



Indian Scare

the kitchen door. Ma understood immediately. "Elmer, they want you to turn the grindstone so they can sharpen their knives," she said, giving me a little push toward the men. "You'd better help them."

I was scared but I went out the door, hearing Ma's low, intense voice saying behind me, "Ella, run quickly to the orchard and get Albert. Go — now!"

My older brother, Albert, was mending fence where a tree branch had broken it a week before. Father was gone for the day, helping a neighbor farther up Birch Creek. There was no one else within three miles in any direction.

My hands shook a little as I moved a rickety box close to the grindstone and sat down on it. The heavy old stone was hard to start, but a hefty shove at the wheel by the older Indian got the momentum going. I pumped away at the

treadle while he held the long blade of his knife against the stone.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Albert and Ella come through the lane gate, Ella running quickly to the house. I was somewhat reassured when my twelve-year-old brother joined us at the grindstone.

One knife sharpened, we started on the second. The first Indian tested the knife edge by slicing at a willow bush nearby. Even above the rough turning of the stone, I thought I could hear the whistle of the blade as he slashed. His approving grunt was evidence that I had pumped the sharpener satisfactorily.

However, the new edge was unaccustomedly sharp. A moment later the Indian cut a finger on his left hand. Combined annoyance and pain registered momentarily on his face. Blood was beginning to drip when Albert pushed me away from the grindstone.

"Here, let me pump. You go get Ma."

I raced to the house where Ma was standing, watching operations from the door. I could see on the table beside her, partly hidden under a towel, the muzzle of our shotgun. Ma was ready to sell our lives dearly if need be. She was a good shot, steady of hand and sure of aim.

She had seen the situation. Quickly picking up a clean flour sack, Ma walked toward the injured man. She pointed questioningly toward the pump nearby, thinking he might want to wash off the blood. But he shook his head, reached carefully into a dark

leather pouch hanging around his neck on a thong and drew out some crumbs of tobacco. These he sprinkled over the oozing wound and pressed them down. Then he motioned for Ma to bind up his hand.

Tearing a strip from the sack, Ma carefully wound the cloth around the cut. She finished with a firm knot and stepped back. The Indian looked appraisingly at her for a moment, then acknowledged his thanks with a brief nod.

By this time the second knife was sharp. As the younger Indian carefully tested his blade, Albert slipped away from the grindstone toward Ma and me. Very slowly, we started to back toward the kitchen door while the Indians prepared to leave. Would they

try the new sharpness of their knives on us?

Suddenly the older Indian with the bandaged left hand made a quick thrust with his knife. One stroke cut through a large red apple sitting on the top of the woodpile. As the two halves fell apart, he tipped the end of his knife into one piece and flipped it toward Albert; the second one to me. We caught them easily.

I thought I saw the faintest flicker of a smile on his lips as they turned to go. A moment later they had mounted their waiting horses and were riding off up the lane.

This story is based on an incident which actually happened on a pioneer ranch in Eastern Oregon during the Indian wars in the late 1870s.



It's a great disguise Tom, but I still don't think it's going to fool anyone.

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