

# Excerpt from *Twelfth Winter*

by J. Arthur Moore

## **Journey's End**

The sun had not yet risen as the distant whistle pierced the morning air with its shrill cry. Approaching from the westward tracks, the light of the engine's headlamp glowed dimly in the mountain fog. The churning of the steam in the pistons grew audible as the train neared the station platform, already alive with activity of waiting passengers and baggage wagons with loads to be transferred.

The sign at the end of the platform read "Truckee, West Virginia." This was the southern end of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad line which ran north through the West Virginia mountains to its terminus at Pine Bluff on the Virginia River, a distance of about one hundred and twenty miles. Here at Truckee, railroad traffic transferred to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad for travel eastbound or westbound.

The morning coach was arriving from the west. Steam blasted from the cylinders and air rushed into the brake lines as metal squealed against metal and the train slowed to a stop. The clunking sound of car couplings knocking together was followed by a brief quiet as the train came to a final stop.

During this brief pause in activity punctuated with the rumblings of steam in the engine's belly and the hissing of escaping pressure, trainmen climbed down to place stools on the station platform at the bottom of each of the cars' steps. Then controlled chaos broke loose as passengers clambered down or up depending on where they were headed, and baggage wagons were rolled into place to receive or send out various packages and shipments and personal goods.

A middle-aged traveler, very much annoyed by the harangues of his wife and the prattling of a half dozen offspring ranging from fourteen to four, descended the steps in tight-lipped silence. An older couple, comfortably married, followed, arm-in-arm, with weary smiles and enthusiasm in the sparkle of their eyes. They took time to see and appreciate the movement about them.

On the platform, children asked questions, or whined, or argued, or explored, or slept in their mothers' arms. Adults talked or pushed their way through the crowd. Some were blind to the happenings around them. Some took in everything with the awe of youth or a first trip away from home. There were city folk and country folk, folk from the east and folk from the west, folk used to civilization and folk just off the frontier.

Amidst the commotion the small figure of the boy descended the steps. He was lost in a confusion of people and motion which had never before been forced upon him in the short dozen or less years of his life. In appearance, he was a clash of civilizations. Long blond hair hung across his shoulders.

Dressed in buckskin from his fringed shirt to his moccasins, and dark-skinned from continuous exposure to the sun, he appeared to be an Indian child, but his features were those of a white.

The boy looked again at the paper in his hand. He stood for a while in confusion as he gazed about to get his bearings. Then, folding it up, he tucked the paper back into his waistband. The boy carried a parfleche, a beaded bundle which contained his personal possessions. He also had a long package, wrapped neatly in buckskin and tied with rawhide strings.

Crossing the wooden platform, pushing his way through the crowd, he reached the train on the northbound track. He mounted the steps, entered the coach, and found an empty seat by a window. Placing his parfleche on the bench and leaning his long package against the side wall, he sat near the window and stared out at the crowd. Tears welled up in his eyes and slid unchecked down his cheeks as he watched the activity so unlike that which he had lived all his life. He cried quietly to himself. The boy was not aware of the figure that paused in the aisle by his seat.

“Michael?” The voice and the name were nothing to him and he ignored them.

“Prairie Cub?” His name startled him and he looked to see who spoke it.

The conductor in his dark blue uniform and gold name-plated hat, stood there. He seemed friendly. He even smiled.

“I’m Dan Seegers.” He pushed the back of the next seat forward to reverse it, then sat down facing the boy. Folding his hands under his chin he explained, “Your friend Scot wrote that you were coming. Perhaps he told you of Jay Miller up at Snow Shoe.” The boy nodded an acknowledgement. “Jay and I work together for the railroad. We and some of our friends have been taking turns watching for you.” Dan stopped.

The boy gazed out the window again. They sat there in their own silence amidst the constant noise around them.

“Why?” the boy cried softly. Pleading eyes the color of a clear spring sky met those of the man. “Why am I here? My whole life is like it never happened. It is so far back and so long ago, I feel like it was a dream.”

“Michael, I cannot help you with your hurt. I only know of you from what Scot wrote in his letter . . .”

“I am Prairie Cub, son of Thunder Eagle!” the boy cried.

The noise around them paused as people stopped to stare, then moved on. Again the noise.

“You are Prairie Cub and you are Michael. You have always known that. Now you are in Michael’s world, though we will know you as both.”

“I want to go back!”

“There’s nothing to go back to.” Dan could feel the heat of tears rising up in his own eyes and brushed them aside as inconspicuously as he could.

“I know that! Why did it have to happen?!” Tears flowed freely. He looked at the parfleche and ran trembling fingers across its beaded design. “This is my grandmother’s gift before the last buffalo hunt.” Tears puddled on his shirt and the body shook with the sobbing.

Dan, too, cried. He tried to hide it. But his emotions were touched too deeply. He took out a kerchief to check his tears. The boy calmed some and wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve. Dan placed a consoling hand on his wrist.

"Trust me. We will do all we can for you." He dabbed his eyes as he stood, very conscious of their redness and wanting to get away to himself. "Stay where you are. I'll be back later."

The boy watched him through the door to the open platform. The aisle emptied as the last of the passengers took their seats. Michael reached forward and reversed the seat in front of him. He did not wish for anyone else to sit there.

The engine's whistle cut the air with two sharp blasts. Pressure rushed through the brake lines under the floorboards. Brake shoes clattered loose and couplings rattled tight as the train began to ease into forward motion.

The boy leaned back against the seat. He closed his eyes. His mind drifted back to his life on the plains.

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The engine's whistle sounded. The boy stirred from his sleep. Sitting up, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and glanced at the passing countryside. It was a misty morning. The glow in the air meant the sun would most likely break through the mist and drive it away. Michael looked up as the conductor, Mr. Seegers, approached.

"How did you sleep?" the man inquired as he pulled the seat and sat down.

"Good," the boy replied. "Do you know how my pony is? I haven't seen him since two days back."

"He's fine," the conductor assured. "I checked on him as soon as we left Truckee."

"How much further?"

"We should arrive in Arlee in five minutes. Look outside. You will see the engine yards as we pull into town."

The boy turned his attention to the window once more. The engine's whistle blew.

"There it is," Dan Seegers pointed.

The train slowed as it passed through the yards. Several locomotives stood on the tracks, some ready to go to work, others quietly unattended. The yards fell behind. Buildings passed by. The train slowed to a crawl.

Mr. Seegers stood to the aisle. "Hurry, Michael. Grab yer things and come outside." The conductor led the boy to the platform as the train rolled into the station area, alongside other trains already waiting on a pass track and siding. "Look there," Dan pointed. "See that engine, number twenty-one?" Michael nodded. "Wave. That's Jay in the cab watchin' us in."

The boy waved. A stocky-built, bearded man waved back. He had a kindly smile hidden in his whiskers. As the train shuddered to a stop, the bearded engineer scrambled down the steps and passed between two cars to

the station platform. He hurried to meet the boy as Dan guided him down the coach steps.

"I'll see ya later," Dan called. "Don't forget the boy's trunk and his horse!"

"I won't," Jay returned. "You must be Michael," he approached the boy and offered his hand.

"Yes, Sir," the boy accepted. "And you are Scot's friend, Jay."

"The same."

"I'm glad to meet you. He's told me much about his time with you."

"Come on," the engineer said, "let's find yer horse and trunk. This train only sets here ten minutes."

With parfleche and bundle tucked securely in arm, the two walked toward the front of the train. The pony pranced, panicky, as it was led down the wooden ramp, but calmed as soon as its young master took the lead line and stroked the prickly muzzle.

"He looks good," Jay observed. "Now for yer trunk."

While the two wandered the platform and checked the baggage wagons, people finished boarding the train and baggage handlers finished loading. It soon departed and continued its journey northbound. A second train soon departed leaving only number twenty-one with its two cars, a coach and a mixed baggage.

"That's our ride home," Jay observed. "We'll put yer horse on an you can ride in the baggage room with him."

They led the horse across wooden platform and tracks until they neared the baggage side door. It was rolled open and a ramp slid out for the pony.

It was time to go on again. The journey's end was near. Yet now that Michael was already with Scot's friend, it really had reached its end. He watched as the baggage wagon was unloaded into the train and saw his trunk go on. Of-the-Wind whinnied for his master. The boy climbed into the baggage room with his pony and the door was rolled shut. The few remaining passengers had climbed aboard.

The engineer sounded the whistle and the fireman set the bell to ringing as the train eased out of the siding and crept onto the main line. Inside, Michael, still dressed in his buckskins, sat atop the trunk and stroked his pony's mane. The bundle of bow and arrows rested across the parflech which sat in the straw against the trunk.

The engine picked up speed. Arlee fell behind. Soon the train disappeared into the hills on its morning run to Snow Shoe.

### **A New Beginning**

A soot-darkened, gloved hand closed around the cord overhead and pulled expertly on the line. The steam locomotive's whistle responded with a scream that echoed through the surrounding hillsides -- two long calls, a short

blast, and a long wail that hung on the crisp autumn air. Through the open door to the boiler walkway, the small country station closed rapidly as the train approached its scheduled stop. The engineer pushed the throttle lever forward to slow the locomotive. Across the cab, the fireman reached for a second line and set the bell to a rhythmic ringing. The movement of the pistons slowed as the large driver wheels slackened their speed. Concentrating on the approaching station area, the engineer pulled gently on the brake lever as he guided his train into position to line up the cars on the wooden platform. Brakes squealed against the wheels. Surplus steam pressure hissed as it was released from the piston chambers. The train rolled to a gentle stop as the bell echoed its last and fell silent. The engineer pulled one last short toot to signal the brakes were set.

“Scot,” the engineer spoke to his fireman, “Keep an eye on things for a while. I’m going back ta talk ta the boy. We’ll take a few extra minutes here.”

“I got it, Jay,” the younger man responded. “I need ta draw some water into the boiler and rake down the fire anyway.”

The engineer crossed the cab to descend to the station platform while his fireman walked to the tender to open the water valve. Jay Miller was in his late thirties. A full beard, neatly trimmed, framed a friendly face. Eyes that sparkled with kindness, reflected, too, pride and confidence of a man at ease with his life’s work. Ignoring the few passengers that were boarding or leaving the train, he strode directly to the first car, a mixed coach and baggage, climbed the front steps to the open platform, and entered the baggage compartment.

The brown and white pony snorted nervously at the intrusion and pawed at the straw. Stroking the pony’s muzzle to reassure him, the boy looked to the door as Jay gently pushed it shut. A slight smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, but was not reflected in his eyes. Long blond hair hung to his shoulders, brushing the collar of his buckskin shirt. Chrystaline blue eyes glistened with a sadness born of recent tragedy in his young life. Obviously of white parentage, the boy was wearing the clothing of a Sioux Indian. He hung his arm across his pony’s neck and leaned his body against the sturdy shoulder as the engineer stopped before him and gently stroked the bristly muzzle.

“Where are we?” the boy asked.

“We’ve stopped at Blakesville. We’ll be goin on soon. But I thought we should talk some first.”

The boy stroked the strong neck with his free hand as his pony swung his head and nudged him. The man walked to a nearby stack of crated produce and leaned against the boxes.

“Michael,” the man began, “It’s a very difficult thing you have ta do now, startin over. We don’t know each other except for what Scot’s told you about me and written me about you. I know some of what’s happened. When ya feel like it ya can tell me more of yerself.”

“I’d like that,” The boy smiled. This time his eyes smiled too.

“But again, so’s folks don’t come down hard on ya, we’ll use the first an last names, Michael Freeman. When needed we’ll put initials “P.C.” fer Prairie Cub.”

“That’ll be okay.”

The man smiled beneath his beard as he stood. “Guess it’s time ta get this train on the move. Folks’ll get impatient.” He put his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “You go ahead an change now an get yer trunk packed up. I’ll check back at the next stop.” He squeezed gently to reassure the boy that everything would be okay. “Ya take care, too,” he added as he patted the pony on the neck.

“He is called Of-The-Wind,” the boy volunteered.

Jay reached an apple from a produce crate. “Here, Of-The-Wind. It’s been a long trip and ya deserve somethin’ special.”

The pony took the apple from the outstretched hand and crunched it gingerly as the engineer reached for the door knob and left the boy and his pony to themselves.

While Of-The-Wind finished the apple and pawed the straw impatiently, Michael removed his shirt and laid it across the top of the trunk to fold it neatly for storage. As he knelt in the straw and lifted the lid to lay it within, two sharp blasts of the engine’s whistle cut the air. The car eased into motion as the shirt was laid reverently in the chest and a change of clothes was withdrawn. He fingered the cotton fabric of the shirt and thought again of Keith Summers, the storekeeper who had given it to him. Laying it across his knees, he picked up the bundle from where it lay beside the chest and the buckskin wrapped bow and quiver of arrows and thought of his people and especially of his parents, Thunder Eagle and Prairie Flower. His mind was flooded with memories of Grandfather and Granny-Woman, of life and death, of joy and tragedy and sorrow. Oh how his heart ached. A tear slipped down his cheek. Laying the precious bundles in the bottom of the chest, he stood and slipped his arms into the shirt sleeves. Brushing aside the tear, he walked to the door and watched the colorful foliage of the West Virginia mountain country flash its autumn beauty as the train rushed on. Again the whistle echoed through the hills. A dirt road flashed by. The boy turned back to finish changing and to pack and close the travel chest.

The morning run of engine number twenty-one continued to wind its way through the Appalachian mountain country. The consist of a coach and mixed baggage, painted yellow with green trim, bore the name Virginia and Truckee. Having departed earlier from the transfer point of Arlee, West Virginia, it was on its regularly scheduled return trip to the branch terminus at Snow Shoe. The rhythmic chugging of the locomotive echoed through the brilliantly colorful tree scape as the light cloud of coal smoke trailed behind, drifting off in a slight breeze.