EDNA FERBER

Cimarron

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TO MY MOTHER
JULIA FERBER

FOREWORD

Only the more fantastic and improbable events contained in this book are true. There is no attempt to set down a literal history of Oklahoma. All the characters, the towns, and many of the happenings contained herein are imaginary. But through reading the scant available records, documents, and histories (including the Oklahoma State Historical Library collection) and through many talks with men and women who have lived in Oklahoma since the day of the Opening, something of the spirit, the color, the movement, the life of that incredible commonwealth has, I hope, been caught. Certainly the Run, the Sunday service in the gambling tent, the death of Isaiah and of Arita Red Feather, the catching of the can of nitro-glycerin, many of the shooting affrays, most descriptive passages, all of the oil phase, and the Osage Indian material complete—these are based on actual happenings. In many cases material entirely true was discarded as unfit for use because it was so melodramatic, so absurd as to be too strange for the realm of fiction.

There is no city of Osage, Oklahoma. It is a composite of, perhaps, five existent Oklahoma cities. The Kid is not meant to be the notorious Billy the Kid of an earlier day. There was no Yancey Cravat—he is a blending of a number of dashing Oklahoma figures of a past and present day. There is no Sabra Cravat, but she exists in a score of bright-eyed, white-haired, intensely interesting women of sixty-five or thereabouts who told me many strange things as we talked and rocked on an Oklahoma front porch (tree-shaded now). Anything can have happened in Oklahoma. Practically everything has.

EDNA FERBER.

I

All the Venables sat at Sunday dinner. All those handsome inbred Venable faces were turned, enthralled, toward Yancey Cravat, who was talking. The combined effect was almost blinding, as of incandescence; but Yancey Cravat was not bedazzled. A sun surrounded by lesser planets, he gave out a radiance so powerful as to dim the luminous circle about him.

Yancey had a disconcerting habit of abruptly concluding a meal—for himself, at least—by throwing down his napkin at the side of his plate, rising, and striding about the room, or even leaving it. It was not deliberate rudeness. He ate little. His appetite satisfied, he instinctively ceased to eat; ceased to wish to contemplate food. But the Venables sat hours at table, leisurely shelling almonds, sipping sherry; Cousin Dabney Venable peeling an orange for Cousin Bella French Vian with the absorbed concentration of a sculptor molding his clay.

The Venables, dining, strangely resembled one of those fertile and dramatic family groups portrayed lolling unconventionally at meat in the less spiritual of those Biblical

canvases that glow richly down at one from the great gallery walls of Europe. Though their garb was sober enough, being characteristic of the time—1889—and the place—Kansas—it yet conveyed an impression as of purple and scarlet robes enveloping these gracile shoulders. You would not have been surprised to see, moving silently about this board, Nubian blacks in loincloths, bearing aloft golden vessels piled with exotic fruits or steaming with strange pasties in which nightingales' tongues figured prominently. Blacks, as a matter of fact, did move about the Venable table, but these, too, wore the conventional garb of the servitor.

This branch of the Venable family tree had been transplanted from Mississippi to Kansas more than two decades before, but the mid-west had failed to set her bourgeois stamp upon them. Straitened though it was, there still obtained in that household, by some genealogical miracle, many of those charming ways, remotely Oriental, that were of the South whence they had sprung. The midday meal was, more often than not, a sort of tribal feast at which sprawled hosts of impecunious kin, mysteriously sprung up at the sound of the dinner bell and the scent of baking meats. Unwilling émigrés, war ruined, Lewis Venable and his wife Felice had brought their dear customs with them into exile, as well as the superb mahogany oval at which they now sat, and the war-salvaged silver which gave elegance to the Wichita, Kansas, board. Certainly the mahogany had suffered in transit; and many of their Southern ways, transplanted to Kansas, seemed slightly silly—or

would have, had they not been tinged with pathos. The hot breads of the South, heaped high at every meal, still wrought alimentary havoc. The frying pan and the deep-fat kettle (both, perhaps, as much as anything responsible for the tragedy of '64) still spattered their deadly fusillade in this household. Indeed, the creamy pallor of the Venable women, so like that of a magnolia petal in their girlhood, and tending so surely toward the ocherous in middle-age, was less a matter of pigment than of liver. Impecunious though the family now was, three or four negro servants went about the house, soft-footed, slack, charming. "Rest yo' wrap?" they suggested, velvet voiced and hospitable, as you entered the wide hallway that was at once so bare and so cluttered. And, "Beat biscuit, Miss Adeline?" as they proffered a fragrant plate.

Even that Kansas garden was of another latitude. Lean hounds drowsed in the sun-drenched untidiness of the doorway, and that untidiness was hidden and transformed by a miracle of color and scent and bloom. Here were passion flower and wisteria and even Bougainvillea in season. Honeysuckle gave out its swooning sweetness. In the early spring lilies of the valley thrust the phantom green of their spears up through the dead brown banking the lilac bushes. That coarse vulgarian, the Kansas sunflower, was a thing despised of the Venables. If one so much as showed its broad face among the scented élégantes of that garden it suffered instant decapitation. On one occasion Felice Venable had been known to ruin a pair of very fine-tempered embroidery scissors while impetuously acting as heads-

man. She had even been heard to bewail the absence of Spanish moss in this northerly climate. A neighboring mid-west matron, miffed, resented this.

"But that's a parasite! And real creepy, almost. I was in South Carolina and saw it. Kind of floating, like ghosts. And no earthly good."

"Do even the flowers have to be useful in Kansas?" drawled Felice Venable. She was not very popular with the bustling wives of Wichita. They resented her ruffled and trailing white wrappers of cross-barred dimity; her pointed slippers, her arched instep, her indifference to all that went on outside the hedge that surrounded the Venable yard; they resented the hedge itself, symbol of exclusiveness in that open-faced Kansas town. Sheathed in the velvet of Felice Venable's languor was a sharp-edged poniard of wit inherited from her French forbears, the old Marcys of St. Louis; Missouri fur traders of almost a century earlier. You saw the Marcy mark in the black of her still bountiful hair, in the curve of the brows above the dark eyes—in the dark eyes themselves, so alive in the otherwise immobile face.

As the family now sat at its noonday meal it was plain that while two decades of living in the Middle West had done little to quicken the speech or hasten the movements of Lewis Venable and his wife Felice (they still "you-alled"; they declared to goodness; the eighteenth letter of the alphabet would forever be ah to them) it had made a noticeable difference in the younger generation. Up and down the long table they ranged, sons and daughters, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law; grandchildren; remoter kin

such as visiting nieces and nephews and cousins, offshoots of this far-flung family. As the more northern-bred members of the company exclaimed at the tale they now were hearing you noted that their vowels were shorter, their diction more clipped, the turn of the head, the lift of the hand less leisurely. In all those faces there was a resemblance, one to the other. Perhaps the listening look which all of them now wore served to accentuate this.

It was late May, and unseasonably hot for the altitude. Then, too, there had been an early pest of moths and June flies this spring. High above the table, and directly over it, on a narrow board suspended by rods from the lofty ceiling sat perched Isaiah, the little black boy. With one hand he clung to the side rods of his precarious roost; with the other he wielded a shoo-fly of feathery asparagus ferns cut from the early garden. Its soft susurrus as he swished it back and forth was an obbligato to the music of Yancey Cravat's golden voice. Clinging thus aloft the black boy looked a simian version of one of Raphael's ceilinged angels. His round head, fuzzed with little tight tufts, as of woolly astrachan through which the black of his poll gleamed richly, was cocked at an impish angle the better to catch the words that flowed from the lips of the speaker. His eyes, popping with excitement, were fixed in an entrancement on the great lounging figure of Yancey Cravat. So bewitched was the boy that frequently his hand fell limp and he forgot altogether his task of bestirring with his verdant fan the hot moist air above the food-laden table. An impatient upward glance from Felice Venable's darting

black eyes, together with a sharply admonitory "Ah-saiah!" would set him to swishing vigorously until the enchantment again stayed his arm.

The Venables saw nothing untoward in this remnant of Mississippi feudalism. Dozens of Isaiah's forbears had sat perched thus, bestirring the air so that generations of Mississippi Venables might the more agreeably sup and eat and talk. Wichita had first beheld this phenomenon aghast; and even now, after twenty years, it was a subject for local tongue waggings.

Yancey Cravat was talking. He had been talking for the better part of an hour. This very morning he had returned from the Oklahoma country—the newly opened Indian Territory where he had made the Run that marked the settling of this vast tract of virgin land known colloquially as the Nation. Now, as he talked, the faces of the others had the rapt look of those who listen to a saga. It was the look that Jason's listeners must have had, and Ulysses'; and the eager crowd that gathered about Francisco Vasquez de Coronado before they learned that his search for the Seven Cities of Cibola had been in vain.

The men at table leaned forward, their hands clasped rather loosely between their knees or on the cloth before them, their plates pushed away, their chairs shoved back. Now and then the sudden white ridge of a hardset muscle showed along the line of a masculine jaw. Their eyes were those of men who follow a game in which they would fain take part. The women listened, a little frightened, their lips parted. They shushed their children when they moved or