

A GIFT FOR RED FEATHER

When Indian Moses died, something amazing happened. Instead of rising slowly on shaking crippled legs, he leaped like a running hare from his body, then stood staring at it.

"That's not me," he mused in his native Sioux language. But it was definitely the man children of the tribe called Ton-ta-tanka, meaning everyone's grandfather. And it was unmistakably the old man his white friend named Cyrus had called Indian Moses since the day they met thirty years earlier on the Iowa prairie in 1849.

He remembered, and he mused, "That crippled old man was in so much pain, he groaned when his wife pulled him out of their tent and prayed for the sun to heal him while she went down to the river to wash his soiled blanket."

He leaped in glee and landed in a young hunter's crouch, on the balls of his feet, then whirled and snubbed the corpse.

In The distance, he could see the women at the river, bent over, scrubbing soft deerskin loin cloths and roughly woven cotton dresses made from feed sacks the women got from white farmers. The woman with long gray braids was scrubbing an old bearskin blanket with missing patches of fur.

He recognized it as a wedding gift they'd received more than fifty years earlier, before white men and the railroad came, before he became Indian Moses, whose body, with its glazing open black eyes open and head raised toward the sun, was propped against dry stalks of sun-dried corn. Their seed would be used for next season's planting if the crows didn't get them first. The stalks served a triple purpose: to serve as stationary litters that held up the bodies of sick individuals while they received the good medicine of the Great Spirit's Sun Light. They also functioned as scarecrows, and served as launch areas from which the dying could easily ascend into the sky.

"If you are dead, why don't you rise into the sky?" he thought, feeling like he was talking to the immobile body.

It did not move, so he reached out and poked his finger under the dead man's chin. His whole hand moved right through the jaw of the deceased. He pulled it back out and shook his fingers. He could see through them.

Just then the old man's wife, who was carrying the wet blanket toward a tree on which to hang it, approached the row of corn.

"Hello," he called, but she did not hear him.

"Red Feather, I'm right here!"

She looked around, as if she thought she heard a voice.

He leaped in front of her, waving both invisible hands. "Red Feather! Look at me!"

She glimpsed her dead husband's face, dropped her load in the dust and began to moan. Her moaning became a keening wail that attracted attention of the other women and a few stray dogs.

"Red Feather, beloved wife, don't cry so loud," he joked. "You might wake the dead!"

She turned, a look of horror on her face, and gazed right at him without seeing him. The other women came running, staring, mumbling, as Red Feather tenderly closed the glassy eyes of the man who had been her husband since she was a child bride with shiny hair the color of a nut-brown prairie dog.

At that moment, a great burst of white light filled the consciousness of the spirit of Indian Moses and, despite his efforts to stay grounded, he rose into the sky and saw the scene beneath him grow smaller and smaller as he ascended higher and higher toward the Great

Spirit.

He laughed, using his white friend Cyrus's language as he shouted with enough power to move the wind, "Well, I'll be danged. If I didn't know better, I'd swear I just shapeshifted and am now looking at Earth through the eye of an eagle."

Then, with the renewed vigor of an unencumbered young hunter, he intoned the sacred sound of Aho, soared through the flock of black birds descending toward the banquet below them, and dropped a white feather at the feet of the wrinkled old woman who was wrapping her husband's empty body in the wet blanket to preserve it until the shaman could bless it as food for crows.

Red Feather lifted the sacred sign, pressed it to her heart, looked into his eyes, smiled and blew him a kiss.