

PRITMON PIRANN

## ONE MORE FIND BY THE RIVER

RICKIE AND NODDY RETURNED INVARIABLY to the isolated marshes and fens where, in former times, the river had traced a course. It was in this territory that they had learned, among other things, to test the ground for indications of the mineral crystals that fetched a high value in the city. The crystals of gypsum had arrived here not through geological processes but by the ignorant, scattering hand of man in the course of sundry diggings in other places. Similarly, in probing the shallow waters of the bogs, the two partners occasionally encountered chunks of slag dumped half a century before that contained aurous strands in sufficient number to warrant a keen interest.

They were not the only ones engaged in this contemporary prospecting of a desultory sort, yet they largely kept out of the way of others of their kind. Only when they happened to come to the riverside did they stumble across those journeying in a similar occupation between town and country. On occasion, they saw some of these people at a distance in the marshes scouting in a familiar style for material. Most were Natives, but there was a sprinkling of Caucasians as well.

During their most recent outing at the riverside they had met a certain group of Natives with at least two of whom they seemed to get along. The members of the group were relaxing upon a newly laid incline. The men were dressed in smart but somewhat raddled jackets with shredded frilling, and their straight, glistening black hair was just as long as Rickie and Noddy's. The most striking members of the group were a couple of young women, who were not common in this company. They wore colourful bandanas and impressed the beholder with an unmistakable stamp of polished character.

"Hey you!" said one of the men affably. "Where are you going? You seem to belong to another age."

"Hi," responded Noddy. "We just happen to go anywhere."

“Come join us for a smoke,” said the man.

The two sat down with the company, which they hardly ever did. They all drew on homemade pipes and contemplated the semitransparent, lazy waters of the river. As she smoked, the younger of the two women looked at Rickie and said straightforwardly, “How come you two haven’t settled down yet? You seem our age, and most of us are married, though I’m not.”

Rickie mumbled a reply to the effect that the time had not yet arrived. Noddy was more articulate in saying that so long as they were nomads they could not bind themselves to a set home.

“But you can’t always live like this,” she persisted, adding that her name was Louisa. The others in the group said nothing.

Neither of them spoke much after that, though no one felt ill at ease. Rickie and Noddy eventually said that they wanted to resume their way, and the man who had hailed them said he hoped they would meet again. Louisa did not look any more in their direction.

Rickie thought that she was a uniquely pretty and appealing girl, with her deep jet eyes and rose-tinted cheeks, and Noddy said that he very much shared this opinion.

Sometimes, in the city, they dropped in at select places where Natives and the unemployed gathered, for the most part, informally. On one particular day, after taking a stroll to whet up an appetite for Caesar sandwiches, they wanted to get back to their room, sleep early, and depart at sunrise the following morning. As they were returning to their hotel, however, Noddy poked his friend and made him stop. A tanned, sleeveless man in a cowboy hat was walking away in the other direction and beside him, though at a remove and with the impression that she would soon take her own path, was a woman with her head lowered. They were not sure, but they thought that it could be the same woman they had seen at the riverside. What arrested them was the sense that she was someone they had come across somewhere else—someone who certainly should not be here in this condition.

“Is it her?” Rickie asked.

“I should like to think not,” said Noddy. “From the back she does give the look—her rich dark hair, her stature—but that drooping head is unlike her.”

“No, it is *not* Louisa,” said Rickie with a conclusive air. “It just can’t be her.”

“She is someone else, yes,” Noddy agreed. “But whoever she is, may God

look after her. Come, let's go in and sleep."

The next day, under a sun that gave out heat but did not scorch, they set out early and reached Hibou Town by mid-afternoon. They made for their lodgings on top of what used to be a barroom and gambling locale, presently a more reputable yet moderately priced inn with a tavern, and in the evening they came out wearing new clothes and sporting freshly-shaven faces. They had made sufficient money to retire for the winter, and they intended to surrender themselves to the gaiety of the town before leaving for the settlement up north, where, to put it plainly, an atmosphere of melancholy and gloom reigned. At this hour people were gathering on the outskirts around bare, level terrain to watch dog races on jaunty, wheeled carts. Each spectator cheered for a particular team, and bets were made and neat sums were gathered. Then they made an arena out of a section of the enormous pit of the mine, and acoustic bands played till late into the evening while an audience sat at their feet or made seats on the slopes. The air became rife with the fumes of numerous joints and, as the weather was still warm, some people simply fell asleep and stayed on there for the rest of the night.

Later in the evening Rickie and Noddy dined with acquaintances at a house where many people stayed together. It was the pattern to live together in large numbers in the old three-storied dwellings of timber and brick that still made up the majority of houses, and for this dinner everybody generally brought along something to eat or drink, so it was rather a potlatch for which no one was indebted to any one patron. Still later, Rickie and Noddy paid their way with a nominal amount into a soirée at another old house. On this occasion the patron was clearly responsible for the dispensation of drinks, but he was one of the altruistic kind who wanted no more than to have fun along with the rest. Although Rickie and Noddy had no friends there, apart from each other, they renewed acquaintances and made new ones in the course of the get-together. Each eventually found a girl with whom to pass the night.

During the day they were fond of roaming the scrubby flats outside of town, where they passed long spells feeling at one with the air, the wind, the streams, and the earth. One day, as they emerged into a sparkling morning and prepared to jaunt out beyond the limits, they were hailed by a voice that stopped them in their tracks.

"Hey, you guys! Where are you going?"

They turned around and saw that it was Louisa from that day at the

riverside. Both of them took off their peaked caps in that old gesture of respect.

“Must you two always be bumming about?” she continued good-naturedly.

“We continue in our settled ways,” said Noddy, always the first to reply.

“Settled ways, bah!” she replied with mock contempt.

“We haven’t seen you here before,” observed Noddy.

“We don’t often come to this side. I mean to enjoy this place before I go my own way.”

“What do you mean by ‘go my own way?’” Rickie spoke up for the first time.

“Listen, you two!” she replied forcefully, addressing both of them but really keeping her eyes on Rickie. “Isn’t it time you thought of finding good jobs and living in warm homes?”

“I mean to do so myself,” she added before either of them could respond. “I mean to find myself a home and get down to a useful life. I won’t be bound to what many of us see as fate.”

“We might think about it,” said Noddy, although it was Rickie who should have spoken.

“Well, good luck to you!” said Louisa. “You know I just don’t like to catch you trailing around for odds and ends as your vocation.”

She made an emphatic nod and smiled in their direction before leaving to join those she had left in the street.

For the rest of the day Rickie and Noddy were contemplative in a way that they seldom were. When they leaned against the polished boulders a few miles from town, they looked down at the ground and spoke little. The tracks of fleet quadrupeds did not interest them, nor did the sporadic screech of a hunting bird.

“I don’t like it,” said Rickie. “She shouldn’t be here. This place is not for her. The people seem nice, but I can’t bear to think that another man may approach her.”

“She has her eyes set on you,” said Noddy. “Go to her now.”

“It’s too early yet. Oh, why must she turn up now?”

“Take her aside next time and talk to her.”

“I have nothing to propose. Maybe both of us could work out a living arrangement with her.”

“What are you saying? That would not be recognized by the law.”

“I just can’t bear to part from you at this time,” Rickie put down strongly.

They had another week to spend in the town, but they did not see Louisa again. From the enquiries they made when a couple of days had passed in relative inactivity, it seemed that she had already departed on her own to an undisclosed location.

As frosty weather swept over the area, a posse of riding police came into town with posters ready to be placed on walls. Rickie and Noddy did not bother to determine what it was all about, as they were eager to depart for the settlement. Favouring the feel of solid ground over that of a wheeled conveyance, they faced a greater than two-day march ahead of them along an inhospitable route and they needed to concentrate on reaching their destination in time.

Each of them lived with his own family in the settlement, but they saw each other as often as possible. They had learned to kill time by sitting and doing almost nothing, yet it was still an agony to think of these enduring months in such a place. A few times they mentioned Louisa, and they seemed to agree that it would be much better to live with someone like her for company. They had neither marriage nor cohabitation in mind, only the notion that her presence would lighten up even the most dreary of places.

When the warm weather came around and they could put their feet to active use, the two friends were certain that Nature was again accepting them delightfully into her lap. Plants and animals were beginning to beam and burst into life, and the two could not believe that their cares should be bestowed on anything other than the outdoor world. For their first excursion of the year, they deliberately made their steps tardy as they took to circuitous trails and let their limbs regain the bound that had been somewhat lost over the winter.

They usually stopped at Hibou Town on their first trip from the settlement, but this time they allowed themselves to be carried away in their abandon straight toward the river and the fens. Subconsciously, they were honing their tracks for the spot where they had first met Louisa and her group. They didn’t know exactly what they wanted, but they were aware of a premonition of goodwill and happiness. Then one night, as they slept under the stars, a fierce thunderstorm drenched them completely and left their teeth knocking against one another. They had known storms in this season

to be ephemeral and sufferable, but this one exhibited a glowering sky that did not cease to roar most terribly, as if all the spirits had been outraged at some occurrence.

They tried to make no importance of the phenomenon, but when they arrived at the riverside they saw a small crowd gathered around a body that had washed ashore. They immediately knew who it was. Neither the discolouration and bloating of her face nor the welts that left gruesome reddish streaks on her skin could conceal her identity. They took off their caps, made the sign of the cross, and joined hands as they prayed with closed eyes. And as they stood over her, they silently promised, in her memory, to chalk out a different destiny for themselves in the way she had desired for them.