

# The Dogs of Joe Gone

**D**ESPITE his arresting history, it was not in the brusque Oklahoma town to sympathize with that unfortunate Indian, Joe Gone. In particular was sympathy beyond the group of loafers who lived in the buildings of Rotten Row, where the road from the railway station to the postoffice threw a tributary along the gulches.

The want of feeling lay in the fact that these men saw little in Joe Gone to differentiate him from his people, greasy, tawdrily clothed, inane. These whites, being of that worthless cross between idler and ranch-hand which never produces even a tenant farmer, were not of fine perceptions. They hated the Indians for their "orneriness," their easy supply of funds, their race. The promiscuous social relations of the tribal members, the ease with which vice entered along avenues opened by their fluent income, the reactions following the attempt to pour Caucasian culture through schools and agencies into their rough community, had produced many a strange individual history. A man like Henry McClain, for example, could not interest himself in detailed palliations when he thought of the natural depravity of the race. The Southern indifference to inferior breeds and colors combined with this generalizing spirit. The Indians would have been mere objects of contemptuous amusement save that they were also a people to be exploited. The little town even supported several lines of cabs for lazy bucks to hail.

Yet Joe Gone had lived a life that might have caused some sociologists to travel across half the continent to interview him, and that in its tragic implications would put a Lear to shame. Thirty-five years before, when the land was new, the white man a rarity, and government paternalism but faintly foreshadowed, Joe Gone was a hopeful young man. He was on his way to leadership of one of the villages that had prospered during even the dark aftermath of the Civil War in Indian Territory. He was married and had children. An autumn epidemic fell upon the tribe, and amid general suffering he fell ill, grew more deeply emaciated as his fever raged, and one morning was found where he had dragged himself in delirium outside his lodge, stiff and cold. His body was disposed of with proper ceremony, far out on the open prairie, on a rough erection of stakes and skins. Food and drink were duly placed by his mother and wife close to his rigid fingers. Three days later, staring and ghastly, he stumbled back into the village, that scattered in terror to where the buffalo grass hid it. Some would have shot him, but the

elders would not permit such trifling with the demon that had reanimated Joe Gone's body. When his people returned they would neither speak to him nor seem to see him. They passed him by as if he did not exist, and even when he slept by their fires and took the food that they ate, all—wife and child included—made as if he were not.

Thus he had lived for the space of a generation. Now the white men had known him for fifteen years. His mother had died without speaking to him. His wife had remarried. His son had gone away to school and into the Northwest to farm, without noticing his existence. From the government he received his share of his nation's income, but his long isolation had bred a distrust of even white humankind. There were doubtless times when his brain so far yielded to the strain that he thought himself actually a ghost, somehow fated to dwell in an apparent vesture of flesh. There had been but one interruption of this long period of exile. He had once been present at a wheat threshing. One of the children he had taught when he was himself a youth was feeding the bundles into the shredder. The child's arm was caught and drawn among the knives, and in his agony he called wildly upon Joe Gone to extricate him. But no one had ever done Joe a service, and no one ever would. As he became more and more "queer," in the phrase of the whites who knew him, there were fewer and fewer of that race who cared to speak or nod to him.

One close link with the living world, indeed, Joe Gone had. The single other tribal outcast was a lamed or diseased dog, and in the passage of years the Indian had collected around him four of these discarded canines, nursed them back to health and fatness, and cherished them into the most ardent devotion to himself. Whenever he appeared in town one or two of the dogs—the rest were at home guarding his shack—were at his heels, an entourage for which he spared little expense in providing tidbits of meat, and which repaid him by snarling ferociously at any who would stay his path. Their affection for him, be it understood, was undemonstrative. Had they offered to lick his hand he would have kicked them; he seemed to keep them at the distance that men kept voluntarily. But no affable storekeeper thought of saying, "Howdy, Joe Gone?" without inquiring, "How's them dogs of yours to-day?" To have omitted this would have been to miss the curt growl with which Joe lifted his brown eyes, gleams of apprehension and defiance battling with their native resignation.

So much for Joe's history up to August of the

county fair. The fair was planned to attract half that corner of the state, and its domes of canvas and frame—for, thanks to the huge dimensions of the Oklahoma County, it was an itinerant affair, held annually in a new place—were to rise near that section of the town where dwelt the thousand Indians. As the town authorities planned its course, and traveled daily the cotton-lined avenue leading past the Indians' homes, a natural precaution occurred to them. The summer had been hot and parching, and the river had shrunk first to a series of pools and then to a corrugated, scaly bed of clay. Carried swiftly back and forth in their spring wagons, the selectmen and president of the village became cognizant of the rows of dripping red tongues and the panting sides of the troops of Indian dogs visible from the dusty roadway. One Thursday night an ordinance was passed sentencing to death all dogs found after three days without muzzles. On Monday the fair would begin, and it would not do for women and children to run the risk of being bitten by mad animals. "Constable McClain," remarked the president, "will see that everybody, especially in the Indian settlement, is warned of this ordinance." The price set upon the head of each unmuzzled dog was twenty-five cents.

And warn the Indian settlement, through all its chief men, Constable McClain did, though perhaps not without a shrewd consciousness that the warning would never be conveyed to one member of the community, and that others would disregard it. The eight o'clock sun of Monday, an hour before the fair opened, saw him on his way along the dividing ridge beyond which lay the groups of Indian houses. Three stray dogs he shot in the presence of the waking Indians, drawing some plaudits for his skill, and then proceeded with slightly quickened stride to where the lonely shack of Joe Gone stood in the hot sunshine.

Joe Gone was stooping over a skillet on a little rocky platform outside, the deep green and yellow of his short blanket a picturesque splotch in the dun landscape. In the foreground wandered one unmuzzled dog; three others lay recumbent in the tiny patch of shade cast by the cabin. Without a word McClain brought his gun to his shoulder and shot the beast roving in the weeds in front. At the dog's yelping leap in air Joe straightened and darted forward, and the other three animals started to their feet. One after the other, as fast as the ejector of his repeating rifle worked, McClain shot them where they were.

The Indian stood stunned, stood as if he were trying to realize that the only companions he had had in thirty-five years were gone. As McClain, departing, looked back over the ridge, he saw the shapeless mass of gaudy garments that defined Joe

bent unsteadily over the oldest and grayest of the dogs. For a moment his heart smote him. "Oh, hell," he remarked, "what if one of them had got hyderphoby to-day and bit somebody? Better have killed the greasy old skunk of an Indian himself than let that happen." As he straddled the fence into the roadway he muttered to himself, "Nothin' on earth could have got it into that Indian's head that he'd got to muzzle his beasts." His conscience was still a little touched, and he resolved to come back with some tobacco for the old buck when he got his bounties. But at this moment he reached the centre of the road, the sun shot a sheaf of rays to the sky from the upraised instruments of a band approaching the fair, the band broke into a merry march, and McClain's heart lightened as he came trudging in, the licensed protector of the highway.

A week later he passed the Indian's cabin in the dusk, and saw Joe Gone sitting alone in front, as had been his wont for many years. His face was thinner than McClain had seen it, his shoulders more stooped. His rusty black hair was unkempt, and about his figure hung an atmosphere of impenetrable apathy. When McClain passed other Indian homes nearer the town, he inquired for the recluse. "His dogs were shot," was the rejoinder. "Heem very hurt. He went off down the river week ago, mourning heem dog, and gone ever since."

"I knew it," mused McClain, reassured. "The old Indian's never had any friends, and of course he don't take losses hard. I knew he'd get over it in no time."

ALLAN NEVINS.

## Sophronisba

I SHOULD scarcely have understood Sophronisba unless I had imagined her against the background of that impeccable New England town from which she says she escaped. It is a setting of elm-shaded streets, with houses that can fairly be called mansions, and broad lawns stretching away from the green and beautiful white church. In this large princeliness of aspect the naïve stranger, like myself, would imagine nothing but what was grave and sweet and frank. Yet behind those pillared porticos Sophronisba tells me sit little and petrified people. This spacious beauty exists for people who are mostly afraid; afraid of each other, afraid of candor, afraid of sex, afraid of radicals. Underneath the large-hearted exterior she says they are stifled within. Women go queer from repression, spinsters multiply on families' hands, while the young men drift away to Boston. Dark tales are heard of sexual insanity, and Sophronisba seems to think that the chastest wife never conceives without a secret

haunting in her heart of guilt. I think there are other things in Sophronisba's town, but these are the things she has seen, and these are the things she has fled from.

Sophronisba is perhaps forty, but she is probably much younger than she was at eleven. At that age the devilish conviction that she hated her mother strove incessantly with the heavenly conviction that it was her duty to love her. And there were unpleasing aunts and cousins who exhaustingly had to be loved when she wished only spitefully to slap them. Her conscience thus played her unhappy tricks through a submerged childhood, until college came as an emancipation from that deadly homesickness that is sickness not for your home but intolerance at it.

No more blessed relief comes to the conscience-burdened than the chance to exchange their duties for their tastes, when what you should unselfishly do to others is transformed into what books and pictures you ought to like. Your conscience gets its daily exercise, but without the moral pain. I imagine Sophronisba was not unhappy at college, where she could give up her weary efforts to get her emotions correct towards everybody in the world and the Three Persons in the heaven above it, in favor of acquiring a sound and authorized cultural taste. She seems to have very dutifully taken her Master's degree in English literature, and for her industrious conscience is recorded somewhere an unreadable but scholarly thesis, the very name of which she has probably forgotten herself.

For several years Sophronisba must have flowed along on that thin stream of the intellectual life which seems almost to have been invented for slender and thin-lipped New England maidens who desperately must make a living for themselves in order to keep out of the dull prison of their homes. There was for Sophronisba a little teaching, a little settlement work, a little writing, and a position with a publishing house. And always the firm clutch on New York and the dizzy living on a crust that might at any moment break and precipitate her on the intolerable ease of her dutifully loving family. It is the conventional opinion that this being a prisoner on parole can be terminated only by the safe custody of a man, or the thrilling freedom of complete personal success. Sophronisba's career has been an indeterminate sentence of womanhood. She is at once a proof of how very hard the world still is on women, and how gaily they may play the game with the odds against them.

I did not meet Sophronisba until she was in the mellow of her years, and I cannot disentangle all her journalistic attempts, her dives into this magazine and that, the electrifying discovery of her by a great editor, the great careers that were always

beginning, the great articles that were called off at the last moment, the delayed checks, the checks that never came, the magazines that went down with all on board. But there were always articles that did come off, and Sophronisba zigzagged her literary way through fat years of weekly series and Sunday supplements and lean years of desk work and book-reviewing. There are some of Sophronisba's articles that I should like to have written myself. She piles her facts with great neatness, and there is a little ironic punch sometimes which is not enough to disturb the simple people who read it, but flatters you as of the more subtly discerning. Further, she has a genuine talent for the timely.

There has been strategy as well as art in her career. That feminine Yankeeism which speaks out of her quizzical features has not lived in vain. She tells with glee of editors captured in skillful sorties of wit, of connections laboriously pieced together. She confesses to plots to take the interesting and valuable in her net. There is continuous action along her battlefront. She makes the acceptance of an article an exciting event. As you drop in upon her for tea to follow her work from week to week, you seem to move in a maze of editorial conspiracy. Her zestfulness almost brings a thrill into the prosaic business of writing. Not beguilements, but candor and wit, are her ammunition. One would expect a person who looked like Sophronisba to be humorous. But her wit is good enough to be surprising, it is sharp but it leaves no sting. And it gets all the advantage of being carried along on a voice that retains the least suggestion of a racy eastern twang. With the twang goes that lift and breathlessness that makes everything sound interesting. When you come upon Sophronisba in that charming dinner group that she frequents or as she trips out of the library, portfolio in hand, with a certain sedate primness which no amount of New York will ever strain out of her, you know that for a few moments the air is going to be bright.

How Sophronisba got rid of the virus of her New England conscience and morbidities I do not know. She must have exorcised more demons than most of us are even acquainted with. Yet she never seems to have lost the zest that comes from standing on the brink and watching the Gadarene swine plunge heavily down into the sea. She has expelled the terrors of religion and the perils of thwarted sex, but their nearness still thrills. She would not be herself, neither would her wit be as good, if it were not much made of gay little blasphemies and bold feminist irreverences. There is the unconscious play to the stiff New England gallery that makes what she says of more than local relevance. In her serious talk there lingers the slight, interested bitter tang of the old Puritan poison. But current issues mean