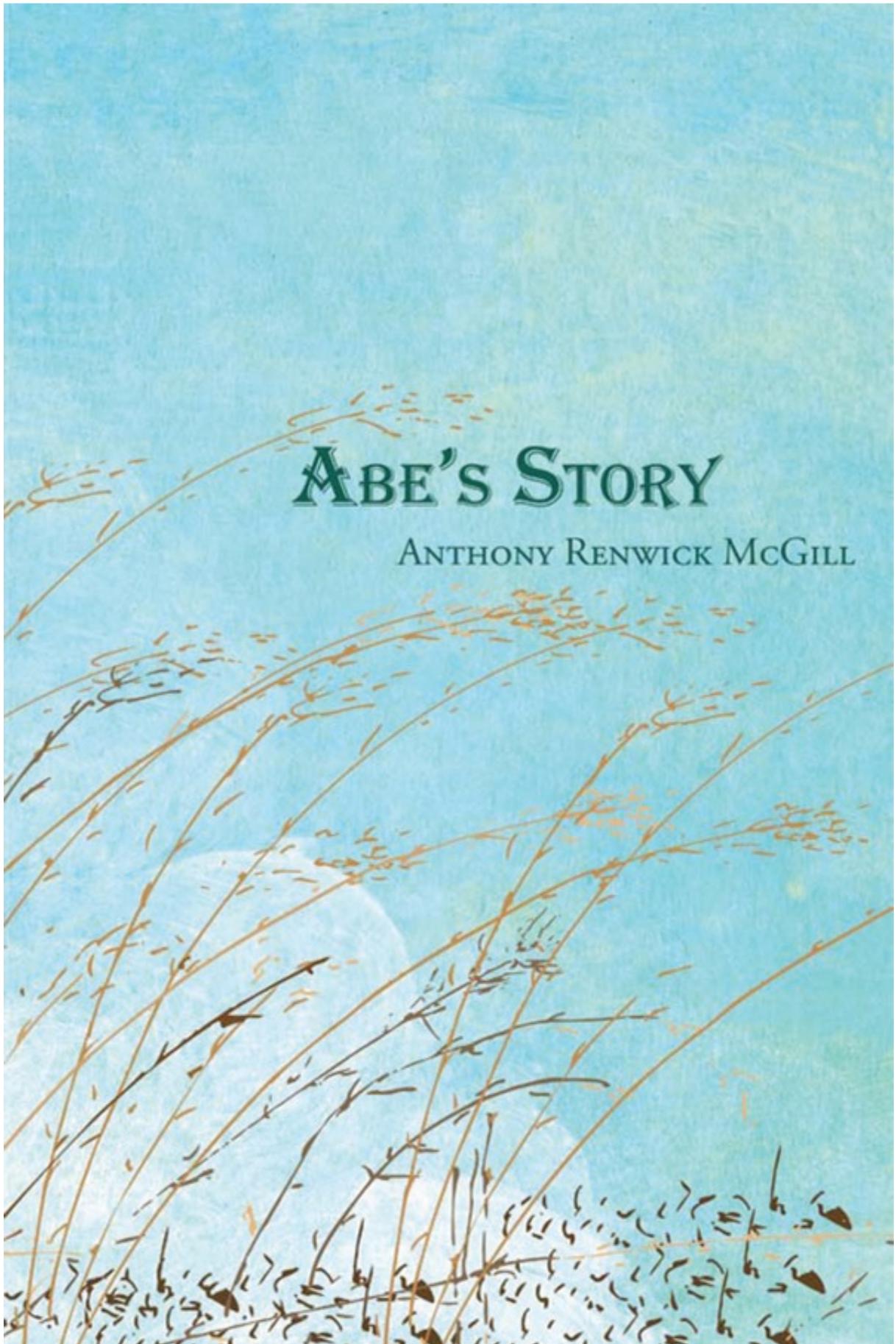


# ABE'S STORY

ANTHONY RENWICK MCGILL



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A HERITAGE NETWORK ORIGINAL

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*Abe's Story* is a work of fiction. The setting of the story, several of the characters and events are drawn from North American history of the mid- to late 19th century. Their names, place names, the dates and interpretations of incidents are taken from established accounts and records of that period. This book is a work of fiction – as are the main characters and their lives – that has been created by employing that historical background. *Abe's Story* cannot be construed as being in any way a representation of historical fact.

For Savio

## Acknowledgements

Although *Abe's Story* is a work of fiction, I felt that it had to be told against a strong background of historical truth. In this regard, I found the superb international bestseller of Dee Brown – *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* (Owl Press, 1970) – a marvellous source of factual material told from the perspective of the Plains Indians. Information has been gleaned from this and many other reference works too numerous to mention here, including the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.

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Anthony Renwick McGill

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## PROLOGUE

### A DASH TO SOUTH DAKOTA

The train pulled into the station at Pierre, South Dakota, on Wednesday 20th May 1931. From the First Class Section, there emerged a tall, well-dressed man who swept up his heavy valise with ease and strode down the platform to the barrier on the westbound side. He showed the ticket to the checker and proceeded through. Once in the station proper, the new arrival glanced about him until his eyes rested on a man in his late twenties holding up a card seeking 'DOCTOR BELL'. He beamed and headed for the young man.

"Robert?" he asked, the cultured Bostonian twang somehow incongruous, coming from a person who was so obviously a full-blooded Red Indian. "Last time I saw you, you were about yea high."

He gestured to about the level of his knee as he dropped the valise. The other, clearly of European descent, grinned like a child.

"Uncle Aaron."

The two embraced warmly before Aaron Bell held his nephew at arm's length to appraise him more keenly.

"The very image of your Pa," he noted with approval then became serious. "How is he?"

"... Fading fast," replied Robert.

"We'd better not delay in that case," said Aaron, snatching up his valise and dismissing his nephew's offer to carry it.

"The Ford is just outside. We can be there in fifteen."

Within twenty-five minutes, the doctor, whose hair was just greying at the temples despite the fact that he had long since advanced into his fifties, had been greeted by Margaret, his brother's wife, and the rest of the extended family.

"He's very weak, so don't ..." Margaret began.

Aaron nodded sagely. He was no stranger to the sickbed.

"... He's been waiting for you."

Doctor Bell entered the dim-lit room alone and went over to the bed in which the dying man was propped up by mounds of pillows. Abe was dozing lightly as his adopted brother perched on the side of the bed and held the bony left hand on the coverlet. The patient's head rolled to one side and he squinted at the newcomer. Joy illumined his face when he beheld his brother and he tried vainly to rise from the bolstering pillows. Aaron eased him back and held him close.

"The locker," murmured Abe. "It's all in the locker ..."

Doctor Bell began to reach down but was stayed by his brother.

“It can wait until I am gone, Aaron.”

The other nodded and smiled.

“When you read it you will understand; and you can decide ...”

He broke off, racked by a cough, and then motioned Aaron closer to whisper into his ear, after which Abe Bell slumped back and settled into a deep slumber, disturbed by episodes of what Aaron knew formally as Cheyne-Stokes respiration. Resignation flickered across the doctor’s concerned features – he had heard the ‘death rattle’ too many times to be in any doubt that his brother’s end was imminent. He opened the bedside locker and took from it a packet, on which his name was inscribed in an expressive script, and tucked it under his arm. Aaron walked away from the bed intending to leave the room but stopped in his tracks as his brother’s breathing became even more tortuous, then returned to his seat to bow his head in a silent prayer. Choking back a sob he mastered himself and rose. Then he kissed the brow of his beloved brother and turned away.

Aaron gently advised the family that the terminal phase had commenced. They all filed back into the room, conscious of the frightening new sound emanating from their paterfamilias. Each in turn paid final respects to him before withdrawing and leaving Margaret and Aaron to await the end together. Without warning, the sound ceased and Reverend Abe Bell passed into the next world.

That night, Aaron Bell opened the packet. It contained a hand-written account labelled ‘Abe’s Story’ and another heavily taped envelope with the instruction that it must only be read after the other. As he unfolded the sheets, he recalled with a twinge of anxiety his brother’s final whispered words to him: “Forgive me, Aaron. I lied ...”



## 1. ELI BELL OF SIOUX FALLS

“We know you’re out there, Mister Seckert,” rasped Svensen, the baker. “You’ve stolen your last bread from me.”

Then I froze as I heard them: dogs. I snatched up my bundle and ran for my life. Jumping over the low wall, I tried to keep out of sight for as long as possible, hoping that Svensen and his son Jack would not release the leashes. I charged across the uneven terrain, with prickly bushes tearing my skin and blood dripping from cuts and scratches, air ripping into my lungs and fear clawing at my bowels. I was heading for water. It was my only chance of throwing off the scent. I stumbled, almost twisting my ankle.

The cries of my pursuers, and the excited yelps of their hounds, were closing in on me. I burst through a clump of trees for my first glimpse of the river, my saviour, and in a moment felt the water wash around the calves of my legs. I looked back. There was still no sign of Svensen and his brutish son. I staggered upstream for thirty yards before diving for a clump of reeds on the far side of the river. Down I went, only my mouth and nostrils above water, and just in time. The baker and his son slipped the dogs’ leashes. There were four of them, and they were frantically sniffing up and down the banks, sometimes close, but not close enough to sight me.

“We’re gone catch you, Seckert. Then the dogs will rip you apart and feed on your bones,” yelled Jack venomously.

Terrified and shivering, I dared not move lest I betray my position. The search went on for twenty endless minutes before the baker and his son called off the dogs and headed downstream to continue the pursuit. I did not move a muscle for a further

half hour and then it was to move in the direction opposite to that taken by the Svensens. Finally, I collapsed in a heap under the bushes and fell into a deep sleep.

Much later, layers of tired slumber were penetrated by an aroma that teased and beckoned me. Eyelids still gummy with weariness, I rose from my grassy bed with my senses filled by the scent of cooking, and I homed in on the source. My instincts sharpened by a feral existence, I snaked my way towards the campfire, all the while mindful of predatory dangers. Roasting rabbit had coaxed me out of the shadows, and as my right arm extended towards the food, a powerful hand grabbed the back of my neck. I was hoisted from the ground, arms and legs flailing wildly. Lifted higher still, I faced the brightest pair of blue eyes that I have ever seen.

“Easy, boy,” soothed the deep voice, “easy.”

My limbs relaxed until I was sat down on the ground on the other side of the fire, whereupon I turned to flee.

“There’s no need to run, lad.”

The combination of those eyes and that inviting tone held me, and I settled into a squatting position.

“Join me for supper,” the deep voice continued.

In grateful response, my hand moved automatically towards the food, but was then firmly stayed.

“First, young man, there is a question of introductions ... What is your name?”

“Abe,” I croaked.

He tilted his ear towards me.

“Abe,” I tried again.

The long neck craned towards me, the bright eyes never leaving mine.

“Abe Seckert,” I advanced.

“A-aah, yes,” he nodded. “And do you know who I am?”

I nodded.

“... Di ...” I began to blurt out the nickname – ‘Ding-Dong’ – that the children of Sioux Falls had for him.

“Yes,” he interrupted, “I am Reverend Eli Bell.”

My hand edged again towards the roasting rabbit.

“Before we take food, let us lower our heads and thank the Lord for that which He has provided this night ...”

I bowed my head in acquiescence.

“... Lord, we thank You for Your gift of this food that we have before us. May You look after the wants of the poor; may Your peace rest upon us ...”

He gestured to me.

“You may help yourself, Abe.”

Even before the first morsel of the food he shared slid down my throat that night, I seemed to know that I loved that man and that it would be my privilege to do so until death would separate us. As we ate, he drew from me a brief history of my eight and three quarter years, concentrating on the sixteen or so months since my parents and

little sister had been carried off by cholera. After food, the Reverend tossed a blanket to me and nodded. No words were necessary. I covered myself and curled up in a blissful sleep.

A hand, gentle but insistent, on my upper arm awakened me from my mother's embrace and guided me to a breakfast of beans and coffee. First, however, came the obligatory wash. I scrubbed my hands and splashed my face. The preacher stripped to the waist and washed himself thoroughly before proceeding to shave with the aid of a cutthroat razor and a tiny mirror. Naturally, there was 'Grace' before the consumption of any food. After our meal, we struck camp and Reverend Bell picked me up and plonked me on the back of his pack mule. He swung up into his saddle, took me in tow and started off in a direction that made me jump.

"Wh-where are we going?" I squeaked.

"Sioux Falls," he replied.

"But, but, Svensen's dogs ..." I gasped.

"What about Mister Svensen's dogs?"

"They have my scent ..."

I blurted out my account of the events of the previous evening and he listened closely, nodding at the details as they spilled from my mouth.

"... So, you see we can't ..." I pleaded.

"But we can, and we shall, proceed into Sioux Falls, Master Abe. We have business to conclude in that town and I can assure you that no harm will come to you as long as you are in my company," said the minister.

I convinced myself to believe him as the horse and mule ambled on towards town. As we came into Sioux Falls there were cordial greetings for the great man, and perplexed stares for his raggedy companion but no dogs barked. We proceeded to the stables, where I was given charge of supervising the unburdening of the beasts by the hired hand, while the Reverend contracted some business with the owner. Our next stop was Mistress Plunket's lodging house, where Reverend Eli Bell had kept rooms for several years. There were muttered instructions for the proprietrix when I was handed over to her care and he headed off on some other errand.

No sooner had the preacher departed than I was firmly steered into a back room dominated by a very large tub. Before I could think of protesting I was efficiently rid of my clothing and dumped into hot soapy water. Mistress Plunket scrubbed at least two layers of skin from all over my wriggling body before she was satisfied that I met her hygienic standards. As I stood uneasily in a commodious towel, I saw with a start that every last stitch of my clothes had been thrown into the furnace that was heating the water. Fresh garments had been brought for me, clean and well made, if a trifle large. The minister would later describe them as "having plenty of growing in them".

While I was being washed down to a shadow of my former self, Reverend Eli Bell was paying a professional visit to Judge Packard. He informed the judge that the Good Lord had plainly decided to place Master Abe Seckert, orphan of the parish, under his wing for education and discipline of the boy and the common weal. Very few persons

have ever been able to turn Reverend Bell away from any project, so the judge sanctioned the idea warmly with the proviso that the boy (myself) proved agreeable to the arrangement. When, about an hour later, I nodded a mute and incredulous assent the judge was authorised to draw up the legal documents whereby I would become Master Abraham Seckert Bell, adopted son of the Reverend Eli Bell.

Back at the lodgings the two of us joined Mistress Plunket for a meal the like of which I had fantasised about time out of mind: beef stew jostled with potatoes and dumplings in an ocean of gravy flanked by islets of vegetables, half of which I could not name. Having done ample justice to the stew, I was hard pressed to make room for the generous helping of blueberry pie and whipped cream that followed. Happily, there is little by way of engorgement that cannot be accomplished by an urchin who, it seemed, had died and gone to heaven. The miraculous change in my circumstances continued to astonish me as I was bodily carried by Mistress Plunket to a little cot bed in the corner of the minister's room. I tried staying awake for fear the dream might slip away, but to no avail. Ten minutes after the lady tucked me in, I was fast asleep. Paradise had come to earth.

The next few event filled days were to direct a great deal of my future course. I was re-introduced to half-forgotten notions like discipline and cleanliness. I was forcefully reminded that I could actually read, write and count, play with other children and laugh out loud. I came to understand that I could be loved for no reason other than simply being me.

On Friday morning I signed my name to a paper in the judge's chambers, and walked out as the legally adopted son of Eli Bell. Then my new father and I went to the graveyard, where my natural parents and younger sister lay under a headstone he had arranged to have put there. On it was the simple legend: 'KARL AND KATE SECKERT AND THEIR DAUGHTER AMY. 1869.'

"You must never forget them."

"Yes, Rev'nd," I nodded solemnly.

He came to a halt and bent down to look at me, with those piercing blue eyes.

"Now, that has got to change. You must find something else to call me."

I frowned and thought. "Pa?"

"That will do just fine", he said, standing up and clamping a great palm upon my shoulder. "Just fine."

There was a glint of something, a tear maybe, in those bright eyes.

As we walked from the graveyard, he paused at another, older marker. 'MARTHA BELL WITH ANDREW, STEPHEN AND JOSIE BELL. 1858.'

Now my Pa turned in a direction that shot alarm through me once again. We headed quite clearly towards the bakery of Henrik Svensen and Son. We entered with Eli being greeted effusively by the storekeeper, who barely noticed the youth skulking behind. Pa pressed a penny into my hand.

"Abe, give that to Mister Svensen, for the bread you took ..."

I obeyed.

“Now, go.” I paused at the doorway, to overhear the following:

“Mister Svensen, if I ever hear tell of you setting dogs on any starving child again – and you can be sure that I shall hear – I can promise you that you will live to regret it. I bid you good day, sir.”

With that curt statement made in the most moderate of tones, the Reverend turned on his heel and followed me from the baker’s store. Back outside, on the sidewalk, Eli turned to me.

“And now young man, I have a surprise for you.”

I trotted along to keep up with his long strides on the way to the stables, where I was introduced to a pinto pony.

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“That’s for you to decide,” replied Eli, with a wink to the stableman.

“Prince,” I cried, “for certain, it’s Prince.”

“Then, that is his name.”

The next morning (Saturday) I was roused early and, following a hearty breakfast, went riding with my new Pa. That routine, along with church on Sunday was to become a pattern, as the weeks, months and seasons rolled by. Monday to Friday I attended school under tutelage of a Miss Cunningham, who would insist that her curious accent was “Scottish not Scotch”. Saturdays and Sundays were spent mostly in the company of Pa Bell, and that was the best part of the week. For Abe Seckert Bell, life had become very good indeed.



## 2. A VISITOR IN THE NIGHT

Although I enjoyed the company of my peers at school, I preferred being with my father and, during summer recess there were reduced odds of him heading off on one of his excursions into the hinterland without me. Mistress Plunket did all she could to reassure me that Pa would return safely from these missions into the Badlands up north or even to the mysterious Black Hills, when he absented himself during term time, but when he did I rarely slept without anxiety.

In the summertime things were different. I accompanied him on trips as far as Fort Laramie, and on those journeys I learnt many of his outdoor ways. He had a number of campsites known only to him. These were secure, and adequately supplied with water. It was his habit to make camp within just a few hours ride of his destination. In that way he would have the night for mental preparation, prayer if you like, before arriving recharged to do battle with 'the Enemy'. This, in fact, was the reason he had camped so close to Sioux Falls on the night of our first encounter, although I could not discount entirely his contention that, "the Lord had notified him to *'expect a visitor'*". With Eli such eventualities were just possibly genuine.

The last two nights on the trail to Laramie were invariably spent in a clearing close to an ancient Indian burial ground, and then in the lower pasture of the 'Carver Ranch', which was located a mere four hours ride from the fort. The burial grounds were of great interest to one with a boyish partiality for the ghoulish. However, Eli was insistent that the traditions of all cultures were sacrosanct; and were certainly not a fitting subject for prurient curiosity. In time, he promised, he would introduce me to the mysteries of these strangely haunted places.

During my eleventh summer, I was caught up in a series of adventures which were

to define the remainder of my life. Late one night, a rapping on the window of our first storey room roused me. As I lay still, feigning sleep, my father opened the window a fraction wider, and there was a brief exchange with some nocturnal visitor. He returned the window to its usual position, to allow for sufficient ventilation on oppressively warm nights; then pulled on his trousers and checked that I was asleep, before departing to speak further with the mysterious messenger of the shadows. I remained prone on my bunk, but could not relapse into slumber until Eli's return.

After breakfast the next morning, the Reverend commenced preparations for an excursion. There was no indication that I was to accompany him on the road, and that usually meant Pa anticipated hazard or difficulty.

Young Abe Bell, however, was having none of this. I fetched saddlebags from under my cot and started to fold and stow clothing, in a self-convincing imitation of my life mentor. A few minutes elapsed before I became aware that he stood over me, hands on hips.

"And where do think you are going, young Abe?" his voice teased.

"With you, Pa," I replied trying to quieten the flutter in my larynx.

"Indeed?" he boomed, then, after a thoughtful pause, laughed. "Indeed, you shall."

Even when we had completed provisioning, Eli did not inform me of our proposed destination. As the journey unfolded, it seemed to me that we were taking a very circuitous route, avoiding many of our usual contacts and bypassing altogether both the Carver Ranch and Fort Laramie, before joining the Bozeman Trail. Pressing on ever deeper into Indian territory towards the Powder River, I felt excitement mounting in my gut. Each time I spotted a glint of sunlight flashing on a distant polished surface, or a feather-decked head silhouetted against the horizon, a new flurry surged in my pulse.

We made camp in the shade of the towering majesty of one of the buttes. My father took out his special pick, which he kept strapped to the side of a pack animal, and approached the base of the wall of rock. This implement of polished steel had a gently curved head one foot in length, tapering to a point at one end, and the other was flattened to a hammer head. Engraved on the shaft were the initials 'E.B.'. With the hammer section of this implement he tapped upon the rocky pillar in several places, listening intently and muttering under his breath. At length he swung, so that the pick element bit into his chosen spot whereupon water spurted. Amazingly, we had water in the desert! After our meal, Eli spoke to me in an unusually earnest tone.

"Abe, I want you to promise never to speak about this mission or anything that happens in connection with it, until long after I have gone to the Father above."

"Yes, Pa; just as you say Pa," came my reply.

"As you know," he continued, "the way the army and the government has been treating our Red Brothers is little short of shameful. They have broken every treaty, denied them their rights, and robbed them of their dignity; their land has been taken from them with all their means of livelihood. This is a great evil in the eyes of the Lord ..."

Following a brief pause, he went on, "... There are difficult times coming, with much bloodshed, and it would be better that my close contacts with the Red Man not be spoken about. There are those who would plot against me, and try to undo the works of the Lord. They would use knowledge of my contacts with the Sioux and Cheyenne to contradict all that I believe in and worked for to deliver the tribes of the Dakotas into the arms of Our Blessed Saviour. Never suppose that evil men will put aside their greed for wealth and power. You yourself have heard people who say that the only good Indian is a dead Indian. . ."

I nodded.

"Those are the devil's own words, planted in grasping, avaricious hearts. But, again, I must warn you to be cautious. There will be a time to come out with the truth about all of this, but it is not yet."

"Yes, Pa. I do promise."

*Only now, many years after his passing, and towards the end of my own life, do I commit to paper these truths, as passed on to me by my father.*

"Then, let us pray that the hard times to come, the great sorrows, can lead us towards a better world."

We knelt and prayed for an hour before retiring. In the morning after striking camp, Eli went up to the base of the butte applied a handful of mud and a few stones, to seal up our water supply until the next time it should be required.

So it was on this last leg of our trek that my adoptive father enlightened me concerning the purpose of this whole undertaking. The late night visitor was a Sioux warrior, and the message was an urgent request, from the awesome Chief of the Oglala Tetons of the Great Sioux Nation, Red Cloud, for him to attend a special judicial convention. No wonder there was a need for secrecy. If this were to become known, Eli Bell would have Ulysses S. Grant at his doorstep asking questions and demanding explanations. Had not this same Red Cloud, only two years earlier, sat in negotiation in Washington House on Pennsylvania Avenue, and had he not gone on from there to address a huge audience at the Cooper Institute in New York?

Our entry into the camp of Red Cloud was like a pageant, with whooping braves riding as escort, and excited children running alongside. It was clear that my father was a welcome (and not unfamiliar) visitor. We came to a halt in front of the Chief, and dismounted. At a wave of his hand, our animals were taken for attention by a young brave. Eli stepped forward.

"Mahpiau-Luta, my friend."

"Red Cloud welcomes Eli Bell to his lodges," was the gracious response.

The two men embraced, and my father gestured to indicate me.

"This is my son, Abe."

The stern features of the chief softened as he looked down upon me.

"Red Cloud welcomes Abe Bell. May he grow to the stature of his father, and may he always be treated well by the Oglala."

Faced with this renowned figure who was at least four times my age, I blushed and

murmured an incoherent reply. As Eli went into hurried conference with Red Cloud and the elders of the village, I remained in the background, in company of the boys of the village.

What had brought us there was the record of grave misbehaviour by a warrior who had for a long time been linked closely with Eli. That crimes had taken place was not in dispute. Eli was being consulted with to discern the origins of the problem, which was necessary to help the elders decide whether or not to proceed with the customary punishment, which was mutilation. The discussion was heated, for some of the offended parties pressed for punishment as prescribed by the Law of the Sioux Nation, but Red Cloud ordered that the clergyman should be given opportunity to investigate. After all, it concerned what was clearly aberrant behaviour on the part of one of the great sons of the tribe.

Eli was taken to where the captive was held, awaiting judgement. Curious, I followed some little way behind my father, and quietly entered the tepee in which the miscreant was held under guard by eight braves. My eyes almost popped out of their sockets when I came upon the detainee, who had the most wonderfully developed physique I would ever behold in my life. 'He-Who-Crushes-Bears', or 'Bearcrusher' as he was locally known, stood six feet six inches tall clad only in a loincloth, his entire body undulating with powerful muscles. It was my impression that the only reason that the thick ropes in which he was swathed gave the impression of restraining him was that he permitted it to be so. With a mere shrug of his massive shoulders and straining of his sinewy arms and legs it seemed as if the lashings might fall in tatters at his feet. As for the eight braves, I wondered just how long they might remain in the tepee were that to happen.

As soon as Eli entered he dismissed the guards, but chose to ignore my presence in the corner. He untied the giant with the gentle face and the sadly vacuous eyes. This task completed, Bearcrusher fell on Eli's shoulder in a convulsion of tears. My father eased him down to a squatting position, and began his interrogation in a tone close to crooning. Responses were as if in moans, by this human specimen who looked as if he could have been one of the greatest warriors the Oglala had ever produced. Here was a man who had literally crushed a bear in combat, and (armed only with the branch of a tree) was reputed to have slain, single-handedly, a dozen marauding bluecoats, bringing to an end their drunken spree of murder and rape.

Of course, at that time being unfamiliar with the Sioux language, I was not to know until later the import of the words spoken to Eli, but was impressed by the emotional power generated by this encounter. Great was 'the heat down there', he explained to my father, and with the heat a physical need so strong that it overpowered him. He had taken his own wife with less than customary tenderness, and unquenched, had forced his attentions on squaws of at least three other braves. This was his crime he wept, a result of an ever present burning need and frenzy.

Under Eli's supervision, a meal laced liberally with laudanum was prepared for Bearcrusher, who consumed it without misgiving. Shortly thereafter the giant lapsed

into a comatose state inside the special tepee, and when they were satisfied that he was fully unconscious my father and the tribal medicine man examined the captive. Eli undid Bearcrusher's clout and checked the warrior's private parts for the cause of 'heat'. Discovering an obvious abnormality, he brought the other over to confirm his finding. I was then sent off to bring my father's shaving kit and, when I returned with it, was dismissed from the tepee while the two performed a surgical procedure of some delicacy.

It was while I awaited my father's re-appearance that I was apprised of the circumstance that bound him to Bearcrusher. Approximately twenty years earlier Reverend Eli Bell was laying foundations for his ministry to the Sioux, linking *Wakantanka*, the Great Mystery of their tradition, with 'the Father in Heaven' and elaborating on the manifestation of 'the Son' on earth. While making slow but steady progress with some of the more thoughtful Elders, he was finding conversion of the younger, war-like members of the tribes more problematic.

He had been squatting in a circle of listeners when they were interrupted by an anguished cry followed by desolate keening from one of the women of the tribe. She came holding the limp form of a small child, just snatched from the river. Eli was swift to react. He leapt up, grabbed the little boy from his mother's arms, and laid him face down on the ground. Using the child's own arms as levers he massaged the water out of his lungs and then, turning the child on his back, breathed into its mouth and rhythmically stroked the chest. This was repeated over and over again for a full five minutes, before at last a cry broke out from the child's mouth and his eyes opened.

Eli gave him back to his stricken mother, who took the boy home. He cautioned the tribal medicine man that the boy should be watched in his growing years, for any sign of mental impairment; and it was later observed that despite growing into a magnificent specimen of manhood, at which time he had wrestled and killed a bear, earning him the soubriquet of 'Bearcrusher', he was ever simple and childlike in his dealings with others. Over the years, first as a boy and later as grown man, Bearcrusher would acknowledge Eli Bell as the one who had restored him to life, and that timely feat of the preacher thus passed into Oglala tribal lore. Concurrently, in the short term, there was 'a harvest of souls for the Lord'.

When Eli and the medicine man emerged from the tent in which the unconscious Bearcrusher lay, the latter was holding in his hand a large organic tumour that had been excised from the patient's scrotum. The Satan had been purged. How decisive the action was would become clear at a later time.

Father and I remained in the village for a few more days, by which time Bearcrusher had been returned to the care of his wife, Morning-Bright, who would bring him back to health from what had been a hurtful and terrible experience. When we departed it was with a promise to return after one moon had elapsed.



### 3. THE CARVER RANCH AND AMAZING GRACE

On our journey back to Sioux Falls we bypassed Fort Laramie but, partly because of a shortage of provisions, we stopped overnight at ‘the Carver Ranch’, where Eli brought me up to the ranch house for a rare visit with its owner, Mel Carver. Soon we were sitting down to a couple of steaks, and generous helpings of beans. After dinner my father was persuaded to join our host on the porch for a social chat and a pitcher of lemonade, while I was sent scouting for the eggs that should make up our breakfast next morning, yet never venturing so far out of earshot that I could not make sense of the adults’ conversation.

“Heard tell of the Seckert young ‘n,” ventured Carver, his enunciation obstructed by a clay pipe that seldom left his mouth. “Not much of it good, neither ...”

“That would be the Svensen bunch,” muttered Eli. “A bad lot.”

“He don’t steal?”

“Never a single penny. No, Abe’s a fine boy. He’d make any man proud to call him son ... Speaking of which, wouldn’t it be about time now that you finally finish with your mourning for Maggie? It isn’t good for you to be alone so much. There should be more to life than continual work, and the jug of moonshine.”

“Now, Rev’rend, I don’t see you taking a new bride to the altar, either,” was the genial riposte.

“A fair point,” nodded Eli, “but I’m away so much on the work of the Lord that I could rarely pass the time of day with a wife ... Indeed, if I had been around home a little more, maybe Martha and the children wouldn’t have become so sick that they were gone by the time I managed to get back. But you, Mel, you have this fine spread and a good business supplying Laramie. Who’s to benefit from the toil of your life, a hired hand, or flesh of your flesh?”