

*Allan Bevan*

## BLOOD AND THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

NOT MANY KIDS my age have a story worth all the trouble of writing it down, but I sure have and I aim to tell it if it kills me. I suppose city kids can go to the movies and see Tom Mix or Charlie Chaplin, but I bet they never had the kind of adventure I had last year—that is in the fall of nineteen twenty-five. They wouldn't be able to do the things I did, and they'd have been scared stiff if they had seen the things I saw. Well, anyways, here goes, and I hope if anybody reads this he won't be too hard on me if I make some mistakes once in a while, since I haven't ever done this writing job before except for the kid stuff the teacher always hands out.

Well, you see my Dad has a farm in Saskatchewan, and every year he has to decide who he will get to come and do the threshing since we don't have any threshing machine ourselves. He had old Sam White a couple of times but they got pretty mad at each other one year about the bill for the threshing and there was almost a fight first off and then almost a law suit when Sam claimed my Dad hadn't paid him the whole bill, which of course he had, and everybody knows that Sam is a crook anyways. So when the man that owned the big steam outfit from up around Battleford came down late in the summer to try to get some business, Dad made a deal and Mr. Kelly he said he'd come and do ours just as soon as the crop was dead ripe and ready for threshing.

I was pretty pleased about the deal myself since I'd never seen one of the big outfits in action, although I had heard the old steamers tooting for straw or water and sounding just like the train engines that we could hear some nights in the winter, long and mournful and sounding so sort of ghostly as the train tooted for the crossing, two long ones and two short ones just the same as our telephone number.

Well, we had a good crop last year and after we got it all cut and stooked we were ready for that big outfit to come along. Dad and the hired man got the granaries patched up again and hauled them out to the fields in

the places Dad thought was best for the straw stack and then we just had to wait until Mr. Kelly got good and ready for us. Pretty soon, though, Dad found out that he'd told everybody the same story and so we had to wait our turn. Dad and I were both pretty mad but we couldn't get anybody else so we just waited. It was all right as long as there was something to do, like watching the binder cut the wheat and kick it out all nice and tidy in sheaves and trying your hand at stooking, but not for very long as that is too tough a job for a kid to do, and it wasn't even too bad when they were fixing the granaries, but when the kids at school starting boasting about their old man's crop being all threshed and in the granaries or at the elevator it was kind of tough going because you were always scared that it would rain or even snow and spoil some of the wheat and maybe lower the grade so we couldn't get a new car and the old Saxon was getting pretty well shot especially after my big brother learned to drive if you can call it that.

But they finally came and it sure was a pretty big show all right. There were so many men in that crew that Mr. Kelly used two cook cars and instead of a bunk house they had two of the biggest tents outside of the chautauqua tents that I had ever seen. I was twelve last fall and so I was old enough to drive one of the teams hauling the wheat to the elevator in town four miles from our farm. So I was out of school when they brought the tents to set them up and it was real exciting to see them go to work. They picked a nice level spot in the barnyard and had them up in no time flat.

The crew's things were all brought in one big wagon and every man had his name on his own stuff, and I can tell you there were some pretty funny names too, a lot of them I didn't even try to read, all full of funny letters and some looked like Chinese, but the only Chink in the outfit was the cook and he was a good cook too, specially his pies. His cake wasn't so hot, all dry and tasting like pudding and no frosting, but his pies were as good as any I ever tasted. I think some of the funny names were Russians and Ukranians and maybe Polish since there were an awful lot of foreigners in the crew, more of them than the real white men, so there wasn't much teasing of the bohunks in that outfit I noticed.

The tents were the first thing we saw, and then came a few stray teams over the hills from the MacDonalds, which was the farm they threshed before coming to us. That made me feel kind of funny too because old Donald MacDonald was the luckiest farmer in the country and every year after he had his crop safely away it seemed to set in for a rainy season or even a snowstorm.

The year winter came on October 8, well old Donald had just finished his threshing and the outfit came to us and stayed around for days before they gave it up for good. So I was a bit worried all right when I knew the teams were coming to our place from MacDonald's.

When the old steam engine puffed over the hill with that great big separator after it, though, I was pretty excited. I was there when they set the outfit up for threshing and I can tell you it was really something to watch the engineer work that great big machine around so that in one try he had the line just right and the belt on. Why, they were ready to thresh in half the time to took old Sam White to get his piddling little outfit set. That was the biggest outfit I ever saw threshing. They had four men feeding sheaves to the separator, two from each side and they had to keep humping all the time. They had ten teams usually lined up something like this, a full one pulled in on each side of the separator, the two real empty ones trotting off to the field, and all the others out in the field with men throwing the sheaves in a mile a minute. They had field pitchers for every two teams so that there was always two men filling the rack and two others emptying her. Then there was an engineer, but he was Mr. Kelly and he usually let the fireman run the engine. They had one guy who did nothing but haul water to the engineer and another who was what they called the straw monkey, and his job was to bring the straw they burned in the engine. Then of course they had Mr. Gibson, and he was the separator man and a mighty good one too or he wouldn't have had the chance to run that big old machine. I guess they had about twenty-five men on that outfit, and then when you counted all of us, Dad and the hired man and me and my two uncles who helped us when we were being threshed and who we helped when they were at it, well I tell you it was almost like a baseball tournament on the first of July. And the noise with that old threshing machine shaking and coughing and whining, and the engine tooting and the men yelling at each other and at their horses and the wheat beginning to pour out the grain spout and the straw just belching out of the straw blower.

Well I was pretty excited, and it was a real good crop too for a change with great big heavy sheaves chuck full of wheat so the grain came down pretty fast. Dad let me take the first load since he wanted to keep a lookout on how things were going. I didn't have one of the big wagons, only one of the sixty bushel ones because I had old Pete and Billy for a team and they were kind of light for the big loads, but pretty fast on the way home when the wagon was

empty. But they had to hump to get the first load off because there wasn't any trail off of the stubble. It was good once I hit the road which was hard and well packed down from all the wheat that had gone down the road. Kind of dusty though. I made the elevator in about an hour because they had to walk all the way. Mr. Douglas was elevator man and he took a sample and weighed it and he sifted it around in his hand and even smelled it, and then he said that it looked like number one to him and I was pretty proud and pleased. Then he weighed the full wagon, tilted her up and helped me open the end gate so that the wheat poured down into the pit beneath. Then he weighed the empty and did a bit of arithmetic and told me that I had just over sixty bushel. The first load always takes longer because he has to try to grade the wheat.

By the time I was on my way home after picking up the mail and buying a couple of chocolate bars in case supper was late it was getting on in the afternoon and I thought that I wouldn't have another trip that day. Boy, I was sure right. When I was about a mile from home I heard the honk honk from away down the road and pulled over to let Doc Jones go by. He always drives a Buick and this one was a real beaut, a new 26 sedan and he was going so fast that he left a trail of dust behind him for a whole mile. Of course I kind of wondered where he was headed but not too much since he always drives like a bat out of hell. But when I got over the little hill a half a mile from our house I could see that his dust ended at our front gate and I began to get worried and excited. Old Pete and Billy could trot pretty good so I gave them a lick with the lines and we made some dust of our own.

Before I got home I could see that Doc was up at the threshing outfit, and just pulling out across the field still going fast but not so fast as before. Just as I got to the gate he came out it, and he was going real slow to make that tough turn and I looked down into the car and saw all the blood oozing through the sheet and a man who looked all right sitting beside the guy that was all bloody and dead looking and I felt sort of dizzy, but not too much. So I kept the old team moving and headed for the threshing machine. I almost made it before I heard my dad hollering at me to come back and not to go up there so I had to come back to the yard and unhitch the team and put them in the barn. There were a lot of people moving around and they all looked sort of sick and excited and none of them wanted to talk to me at all. Not even Dad who kept yelling at me to get in the house. So I had to go.

Then I found out what it was all about. One of the foreigners had

jumped into the separator, head first into those flashing big knives, but he hadn't managed to kill himself all at once because the engineer had seen it and acted like a flash to kill the machine dead instead of the poor old guy. Well I guess they plugged the machine too and it was getting a bit late in the afternoon anyway so they shut her down.

After supper, and a funny nervous kind of supper it was too, I had to go out to the barn to water my team since Dad made me look after my own horses. It was the scariest night I ever saw. Everyone was jumpy and the whole place was full of a sort of feeling that there was a keg of dynamite somewhere. Even the cocky kid that ran the straw wagon was quiet and nervous. I sort of jumped and sort of tried to hide from people and they all seemed to be talking in whispers which made it a lot worse. And then those northern lights. It was pretty early in the fall for them, but that night they fairly danced all over the sky, right down over the top of the sky spilling out in all directions. They helped to make that funny feeling and I had a heck of a time to keep from running to the house, but I did my chores and I didn't run once.

But it was nice to get into the warm kitchen with the lamp going good and strong and the warm smell and my mother there and my kid brothers. But I did my chores first and my Dad looked kind of pleased when he came in but I acted natural. But that night I kept seeing that bloody sheet and the way the man's hands were going and the way Doc kicked up the dust on his way back to the hospital and I didn't sleep too well. Every so often I could hear voices in the dark and hoped it was my mother and dad, but I didn't look and I was glad I didn't have to sleep in a room by myself. But it got light after a while and then I went to sleep.

When I woke up the sun was way up and the machine had been going for a couple of hours and nobody had told me and I was supposed to be hauling grain so I got out as quick as possible and somebody I guess Dad had harnessed my horses. When I got up to the outfit I saw the blood and I felt just awful again. Every time the canvas came around there was that great big red patch and I knew it was a man's blood and I only saw it three times and then I went away. But I wasn't any more scared than some of the grown up men were in the dark and I did my chores and didn't run even though I wanted to and I wanted to get away from the whispers and those awful dancing northern lights and a man had killed himself on our farm only a quarter of a mile from the house, and I had seen him just when he was dying as Doc tried to get him to the hospital.

I don't think the rest of the threshing is much out of the ordinary and we got the crop off and it was a good one and I did my share of the work.

I still haven't got used to the northern lights, though, and I still want to run when they start to put on a show and sometimes I see that blood again. And I still feel when I walk from the barn to the house after dark and the northern lights are going I still feel that there is something kind of ghostly breathing right down my neck and I want to run but so far I haven't done it. I sure hope I can keep it up.

## THE SPEECH OF YOUR COUNTRY

*John V. Hicks*

The speech of your country is like music,  
 resisting translation, sufficient of itself  
 in phrase and cadence, flowing eloquently towards  
 the perfect understanding. You walk beside me  
 a stranger, yet at the touch of hand and hand  
 words rest upon the tongue, needless  
 of being spoken. It is like light  
 kindled at morning, like song's unburdening  
 from the first outlined tree.

They will ask why

I come silent from my journey, why I bring  
 no message, no least token; and I shall say,  
 the speech of her country is like music  
 not to be translated, sense of its own sound,  
 entire with meaning. Set adrift in the heart,  
 it finds the ear in its own fashion. I  
 have heard it, and I understand.