The Legend of Meyer Torgeson

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Abstract

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THAT SUMMER started like all the Summers in Nebraska had. Meyer Torgeson had sowed his oats and wheat, and had planted his corn. The rains came at just the right times, and the black loam turned to an emerald green of grain, and the corn sprouted and formed straight green rows against the black soil. Meyer and Sarah had put up the first cutting of hay and the blue-green alfalfa was beginning to bloom a second time, when the rains didn’t come anymore. The sun rose hot and feverish and white in the pale mornings, and at noon beat down with an August flame. The tender corn leaves grew stragglingly for a time, but then, without moisture, slowly curled and died. They stood, shriveled to a brown crisp, the few remaining wisps of leaves crackling huskily in the hot breeze. The wheat, caught in the middle of the milk stage, dried up to wizened hulls and brittle brown sticks of useless straw.

Each day Meyer would go out and look up at the sky. He would stand beside his gaunt cows with their dried-up, shrunked udders and curse the weather. Some mornings there would be feathery clusters in the West, and Meyer’s face would light up, but the tufted clouds would scurry by as if afraid of the Torgesons, and by noon there was only the deep blue of the sky, the crackling brown of the earth, and the scourging yellow ball.

There were rumors, too, that the Indians were getting out of hand because there were many prairie fires and no buffalo. Too, the Indians became thicker where the Torgesons lived. Each day a little band would trot by, less than a hundred yards from the cabin. At those times the children would run to where either Meyer or Sarah were and breathlessly watch the painted braves on their spotted ponies till they were out of sight. Meyer took the last of the money from the pewter jar above the fireplace and went to Norfolk and bought a new Winchester rifle. He placed it in the corner beside his old Sharps, “just in case.”

The Summer passed somehow. The Torgesons came to like dried turnips and tiny, scabby potatoes. Their faces
grew more narrow and loose folds of skin hung from their necks, but their eternal hunger wasn't so bad by the time Fall had come. One early October morning Meyer went out to harvest his corn and came back at noon with a sackful of nubbins. He would sadly and helplessly watch the skinny cows rush up every night when he went to strip them of their few drops of milk. He would either have to sell some of the animals or let them starve to death, he and Sarah had decided, so it was that one cold morning he took a little red heifer and his scrawniest steer and led the now docile beasts off to Harrington to be sold. They didn't bring very much, the prices being very low. Meyer stood a long time outside the auction house, counting over the pitifully small handful of silver. There was hardly enough to buy provisions for a month, without even thinking about the hard Winter that was sure to come. As he stood sadly shaking his head, he noticed a big square sign in front of the post office. "Need extra money?" it said in big print. Meyer went closer. "Just sign up for the Home Guard. Get ten dollars a month for staying at home. All you have to do is fight Indians in case there's an uprising." Meyer didn't like fighting much, but that money would sure come in handy. But then, he'd probably have to fight Indians anyhow, so he may as well get paid for it. He stood a long moment stroking his beard, as if in deep thought. Then he strode firmly up the steps and into the post office. "I want to sign up for the Home Guard," he said, loudly, to the man behind the counter. The post-master brought out the contract and Meyer signed very carefully on the dotted line, without bothering to read the fine print. Meyer walked out of the post office with a new spring in his step. When he went home that night, he called all his family about him and told them the good news. Then he took the old accordion down from the wall and played it and even had Sarah get out some beer they had made the year before. The Torgesons were very happy that night.

The Autumn was short and hot, and when November came, the brown, dry earth froze, and the frost festooned the trees but no snow fell. With no husking of corn to be done, or wheat to grind, Meyer found little to do. For the hundredth time he had polished his rifles, and curried his
two horses. One mid-November day he heard the clatter of hooves coming from the creek. It was young Otto Schwarz, riding full tilt. He swung out of the saddle, clumsily, as any farmer might. "Mr. Torgeson," he called, "Wer müssen nach Nort Dakota gehen, mit the Home Guard."

"North Dakota! I thought we were going to fight Indians here."

"No sir, Keptin Crocker says ve ban be put in chail if ve don't go vere dey say. You better hurry. I'll seddle your horse vile you tell the missus good-bye. Und get your rifle und sumting to eat."

Meyer didn't like it. North Dakota was away up North. But then, he couldn't go to jail. Anyway—he'd heard there was good land up there. And his son Matthew was thirteen now; he could do the work, and handle the Sharps as good as any man. And ten dollars a month!

Sarah listened and began to pack some dried beef and hardtack. Meyer put on his heavy coat, took his gleaming Winchester, and kissed each of his seven children. Sarah gave him the flannel knapsack, kissed him on both cheeks, and smiled bravely as he walked to his saddled bay. He swung himself onto the horse, and called to Matthew standing in the doorway, "Take care of the family now." With that he was gone, trotting easily across the hard ground, to Hartington, and then to North Dakota.

The days were an eternity for Sarah. The softly clicking spinning wheel counted out the slow seconds. Then, on the eleventh day, she got a short letter from Meyer. All was quiet, he wrote, and there was snow, so he couldn't see the land very well. He hadn't yet seen an Indian. Sarah felt relieved. He would be back soon. They wouldn't keep him up there all winter doing nothing.

The first snow fell December eighth, covering the raw, brown hills—a fine, feathery snow that filtered through every crack and chink in the cabin. Sarah awoke early that morning, and before she started the fire, she carefully scooped up the sparkling little drifts. As she was tossing the last fine flakes out the door, she glanced across the valley. Less than fifty yards away, were six or seven young braves atop their gaunt ponies, staring at the house as they loped by. Each
day more and more Indians trailed by, going east to the Winnebago reservation or west to the Santee reservation.

The air became colder and colder, but no more snow fell. Just a few days before Christmas, Sarah's stomach felt curdly and her head burned. She stayed in bed and told Matthew to build a fire and then fetch Mrs. Schwarz. Matthew, proud to be the head of the house for at least a day, built the fire from the logs that Meyer had dragged up, then bundled up in Meyer's old coat, took the old Sharps rifle, and headed down to the creek.

Mrs. Schwarz was peeling potatoes, unmindful of her scuffling twelve children, when Matthew arrived. Matthew haltingly said she was supposed to come with him, so Mrs. Schwarz laid down her potato pan, gave her children a few orders, and, picking up her heavy black shawl, followed Matthew back.

Her ponderous bulk filled the Torgeson home, and the Torgeson children were eager to see her come while Sarah lay in bed. For a few days she was puzzled by what ailed Sarah, but then she put it down, professionally and absolutely, as chicken pox. Sarah felt better when she learned that it was nothing serious.

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Meyer laughed as he threw his saddle on his big bay. After twenty-five days of doing nothing, he was going home to Sarah and the kids. He slapped the gelding on the rump and noticed for the first time how fat the horse had grown since he'd been in North Dakota. "Too bad, old fellow. But you're going home now."

Otto was saddling, too, over in the next stall. "When will we be home, Otto?" Meyer called.

* * *

"Oh, I tink by Tuesday—the twenty-eighth."

On the morning of December 28th, the sun rose a dull red across the rolling prairie hills. Matthew got up and made the fire. When he went out to look after the two cows and the horse, he could see the smoke from the Schwarz's chimney curling straight up, like a gray feather in a tarnished purple sky.

Sarah felt weak that morning. She was dizzy, with a retching cough. Matilda, the youngest, was sick, too. I sup-
March, 1951

pose everyone will get chicken pox now, Sarah thought. If only Meyer were home. At noon, Mrs. Schwarz came over with a heaping basket of spicy-smelling sausages and heavy loaves of dark bread. Mrs. Schwarz sat on the edge of the bed and held Sarah's hot hands in her cool ones. Mrs. Schwarz was saying, "Ich dacht ich wird comin' over now und bring diese shtuff for du tzu essen. Karl mus nach Hartington hin fahren, und ich dacht das ich wird mit fahren." She gave Sarah's hand a last pat, and then, picking up her shawl and basket, she gave each of the children a soft pat on the head. Mrs. Schwarz leaned over the bed and peered at Sarah. "Schlaf, Sarah, schlaf." Slowly she moved her enormous bulk through the door out of sight. The children crowded around the window and watched her waddle along, sorry that she was gone.

Sarah lay a moment, staring at the gaudy Indian blanket hung at the end of the room. "Mathew, look after every­thing. Keep the fire going..." She was drifting through some vast lake of tall grass gently bobbing and rippling with the wind.

Sarah awoke with a start. John and Matthew were scuf­fling. She could hear John saying, "But poppa said you weren't sposed to touch the rifle. You leave it here."

"Get out of the way. No damn Indians are gonna go running all over. I'll chase 'em off."

"Matthew," Sarah whispered. She couldn't hear herself.

"Matthew," she shouted. Her voice cracked gratingly. She heard him walking across the room, then digging into the cartridges. Sarah half rose in bed. "Matthew, leave the rifle be!" She heard the door open and close. "Matthew," she called again, frenziedly. She rose, and clutching the blanket around herself, tottered into the next room. She could see the Indians, riding single-file just past the garden gate. Eight of them. Matthew was standing outside the door. She saw him raise the rifle. "Don't, Matthew," she whispered hopelessly. The blast hammered heavily against her ears.

The shot had been a clean miss. The surprised Indians wheeled their horses around and stared at the small figure standing in front of the cabin. With a whoop and a kick, their horses sprang forward. Matthew stood a moment,
transfixd, staring at the riders hurtling towards him. He dropped the rifle and tried to run, but a singing tomahawk split his head to the neck. The crazed Indians sprang from their ponies and charged into the cabin, brandishing tomahawk, and rifle, and lance. There was a moment of shrill cries, of blood-curdling shrieks. Then there was only the crackling of flames, and the pounding of pintos' hooves. The redskins galloped towards the dying sun. And, if you had watched their flight, you could have seen eight, fresh, bloody scalps hanging loose from their belts.

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Meyer Torgeson came riding late into Hartington with Otto Schwarz and the rest of the Home Guard, just before the sun began its plunge to darkness. They had a glass or two of beer, and Meyer bought a pair of shoes for Matilda. Then the two set out on the twelve miles home. Halfway there, they overtook Karl Schwarz and a part of his family riding back from town in their big box wagon. Greetings and much shaking of hands took place, and then the whole group again set off, the horses trotting easily through the crisp air. They reached the Schwarz homestead and Karl urged Meyer to come in and warm, but Meyer refused; he'd better go home and look after things, now that Sarah wasn't well. So they shook hands, and Meyer spurred his horse towards his land, and his family.

As Meyer Torgeson trotted over the rise and down towards the creek, he saw the smoke drifting away in fragile wisps from the cabin. He jerked his horse to a halt and stared at the glowing shambles. He blinked his eyes, but still the sight was there. He slid the Winchester out of the sheath and loosened the reins. The horse began trotting forward again. The sun splashed, unnoticed, into oblivion in the West, tossing up great spirals and blobs of blood-red color, and the darkness began hurrying over the land. The horse stopped, snorting and pawing the ground, fearful of the stench of death. Meyer sat staring down at the bloody pulp of what had been Matthew. He felt a slow pulsing at his throat as the vomit rose in him. He twisted his head away; then slowly, like an old man, he crept down onto the ground. He crossed to his cabin, and gazed at the charred figures. In
the glowing embers he picked out, one by one, the bodies of his children—little Karl, and John, and Sonia lying in a grotesque heap in the center of the four scorching walls—Peter, and Marie, and baby Matilda sprawled beneath Sarah. Meyer knelt and began to sob, great, harsh sobs torn from deep in his throat. And then he was quiet. He reached out slowly and laying his hand upon her charred breast, whispered, "I swear . . . by all the saints in Heaven, in . . . the name of God Almighty Himself, that I will not . . . rest till every death is repaid tenfold . . . no, a hundredfold."

Meyer Torgeson was never again the same. One morning he took his Winchester, leaped upon his horse, and galloped off. He came upon a band of five Indians trotting slowly along a path near the Logan Creek. When he was almost upon them, he swung his rifle up and fired. A redskin slumped off a pony and thudded to the ground. Twice more he fired, before the startled Indians knew what was happening. Two more bodies slid to the ground. The other two fled, with Meyer in hot pursuit. That was only the first move in Meyer's revenge. From that time on, he rode day and night, his big bay overhauling the terrified Indians, and his black Winchester cutting them down like sacks of meal.

The Indian agencies tried to capture Meyer, but when the pursuit became too hot, all he had to do was to turn in at some farm. The farmer would protect him, lie for him, and give him something when he left.

The weeks twisted into years, and still Meyer Torgeson hunted the redman. The Indians detoured to the north through the bluffs and moved in fearful, silent detachments. Meyer moved along with them. He settled in a cabin west of Ionia on a high, barren bluff which gave him the sweep of the countryside. The unalert soon fell before his long rifle; and to save cluttering up the area with dead Indians, he would drag the misshapen bodies down to the river. He would roar in triumph as the swirling yellow waters closed over the disfigured corpses.

The Winnebagoes were almost completely blockaded by the silent old man who rode a big bay horse and carried a long rifle. Eventually the Indians were restricted to their reservations. So when the Indians didn't come to him, Meyer
went after the Indians. One bright morning he rode casually into Macy, calmly shot four Indians, and just as casually trotted out again, while the terrified natives fled screaming. Years passed, but the sharp eye of Meyer Torgeson never lost its cunning. Week after week, the crafty old white-haired man went for a ride, and week after week, a death or two was added to the mounting list.

Then, suddenly, the deaths stopped. When a month went by, and no one had seen Meyer, an old farmer went up to his cabin to see where he was. Alone and cold, Meyer Torgeson had died of pneumonia.

A huge procession followed Meyer Torgeson's body to its grave in a rocky bluff overlooking the broad Missouri. The Indians of Northeast Nebraska sent up a special dance of thanks to the Great Spirit. The old homesteaders shook their heads sadly. "He was a good man," they all said.

No one ever knew how many Indians Meyer Torgeson killed. Some say two hundred fell before his rifle, others say three hundred, and still others three hundred fifty. At any rate, he did not revenge his family a hundredfold, as he had sworn. And, so it is said, in the waning of the moon, Meyer Torgeson may be seen trotting along atop a big bay horse, with a black stetson shadowing his face, and a rifle slung across his lap. Now and then he stops to ask some traveler at night if he has seen any Indians along the road.


Prisoner

I see thee in the pool
And in the looking glass.
I see thee, silly fool,
In every shop I pass.