty

**I**t sure didn't seem that Sunday morning was going to be any different than any other.

Me and Ma and Pa had rode in the buckboard to the church over by Fort Sill, Oklahoma Territory.

They had a new preacher over there and Ma had taken a liking to the way he would rave and pound his fists. He'd holler about drinking and carousing, and the women all seemed to enjoy this line of preaching. Bit it sure made all the men cough and squirm, and they didn't look too comfortable.

I didn't like him too much. Every time I was about to drift off into a quick cat-nap, he'd pound his fist against that old wooden podium and my head would jerk and my eyes would open wide and it'd be at least ten minutes before I had another chance at slipping off into sleep. I think it must've made him mad or something if he heard somebody snoring when he was talking because I twisted around so I could see all the folks in the church and none of us fellows was getting any sleep. I could see months of slow, itching Sundays

before me with no excitement at all.

Then Preacher Simpson crashed his hand down on that old wooden stand again. I think he must've hurt it this time because his face turned red and he gasped and looked at his hand funny, but he recovered real quick.

"And I tell you," he shouted, "the Lord wants to gather all His sheep into the fold, even the little lambs." He looked at the kids in the church; then he looked at me, and me being twelve and grown already! I tell you, I wouldn't mind being called a colt or a calf, but I didn't like being called no lamb.

"Yes," he said again, "the Lord wants to gather all His sheep." At that second exactly, I heard the doors open, creaking behind me and I knew that somebody was coming to church late. I figured they'd planned it that way so they'd miss half of Simpson's sermon. I looked up at Simpson and his face was red as if he'd hurt his hand again, only he hadn't.

I twisted around so I could see and my mouth fell open because I hadn't never seen anything like that before.

An old Comanche stood with the church doors open behind him. You could see the plains fading away in the light blue sky on both sides of him. He was old all right, but he stood straight like he had a pine board in his back. His long hair was streaked with gray and he wore a shirt with blue and red in it. He wore green trousers with a concho belt and buckskin boots. I'd never seen a man wear a shirt like that before. Daddy called them bawdy house shirts.

Everybody got real quiet because that old Comanche just stood there. I could tell he was a Comanche because civilized Indians didn't dress that way.

Finally Simpson cleared his throat and said, "Can I help you? Are you lost or something?"

The old Indian just stood there and he never blinked or nothing. I wondered if he understood American.

Simpson seemed to be getting mad. "This isn't a public place. This is the house of the Lord."

The old Indian nodded. "I come to see Him."

I reckon that was all Simpson could take.

"That is no way to dress in the house of the Lord," he bellowed.

The Indian didn't say a word. He gazed over at a painting of some of the disciples dressed in long flowing purple and red robes. It was hard to tell if he was trying to tell the preacher

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*"That is no way to dress in the house of the Lord," he bellowed.*

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something or if he was admiring the robes, maybe thinking how good they would go with his blue and red shirt. Anyway, Simpson didn't say nothing else about clothes.

My ma jumped up. She was always taking in homeless dogs and cats and such. "I believe he wants to hear the sermon," she said, and the old Indian nodded again.

Ma and a couple of other ladies took the Comanche by the arm and led him toward the pews. I glanced at Simpson. He looked like a horny toad right before it spits at you.

Ma led that Indian over and told him he could sit beside me. I don't think Pa liked it but Pa was a smart man and sometimes he could look at Ma and tell when to keep his mouth shut. I guess he figured this was one of them times.

I can't remember nothing else Simpson said. I got too excited. I wondered how many men that old Comanche had scalped, how many soldiers' throats he'd cut. And here he was, sitting right beside me in church! It was better than catching a ten-pound catfish.

The sermon ended and we all walked out and Simpson shook everybody's hand and asked them to come back next Sunday, everybody but the old Comanche. I think Simpson wanted to say something to Ma and some of the other ladies, but I guess he remembered the seventy-five cents

she put in the collection plate each Sunday. Or maybe he was a little bit smart in the way Pa was smart a whole lot.

After that, the old Indian came to church every Sunday. It didn't even bother him when Simpson would preach about the heathen. I guess the Comanche didn't know he was a heathen.

I could tell by the way old Simpson gave us the evil eye that he was figuring on some way of getting rid of the visitor. But I have to tell you true, that old Indian never once tried to sneak a cat-nap in all the Sundays he sat beside me.

After church I would talk to him. He wouldn't tell about battles or nothing like that. He told me some stories about Indian life before us whites became their neighbors. It sure sounded good, hunting and fishing and fighting and letting the women do stuff like skinning the game. It was hard to believe at first, but he said it was true. He'd been some kind of medicine man at one time.

Even though Pa had fought against the Comanche, I think he came to respect the Indian a little.

Summer came and it was fun for awhile until the drought hit. We kept looking for rain but we never did find it. Crops were dying; food was low and water lower.

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*"Hand me that jug," Mr. O'Casey said and my pa took a drink and so did all the other men.*

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The men were uneasy because if it didn't rain soon, the families would have a rough time this winter. (old Irish O'Casey seemed more worried than anyone).

We prayed every Sunday for rain but it still didn't rain. Simpson said this was because there were unbelievers in the congregation; then he'd stare at the Comanche. I don't know if the Indian knew old Simpson was

giving him the evil eye or not. He just stared straight ahead like there was a beautiful painting on the wall in front of him, only there wasn't no painting. Sometimes I wondered if he even heard what Simpson said. It was like he was listening to someone else.

It was at Bill O'Casey's barn raising that it started.

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*"I ain't saying the Injun can do it," Hawk said. "Only one medicine man in a hundred can do it."*

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The moon shone bright that night and some of the men gathered at the edge of the woods, close enough to hear the fiddle music but far enough away to keep a look out for their wives.

Me and some of the younger fellows stood around listening to the men talk. Sometimes you could hear real good stories that way, ones they wouldn't tell when the women were around.

"Hand me that jug," Mr. O'Casey said and my pa took a drink and so did all the other men.

After they swallowed a few drinks they told a couple of good stories but nobody was in too fine a mood that night.

"Men," Mr. O'Casey said, "I don't know what we'll do if we don't get some rain soon."

"There's not much water left for the cattle," Pa said. "My pond'll be dried up soon."

"Mine's nothing but a mudhole now," Jenson said. "If we don't get rain the crops'll be gone too."

Nobody said nothing. Even the fiddle music stopped. The men drank the whiskey, but I could tell it wasn't whiskey they were thirsty for.

Finally old Hawk Slaggard spit. We all looked at him because when Hawk spit it meant he was about to say something.

Hawk had been a scout for the

*Continued*

cavalry and he'd lived in the Rocky Mountains for years. Some folks said he'd lived with the Cheyenne, but old Hawk never talked about that.

"I seen it done once, 'bout twenty year ago. It was a drought worse than this. Buffalo bones was everywhere."

He stared at the ground. I thought he was through talking but he spit again.

"I seen a Cheyenne medicine man do it, some kind of a secret ceremony and dance the rascal did and I'll be dogged, it wasn't about four hours till there came a real gully water splashing down."

"You reckon you can fetch that old Cheyenne?" O'Casey said, kind of spiteful like.

"Nope, I sure can't. But there's a medicine man sits by this boy in church every Sunday."

The men all turned and stared at me.

"I ain't saying the Injun can do it," Hawk said. "Only one medicine man in a hundred can do it. But it seems like we ain't got nothing to lose."

"That old Indian's been going to church," O'Casey said. "What if he won't do those pagan ceremonies anymore?"

"Boys," Hawk said, "look at the sky--not a cloud in her. You'd better pray that heathen ain't been converted yet."

Three days later the men gathered in the woods. The old Indian appeared at the edge of the scrub oaks. My heart beat faster when I saw my friend.

He wore a buffalo headdress and his face and chest were covered with paint. He nodded to the men. He held a drum and a gourd that rattled. The ceremony began and his moccasined feet struck the ground in crazy rhythms. I must've went in some kind of trance or something because I don't remember nothing except my pa

shaking my shoulder and telling me it was time to go.

Later that evening Ma sent me to town in the buckboard to get some supplies. As the mules plodded to town I saw some clouds gathering in the west. Soon I felt the first drops hitting my nose. By the time I reached the general store, clouds had opened and I was soaked. The gully by O'Casey's farm had washed away.

I hopped from the buckboard and ran dripping into the general store. "Ain't it something?" Mr. Fleming asked. "And to think that heathen did it with a rain dance."

I nodded, but Mr. Fleming hadn't been at the ceremony. I guessed everyone around had heard the story by now.

I put the supplies in a small wooden barrel in the back of the buckboard, climbed back in the seat, and started home when I saw someone entering the church. Even in the driving rain, I recognized the blue and red shirt.

I pulled the mules to a stop and entered the church. The old Indian stood in front of the altar, his back to me, his head bowed. Finally he turned and smiled.

"My little friend," he said.

"You did it!" I said. "You really did it! You'll be famous around here!"

He smiled at me again.

The door swung open behind us and Simpson strode into the church, followed by several members of the congregation. I thought at first that they were going to thank the Indian. Then I saw their faces.

"I heard about your rain dance," Simpson said mockingly. "So now I suppose you'll try to take credit for this rain. It was my prayers that brought the rain, mine!" He shouted as if he were preaching a sermon.

He calmed himself. Enjoying each word, he said very slowly what he'd been wanting to say for months. "Yes,

we heard about your pagan ceremony. You had the ladies here fooled, thinking you'd been converted to our ways, but you didn't fool me. They finally see things my way. The congregation has agreed to tell you that you're not welcome in the church."

I knew that was a lie because my ma and pa were in the congregation and no one had asked them.

But the old Indian just nodded.

"I knew I wouldn't be welcome." He looked at me. "I was saying goodbye when you saw me, young friend."

We stepped out into the drenching rain. Raindrops mingled with my tears. "They shouldn't do this to you," I said.

"It doesn't matter. I don't have to be in the church to listen."

Thunder boomed and lightning slashed the sky.

"But you did the ceremony to help them."

He stopped walking. I didn't hear the rain.

"Young friend," he said, "that wasn't the ceremony you watched. I performed the real ceremony all alone in the woods."

Now I was really confused. "But you were praying in the church. I don't understand. Who made it rain? Was it the Indian God or was it our God?"

"Young friend," he smiled, "they are the same God."

He turned and walked away. I walked beside him.

"But why did you do the ceremony for the men? They've told everyone you caused the trouble. Why did you do it?"

It rained harder now. I could barely hear his soft voice over the roaring water.

"So they would believe," he said.



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