



Long Winter Gone

Son of the Plains-Volume 1

Terry C. Johnston

From the battlefield to the homefront, they were the proud and passionate inheritors of a glorious frontier, their fates linked to the star of one ambitious, enigmatic—and tragic—man

LIEUTENANT COLONEL GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER

Driven to succeed at any cost, his destiny was bound inextricably to the savagely beautiful Great Plains—and to the very people he came to conquer.

GENERAL PHILIP SHERIDAN

A seasoned commander and Civil War hero, he'd witnessed firsthand just how fierce the "Boy General" could be—and tried to protect his friend Custer from himself.

TOM CUSTER

An incorrigible lady's man, rogue, and hero in his own right, he worshipped his famous brother to a fault and would take his stand beside him no matter what.

ROMERO

A half-breed scout, his loyalties were divided between his Mexican and Cheyenne heritage—and the white man's army he was paid to advise.

LIBBIE CUSTER

As Custer's beloved wife, she understood the soldier in her husband—but not the complex man who yearned for the one thing she could never give him.

MONASEETAH

Daughter of a proud people, she lost her family to the pony soldiers only to lose her heart to the fiercest and most famous of them all—Custer.

Terry C. Johnston's triumphant novel

LONG WINTER GONE



General George Armstrong Custer as he appeared in the Washita Winter of 1868-1869. Photograph courtesy of the Custer Battlefield National Monument

SON OF THE PLAINS - VOLUME 1

**LONG WINTER
GONE**

TERRY C. JOHNSTON



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Dedicated to my friends,
Charlotte and Jory Sherman—
for all your time and tears, work and worry ...
I'll never be able to repay what you both have
given me from the heart and core of your beings.

Indian women soon got to know the white men very well indeed. Many became wives, mistresses, casual bedfellows. The relationships that evolved were about as intimate as human contacts could well be. Yet, there was a gulf that was never bridged: a chasm, not just of race but of archaeological time, that perhaps no civilized white man has ever succeeded in closing between himself and a primitive woman.

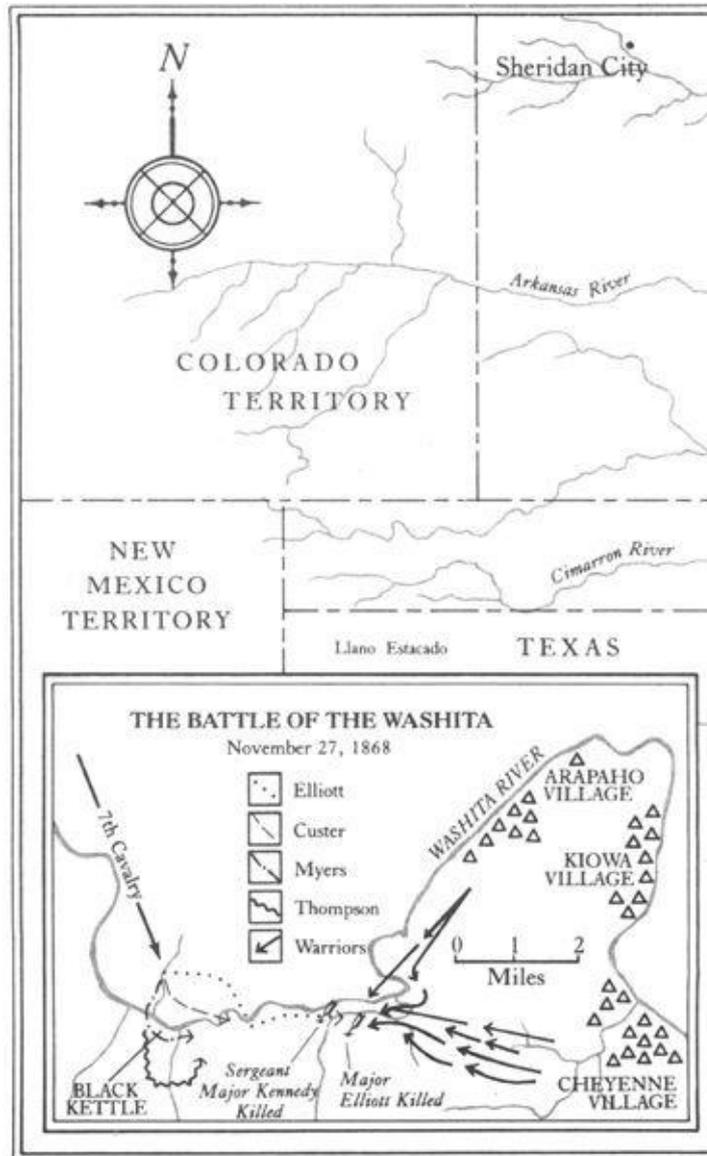
WALTER O'MEARA

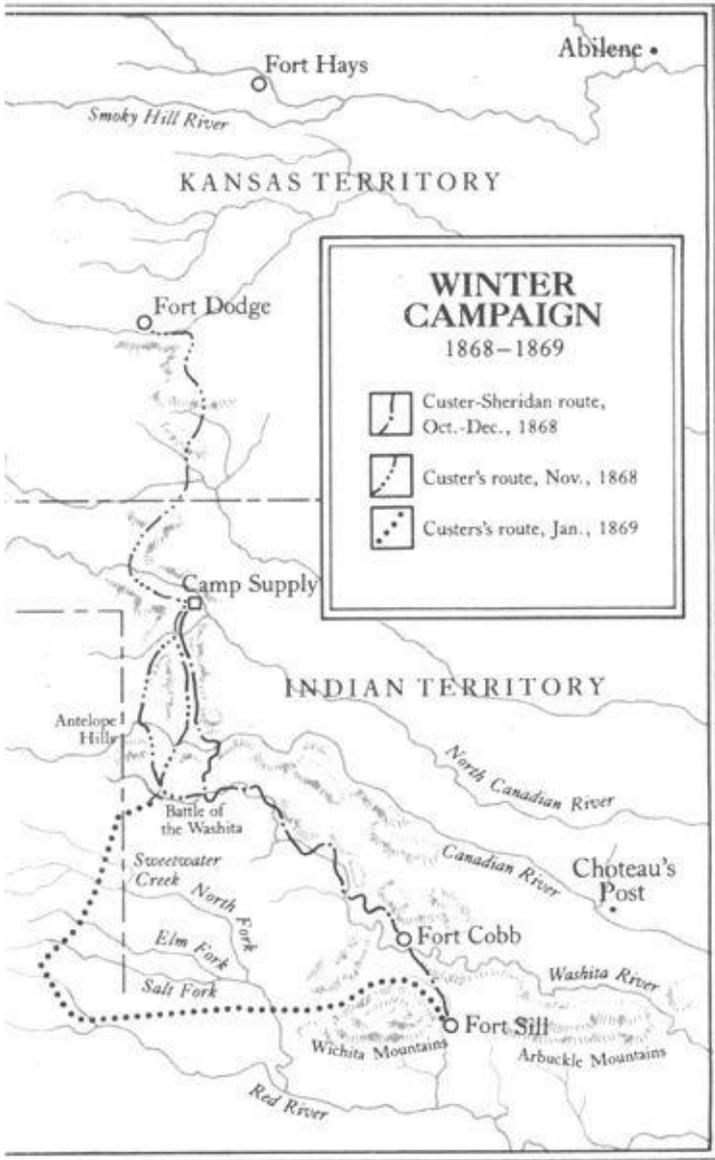
Daughters of the Country

“I was wondering,” an Ankara chief mused, “whether you white people have any women amongst you.” I assured him in the affirmative. “Then,” said he, “why is it that your people are so fond of our women? One might suppose you had never seen any women before.”

HENRY M. BRACKENRIDGE

Journal of a Voyage Up The Missouri River, in 1811





PROLOGUE

“THE hell of it is ... I can’t seem to put my finger on what’s gnawing in my goddamned gut,” Philip H. Sheridan growled.

As he tore the moist stub of a cigar from his thin lips, a bit of dead ash fell on the lapel of his dark blue army tunic. He brushed off what he could with a quick swipe of a hand, smudging the gray into the uniform like a street beggar. Lieutenant General Sheridan studied each one of his staff in turn.

Lieutenant Colonel Michael V. Sheridan was the first to speak, answering his older brother’s question. “I don’t understand what’s eating at you, Philip. Custer won the victory we were certain could be won.”

“And a stunning success it was at that, General,” echoed Major Nelson B. Sweitzer of the Second Cavalry.

“No mistake about that, Nelson.” Sheridan used his cigar to jab home the point. “Still, a voice inside troubles me.”

In stony silence, the commander of the Department of the Missouri turned back to the wide window behind his massive oak desk, his eyes gazing far beyond the bustling Topeka, Kansas, street below. Though he stood shorter than most of the officers gathered around him, Sheridan somehow conveyed a greater stature than most men of the day. Here stood a confident man, every inch of muscle rippling with the martial fervor that had made him the hero of countless cavalry battles in the late war between the states.

But that rebellion lay some four and a half years behind him. Today he had a new war to fight.

The leaden skies dropped a wet, icy snow that turned the Topeka streets into a barnyard slop. Sheridan turned back to his staff and sank heavily into his chair at last. “Sandy, tell me what you’re thinking.”

Major George A. Forsyth cleared his throat. “Undoubtedly, Custer did more at the Washita than my command of frontier scouts ever hoped of doing, pinned down on Beecher’s Island, General. I can’t fault him his success.”

“He damn well could have gotten himself wiped out!” blurted Lieutenant Colonel James W. Forsyth, Sandy’s brother. “Himself ... along with a good piece of his regiment. But we all know that, don’t we? That’s something no one in this room has had the guts to mention. Begging the General’s pardon—”

Sheridan waved his hand; flakes of ash littered the papers scattered across his desk. “No offense, Tony. We all know—don’t we, gentlemen—that Tony’s right. But that’s not all that bothers me.” He rose stiffly, the cold in this office penetrating to his marrow more of late. At the nearby hutch where the ever-present bottles and glasses

waited, Sheridan poured himself a few fingers of amber liquid. Without ceremony or inviting the others to join him, he tossed the fire down a throat more parched these days with the burn of long hours and too many cigars.

“Is this damned Custer doing a single thing different than he ever has in his military career, sir?” Michael Sheridan asked.

With the back of his hand the general wiped some lingering drops of whiskey from his bushy mustache after a second drink. “Near as I can tell, Custer’s still the same cavalry magician he was at Gettysburg, Shenandoah, and Appomattox Wood.” He slammed the empty whiskey glass down. “And frankly, gentlemen—Philip H. Sheridan isn’t a man to argue with success.”

“All of us need reminding that those victories were exactly why we wanted Custer brought out of that year of his ... unofficial retirement.” Major Morris V. Ashe uttered the words the rest of Sheridan’s staff wouldn’t admit to. “All of us asked for him back before his court-martial was over ... simply because we all knew he was the *only* one who could march into Indian Territory. Any man here who says he didn’t believe Custer was the *only* one who could slash his way through the hostile tribes last year is a damned liar.”

“Strong words, Major.” Michael Sheridan sank into his horsehair-stuffed chair, hands steepled before his bearded chin.

“But true, sir,” Ashe said. “Wasn’t a one of us didn’t know what Custer could accomplish ... what Custer *is*.”

“Sounds like you agree with his tactics, Morris.”

Ashe glared at Michael Sheridan. “He won, didn’t he?”

The younger Sheridan turned away without a word, lighting his own cigar.

“Goddamn it, that’s what we’re all about, isn’t it?” Ashe prodded the rest of them.

Philip Sheridan finally filled the aching silence. “Yes, Major. I suppose you are more than right. You’re damned right. We are army. It’s not just what we do. It’s what we *are*.”

“General, again I beg your pardon,” Tony Forsyth said, “but Custer’s success last winter don’t hide the fact that he blundered twice in winning his startling victory.”

“His lack of reconnaissance,” Michael Sheridan added. “The lack of intelligence before attacking Black Kettle’s camp is more than appalling, Philip. It could have cost him—us—the entire campaign!”

The general rose. “We’re all aware my brother has never shared a high opinion of Custer. What I want to know, Tony, is what was Custer’s second blunder.”

“Elliott, sir.” Ashe allowed the death knell of that name to hang in the cold air of the room. “Major Joel H. Elliott, Seventh U.S. Cavalry.”

Philip Sheridan turned back to the smudgy window, peered out into the gray of early winter battering the plains. “With Grant in the White House and Sherman replacing Grant as commanding general of the army, we can now focus our attention elsewhere, gentlemen.” Sheridan’s breath clouded the window before him. “If Custer’s done nothing else, he’s brought peace to the southern plains.”

“And the Southwest, sir?” Major Sweitzer inquired.

“Quiet for now.”

“The Northwest?”

“Nothing stirring there either.” Sheridan sighed.

“All that’s left is the northern plains, sir,” Sandy Forsyth said. “Command have someone in mind?”

The question hung like day-old smoke in the room. This staff that was the cream of the officers corps of Sherman’s “New Army of the West” could only stare at General Sheridan’s back.

“Short of me going personally,” the general replied, “there isn’t a man in this room who’s up to taking on the likes of those Sioux and Northern Cheyenne. Short of me, there remains only ... Custer.”

“That sonuvabitch charges without knowing his enemy’s location, strength, or desire to fight!” Michael Sheridan fumed.

“It’s not Custer’s reconnaissance that wins his battles for him, Michael,” Philip Sheridan said. “It’s Custer’s bold, daring charge into the face of any enemy no matter that enemy’s strength. It’s always been his damnable Custer’s Luck.”

“You’ll reassign Custer to the northern plains?” Tony Forsyth asked.

“Not yet. That’ll come soon enough. Look around you, goddammit. The whole country’s clamoring for him. He’s even more of a hero now than he was at the end of the war. Back east they’ve all heard how he wiped out Black Kettle’s village—what the Republican papers called a nest of vipers. And with that reporter Keim accompanying Custer on his winter campaign last year, the public damn well knows how Custer himself brought the Kiowa, Arapaho and the rest of the Southern Cheyenne back in to their reservations, single-handedly putting an end to their bloody forays into the Kansas settlements ... all without firing another goddamned shot.”

“A stroke of genius?” Michael Sheridan asked.

“Damn right it is,” the general growled. “For those who want a peaceful resolution to the Indian question, Custer has conquered five bands of hostiles without firing a single bullet. And for those who desired a bloodier close to the problem ... well, gentlemen—they got the Washita.”

“You make him sound like a publicists’ dream,” Sweitzer said.

“I’m beginning to think that’s what he is,” Philip Sheridan admitted.

“So you’ll assign him to Terry’s Department of Dakota?”

Sheridan glowered at his younger brother. “Not just yet.” He turned back to his window, watching the drizzle becoming a wet snow. Soggy flakes layered the sill outside. The silence in the room turned as cold as the snow lancing down from the heavy cloud underbellies stalled over eastern Kansas.

George Forsyth finally cleared his throat. “General, I can’t shake the feeling that something’s still bothering you about this whole matter of Custer’s success with the southern Indians.”

Without turning, Sheridan said, “You’ve hit it right on the head, Sandy. Something’s kicked around inside me ever since I rode north, leaving Custer at Fort Sill to finish that winter campaign on his own. And the bastard did better than I expected him to. He even followed my orders, for a change.”

The general wheeled on them, his Irish eyes grave. “So somebody tell me why I can’t sleep at night. Why I drink more than I should ... why I have the dread feeling that even I, his commanding officer, can no longer check or restrain George Armstrong Custer.”

BOOK I

WASHITA

CHAPTER 1

“I’LL be back.”

Those lips below the shaggy, wheat-straw mustache barely stirred. Yet none of the eight officers strung out on either side of him had trouble hearing the soldier’s determined declaration. The chill November air across the parade ground echoed with clatter: low rumbling voices, the incessant roll of drums, the occasional snort of a horse.

“And when I do get back, I’ll show each and every one of these ... *men* who claim to be soldiers how to fight Indians.”

“On those counts of courts-martial—” Fort Leavenworth’s adjutant sent his voice crackling across the dusty parade, “the first, disobeying the orders of a superior officer, dereliction of duty, and misappropriation of U.S. Army property.”

Across the chilly parade shot an electricity every man sensed. Here in the waning weeks of 1867 stood the darling of the army, the youngest man ever breveted a major general, a soldier never found wanting in courage who had seen eleven horses shot out from under him during the recent war of rebellion. Now they watched that same officer sit ramrod stiff astride his favorite mount, his pale face a mask to the tempest raging within his soul.

I’m just like some old bull, he brooded behind those shocking blue eyes of his. Protecting the herd. Fighting off the wolves that nip and snarl at my hamstrings. Here I sit, guilty of protecting the sanctity of this army of our Grand Republic.

“—Guilty of a second count, that of ordering his subordinate officers to summarily execute deserters escaping from his command without the process of trial.”

Didn’t those bastards throw away that very right as they deserted in broad daylight? Taking their government mounts and weapons with them?

“—Refusing to allow proper medical attention to be given to those same wounded deserters he had ordered summarily shot for their infractions of army code. To this count and this count alone the board attaches no criminality.”

“Bloody good of the bastards,” he mumbled, running the pink tip of his tongue across lips drying in a cold breeze that foretold of a harsh winter soon to grip the southern plains.

“—The court found guilt on the charge stating the lieutenant colonel did in fact order the shooting of one Private Johnson without process of trial as deserter, causing same Private Johnson to suffer mortal wounds inflicted by order of the lieutenant colonel.”

A stiff breeze tugged at the blood-colored plume atop his ceremonial helmet emblazoned with an American eagle. His red-blond curls fell over the glittering gold

epaulets that crowned his blue tunic. More gold braid and tassels spilled down his chest while broad gold stripes gleamed at his cuffs. Freckled hands encased in white kid gloves gripped the pommel of his McClellan saddle.

"I'll be back," he muttered once more, watching the young adjutant square his shoulders. "By then I'll be—"

"—Sentenced: to one full year of suspension from rank and command, along with the forfeiture of pay for that rank and its command during the same period of suspension."

Slowly, his breath whistled past his dry lips. Almost imperceptibly he shuddered with the weight of it finally torn from his shoulders. As the adjutant across the parade finished reading, the drums began their stirring roll once again.

By heavens, he thought, it could have been much worse. What with the weight of all those arrayed against me ... their testimony having the ears of—

"—The Court herewith has ordered the reading of its verdict in regard to the case of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, U.S. Seventh Cavalry ..."

I'll bet the court realized this southern department can't do without me for all that long. The corner of his lip turned up and he scanned the quiet knot of civilians, locking on Libbie's eyes once more. *She knows too.*

The drum rolls sank into a staccato cadence. His march to the far edge of the parade ended among a cluster of friends and supporters. The distasteful ceremony was over at last.

Again his pale blue eyes surveyed the assembled cavalry and infantry that symbolized this expanding New Army of the West.

"I'll be back," he said, clear and strong, turning the heads of soldiers ambling back to barracks or officers' quarters. "This country out here needs a man like me. I'll be back ... to take things in hand."

So many times since that frosty November day in 1867, Custer had ruminated on his brief, explosive tenure in that new land of the West.

Chasing Sioux and Cheyenne up and down the Platte River Road in Nebraska Territory with General Hancock, sweeping down into the Kansas country, whipping his young soldiers along behind him, wishing they would ride as hard and as fast as the young warriors they chased—an enemy who eluded his plodding cavalry. More often lately Custer turned his gaze of a late afternoon to watch the sun setting low and lonely, like his own private ache, upon that far land.

That's the arena for a true gladiator, he brooded, tearing his eyes from the west, tramping back across the wide lawn toward the massive house where lived the family of Judge Daniel Stanton Bacon, pillar of Monroe, Michigan, society.

It was here that the judge's only child, Elizabeth Bacon, had yielded to Custer's proposal of marriage in the middle of the bloody conflict that had ripped south from north. Only natural following his court-martial that the young couple would return to Michigan, here to hearth and home for both Bacons and Custers alike, to endure that awful year. Still, each night like this at supper time, Custer drew some small measure of satisfaction knowing one more day of private torture had drawn to a close.

"What day is it, Autie?" Libbie threaded her arm through his as he stepped into the

kitchen. She used the nickname he had given himself as a tiny lad as yet unable to pronounce Armstrong.

“Thursday, Rosebud.”

“No, dear,” she replied, patting his arm. “What date?”

“The twenty-fourth, I believe. September.”

“There, now. I can’t allow you to wear that droopy face of yours to supper. Thank God it won’t be long until this dreadful year is over.”

“I suppose you’re right after all,” he said, sliding a chair beneath her while the rest of the bustling household noisily sat down to a supper of roast beef, summer corn that snapped in your teeth, crisp pickles, young potatoes bursting fluffy from their skins and biscuits that melted on a man’s tongue.

Custer’s younger brother Boston and nephew Autie Reed both hungrily eyed two fresh-baked apple pies sitting on the sideboard nearby.

With a clearing of throats, everyone’s attention drew as one to Libbie as if she held marionette’s threads in her tiny alabaster hands folded before her. The family bowed their heads.

“Our most gracious and heavenly Father,” Elizabeth prayed, “we gather here before you, beseeching your blessing upon this bounty you provide for us all. Here within your sight, our Father, we again ask your forgiveness ... and ask that you help us forgive those who have trespassed against us.”

Custer felt the gentle, insistent pressure of Libbie’s leg against his own beneath the mahogany table. *Why, he thought, does she toy with this fire I suffer?*

This last year of enforced separation from the army had taken its silent toll upon the Custers in many subtle ways. Worst of all—for him—there was no more intimacy shared between them. Barely controlled beneath the surface, Custer burned with a raging desire for this pale-skinned, auburn-haired beauty. Yet even before the sentencing at Fort Leavenworth, Libbie had begun to refuse him. Gently, lovingly ... yes. No longer able to submit to his insatiable hunger. For too long now she had been unable to give him what they both so desperately wanted: a son.

“We ask that all things be made right in your kingdom on earth, as they are made right in heaven above. Amen.”

On cue, male voices around the table echoed “Amen” as they hurriedly stuffed napkins in their collars.

“I’ll get it!” young Autie Reed shouted. He leapt up sending his chair clattering across the hardwood floor, heading to answer an insistent rap at the front door. A moment later the towheaded youngster tore back into the dining room, flagging a telegram addressed to his famous uncle.

“It’s from Sheridan.” Custer gripped the envelope as if afraid it would fly off on its own.

“Open it, dear,” Libbie prodded, her heart already sensing that the envelope would take her beloved Autie from her, a parting she had come to dread more than anything on earth.

Custer ripped at the envelope, sending it fluttering to the rug beneath their feet. Between his trembling fingers Sheridan’s words leapt from the page.

Hd. Qrs., Dept. of the Mo.

In the Field, Ft. Hays, Kans.
Sept. 24th, 1868

GEN'L G. A. CUSTER
Monroe, Mich.

Gen'ls Sherman, Sully & myself, and nearly all the Officers of your Regt., have asked for you; and I hope the application will be successful. Can you come at once? 11 Cos. of your Regt, will move about the 1st of Oct. against hostile Indians, from Medicine-Lodge Creek toward the Wichita Mts.

P. H. SHERIDAN
Maj. Gen'l Comdg. Mil. Dept. Mo.

"Ca-can I come at once?" Custer choked on the words with a characteristic lifelong stammer. He rose from his chair as family members pounded the daylights out of his back.

"I must go wire Philip." He slipped the telegram to Libbie, the mist in his eyes answered by the tears clouding her own.

"Yes, dear Autie," she said quietly. "Tell Philip you're coming as quickly as you can."

"My regiment ... my men."

"I know ... we all know how you feel about your men," she said before turning aside, blinking back the tears. All too well Libbie understood the army came first in his life, first in his heart. Back on that ninth day of February in 1864 she had readily accepted second place in his life. Elizabeth Bacon had become Libbie Custer—till death do they part.

"Go now, Autie," she said bravely. "We're all so happy for you."

Bending to kiss her pale, upturned cheek, Custer then dashed from the room. The ground flew beneath him as he leapt from the porch, tearing down the brick walks to the telegraph office.

Giddy with excitement, he shook hands with everyone he met along the way, breathlessly telling them of the coming campaign and that he had been selected to lead his gallant Seventh into action again. He wildly pumped the arm of the telegraph operator before setting the old gentleman to work pounding out the message to his friend Philip.

Will start to join you by next train.

CUSTER

As a rusty sun came up in the east that very next morning, Custer boarded the first express train out of Michigan heading south and west toward the frontier and the shining destiny that beckoned him. He knew he would ache for her from time to time, but reminded himself: *No, Libbie chose to remain behind. It is the right choice. This is to be a winter campaign. No telling how long I'll be out. The fighting could last all winter long.*

That evening he stared into a sky dripping like coal oil across the western horizon, scratching the ears of his favorite pointer, Blucher. Dear Blucher and Maida, two staghound pups, were Custer's only companions now. Dusk became night and the

locomotive spit cinders into the sky.

At that very moment out on that aching expanse of the western prairie those same bloody atrocities committed by the roving bands of Kiowa, Arapaho, and Cheyenne warriors coupled with the army's blessed clemency for their own marvelous, curly-headed "Boy General" both conspired to set in motion the gears of a crude bit of machinery that would grind slowly, inexorably slowly, over the next eight years.

* * *

Nipped by the cold frosts of lengthening autumn nights, the tall grasses across the prairie turned and dried withering in the incessant winds. Deer and elk grew restless, fought, and mated in their own ancient ritual of love and combat. Ponds slicked over with ice each night until the morning sun came to break the grip of so many things dead and dying on the land.

Near midmorning on 9 October 1868, a large band of painted, feathered warriors swept off the sandy hills, tearing down upon a civilian caravan of wagons returning to Kansas from Colorado Territory along the Old Arkansas Road. The Kiowas and Cheyennes caught the white farmers by surprise some ten miles east of the mouth of Sand Creek.

Blankets flapping, war cries splitting the air, they scared off the loose livestock herded beside the settlers' train. What few oxen and cattle the first rush left behind were hitched to the wagons. Before the first sun went down on those farmers, the warriors finished off the harnessed animals, leaving the oxen to die a slow and noisy death while the battle raged around their bleeding carcasses.

The siege lasted for days with little hope for relief. Early the third morning the Indians captured Mrs. Clara Blinn and her two-year-old son Willie. When the warriors decided they'd had enough of these farmers, they hoisted their booty and two captives atop war ponies and spirited them over the low hills. Only Mrs. Blinn's seriously wounded husband and the wagon master were left behind to send their prayers heavenward before limping to Fort Lyon.

It came as no surprise that before long those same young warriors sent word to the pony soldiers and Brevet Major General William B. Hazen, commander at Fort Cobb down in Indian Territory, stating their desire to ransom the white woman and her son.

Still, no one in the army's higher echelons would wager on who the captors were—Cheyenne or Kiowa or Arapaho. An unfortunate ignorance, for at the same time, from his winter camping grounds along the Washita River, Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle began to mediate the negotiations between the army's General Hazen and those warriors holding the captives. Just when it looked like Black Kettle and the white general would make some headway in ransoming the white prisoners, General Sheridan himself learned of the negotiations and squashed Hazen's peace machinery in midstream.

"I may not have learned much in my short tenure as commander of the Department of the Missouri," the general snorted to his aide Lieutenant Colonel J. Schuyler Crosby, "but now, by God, I can connect Black Kettle's bloody band of Southern Cheyenne with some of the white captives."

"You've got them red-handed, sir!"