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How The Buffalo Lost His Crown

by John H. Beacom

illustrated by Charles M. Russell

How the Buffalo Lost His Crown, now an extremely rare book, was one of C. M. Russell's first projects when he decided to leave cowboying and see whether he could make a living with the painting and sketching that had delighted friends for a decade. A career-soldier friend stationed at Fort Shaw, Lieutenant John H. Beacom, had retold this legend after learning it from a Blackfeet orator. During the winter of 1893-94, Russell settled down to serious painting with a commission from the Niedringhaus family of St. Louis. His studio was in Cascade, purposefully miles away from Great Falls area cowboy friends. He completed the paintings that would illustrate Beacom's book: one black-and-white oil, six black-and-white watercolors, and two spot illustrations.

When the book was published in 1894, its title page gave the name of Charles M.

Russell along with the sobriquet "The Cowboy Artist"—and omitted Beacom's name completely, although his surname appeared on the cover and his signature followed the text. Two pages gave a biographical sketch of Russell, accompanied by a photograph of the artist wearing fringed sash and bandanna tie. Forest and Stream Publishing Company of Minneapolis published that first edition; four years later H. R. Russell of New York (no relation), a leading art-book house of the day, published an identical second edition.

We are pleased to reprint the story here in its entirety, along with four of the illustrations. They are now in the collection of Leon Kelly of Columbiana, Alabama, and are reproduced here through Mr. Kelly's kindness.

Old Nis-sú kai-yo, the celebrated orator of the Blackfeet nation, told me this story several years ago. He was already an old man—a veritable Nestor among these children of the plain. During his boyhood his people had held sway over a vast domain extending from the Yellowstone to the Saskatchewan, and from the Rocky Mountains far to the Eastward; but before he had passed his prime their fortunes had begun to recede before the pitiless advance of another race, and he lived to see them driven gradually Northward and then Westward further and further towards the great rocky barrier, until, as he expressed it, they were forced "to lean against the mountains." Nis-sú kai-yo fully realized the extent of the disasters that had come upon his people, but he seldom spoke of them in the presence of white men. The great battles and the famous buffalo hunts, in which, as a young warrior and hunter, he had taken an honorable part, were the themes he loved to dwell upon. He was familiar also with the folk lore of his people and often, while sitting at my camp-fire of an autumn evening, he told me these quaint tales of the ancient time. It is impossible to reproduce them, for they were related in Nis-sú kai-yo's matchless manner, in the silence of the night, and in a part of the world where all these things happened.

“It was long ago,” said Nis-sú kai-yo, one night after he had lighted his pipe and had smoked it for a time with true Indian impressiveness—“it was long ago; the Buffalo was the great Chief; he was Chief of all the animals. At first he was kind to them, but after a while he began to treat them badly. He made them all work for him—the Indian, the Antelope, the Bear, and all of them. When they were sick he took no pity on them. Matters went on from bad to worse until one day this Great-chief-with-the-black-beard became very angry and went about killing whomsoever he met. Everybody was now very much afraid, and the Indian



AN EVENING WITH OLD NIS-SÚ KAI-YO, the book's one oil painting, portrays Lt. Beacom as he hears the tale "related in Nis-sú kai-yo's matchless manner, in the silence of the night . . ."

most of all, for almost every day some of his people were slain by the hard-hearted Buffalo. In his distress the Indian concluded to pay a visit to his old friend, the Chief of the Beavers, as he always did when in trouble. On reaching the Beaver village he found the old Chief busy at work on his new house but very glad to see him.

"They sat down and had a long talk.

"If it goes on this way much longer," argued the Indian, "he will kill us all. Let us then go to war and die like braves. It is better to die than to endure such wrongs."

"My friend," answered the Beaver, "let us first talk to our friends and neighbors and see what they think about it, for without their help we can do nothing. We have all had a pretty hard time of it, and we should be willing to help one another."

"Just then the Fox happened along and they asked him what he thought ought to be done. After asking many questions, as he always did, he said he agreed with his brother, the Beaver. That settled it.

"The Beaver stopped work on his new house and each went forth among his friends talking to everyone he met about the cruelties of the Great-chief-with-

the-black-beard. Some advised one thing, some another, but most were in favor of holding a great council of all the animals to see what could be done to lessen their hardships. Such a thing had never been heard of, and many were afraid the Buffalo might learn of it and be more cruel than ever. But the Bear, who was very wise, told them of a place in the mountains, near a lake, where they could meet without the Buffalo knowing anything about it. So one night while the moon was sleeping in his lodge they all assembled at the lake to hold the famous council. After a long talk it was agreed that they should go to the Old Man, the father of them all, and ask him to take pity on them and to take away the power of the Buffalo, and to make some one else Chief in his stead.

“Accordingly they went to the Old Man. But when they had told him all their troubles and what they wanted him to do for them, he only shook his head and said:

“You must hold another council and select the one you would have as master over you instead of the Buffalo.’

“So they returned to the lake in the mountains and sat down to counsel amongst themselves. The pipe went round many times and nearly every one made a speech, but it was no easy thing to select a Chief. Finally, however, the Indian was chosen. Then they went back to the Old Man and told him what they had done.

“For a long time Napi sat still, thinking. Then he said: ‘My children, I am very sorry you have cause to complain of the Buffalo, for he has been your Chief since



THE BONE GAME pits two teams against each other. The player hides two bones—one marked with a black ring and the other unmarked—in his hands, shifting them from hand to hand with intricate gestures. Team members wager in pairs on whether the final position of the bones will be successfully guessed.

the ancient days. It would grieve me greatly to decide between him and the Indian. Know, however, that whichever of them is the more worthy shall be the Chief.

“You and your fathers before you have been wont for countless moons to play at Hands, or the Hiding of the Bone. It is well, for by a great game with these fateful bones shall it now be determined whether the Buffalo or the Indian shall henceforth and forever rule the world. Return to your homes and prepare your medicine against the day when you shall array yourselves against your Chief.’

“Soon thereafter Napi sent his courier to notify the Buffalo and all the animals to assemble at the next full moon near the meeting of the rivers.

“When the Great-chief-with-the-black-beard heard what had been done, he was very angry, but he had no fear, for he thought he was wiser than anybody else and especially clever at the Hiding of the Bone.

“Night after night the moon grew bigger and bigger, showing that the awful moment was approaching. Nothing else was talked of, and when at last the morning of the appointed day arrived everybody was at the place of meeting, awaiting with anxious face the beginning of the great game. Never before had all the world been gathered together. Never before had so much been risked on the Hiding of the Bone.

“Just as the sun was highest in the heavens the fateful game began. The Buffalo played first against the Indian and won; then he played against the Fox and lost. Then with the Bear and the Elk and the Bighorn and the Badger, sometimes winning, sometimes losing. Thus all day long the game went on with varying success and no one could tell who was to be Chief. The sun went down and the moon rose, and still it was not settled. Finally it came to the last and least of the animals, the Mouse; and lo and behold! the game stood just even. As the Mouse picked up the bones to play, the excitement became intense. But his medicine was



THE GREAT GAME FOR RULERSHIP OF THE WORLD, just as Mouse takes his turn. (Note that the horse was not yet among the plains animals.)

strong. He tossed the bones in his little hands so deftly that the Great-chief-with-the-black-beard, with all his cunning, was bewildered and at last was beaten.

“When the Old Man heard what the Mouse had done, he was well pleased, and forthwith he fashioned a bow and arrows and made a cover for them. Then he summoned the Indian and gave him the bow and arrows, and taught him how to use them; and then he sent him away, saying:

“From this day forth you shall live on the flesh of the Buffalo, and his skin shall be your shelter and your raiment. In his head the Mouse shall henceforth make his home. Let him dwell there unharmed and forget not that it was he who made you Chief-of-all-the-world.’



“FROM THIS DAY FORTH,” the Old Man tells the Indian upon giving him the bow and arrows, “you shall live on the flesh of the Buffalo and his skin shall be your shelter and your raiment.”

“‘Ai-ik-si-sum-mo’—That was long ago,” said Nis-sú kai-yo, as he relighted his pipe.

To Nis-sú kai-yo’s mind it seemed quite natural that the buffalo should have held universal dominion for so long and that then he should have been superseded by the Indian in the manner described.

The story closes with the Indian in supreme power and thus he continued until supplanted by the white man at a time still within the memory of living men. Nis-sú kai-yo could readily recall the time when the buffalo roamed over the prairie in vast herds, and deer, antelope and other game abounded everywhere. He remembered also that in those days his people were rich and powerful. Now, however, the buffalo was almost extinct and other species were terribly decimated

and, as a result, the Indian was reduced to beggary and utter helplessness. Few realize that the sudden exterminating of the buffalo was a greater calamity to the plains Indian than has ever fallen to the lot of any other people, but such is the fact. The buffalo was the source of his wealth and power. Upon it he was dependent for the material for his tepee or house, for his clothing, for his food; and for all the luxuries of life. No other people have been deprived in a moment of their accustomed food and stripped of their means of shelter or have been forced to adjust themselves to such new and strange environment. Nis-sú kai-yo was too proud to give this painful sequel to his story or to lament over his change of fortune, but as he slowly uttered the words "Ai-ik-si-sum-mo—That was long ago," there was a solemnity in the old man's manner that contrasted strangely with his look of exultation but a moment before.

The story finished we sat there for a time smoking our pipes in silence. Doubtless we were contemplating the same scene but our points of view were essentially different. My race had mastered his and had dealt hardly with him and with all the other dwellers on the plains. Few of the great brotherhood were left alive and his dear prairie land, once so full of life and happiness, had become a lonely desert. As his mind wandered back over the past, it doubtless occurred to him, as it did to me, that if the countless dead could rise again and meet in council as they had done in the long ago, they would choose the Indian and not the white man for their Chief. But what Nis-sú kai-yo thought is mere conjecture, for he sat there calm and impenetrable as became one of his race and dignity.

