

## The Legend of William Fontaine (Otherwise known as Three-Fingered Willie)

MY FATHER TOLD me this story many years ago, as his father had, many years earlier, told it to him. It begins in the late 1700s with William Fontaine, the son of a wealthy merchant who fell in love with the daughter of an aristocrat. The pair kept their love secret until the day a child was born. Indeed, such a scandal would have ruined the daughter of a nobleman, and so the two made plans to escape to the New World, but before they could go, a strange fever swept through the countryside and mother along with child died.

William Fontaine, heartbroken, signed onto a merchant vessel that very day and sailed to Quebec. From there, he traveled westward across the Great Lakes and then through Minnesota on foot, roaming westward until finally finding a place for himself below the wide, open sky of the Dakota prairie. It was here along the waters of the Missouri River William Fontaine found the solitude he needed to live with his grief.

William Fontaine was *coureurs de bois*, a runner of the woods, a trapper by trade, and as it was in the day, he lived peacefully with the nations of the river, the Sioux, the Santee, the Mandan, the Arikara. Legend spread among those people about the gentle man, for unlike many of his fellow trappers, William moved along the river in silence, never making his presence known unless it was needed, and this he would do by singing a sad, gentle river song.

Some would say that with his song he could bring the animals to him, that he needed no traps. However legendary this part of his story might be, it is indeed true that William lived at one with the land, never taking more than he needed, never taking more than the land could give. When the land ached, William ached too, and when the land starved, William starved too, but even in the darkest of days, he was always gentle and always generous with anybody he encountered.

An early spring brought William Fontaine farther west than he had ever traveled, along the White River and onto the Badlands near Pine Ridge. He was encamped near a tiny brook one chilly morning when he heard the scream of a woman. It had been so long since he had heard another's voice that at first he could only assume this was his imagination. But then it occurred to him. The sound of her voice was dancing through the rough-cut painted cliffs. Yes, William was certain now—his imagination never echoed—she was real...and in danger.

William grabbed his tomahawk and straight blade and ran the rocky bottom, the sound of her voice guiding him deeper through the chiseled canyon, deeper into shadow and darkness.

And there, where the canyon came to an abrupt end, he saw something he dared not believe. Pinned against the rock was a young native princess, a rough branch of cedar clenched firmly in hand as her only defense. Circling her, toying with an easy meal, was

old lord of the forest. William tried to circle the mountain lion silently, but a shift of the young princess's eyes told tale of William's approach.

As the cat spun, William said the first prayer he had said in many years, "*Dieu m'aident,*" roughly translated "God help me," and thrust himself at the cat.

The earth was thirsty that day for blood and as the painted rock slipped to grays around him, William was certain he would finally make his peace with the world.

Three days of darkness passed before William found himself waking to her dark, gentle eyes. She was there with him, the princess, tending to his wounds, a small watch fire dancing soft light upon her gentle face, and in the air, the smell of cat, smoldering upon a spit.

"Princess," he said and she could only smile.

You ask why they call him Three-fingered Willie and I will tell you now. It was because of that day he went against the cat.

The princess nursed Willie back to health there in the canyon, and as she tended to his wounds, he noticed she had her own wounds. Her lip had been split. Yellow shone round her right eye.

This was not the work of the cat.

He touched her lip, her eye. "Who did this to you?"

She drew away in shame.

"A man, yes?" He tried to take her wrist gently, but she flinched and there he could feel the twist of bones broken. "Your husband?"

She only smiled sadly and looked to the west.

Her wounds troubled Willie terribly.

Her pain troubled Willie terribly.

She was strong and capable though—stronger than anybody he had ever known.

And so as summer grew longer, the princess nursed Willie back to health and from that day she followed him wherever he went. He tried to abandon her once, but she was just as quick as he. He yelled and screamed more than once for her to leave him, but because they shared no common language she could only smile and continue following.

Willie did not do any of this yelling and screaming because he was a bad man. He just lacked trust. He had lost his first love, who was a princess too, and he could only assume

that one day this second princess would grow weary of him and, longing for more than his broken heart could share, return to her own people.

Soon, he could no longer yell at her or try to push her away. All he could do, every morning before going to check his traps, was say, “You know I love you, but today is the day you return to your people. Indeed, you will leave me for the one who hurt you, and you will leave without ever saying goodbye.”

And all she could do was smile.

This was how it went between them and every day when he would return to their camp, there she would be waiting, his faithful helpmate, lover, and friend.

And each night, beneath the wide, open sky he would find some peace.

Days passed into seasons and seasons into years and as the century turned, the world that William Fontaine had escaped began gathering slowly round him and his princess. Under the orders of Thomas Jefferson, Captains Lewis and Clark journeyed up the Missouri to explore a young nation’s newly acquired lands. Soon after, the pioneers came by boat and wagon, and with them, soldiers on horseback to drive the nations of the river westward. And as more and more settlers came, the river grew dirty and the land became parched. But Willie and his princess continued as they always had, respecting the land, never desecrating grounds sacred, respecting the spirit of each animal trapped, respecting every piece of wood they burnt, for each had been once living and now was providing them with life.

Other trappers and hunters would often try to search for Three-fingered Willie’s campsites, for Three-fingered Willie always brought to trade and Rendezvous the best and finest pelts, but his campsites could never be found—no insects drawn to the spill of blood, no scars in the soil marking the remains of a campfire ring. There was no magic to any of this, just patience. Willie and his princess would even go so far as to carry water from the river so to lift away every last footprint, and as they would go they would coax each blade of grass and every last wildflower straight so each could drink life from the sun once more.

The steamboats brought more settlers and the river towns grew. Those last few of the great nations were forced onto scraps of wasteland known as reservations. The railways came and with them, legendary figures like Buffalo Bill Cody, who did his best to rid the world of the gentle and magnificent Bison. There was even talk of building great bridges that would span the untamable Missouri.

The land ached and Willie yearned for simpler days, but he continued as always, leaving his camp every morning and telling his princess in words she never understood: “You know I love you, but today is the day you return to your people. Indeed, today is the day you will return to the one who hurt you, and you will leave without saying goodbye.”

And all she could do was smile.

Up and down the river, rumors began to spread about a mad Frenchman and his Indian slave. Children would frighten each other with accounts of the strange old runner of the woods. He had three fingers on one hand and if he got you in his clutches, he would take you into the night.

These rumors of Three-fingered Willie spread and as they did, more and more people began to believe. A young captain at Fort Randall, ambitious and wishing to make his name, decided one day he would quell these rumors once and for all.

Soldiers were dispatched two-by-two in search of Willie and his princess. Some diligently searched. Others disappeared into brothels in places like Yankton and Sioux City. One afternoon, however, two soldiers were returning westward to Fort Randall on horseback when they stumbled upon a campsite.

The princess was humming Willie's sad song, working flesh from the pelt of a rabbit when the two soldiers fell upon her.

When Willie returned to camp that evening he was heartbroken. It finally happened. She was gone. He could not bear his grief. He stumbled from camp and fell upon the sandy shores of the Missouri, rending the old furs that kept him warm, beating his fists upon the ground, screaming to God that it should not have been just his two fingers, but his very throat that the cat took in its jaws that day so long ago.

Willie wept until he could weep no more and then as he stifled his tears, something happened. He could now smell smoldering embers. He could now smell meat gone rancid from that rabbit in the hot autumn sun...or was that the smell of rabbit?

Impossible—he knew the princess would never do such a thing before leaving. Campfires left unattended would burn with fury the cottons and maples that lined these banks. Meat left unattended would draw the worst of scavengers, vultures circling high above.

Willie ran back to the campsite, and the vultures his heavenly guide, there he found her, hidden in the reeds.

Gone was her beauty, her body torn ugly by lustful hands and filthy rage.

Willie did not weep or cry out at that moment, for he knew the soldiers—it was soldiers for certain—would return in greater number for him.

And so Willie prepared.

The funerary pyre was built in the traditional way and all that night he watched as her body returned to ashes, and upon that pyre with her, he burned every last shred of those furs he had rent.

And there he stood naked that next morning, covering himself in her ashes. You see, this is the peculiar quality of ash, and it is something every runner of the river should know: mixed with water ash, rich with lye, becomes like soap. Willie had not gone mad, covering himself with her ashes. Willie was keeping a promise to himself. Trappers like Willie were never, ever quite clean, and so he had promised himself many, many years ago that when he left this world, he would leave a clean man.

That afternoon the two soldiers returned with the captain and a contingent of twenty on horseback. The two soldiers were sure this was the place where they had found the princess, but there was no sign of inhabitation. The earth was not scarred from fire. Ants hadn't come to feast on the meat of that rabbit. There were no scavengers circling high above. Even the grass stood high, no sign that any man had ever tread foot here.

This was the place though, they were certain. The twisted cottonwood hissing up river still stood just offshore. A lone diamond willow still bore the marks from where one of the soldiers had hacked away with his sword, while the other was finishing with the princess. The sandy bank, the roll of the hills beyond, the path that had brought them here—it was all exactly the same as yesterday.

The captain was unconvinced, however, and so chastised the two soldiers for their drunkenness. Several of the other soldiers were laughing. A few had dismounted to relieve themselves. One of them fiddled with his rifle, and when the rifle misfired, the captain's horse reared back and stamped a circle, scattering the others around him.

This was Willie's moment, the only moment he would get.

From out of the reeds he came, straight blade and tomahawk high over his head. The cry he roared was like nothing any of the soldiers had ever heard. The ache in him had turned animal, the years of gentleness, kindness, compassion, and grace gone. He was an old man, but fire raged in his eyes and every muscle in his body, rebelling against time, went taut as he struck the first to step in his path.

Much blood was spilt that day.

But an old man can only do so much. Rifles came down on him and bayonets were fixed and soon Willie was brought to his knees, and just as Willie was about to let slip this world one of the soldiers who had killed his wife bent close and whispered, "She didn't struggle, old man—all she did was smile...and whisper your name, again and again."

That night the soldiers camped upon a bluff not far from where they left Willie for dead and there they celebrated their victory, making noise and burning bonfires so big the sky turned an ugly red.

This was what they say woke Willie from death.

They say, to this day, he is still awake.

I have lived upon this river all my life and I have heard and seen a strange many things. More than once I have heard the sound of an old Frenchman singing and I have felt the cool wind blowing through camp on a dead, still summer night.

They say Three-fingered Willie is still searching for those few last soldiers, moving through campsites when all have gone to sleep...seeking further vengeance. You might feel that cool breeze. You might wake to the sound of three fingers crossing your tent flap as he peers in on you.

Whom does he seek and where will he find them?

How well have you, dear runner of the woods, treated those with whom you have shared the woods—the birds, the beasts, the fish, the flower?

I'm sure you didn't pull up wildflowers to tuck in your book or break branches from a living tree to roast your marshmallows.

What about your litter? Those candy wrappers and aluminum cans? You packed them out with you, I'm sure, to be recycled for another day.

And finally, finally...you did put out that campfire, didn't you?

I am certain you have nothing to fear.

But...

Zip your tent and tuck yourself as deep as you can in your sleeping bag and if you do feel those three fingers, be sure to close your eyes tight and tell yourself it is all just a bad dream...and maybe, just maybe, in the morning, you'll wake.

SLEEP WELL