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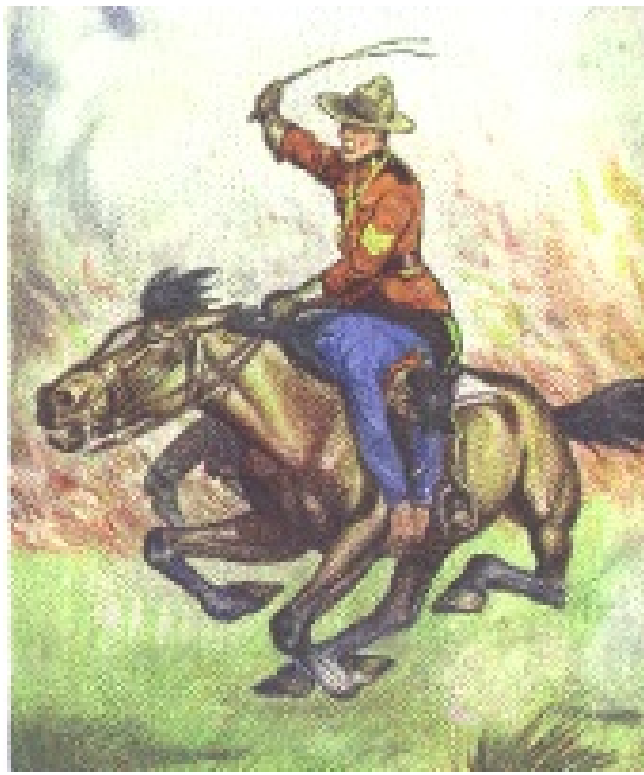
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SERGEANT SILK

THE PRAIRIE SCOUT

BY
ROBERT LEIGHTON

AUTHOR OF "THE CLEVEREST CHAP IN THE SCHOOL," "THE BRAVEST BOY IN THE CAMP," ETC.

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SERGEANT SILK

CHAPTER I

'LIKE A DESTITUTE TRAMP'

"If you ask me, there's nothing like riding across the open prairie for quickening a fellow's eyesight," remarked the Honourable Percy Rapson, breaking a long spell of silence. "There's so little to be seen, anyhow, except the grass and the flowers, that he's bound to catch sight of anything unusual."

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Sergeant Silk smiled at his companion's boyish enthusiasm for the open-air life of the plains. Percy had been sent out to Western Canada to learn farming, but there was no doubt that he was learning a lot that had no direct connection with agriculture. Owing largely to his friendship with Sergeant Silk, of the North-West Mounted Police, he was learning to be manly and self-reliant, and he was beginning to know so much scout-craft that his remark concerning the quickening of his powers of observation was quite justified.

"That is so," the sergeant acknowledged. "The prairie teaches you a lot. It's like being on the sea, where everything that isn't water or sky attracts your attention. I'm bound to say that your own eyesight is improving wonderfully by practice. You don't miss a great deal. What do you make of the stranger that we're coming up to?"

Percy glanced at the red-coated soldier policeman in sharp surprise.

"Stranger?" he repeated inquiringly. "I haven't noticed one. Where?"

Silk returned the boy's glance with a curious lift of the eyebrows.

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"Why, I supposed it was your spotting him that prompted your remark about eyesight," he said lightly. And he pointed towards a clump of bushes some little distance in advance of them across the fresh green prairie grass. "He's sitting hunched up alongside of that patch of cactus scrub in front of us, with his head in his hands, as if he had something tremendously serious to think about. Ah, he's moving now. He hears us. What's he mooching around here for, I wonder?"

"You appear to know him?" said Percy.

Sergeant Silk nodded.

"I know him, yes. It's a chap named Charlie Fortescue."

Percy saw the stranger plainly now, a slightly built, rather good-looking young fellow, dressed as an ordinary plainsman, standing upright and looking expectantly towards the two riders who were approaching him. He waited until they came to a halt in front of him.

Sergeant Silk dropped his bridle rein over the horn of his saddle and slowly regarded the man from the toes of his boots to the crown of his wide felt hat.

"Something gone wrong, Charlie?" he casually inquired. "Where's your pony? What are you doing hanging around here, like a destitute tramp?"

[Pg 12] Charlie shrugged his shoulders.

"That's sure what I am, Sergeant," he answered with an awkward attempt at a smile, "a destitute tramp."

"Eh?" exclaimed Silk. He evidently did not believe him. "D'you mind explaining? I don't understand—unless you mean that you've had a disagreement with old man Crisp?"

"You've hit the mark, first shot," said Charlie. "But it's something more than a mere disagreement. I've quitted the ranch. I'm not going back—ever."

"That's bad," reflected Sergeant Silk, taking out his pipe to indicate that he had leisure enough to listen to the explanation that he had invited. "Real bad, it is. You were such friends, he and you. He was shaping to take you into partnership, and—well, there's that pretty daughter of his. I've heard you were likely to marry her. Surely you haven't broken off with Dora, as well as her father?"

[Pg 13] "I'm afraid so," Charlie gloomily answered. "I couldn't expect her to marry a man whom her father has accused of committing a crime."

"A crime?" Sergeant Silk looked at him in perplexity. "A crime?" he repeated. "That's the way of the wind, is it? Tell me about it."

Charlie Fortescue nibbled nervously at an end of his moustache.

"The worst of it is," he presently began to explain, "I haven't been able to prove my innocence. Appearances are against me."

He raised his dark eyes appealingly to the red-coated soldier policeman, and his face brightened as with a new hope. Percy Rapson was conscious that it was the face of a man of good class. It was almost aristocratic in its refinement of feature. And the tone of his voice was that of an educated Englishman as he added—

"Perhaps you can help me, Silk. You're a member of the North-West Mounted Police and accustomed to dealing with crimes. Perhaps you can try to get at the root of this one?"

[Pg 14] Sergeant Silk struck a match and held the flame to the bowl of his pipe.

"Why, cert'nly," he said. "It is in my line. I shall be glad if I can clear you of suspicion. What are the circumstances? You may say whatever you like before my chum here—the Honourable Percy Rapson, late of Eton College, now of Rattlesnake Ranch."

He dismounted, and Percy followed his example. The three of them stood close together.

"You were right about my wishing to marry Dora Crisp," Fortescue resumed. "We've been engaged for a long time. We were to have been married next month. I had been saving up, on the quiet. But I never told Sam or Dora anything about it. I was keeping it for a surprise, see? I didn't want to say anything until I had saved off my own bat a sum equal to the pile that Sam had put aside to give her as her dowry."

[Pg 15] "One day last week the old man sent me to Banff to look at a new reaping machine attachment he thought of buying, and he asked me also to call at the bank and cash a cheque for him. I drew the money—it was two hundred pounds in gold—and delivered it to him safely."

"'It's for Dora,' he told me, when, having carefully counted it, he swept it into a chamois leather bag and tied the bag round with a wisp of red tape. Then, signing to me to go with him, he went into the harness-room, and I watched him as he cunningly hid the bag of gold in a ventilation hole in the wall; high up, where it couldn't be seen or easily reached. 'It'll be safe there, Charlie,' he said with satisfaction. 'We'll let it stop there until the wedding morning. There's only you and me who know where it is. It's sure safe up there.'"

Sergeant Silk shook his head.

"I shouldn't have thought so," he said. "When was it missed?"

"It was last night that it was stolen," Fortescue explained. "Stolen! and I—I was accused of being the thief; though I'd never touched it, never even looked at it."

[Pg 16] "And your own savings," pursued Silk. "Were they stolen, too?"

"No. That's where the whole complication came in," returned Charlie. "You see, Sam didn't know that I had any money of my own. He believed that I'd sent all that I saved home to my mother in England, and that I was really hard up, as I'd half pretended to be. And this morning, when he rushed into the house, wildly declaring that he'd been robbed, it was his belief that I was in want of money that made him so sure that I, and I alone, was the thief. No one else knew where the gold had been hidden. Who else could have taken it? He had heard me go downstairs in the middle of the night, and it was useless my protesting I'd only gone down to discover why the horses were restless in the stable, and why one of the dogs had barked.

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"The more I protested, the more annoyed he grew. He was just mad with rage against me. He wouldn't listen to me when I asked him if it was likely that I, his future son-in-law, should steal money that was intended for my own sweetheart—money that was to go to the making of my own home. Nothing I could say would convince him. And at last he went so far as to demand that I should let him search my room and boxes, see?"

Charlie was anxiously watching Sergeant Silk's face as he spoke. But it betrayed no sign either of belief or of doubt.

"It wasn't until that moment that I realised how awkward was my situation," he went on. "I must have looked some guilty. I was certainly flustered. And very naturally; because, you see, my own money, my savings, which I kept upstairs in my trunk, happened also to be in English gold; and what was more suspicious and difficult to explain, it was the same in amount as the sum that had been stolen—two hundred pounds exactly; two hundred sovereigns. And I was supposed to be as poor as a church rat."

Sergeant Silk was puffing vigorously at his pipe, but he paused to say, very quietly—

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"That was awkward, real awkward for you, Charlie. But, of course, you let him search your room? You didn't hide anything? You explained how you happened to have money of your own?"

"I hid nothing," declared Charlie. "But his finding and counting the money seemed to be the final proof of my guilt, and I wasn't able to show how any one else could be guilty."

"That's the important point," urged Silk. "You've got to prove that somebody else than yourself—one of the ranch hands, one of the farm servants, or even some stranger, had discovered where that money was hidden and could have stolen it. You say the horses were restless; you say a dog barked. Did that mean nothing? Say, you'd better leave this affair in my hands. I'll ride along to the ranch right now and have a jaw with Sam Crisp. Are you coming back with me?"

Charlie Fortescue's face went very red under its sunburn. He shook his head resolutely.

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"No," he objected. "I'm not going back. Sam Crisp believes me guilty. He has denounced me as a contemptible thief; and in Dora's hearing, too. I couldn't face Dora. I shall never look into her eyes or take her hand in mine again until her father owns that I'm guiltless. Go yourself, if you will. I've told you everything. I'm not going back. If I'm wanted, either to be arrested as a thief or apologised to as an honest man, you'll not have much difficulty in finding me."

Sergeant Silk mounted to the saddle.

"Very well," he agreed. "So long!"

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CHAPTER II

THE BAG OF GOLD

During the further ride over the narrow stretch of prairie that they were crossing towards the foothills, Silk was uncommonly silent, volunteering no opinion concerning Charlie Fortescue. Percy began to believe that his companion regarded the case as of no especial interest or importance. Even when questioned, the sergeant gave him little satisfaction.

"Haven't you made up your mind about it?" Percy asked abruptly.

"Well, you see," returned Silk, "we've heard only one side of the story as yet, and you can't always go by first impressions. What's your own opinion, Percy?"

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"Seems to me things look rather rocky against Charlie," Percy observed. "The evidence is dead against him, and that yarn of his about saving up on the quiet isn't very convincing—especially

when he wants you to believe that the money he'd collected was so exactly the same amount that Sam Crisp had saved. Two hundred pounds; neither more nor less. It's too much of a coincidence, too much like a story made up after the event. Assuming that Sam Crisp didn't rob himself, it's perfectly clear that Charlie took the money, since no one else knew where it was hidden."

"That remains to be seen, however," rejoined Silk. "I happen to have been inside of Crisp's harness-room. I happen to have noticed the hole in the wall that Charlie referred to; and it isn't the first time that it has been used as a hiding-place for articles of value, by others, as well as Sam Crisp himself. It was foolish of him to leave a bag of sovereigns there. He almost deserves to have lost it. He might as well have left it on the front doorstep."

"Then you don't seriously believe that Charlie Fortescue was the thief?" questioned Percy.

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Sergeant Silk did not answer, but spurred his horse to a canter, which was continued until they came beyond a bluff of birches and in sight of Crisp's homestead, lying in the midst of its blossoming orchards and far-stretching fields of green wheat.

"That rain last night has done a heap of good to the old man's crops," he remarked as he drew to a halt at the ford before crossing the swollen creek.

He was looking down at the moist ground of the sloping bank, where there were the impressions of a man's boots.

"I suppose you're thinking that Charlie must have got a wetting, wading across here on foot?" said Percy.

"No. I was thinking of the man who crossed a few hours in advance of him on horseback," returned Silk. "He appears to have been in something of a hurry, by the look of those hoof-marks. Be careful in the middle of the stream. Follow my lead."

At the farther side of the creek he dismounted, giving his bridle to Percy to hold.

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Percy watched him as he strode away in the direction of a clump of dwarf oaks, pausing now and again to examine the ground. He went in among the trees and was out of sight for several minutes, and when again he appeared he was walking along the cart track by the edge of Crisp's orchard. Percy joined him with their two horses.

"What's that you've got in your hand?" he inquired, as the sergeant raised his foot to the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle.

"Looks like some fellow's cloth cap," said Silk, holding the thing suspended between a finger and thumb. "I found it over there, hanging from a tree branch. I guess the owner lost it while he was making his way through the bush. He couldn't find it, anyhow, for all his searching and groping about the ground."

"Do you mean he was blind?" Percy exclaimed.

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"Blind? No!" Silk smiled. "I mean he lost it—had it brushed off his head—when it was dark night. If it had been daylight, he'd have seen it dangling from the twig that caught it as he passed."

"And why have you brought it away with you?" Percy was curious to know. "It doesn't look worth restoring to its owner. I should have let it hang."

"I suppose you would," nodded Silk. "But although it's only a worn-out cloth cap, heavy with rain, I'm interested in it—very much interested. I've learnt a lot about its owner already."

"I don't see how," said Percy. "What do you know about him, anyhow?"

Sergeant Silk thrust the cap under his arm and took the rein in his fingers.

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"Not more than you could have found out yourself," he answered. "I followed his trail and discovered that he'd left his pony hitched to a tree, back of the bluff there, while he went on foot through the orchard towards Crisp's homestead, coming back the same way. It was when he was returning that he lost his cap; and, not finding it, he mounted and rode away. He's a tall man. He has coarse red hair, and he has lost the forefinger of his left hand."

Percy stared at his companion in surprise.

"Did you discover all that in the few minutes you've been prowling over there in the bush?" he asked.

"Why, cert'nly," Silk intimated, touching his broncho's flank with his heel.

"How do you know he is tall?" Percy interrogated.

"Simply because the branch that swept off his cap was high—on a level with my own head."

"How about the colour of his hair?"

"Oh, well," returned the sergeant, "that's only an inference made from the fact that I found two or three red hairs clinging to the lining of his cap. It's likely that the rest of his hair is the same colour. But the only thing I'm certain about is that he has only three fingers on his left hand. You see, he'd been groping about, searching for his cap, leaving his traces on the ground made moist by the rain, and the impressions of his left hand in the mud always showed the absence of a

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finger."

"I see," nodded Percy. "And what does your discovery amount to? Do you connect this chap with the robbery of Sam Crisp's bag of gold?"

"Well," returned Silk, "it's a kind of proof that some one was prowling around the ranch in the middle of the night. Certainly he appears to have wanted to keep his visit a secret. But maybe Sam will explain. I see he's waiting to receive us."

The ranch master met them on the grassy clearing in front of his dwelling.

"Glad to see you, Sergeant," he began. "Say, if you'd happened along a few hours earlier you might have had the job of taking a thief red-handed."

"Indeed?" said Silk, assuming ignorance of his meaning.

Sam Crisp then proceeded to tell him of the theft of his bag of gold, showing that he had not the slightest doubt that Charlie Fortescue was the culprit.

"Did you wish to give him into custody?" the sergeant inquired.

[Pg 27] "Dunno 'bout that," demurred Sam. "You see, having proved him guilty, I kinder took the law into my own hands and fired the ungrateful scoundrel off the premises. In a way, I'm satisfied. I've escaped having a thief and a liar for son-in-law. I've saved Dora from having a mean, low-down impostor for husband. And I've got possession of the stolen money that he'd hidden away in the bottom of his trunk. No, I'm well rid of him, and I don't reckon that his being in prison would do me any sort of good."

Sergeant Silk looked at him keenly.

"Doesn't it occur to you that he may be innocent?" he asked very quietly. "Could no one else have got into the harness-room?"

"Impossible! Absolutely impossible!" protested Sam. "What's the good of supposing any such thing? The money was found in Charlie's box, and if he denied his guilt until he was blue in the face, I wouldn't believe him."

"So?" reflected Silk. "Well, just as a matter of form, I'll have a look round in the harness-room, before going on. Give my respects to Miss Dora."

[Pg 28] Percy Rapson accompanied him to the now open doorway of the little room. On the threshold Silk paused, examined the blurred footmarks on the moist earthen floor, glanced at the ventilation hole high up in the wall just below the rafters, then shook his head.

"I'm afraid Sam is right," he muttered as he turned away. "Unless——" He touched Percy's elbow. "Come round to the back of this shanty," he said.

Percy watched him searching along the ground and saw him stand still, looking down at some curious marks on a bare patch of wet soil.

"Do you see? Do you understand?" Silk asked in an eager voice. "Some chap has been crawling round here on all fours. See the round marks of his knees—the sharp grooves made by the toes of his boots, and—and the impressions of his hands?"

"My hat!" cried Percy. "Why, the left hand has only three fingers!"

[Pg 29] "Seems we're on his trail," smiled the sergeant. "D'you see that dirty old packing-case? Just lift it and put it against the wall. So, that's right. Now stand on it and see if you can reach up to where you see that loose slate. Ah!" he exclaimed as Percy obeyed him, "I see you're not tall enough. And neither is Charlie Fortescue. Let me show you."

He took Percy's place on the box, and, standing on his toes, reached to the slate, moved it, and thrust his hand in at the opening.

"Say, there wasn't any need for Sam Crisp to lock the door when his bag of gold could be reached from the outside," he declared. "The man who took it has left his mark on the wall, see, with his muddy hand. It doesn't matter to us how he found out that the money was there. He has stolen it and carried it off. And I guess I know where we shall find him. Come along! Let's hustle!"

[Pg 30] Late in the afternoon of that same day Sergeant Silk and Percy Rapson rode into a logging camp among the mountains and put up their horses for the night. Work for the day was not yet over, and Percy was glad of the opportunity of watching the lumber-men who were busily felling and trimming the immense trees, and hauling the great logs along the skidways.

The forest glades were filled with the shrieking of steam saws, the panting of donkey-engines, and the thudding blows of axe and adze.

Percy was fascinated by the unfamiliar sight of a gigantic log coming jerkily up a steep incline, butting at boulders, colliding with trees, ploughing deep furrows in the earth and smashing and crashing through the thicket.

"Keep clear of that cable, mister," one of the men warned him. "It might break. You see, when it's hauling a ten-ton log at full steam, and the log fouls a rock, something's sure to give, and it's

usually the cable. It wouldn't be nice for you to be hit by one of the flying ends."

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Percy did not look round at the man; neither did he stand back, and the warning had hardly been repeated when there came an ominous, jarring, crunching noise, followed by a sound that was like the firing of a great gun. Something resembling a coiled snake whistled through the air towards him, and in the same instant he was seized from behind and flung bodily backward.

When he rose to his feet, unhurt, he saw what had happened. The man who had saved him—a tall, red-bearded man—had been struck on the back of the head by a flying end of the broken cable. Sergeant Silk was kneeling at his side. Percy saw him take hold of the dead man's left hand and noticed that the hand had no forefinger.

"It's Dick Ashton," murmured one of the men who had gathered round. "Poor Dick, he's done for, sure. And him only just come in for a fortune. Went to draw it from the bank only yesterday. Wonder if he got it, eh? He seemed some satisfied with himself when he rode into camp this morning, hatless and covered with mud."

Sergeant Silk unbuttoned Dick's vest and there fell out a chamois leather bag, which sent forth the unmistakable jingle of coins. As the sergeant took possession of it, he glanced upward at Percy Rapson.

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"I think we have proved that Charlie Fortescue is innocent," he said. "Don't you?"

"Yes," Percy nodded. "But I wouldn't tell any of Dick's chums, here, anything about it, eh? You'll keep it quiet, won't you?"

"Why, cert'nly!" agreed Silk.

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CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY OF GREY WOLF FOREST

There were two boys in the household of Rattlesnake Ranch—Percy Rapson, who had come out from England to learn farming, and Dan Medlicott, the sixteen-year-old son of the ranch mistress. They were different in many ways, these two, as might be expected when one had been brought up in an English public school and the other had spent the whole of his life in the wilds of Western Canada. But there was one thing in which they were entirely alike: they both had a tremendous respect and admiration for Sergeant Silk.

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He was their hero, and they were proud to count him also as their friend. They admired him especially because he was such a splendid horseman; he could manage any horse you liked to offer him, and could subdue even the wildest of bucking bronchos. He was a sure shot, too, with rifle and revolver, and an extraordinarily fine swimmer. He excelled in all the outdoor exercises that appeal to most boys, and as for pluck and endurance, he was a constant marvel.

Most of all, they respected him for his knowledge of woodcraft and his skill in scouting. He knew all the secrets of the plains, he could tell you the name of every flower and tree and bird and beast, and for following up a trail, for seeing and hearing and smelling and drawing correct conclusions from every little sign that any one else would pass by unnoticed, he was quite as clever as any Indian.

Naturally, his work as a member of the Mounted Police and his duty of going on lonely patrol over prairie and mountain, gave him plenty of opportunity for exercising these powers, and somehow he had the luck of being always at hand when there was any danger to be faced, or when a man of fearless courage and ready resource was wanted to carry out some perilous adventure.

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"I don't believe Silk knows the meaning of real danger," said Percy Rapson one day when he and Dan Medlicott were discussing one of the sergeant's exploits that they had just heard of. "I wonder what he's got up his sleeve to-day. You may bet he's got something. He always has when he's more than usually quiet, as he is now."

"You might ask him," urged Dan. "He's out there on the verandah."

"It would look too inquisitive," objected Percy.

"Well, if you don't, I will," Dan resolved. "I'll go right now, while he's alone."

Sergeant Silk had called in at the homestead on his way along the trail to the depot of the North-West Mounted Police at Canmore, and had been induced by Mrs. Medicott to stay to supper and give his pony a needed rest.

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The meal was over, and he was now on the point of going round to saddle the mare and resume his lonely journey, lingering only, as it appeared, to smoke a pipe. But since coming out into the verandah he had, as his young friends had noticed, suddenly become unaccountably morose.

He was standing with his shoulder against a post of the verandah when Dan went out to him.

"Say, Sergeant," said Dan, making a successful grab at a mosquito that buzzed about his head, "you're gloomy, all of a sudden, aren't you? Anything gone wrong?"

Silk turned his calm, blue eyes upon the boy beside him.

"Can't say that anything has gone particularly wrong, Dannie," he answered slowly. "At least, not with myself. I'm just a bit puzzled, that's all, trying to figure out a problem that occurred to me this afternoon as I rode along through the forest trail." He blew a cloud of tobacco smoke into the midst of the mosquitoes. "Dare say you could help me, some. Two heads are better than one, you know."

Dan Medicott laughed his free, boyish laugh.

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"I'm afraid mine isn't a whole lot of good alongside of yours," he said. "What's your difficulty?"

Sergeant Silk did not answer immediately. But presently he opened a button in the front of his brown canvas tunic, and, thrusting in his hand, drew forth something which looked like a long parcel, in wrappings of dirty white cloth.

Dan watched him unwinding the wrappings. They were ominously stained with ragged smears of a dull red colour.

"My!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "What have you got there? A dagger!"

"Looks so," Silk nodded as the cloth dropped to his feet. He laid the weapon across his left hand and held it for the boy's inspection. "What d'you think of it?" he asked.

Dan bent over it without touching it. The weapon had a long, slender, double-edged blade, which tapered to a very sharp point. The handle was of ivory, decorated with bands of tarnished silver, wrought in a curious Oriental design.

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"What a wicked-looking weapon!" he declared, drawing back with a shudder.

Silk closed his fingers over the haft.

"Ever seen anything like it before!" he inquired.

Dan shook his head.

"Never."

"Neither have I," said the sergeant. "At least, not in Canada. It's the sort of thing you might come across in a museum. I'd say it was of Moorish workmanship. Dare say some Bedouin Arab once carried it in his waist-belt, riding across the desert, as we ride across the plains with our revolvers."

"You're going to keep it as a curiosity, I suppose?" Dan surmised. "Where did you pick it up? Buy it? Have it given you?"

"Found it," returned the soldier policeman, puffing slowly at his pipe. "Found it 'way back in the forest. What I'm trying to figure out is the problem of who left it there, yesterday, see?"

"Yesterday?" repeated Dan, in wonder at this precision as to time.

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"Yes. You see, there's no rust on it. It's too clean and bright to have been there more than a few hours. Besides——"

"Those red stains on the cloth wrappings——" Dan interrupted. "What are they?"

Silk glanced behind him through the open window of the room, where Maple Leaf, the kitchen girl, was clearing the supper table. Maple Leaf was an Indian, and she had sharp ears. He lowered his voice as he resumed in response to his companion's inquiry—

"Not much need to ask what they are. Of course, they're blood. You see, I found the dagger sticking in the trunk of a soft maple tree. The long blade had been driven clean through a man's chest, between the ribs, pinning him against the tree. Who killed him, and why, I have yet to find out. One sure thing is that, whoever it was, he hated his victim so badly, so vindictively, that he wanted him to stay there where he was, fastened with his back against the tree, while the knife should hold him."

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"Who was the victim—the dead man?" Dan asked abruptly. "You knew him?"

Silk nodded. There were not many inhabitants of the province of Alberta whom he did not know, at least by sight.

"Oh, yes!" he responded. "It was a French half-breed, Henri Jolicœur, of Hilton's Jump—the same who won the cup at Regina races last spring, beating Flying Feather, the Iroquois Indian."

Dan Medlicott looked up sharply.

"Those two have always been rivals in horsemanship," he reminded the sergeant. "I shouldn't wonder a bit if it was that same Indian who killed poor Henri, out of revenge."

Sergeant Silk shook his head.

"It wasn't an Indian who did it," he decided. "No Indian would have left so valuable a weapon behind. An Indian would have robbed his victim of everything that was worth stealing, and would probably have taken his scalp. He would almost certainly have appropriated the poor chap's horse. No; it wasn't an Indian."

Dan Medlicott then asked—

[Pg 41] "Would a white man—a Canadian—have been any more likely to leave the dagger behind as evidence against himself?"

"I don't feel sure that a white man would use such a weapon in any case," returned Silk. "He'd be much more likely to use his revolver, openly. But, even allowing that the criminal may have been a white Canadian, the dagger may not have been his own. It may have been the property of some one else, who had nothing to do with this crime, and his leaving it behind would provide a convenient false clue, drawing suspicion away from himself."

"Yes, I see," admitted Dan. And, after a pause, he added: "I expect they had a struggle—a fight—back there in the forest?"

"No. There was no struggle," Silk argued. "It was done stealthily, suddenly."

Dan Medlicott did not ask for an explanation of this theory; but he waited, knowing that one would come.

[Pg 42] "I've figured it out this way," the sergeant presently resumed. "The two men met each other on the forest trail and decided to make camp together. They hobbled their ponies, and went on foot in among the trees to fix up their camping place. They made a fire beside a stream, boiled some water, and made tea. I saw the ashes of their fire, the tea leaves, and some bacon rind. I found a crust of bread, with teeth marks on it. They were very even teeth; not the teeth of Henri Jolicœur, which were crooked and broken."

"They seem to have been friendly enough, anyway," remarked Dan, "eating together and meaning to camp together."

"Yes," acknowledged the sergeant, "but, at the same time, there was treachery in the mind of one of them. When they had finished eating they went aside from the fire and sat together on a bank under the maple tree, where they remained for a long time, smoking cigarettes. Henri never suspected what was coming. But the other knew. He was nervous, very nervous."

"Eh?" interrupted Dan Medlicott. "Nervous? How on earth did you make such a discovery as that?"

[Pg 43] Silk took his pipe from his mouth and knocked out the tobacco ash on the rail of the verandah.

"Well," he answered. "For one thing, it was shown by the fact that, having spoiled a cigarette paper, he tore it up into little bits. For another thing, he used quite a heap of matches to keep his cigarettes alight, and he chewed the ends of his cigarettes to tatters. He was restless, too, always moving, cutting the dry grass and ferns with his spurs, and digging his heels into the parched ground. They were high heels, like those of a cowboy's boots."

"An Indian would have worn moccasins, and no spurs," said Dan.

"Why, cert'nly," assented his companion. "It's clear he wasn't an Indian. I'm inclined to think he was a half-breed, the same as Henri himself. Still, I'm puzzled."

"I don't wonder," nodded Dan. "You don't seem to have got any clue that's of much value, except the weapon. What has become of Henri's horse? It wasn't stolen, you say."

[Pg 44] "No. The fellow was too cunning to risk being discovered in possession of his victim's broncho. He left it hobbled in the forest, where I found it. It's there now, in charge of one of my men—Trooper Collins."

Silk had wrapped the dagger in its windings of dirty cloth, and now he thrust it back under the cover of his tunic.

"Will you do me a favour, Dannie?" he asked, as he went down the steps.

"I'll do anything you wish," returned Dan, accompanying him along the garden path. "What do you want me to do?"

"To ride to Hilton's Jump to-night," said Silk, "and break the news to Marie Jolicœur about what has happened to her son. And perhaps while you are there in the half-breeds' village you might be able to discover who were Henri's enemies. I can trust you to be discreet."

Dan said nothing of this affair to Percy Rapson, leaving Percy to guess what he liked concerning his reason for going out on horseback after Silk had said good-night and ridden off alone along the trail.

[Pg 45]

On the next morning Sergeant Silk was back again at Rattlesnake Ranch, on the same chestnut mare. He had had no sleep, but if he was fatigued the fact was not betrayed in his appearance, for his eyes were as brightly alert as always. He had shaved. His dark moustache had its usual curl, and his brown canvas uniform—even to the shine on his long boots and the gleam of newly-polished brass in buttons and cartridges—was as tidy as if he were going on parade.

Dan Medlicott met him as he approached the homestead.

"I see you did not fail to go to Hilton's Jump last night," the sergeant smiled.

Dan looked at him queerly.

"How do you know?" he asked.

Silk glanced down at the feet of Dan's pony.

"By the mud on your broncho's fetlocks," he answered. "You took the short cut by the edge of the marsh, and you didn't give yourself time to groom your plug this morning. Well, have you any news? Did you see Marie Jolicœur?"

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"Yes. She was in an awful state about it. Henri was her only support. Of course, she wanted to know everything, and I told her as much as I could. When I spoke about the dagger and described it, she screamed and rushed excitedly to a corner cupboard and flung it open and brought out an old leather scabbard, which she dropped on the table. It was empty, but I saw in a moment that it was ornamented with the same sort of silver bands as those on the handle of the dagger you showed me."

"Ah!" cried Silk. "That is significant. It means that it was with his own weapon that Henri Jolicœur was killed."

"Yes," Dan agreed. "His mother saw him handling the dagger, day before yesterday, but she didn't know he'd taken it out with him."

"I see," nodded the sergeant. "It was probably snatched from his belt—and used—while he stood up beside the maple tree. In that case it isn't of much further use as a clue. Did you discover the name of his enemy? He must, after all, have been afraid of being attacked."

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"It seems he had several enemies," said Dan Medlicott. "There was Dick Transom for one, who hated him like poison, and Emile Guyot for another, who owed him a grudge on account of some gambling affair."

"It wasn't Transom," promptly decided Sergeant Silk. "Dick Transom has lost one of his front teeth. And it wasn't Emile Guyot, for he is in prison at Moose Jaw. Any others?"

"Henri's mother believes it was Flying Feather," Dan went on. "They had a bad quarrel just after the races in the spring. But I assured her that it wasn't an Indian who did it. The only other enemies of Henri's that she could think of were Pierre Roche and Adolf Simon, both of them half-breeds; but she didn't reckon it could be either of them who took her son's life."

Silk repeated the two names thoughtfully as he turned to remount.

[Pg 48]

"Pierre Roche?—Adolf Simon? Let's see! Yes. Thank you, Dan; I was right about two heads being better than one. You have put me on a new scent. I hope you haven't mentioned either of these men to any one else?"

"Not I," Dan assured him, adding, as the soldier policeman leapt into his saddle: "Aren't you coming into the house to have some breakfast?"

Silk shook his head.

"I am on duty," he answered. "I am off to Pincher's Creek. That is where Adolf Simon and Pierre Roche usually hang out."

"Then it's one of them that you suspect?" said Dan.

"I did not say so," smiled Silk, touching his pony's side with his spurred heel.

He rode through the stifling heat of the summer noon across the parched prairie and among the winding valleys of the foothills, arriving at Pincher's Creek in the early evening, covered with dust, but with his well-cared-for broncho as free from fatigue as he was himself.

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No one guessed what he had come for. The ranchers and cowboys supposed that his purpose was only to make one of his periodical patrol visits to inquire into any complaints that they might have to make, and to see that the settlers' homesteads were guarded against fire, as the law required them to be.

Silk made the tour of the far-stretching corn-fields, where the men were at work harvesting the ripe grain, and when the labours in the fields were over and he had taken supper with the ranch-master's family, he strolled down to the bunkhouse, where most of the hands fed and slept. He

entered very casually, and was greeted as a friend.

At first he gave his attentions to the white men, but presently he approached a group of Indians and half-breeds. Amongst the latter he had seen Adolf Simon, one of the men against whom his suspicions were directed. Adolf was now seated at the end of a bench, rolling a cigarette, while he chattered volubly in Canadian French to his companions.

"Say, Adolf, are you making that fag for me?" Silk inquired.

The half-breed looked up and smiled, showing his white and even teeth under a small, black moustache.

[Pg 50] "Oh! but yes, if m'sieur will accept," he answered gaily, as he delicately held forth the cigarette ready to be licked. "*Voilà!*"

Sergeant Silk took it and ran the tip of his tongue along the edge of the paper, smoothing it down neatly and nipping off the shreds of tobacco which protruded from the ends. He crumpled the fragments between a finger and thumb and sniffed at them critically.

"Ah! you no like such tabac," said Adolf. "It ees no good for mek de cigarette; only good for pipe, eh?"

"I dare say it smokes all right," nodded Silk, striking a match.

He was not concerned whether the tobacco were good or bad. What he wished to discover was whether it was the same quality as the tobacco in the cigarettes smoked by Henri Jolicœur and his enemy at the foot of the maple tree in Grey Wolf Forest. He quickly assured himself that it was different. It was darker and coarser. He noticed also that the paper used by Adolf was yellow instead of white.

[Pg 51] As he lighted the cigarette Silk glanced down at Adolf's feet. They were clad in very much worn moccasins. Already he had decided that Adolf Simon was not the criminal of whom he was in search. Nevertheless, he put his judgment to the proof. Watching the half-breed's face, he casually asked—

"Say, Adolf, have you seen anything of your friend Henri Jolicœur, lately?"

Adolf's countenance betrayed no agitation at this abrupt mention of a name which would certainly have disturbed his conscience had he been guilty.

"Henri Jolicœur?" he repeated, pausing in rolling another cigarette. "He is no friend of mine. I tink you mek meestek, Sergeant. Once—long tam since—we was *bons camarades*, but since two, tree month we 'ave nevaire speak. We 'ave not meet. Dere is no occasion, you un'erstand."

[Pg 52] "In that case," returned the soldier policeman, "it is needless for me to ask you anything about him. I shall probably get all the information I require from Pierre Roche. Pierre is on the ranch here, isn't he."

Adolf sent a very long, slow jet of tobacco smoke into the air and watched it fade.

"Not since four day," he responded, meeting Silk's keen scrutiny. "He 'ave mek heemself absent on private affair."

Presently, when Silk went out of the bunkhouse, Adolf followed him at a distance and overtook him as he came within sight of the lighted windows of the homestead.

"Pardon, Sergeant," he began mysteriously. "Why you come here, nosing round? I tink you come for de special police duty, eh? Is not dat so?"

"It is possible," admitted Silk. "But is there anything wonderful in that? Why are you anxious about my being here—on special police duty?"

Adolf shrugged his shoulders.

"You spek of Henri Jolicœur, of Pierre Roche," he went on. "You savee dey was enemy, hating each oder lak de poison—what? You 'ave discover som'ting."

[Pg 53] Sergeant Silk stood facing the half-breed looking into his dark, alert eyes, wondering if he were to be trusted.

"Why, cert'nly," he nodded. "I have discovered something. I have discovered the dead body of Henri Jolicœur in Grey Wolf Forest."

"So?" ejaculated Adolf, with less surprise than might have been expected. "*Tiens! tiens!* And you 'ave come for try mek de arrest of Pierre Roche? Dat is ver' queek, certainly. You 'ave lose no tam. But dere is no use you come 'ere. He no come back to Pincher's Creek. It ees de las' place he come to."

"You appear to have no doubt of his guilt, anyway, Adolf," observed Silk.

[Pg 54] "But what would you?" rejoined the half-breed. "Was it not hees intention? Many tam I hear heem say he will tek de life of Henri Jolicœur. Yes, many tam. And now he 'ave tek it! Well, M'sieu', it will be ver' interesting suppose you catch heem. You are clever tracker, Sergeant Silk. You catch many criminal. But you no catch Pierre Roche. It is impossible, absolutely. You nevaire catch

heem—nevaire. He 'ave too many friend. He ees too cunning—cunning as de fox."

"There can be no harm in trying," Silk smiled. "Canada is a large country, and there are many places where a hunted criminal may hide successfully—for a while. But Pierre Roche will not escape."

"We shall see," laughed Adolf, turning on his heel.

CHAPTER IV

THE FUGITIVE AND HIS PURSUER

[Pg 55]

Sergeant Silk had at least the satisfaction that he had now discovered the identity of the man who had taken the life of Henri Jolicœur, and that same night, without resting, he hastened to the nearest police depot to telegraph his report to head-quarters at Regina. He waited for a reply, which came in the early morning, intimating that Pierre Roche must be captured, dead or alive. The whole Force would see to it that he was caught and brought to justice.

Roche had long been suspected as a persistent law breaker, but he had never yet been convicted. More than half an Indian, he had all the Redskin's cunning in covering his traces and evading detection; but now the evidence against him was more than a mere suspicion.

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A whole troop of the Mounted Police turned out in pursuit of him. They were posted to guard all passes through the Rocky Mountains, and a district of ninety square miles was combed over incessantly by strong patrols. His escape seemed almost impossible. The district, however, was one of foothills, bush, winding gorges, tracts of boulders, and, to the eastward, rolling prairie, where the fugitive's friends, the Piegan and Blood tribes, were using every subtlety of Indian craft to hide him and outwit the police.

Day after day went by, and no positive trace of the criminal was found. The only hint of his whereabouts was given in the fact that Sergeant Silk, the most energetic of his pursuers, was constantly encountering unexpected dangers. This was particularly so whenever he rode alone unattended by scouts.

Artful traps were laid for him. He was misled by a hundred rumours that took him far astray into lonely places. False trails were set to lure him into hidden pitfalls and ambushades.

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Once, in the darkness, his horse bolted for a cause unknown until he found an Indian arrow sticking in her buttock. Once his saddle and bridle were stolen while he slept in the shelter of a friendly ranch house.

It did not take him long to realise that he was himself being dogged and shadowed by the very man he was pursuing and against whom he had given information. His every movement seemed to be known almost before it was made. A man less bravely watchful might have gone in fear of his life; but Silk only welcomed the signs which proved that he was still upon the fugitive's trail.

At Lee's Crossing one dark night he went out swinging his lantern, sniffing the warm air, bound for the stable, when he saw a sudden blaze revealing a dark face behind the horse trough, while a bullet ripped through his sleeve.

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Silk ran back to the house, grabbed his gun, and returned, only to hear a horse galloping away in the night. The creature was his own favourite mare, and the man who had stolen her—the man whose face he had seen in the flash from the gun barrel—was Pierre Roche.

On a borrowed mustang, heavier and less swift of foot than his own stolen troop horse, Sergeant Silk went off in pursuit. He knew by the direction taken that Roche was making for the refuge of the Indian Reservation at Minnewanka, thirty odd miles away across the mountains.

There were two possible trails. He realised that the fugitive would take the shorter one over the steep shoulder of Minnewanka Peak, and that he would give the mare a rest before ascending. By taking the longer, though somewhat easier, trail through One Tree Cañon, it might be possible to head him off. This is what Silk did, and he urged his horse forward at almost reckless speed.

It was early dawn when he came out from the gloom of the gulch at the point where the trails crossed and examined the dewy grass for signs. There were no hoof marks to be seen, and, satisfied that he had gained his object, he waited under the shadow of a great boulder, watching and listening.

In less than an hour's time he heard the familiar sound of his mare's hoofs, carried towards him by the morning breeze, and soon afterwards his keenly searching eyes distinguished against the rosy glow of the sky the form of a horseman riding slowly over the ridge of one of the nearer hills.

The sound of pattering hoofs came clearer and clearer from the farther valley, and at length, when Pierre Roche came again into sight, hardly a hundred yards away, Silk moved out and halted in the middle of the trail, drawing his revolver.

"Stop, or I fire!" he cried aloud, confronting the fugitive.

His instructions were to shoot at sight, but he held his weapon in front of him, hesitating to fire, wanting, for the sake of a great tradition, to make the usual arrest, the taking of an outlaw alive and uninjured.

Roche's rifle lay across the saddle, and he held the reins Indian fashion with the right hand; but when Silk, riding boldly up to him, grabbed him by the shoulder, he swerved, touching the trigger with his left.

Silk knocked the gun upward, and the bullet, meant for his body, tore through the rim of his hat, grazing his ear.

"Hands up!" he commanded, keeping a watchful eye upon the now desperate half-breed. "Drop that gun!"

Roche stared into the threatening muzzle of the shining weapon that was levelled at his forehead. He knew that it was futile to resist one of the resolute Riders of the Plains. For an instant he glanced around to see if the sergeant were alone, fearing, perhaps, that he had companions waiting in ambush. His fingers were twitching at the lock of his repeating rifle, but he saw that it was no use, and he sullenly obeyed, letting his weapon fall heavily to the ground as he slowly raised his empty hands above his head.

Sergeant Silk brought the two horses closer together, took possession of his prisoner's knife and pistol, and leisurely drew out a pair of handcuffs, which shone like burnished silver in the sunlight.

At sight of them Pierre Roche swayed in his saddle, then began to struggle in an attempt to break away, but the cold ring of a revolver muzzle was pressed against his neck, his right arms was seized by a hand stronger than his own, and the handcuffs were smartly clasped upon his wrists.

"Now you will go with me," said Sergeant Silk.

He dismounted to pick up the gun and his hat and to examine his mare to assure himself that she had suffered no harm at the hands of her strange rider.

"You tek me to de prison for steal your cayuse?" Roche panted agitatedly.

Silk nodded.

"For stealing my mare, yes," he answered, bringing his hat into its proper shape, "and for an offence yet more serious than your old game of horse stealing. And you may consider yourself lucky that I did not shoot you at sight just now."

"It is probable you tek me to Bankhead?" questioned the half-breed. "It is de nearest depot of de police."

"It is the nearest, sure," returned the sergeant. "But as the way to it lies across the neighbourhood of your Indian friends, who would no doubt attempt to rescue you, I take you to a stronger lock-up, see? I take you to Fort Canmore."

"But dat was a two-day journey," exclaimed Roche, "across de prairie!"

"If it were twenty days it would be all the same to me, now that I have you," Silk retorted.

He tied the mare's bridle over her neck, fastened a rope to the bit ring, and led her behind the heavy bay mustang, which he continued to ride.

As the sun rose above the hills the air became oppressively hot, and Pierre Roche appealed many times to have his hands liberated, if only that he might wipe the perspiration from his forehead and fend off the midges and mosquitoes; but all that the police sergeant would do for his comfort was to give him a drink of water whenever they came to a creek, and, at midday, to let him dismount for a rest and to feed him with a share of the remaining contents of his haversack.

By the afternoon they had left the foothills behind in the blue distance, and were ambling slowly, wearily, over the parched prairie, miles and miles away from any human habitation.

So fatigued were they and their ponies that even before sundown Sergeant Silk resolved to halt and make camp for the night beside a water hole in the hollow of a coulee, where a few dwarf elder trees afforded a meagre shelter.

On dismounting Roche flung himself down in the long grass, apparently to sleep, while Silk attended to the horses. He had taken off his tunic, and laid it neatly folded with his belt and the firearms on a tiny knoll. Once he glanced round at his prisoner, and saw that he was lying exhausted, with his face downwards, across his manacled hands.

Having no fear of him, Silk went on with his work of driving stakes in the dry ground, by which to tether the horses by trail ropes. His back was turned to the half-breed, but in a pause of his hammering he heard a slight movement behind him.

[Pg 64] He wheeled sharply round, and, to his amazement, saw that Pierre Roche had crawled forward, caught up one of the loaded revolvers, and was holding it with both hands, aiming at him point-blank.

With quick instinct Silk gripped his hammer to fling at the man, but even as he raised his arm there was a flash. The bullet went wide of its intended mark, but struck the shoulder of the bay mustang, which reared, kicked and whinnied with pain.

"Say, my boy, you've done yourself no good by that silly trick," cried the sergeant. "How d'you suppose you could have mounted and ridden away with the handcuffs on if you'd killed me? You'd sure have died here of hunger and thirst, and that wouldn't have been anyways nice."

"*Tiens!* Is dat so?" returned Roche in surprise.

"Why, cert'nly, you brainless cariboo. Don't you understand that you're helpless without me to look after you?"

[Pg 65] As a precaution against the repetition of any such attempt upon his life, Silk now took one of the ropes and tied it tightly about his prisoner's legs and body, leaving him lying there unable to stir hand or foot. Then he went to examine the wounded bay.

The wound was much more serious than he had supposed, and he was occupied for a long time in trying to extract the bullet and staunch the flow of blood from the animal's chest. Darkness came over the prairie before he had finished, and he had no lantern. All that he could do was to plug the wound with his handkerchief and wait for daylight, snatching a few hours' rest meanwhile.

Before lying down he saw that his mare was secure. There was no need for him to concern himself further with Pierre Roche, who could do no harm. So he wound his watch, took a drink of water, glanced at his prisoner, spread his blanket, and curled himself up to sleep.

[Pg 66] The difficulties and anxieties of his situation, isolated here on the desolate prairie in charge of a desperate criminal and a wounded horse, without food or the immediate hope of getting any, did not prevent him from sleeping soundly. He had had no rest on the previous night, and had been in the saddle for a score of hours, and he yielded to his fatigue.

He awoke with a start. There was a dry, choking sensation in his throat, which made him cough. His mare was snorting impatiently and tugging violently at her halter.

A strange, weird moaning filled the air, like the sound of distant waves breaking against a rocky coast.

Silk sat up, staring about him wonderingly. All was dark around, excepting in the east, where there was a rosy flickering glow in the sky. He could see Pierre Roche lying near him, still sleeping soundly.

He leapt to his feet and strode up to the wounded horse. It lay motionless on its side, and, as he bent over it and touched it, he found that it was dead.

[Pg 67] He turned away from it and stood staring upward at the sky, sniffing curiously, agitatedly, at the warm air. It was heavily charged with nipping, pungent mist. Flocks of prairie birds were in flight—sage hens, sand owls, linnets—all winging their way westward.

Silk knew the awful meaning of these signs. He ran up the sloping side of the hollow coulee, and when he reached its rim his worst fears were realised. The prairie was on fire!

Far back the whole wide expanse was wrapped in a vast rolling cloud of grey-brown smoke. The rising sun shone dimly through it, red as the flames beneath, that curled and leapt and twisted like a long ocean wave, sending up a spray of sparks into the overhanging gloom.

He heard the fierce crackling of the burning grass as the fiery tide swept towards him, devouring all in its way. He saw the wild creatures of the prairie bunched together in a moving mass—elks and antelopes first, then a host of the smaller fry—all bounding along, friend and foe alike, in a frantic stampede.

He was cool, as he always was, in the face of danger; but he knew the value of every moment now, and he ran back to his prisoner.

[Pg 68] "Quick! Quick!" he cried, awakening him with a rough shake as he began to untie the rope with which the half-breed was bound. "The prairie's on fire! Look at the smoke! Quick; get to your feet. We've no time to lose. There's only one horse—my mare. The other's done for, see? You killed it—as you meant to kill me."

"Holy!" exclaimed Pierre Roche. His bronzed face had become suddenly livid. His dark eyes showed the abject terror that had come over him. "Only one horse? Yours? Den you will abandon me? You will tek your revenge so?"

A ghost of a smile played about the lips of Sergeant Silk. He turned away without answering, and the crackle of the advancing flames grew louder, the hot breath of the burning prairie grew

hotter and hotter, the smoke more dense and choking. He went up to his mare, caressed her as he loosened her halter from the bit ring.

"All right, my beauty," he said very tenderly. "Be brave, keep cool. It all depends upon you. But you can do it, eh? At least you'll try."

[Pg 69] He flung the saddle over her back and fastened the cinches. Then he led her to where Pierre Roche stood, with a foot across the two revolvers, while he frantically tried to squeeze his wrists from the handcuffs.

"Steady there! Steady!" cried Silk. "What's your game?" He gave him a shove backward, took up his own revolver, slipped it into his holster, and then flung the other away.

"So?" objected Roche. "You refuse me even de satisfaction for shoot myself? You leave me here, handcuffed, for de flames?" He made a step forward. "Pardon," he said, "but will you not do me de favour for shoot me yourself? It is more queek, less 'orrible. And for your revenge it is all de same. I die anyway. What?"

[Pg 70] Silk was not listening to him. He glanced round apprehensively as a shower of black dust and smouldering grass blades fell from the midst of the heavy pall of rolling smoke. Then he stretched out his hands and caught hold of his prisoner in his strong arms, lifted him bodily, and flung him across the mare's back, holding him there while he seized the reins, raised a foot to the stirrup, and leapt up behind him.

"Go!" he cried, when his seat was secure. "Go, my beauty!"

With a snort and a shake of her mane the mare went forward, dashed up the slope, gained the level, and plunged off with a long, racing stride to mingle with the panic-stricken crowd of bellowing, screeching creatures of the prairie in the mad stampede for escape.

Mile after mile she galloped with her double burden, making never a pause or a break, while the fire, with its terrible crackle and moaning, came closer and closer, and the blinding, choking reek swept by in a thickening cloud.

[Pg 71] Silk had no need to use spur or reins. He let her go her own instinctive way, and only strove to keep his awkward seat in the saddle and to hold grimly, desperately to the man lying helpless across his knees. Once only he tightened the reins to check the mare's headlong flight as they came to the brink of a creek. Then, with coaxing, affectionate words, he bade her go warily, guiding her through the shallows, where a struggling crowd of coyotes, rabbits, and prairie dogs wallowed or swam or sank exhausted.

At the farther side of the sluggish stream Silk dismounted, trusting that the fire would not yet leap the water.

"Reckon we can take breath for a while," he said to his moaning prisoner. "Say, I'll just fix you in a more comfortable position and give you a drink. Guess you're needing it. I'd take the handcuffs off you, only I'm afraid you can hardly be trusted, even now. What do you say?"

As he brought a hatful of water and held it up, the half-breed dipped his face in it, and then looked down at him appealingly.

"Sergeant," he pleaded, leaning over and holding out his swollen hands and exhibiting the bruised wrists, "you tek dem off. You 'ave pity, eh?"

Silk shook his head and emptied his hat upon the mare's face.

[Pg 72] "Do you think you deserve so much pity?" he asked. "If I took them off you'd only try to escape."

Pierre Roche drew back his hands and awkwardly moved his body as if he meant to slip to the ground.

Silk stopped him.

"Stay where you are," he ordered sternly. "What are you up to?"

"I go no more," returned the half-breed. "I was coward. I no deserve any pity. It ees true. Listen, Sergeant. You was de mos' brave man I ever know. It ees not good you reesk you good life for me any longer. You leave me. You go on alone. I remain. I die. I gif myself to de flame. It ees bes' you go alone, see?"

Sergeant Silk recognised that the man was sincere in his curious entreaty to be left to his fate.

But he shook his head gravely.

"No," he responded. "I must do my duty. I cannot go without my prisoner, and, though you were the worst sinner that ever breathed, I could not bring myself to abandon you to *that!*"

[Pg 73] He nodded in the direction of the fiercely advancing flames. A spark nipped his cheek. Round about him he saw tiny jets of smoke rising from among the dry herbage.

"It's coming," he said. "The water won't stop it. Quick!" he cried. "Your wrists!" He seized the handcuffs and adroitly whipped them free. "There!" he nodded, "I trust you, see? You could dash off without me now."

Pierre Roche drew a deep breath of relief. He looked down into the sergeant's eyes.

"Dat is true," he acknowledged. "But I give you my parole. I go wid you. I am you prisoner. I no try for mek my escape. No. I go to my punishment. Quick! Quick!"

He held out his blue and swollen hands to help the soldier policeman to mount.

The mare sped on again, panting hoarsely, snorting, swaying sometimes, but never faltering, never slackening her onward rush, until, at last, she reached safety on a wide stretch of blackened earth, where a previous fire had stripped the prairie.

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And late on the following morning Sergeant Silk rode into Canmore and delivered up his prisoner at the barracks.

"Ah!" declared the commandant with satisfaction. "I am glad it was you who arrested the rascal, Sergeant. And single-handed, too. You look some jaded. I hope you have had no difficulties?"

"No, sir," returned Silk, "nothing to speak of."

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CHAPTER V

NICK-BY-NIGHT

Percy Rapson discovered the lumbering wagon by the cloud of dust which rose above the pine-trees half-way along the valley. He reined in his broncho and waited on the ridge of the hill until his two companions in the uniform of the North-West Mounted Police should rejoin him.

The loud crack of a teamster's whip had told him that there were strangers on the trail beyond this intervening hill.

"There goes the outfit that made the track we've been following up all the afternoon," he announced, pointing in the direction of the cloud of white dust. "Whose is it, I wonder?" he questioned, speaking more particularly to the one who wore a triple chevron on the arm of his faded red tunic. "Looks rather unusual, doesn't it, Silk?"

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Sergeant Silk drew down the wide brim of his hat, to shield his eyes from the glare of the setting sun, and contemplated the distant vehicle with its white canvas roof and its plodding team of mules.

"I expect it's a party of prospectors going west to the diggings," remarked Trooper Medlicott, riding up to his side.

Sergeant Silk shook his head.

"It isn't that," he decided. "It's not the best time of the year to start for the diggings, winter coming on. And besides, a woman—a girl—would hardly be going alone on a journey like that."

Young Rapson looked at him sharply.

"A girl?" he repeated wonderingly. "But you can't possibly see her, all this way off! How do you know?"

"Come to that, I don't know—with any certainty," Silk returned. "And, of course, as you say, I couldn't see her all this distance off, even if she were not hidden under the awning. Who could?"

[Pg 77]

"But you never say things like that at random," pursued Rapson. "You've always got a good reason for everything you do and say."

"Exactly," Silk nodded. "But it's only my surmise that there's a girl in that wagon. I don't insist that she's alone. There's the teamster and the off man taking charge of the outfit, even if their passenger had no other companion than her dog. She's young," he went on, as if speaking to himself, "and I guess she has fair hair. A bit of an artist, I believe. Paints landscapes. I'm inclined to promise that if you were to overhaul her fixings, Percy, you'd find she has a sketch of Minnewanka Peak in her portfolio."

"My hat!" exclaimed Percy. "Say, you're clever to have figured out all that!"

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders.

"Clever? Not at all," he protested. "I've only found out what you or Medlicott or any one else might have discovered equally well. It's quite simple. I merely happened to notice a few little things back along the trail where we halted to have our grub. You noticed yourself that somebody'd been camping there in front of us, didn't you?"

"Yes," Rapson signified. "I couldn't help seeing the ashes of their bivouac fire; and, of course, I've noticed the track of their wagon wheels all along the trail, as well as the footmarks of a rather big dog. But I fail to understand how you can make out all that information about the girl having fair hair and bein' an artist."

Sergeant Silk smiled as he turned to lead the way down the slope of the hill trail into the valley.

"That's only because you don't smoke a pipe that needs occasional cleaning out," he responded. "Mine needed cleaning, see? and while you and Bob Medlicott were down at the creek, watering the horses, I looked about for a stalk of sage-grass or something that would go into the stem. I found just the very thing I wanted—a hair-pin. You'll allow that a hair-pin is peculiarly a feminine piece of furniture. It's reasonable to infer that it wasn't a man who lost it; and since the one I picked up was made of gilt wire, I guess it wasn't the property of a woman with black hair. What? Don't you agree with me?"

Percy Rapson was laughing.

"It's too ridiculously obvious to be disputed," he acknowledged. "But," he added inquiringly, "how about the supposed sketch of Minnewanka Peak? That's a corker!"

Silk pushed back his hat.

"For one thing," he explained, "she sharpened a black-lead pencil, leaving the chips lying around, close beside the marks in the soil where her easel and camp-stool had stood, the dog sitting near. She had thrown away a bit of rag on which she had cleaned her paint-brushes. She'd used more azure blue than any other colour, and, say, I don't know anything quite so blue as Minnewanka Peak, of which she had an excellent view from where she had propped her easel."

"Rather a jolly idea, that—touring about Canada takin' sketches of the scenery," observed Percy Rapson. "I've often wished to be an artist. Do you suppose that she would let us have a look at her sketches, Silk?"

"There'd be no great harm in your asking her," the sergeant answered. "But we shall hardly have time to loiter around. You see, Medlicott and I are on special duty. We're not here to occupy our time with strangers; unless, of course, we can be of some help to them. We've got to follow up the trail of Nick-By-Night and his gang, and hale them off to prison—if we're lucky enough to lay hands on them."

Percy Rapson glanced forward to the cloud of dust.

"Risky for an unprotected girl to be travellin' about when there are such characters as Nick-By-Night on the trail," he said. "I wonder nobody warned her against the possibility of bein' held-up by bandits."

"There is certainly that danger," Silk said with a tone of anxiety in his voice. "It was only half-a-dozen miles beyond where we are now that the bandits, as you call them, escaped from the patrol a week ago. Nick's secret hiding-place is somewhere over the hills there, on Ghost Pine Creek."

"Then that is where you are bound for?" Percy Rapson inquired. He had met the two Riders of the Plains unexpectedly, earlier in the day, and had continued to ride in their company, intending to break off from them on reaching the cross trail leading to his home at Rattlesnake Ranch.

"Exactly," Silk answered.

"Are you going to allow me to stand in with you?" the boy asked.

The sergeant shook his head.

"It would hardly be wise," he responded. "You might get hurt. There's sure to be some shooting, and I don't figure that I shall need you to identify him. I shall know him when I see him."

"You ought to," rejoined Percy. "You've seen him before."

"Eh?" Sergeant Silk looked aside at him in curious surprise. "I've seen him before, you say? When? Where?"

"Six months ago," Rapson answered, "at Calgary Races. I was there at the time, only you didn't know me very well then. It was in the Golden Bar saloon. I dare say you would have arrested him then, only there was a nasty scuffle; you were wounded, and he gave you the slip."

Silk checked his mare's pace and stared at his young friend in a puzzled manner.

"Do you mean that swell mobsman with the diamond ring?" he questioned. "The chap who was playing three-card monte? Was *that* Nick-By-Night?"

"That's the chap, sure," Rapson informed him. "He'd done me out of two pounds by that sharper's trick of his, and I'd followed him and his gang of confederates into the saloon to try to get my money back. You remember what happened?"

"I am not likely to forget," answered the sergeant, "since apart from the wound, which was not worth mention, it was the one occasion in my experience on which I have known the excitement of pitting my common-sense against the skill of a professional swindler."

[Pg 83] Percy recalled the exciting incident to his own memory now as he followed the red-coated officer down the trail. He pictured to himself the noisy saloon, thronged with racing men, cowboys, ranchers, idlers from the town and the outlying homesteads, with a sprinkling of Indians and half-breeds.

He saw a tall, lithe, blue-eyed man, dressed as a rancher, in corduroys, blue shirt, and wide felt hat, slowly threading his way, as though without definite aim, among the little tables at which men sat drinking, smoking, gambling. Percy did not recognise him at first in his disguise, never before having seen him out of his smart uniform of the Mounted Police; but presently he overheard a half-breed muttering—

"*Parbleu!* yes; it ees Sergean' Seelk! He shape for mek de arrest of Monsieur Cutlaire. What?"

Rapson watched the sergeant saunter up to the table at which the card-sharper now sat with a couple of companions as flashily dressed as himself.

[Pg 84] "Say, stranger, what kind of a lay-out d'you call this?" Silk inquired in a slow, drawling voice, without removing the cigarette from his lips.

The sleek, clean-shaven, flashily dressed man with the diamond ring looked up at him without suspicion, evidently supposing that he was what he appeared to be—a careless, good-natured, easy-going rancher out for a holiday; a likely victim to be gulled and fleeced.

"What sort of eyesight have you got, cully?" the gambler asked, holding up three cards with their faces outwards, so that the newcomer might see them.

"Oh, I dunno," said Silk, trying to look stupid. "Pretty middlin', I reckon. Why?"

"Say, now," went on the three-card man, "d'you reckon you could locate the king when I throw them out, this way?"

"Why, cert'nly," declared Silk, pointing at one of the cards. "It's that one."

"My!" ejaculated the dealer in pretended surprise. "So it is! You're not such a cariboo as you look. But I bet you five dollars you can't do it a second time."

[Pg 85] "Right you are," Silk agreed, producing a five-dollar bill. "Show your money."

For a second time he was allowed to pick out the king and to take possession of the stakes. The table was now surrounded by a pressing crowd of onlookers, including Percy Rapson, who tried to attract the sergeant's attention and to caution him against the certainty of being swindled; but Silk held his face down, shadowed by his wide felt hat, all his attention upon the game.

"You've got the eyes of a lynx," commented the dealer encouragingly. "You'll sure make your pile at this rate. Try once more!"

The cards were thrown again, and again the supposed rancher won. He made a clever show of becoming eager, though he knew that he was only being decoyed to a final plunge. When he had won twenty dollars and the watching crowd had drawn closer, he laughed and glanced across at the sharper.

"Say, do you put any limit on this here game?" he asked.

[Pg 86] "How far will you go?" questioned the dealer. "You're twenty dollars to the good already. You're shaping to break me."

Sergeant Silk hesitated and looked swiftly back over his shoulder. He wanted to delay operations until one or more of his chums of the Mounted Police should come in to his support, as had been planned in case of trouble.

"How much do you bet?" invited the sharper.

Silk leant forward, fumbling at his belt pocket.

"Fifty dollars," he readily answered.

The man with the diamond ring made a pretence of hesitation. Silk deliberately counted out ten five-dollar bills and held them between his fingers on the table.

"All right," the gambler assented, taking up what appeared to be the same three cards. "I don't mind running the risk, just for once on the off-chance of my luck taking a turn."

And he began to make passes with the three pieces of pasteboard.

[Pg 87] "Wait a bit, though," objected Silk very calmly. "I don't see your own stake. Here is my money. Where's yours?"

"Oh, that's all serene," said the other. "My credit's good for anything in this emporium."

"May be so," demurred Silk. "All the same," he insisted firmly, "I expect to see your money alongside of mine."

There was some quibbling, but after consulting with one of his confederates the gambler yielded and reluctantly counted the money in gold from a bulky canvas bag that he drew from his breast pocket. Probably Silk was the only stranger present who was aware that the coins were counterfeit.

"That ought to satisfy you," sneered the trickster, as he dealt out the three cards.

Very coolly and without an instant's hesitation Sergeant Silk bent over and placed his hand upon the card nearest to him, drawing it an inch or two towards him, but not turning it up.

"This is the king," he declared positively, for the first time looking the gamester straight in the eye.

[Pg 88] "Ah, so that's your fancy, is it?" The professional swindler leant back with a satisfied smile. "Well, suppose you just turn it over and let every one see."

Silk's steel-blue eyes flashed for an instant. He knew that with his next move there was going to be trouble.

"No," he cried. "You will turn over the other two."

With an oath the swindler refused, betraying by his agitation that for once he had met his match.

"That's not the way this game is played," he objected in confusion. "Show us your king."

"It's the way that I intend to see it played," declared Silk very calmly but firmly. And with his forefinger he adroitly flicked the two cards over, face upward. "You see," he cried, "neither of yours is a king. Therefore mine is bound to be."

Utterly confounded, and dreading the consequences if the third card should now be revealed, the swindler tried to shuffle out of his awkward position by giving in.

[Pg 89] "In that case, you win," he said.

Sergeant Silk quietly pocketed the hundred dollars with one hand, while with the other he still retained the third card.

The gambler snatched at it.

"Give me that card!" he demanded, dreading that any one should see it.

Silk laughed and stood up.

"Not before the company have seen it," he retorted, and turning the card over he cried: "See, boys, it's the three of diamonds! The king is up his sleeve!"

His voice, the accusing flash of his eyes, his whole attitude, revealed him in his true identity to the crowd, who now recognised him through his disguise as a well-known officer of the Mounted Police. There was a cry—

"It's Silk—Sergeant Silk!"

[Pg 90] In the wild confusion that followed his exposure of the cheat, Percy Rapson did not see exactly what happened. All that he knew was that the unmasked card-sharper and his confederates were fighting their way out of the saloon, that one or two pistol shots were fired, and that Sergeant Silk had been flung to the floor with blood upon his face.

"So that was Nick-By-Night, was it?" Silk now asked of Rapson as they rode into the valley. "How do you know?"

"I found out only this morning," Percy explained. "I was at Hilton's Jump and heard two fellows talking about him in Canadian French. They called him Nick Cutler, and Cutler was the name by which Pierre Roche referred to the card-sharper in the Golden Bar. I expect he has heaps of aliases and disguises. Anyhow, you'll know him when you see him, won't you?"

"Why, cert'nly," nodded Silk, "thanks to you. You see, I never forget a face."

"Say, Sergeant," interposed Constable Medicott, "that outfit in front of us has pulled up. I guess they're intending to make camp for the night."

"Do you suppose they've spotted us?" questioned Percy Rapson.

"It's likely," said Silk. "What if they have?"

[Pg 91] "Well," returned Percy, looking serious, "I was thinkin' it might be a trap. It's quite possible that the man you're trackin'—Nick-By-Night—is in that wagon with some of his gang, lying in wait for you, and that he planted that hair-pin and the other signs to decoy you."

Silk smiled.

"It's 'cute of you to hit upon such a notion," he said, "but, you see, it was by the merest chance that we halted where we did; and besides, the innocent hair-pin was dropped there quite early in the morning, before I myself knew we were coming on this trail. Just in case there is any trickery, however, I will ride on in advance, and if I find that the wagon is occupied by a gang of armed

bandits, I'll sound my whistle. You two will wait right here."

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CHAPTER VI

THE SURPRISE VISIT

He touched his mare's flank with his heel and went off at an easy gallop down the trail. As he drew near to the wagon he saw that the two men in charge of it had unharnessed the mules and were taking them to a neighbouring stream. A large deerhound appeared from behind the vehicle, followed by a girl. The hound barked at the approaching horseman.

"Quiet, Don! Quiet!" the girl called.

She stood waiting. Silk observed that she was dressed in dark serge and wore a green felt sun hat, which did not wholly conceal her very fair hair. He also noticed that she carried an artist's canvas and a portable easel.

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"How do, officer?" the girl said in response to his salutation, as he drew to a halt in front of her. "The sight of your uniform is like a rainbow. It signifies hope."

"Hope?" he smiled. "Hope of what?"

"Hope that you are here to protect a lone and defenceless wayfarer from danger," she answered him. "My teamster alarms me with the news that there is a notorious highwayman prowling around in these parts. Naturally the presence of a member of the Mounted Police is reassuring." She glanced at the stripes on his arm. "Won't you dismount, Sergeant?" she asked.

Sergeant Silk slipped from his saddle.

"I'm glad to know that you have been warned," he said. "I can't deny that the warning is reasonable. As a matter of fact, we are at present hunting for that same highwayman."

"I hope you will catch him," the girl urged. "One hardly expects to be troubled by such characters in peaceful, law-abiding Alberta. I hope sincerely that he will be arrested. Do you think he will be, Sergeant? Shall I be safe, camping here?"

[Pg 94]

"You need not be afraid," Silk assured her. "Whatever else happens, Nick-By-Night shall not be allowed to interrupt your sketching tour."

The girl looked at him in amused wonder.

"My sketching tour?" she repeated. "You have not taken long to discover that I am an artist."

"The fact is obvious," he rejoined quickly, indicating the canvas that she held in her left hand. Its back was towards him, and he could not see what she had painted; but he added at a venture: "You made a picture of Minnewanka Mountain this morning."

"How do you know?" she asked in surprise. "Were you there? Did you see me at work?" She turned the canvas and held it for his inspection. "It is only a rough sketch," she explained. "I haven't come out West on a sketching tour. It is only my amusement. I am on my way to pay a surprise visit to my brother on his ranch at Mosquito Crossing. I am going to live with him, I hope, and help him with housekeeping. Perhaps you know him?"

[Pg 95]

Sergeant Silk had glanced aside at a packing-case that lay on the grass near one of the wheels of the wagon. She saw that he was reading what was written on the address label: "Miss K. Grey, Mosquito Crossing, Red Deer River, Alberta."

An expression of perplexity came upon his face.

"I did not know that any one of the name of Grey had a ranch near Mosquito Crossing," he said. "There was Andrew Grey, who ran a fruit farm near Medicine Hat; but he was too old to be a brother of yours, and besides——"

He broke off.

"My brother's name is Jim," Miss Grey explained.

"When did you last hear from him?" Silk inquired.

"Oh, months and months ago—six months, at least. It is because he hasn't written to me that I have come out to take him by surprise."

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"I see," Silk nodded. "But many changes may happen in six months. I guess you had better have announced your intention. He might then have met you and saved you some trouble. Surprise visits aren't any more successful in Alberta than anywhere else. They're a mistake."

The fair-haired girl stared at him in alarm.

"Do you mean that something has happened to Jim?" she cried. "Do you mean that I shall not find him—that he has gone away—or that he is dead?"

Sergeant Silk shook his head.

"I did not say so," he responded. "I do not happen to know him, that is all that I can tell you. But, you see, there are many people in the Province of Alberta whom I do not know. Your brother is just one of them. Nevertheless, I hope I may find him for you."

"You are very kind to trouble about me," the girl told him. "I've no doubt you will find Jim, if any one can. For the present, however, I am more concerned about my personal safety from those highwaymen. You see, Sergeant, I haven't even a pistol to defend myself with."

Sergeant Silk took out a cigarette as he said—

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"The situation would only be awkward if Nick-By-Night chanced to come along this trail and discover your outfit. It certainly wouldn't be nice if he were to take a fancy to your mules and leave you stranded in a lonesome place like this. But, I repeat, you need not be afraid."

He lighted his cigarette, raised his hand to a half-salute, and strode up to his broncho, while Miss Grey climbed the steps at the rear of the wagon with her easel and picture.

Silk looked down upon the dusty trail where the marks of his mare's hoofs showed amid the smaller footprints of the four mules.

"Guess we'd be wise not to disturb that track, Beauty," he decided, speaking to the mare as if she were a human.

Without giving any explanation to the girl, without even telling her that he was leaving her, he leapt into his saddle and rode down to the stream where the two wagon men were watering the mules. He spoke to the older of them, bidding him keep a big fire burning and to see that the mules were well secured. Then he entered the shallow stream and followed its current to a point near to where he had left his two companions, when he whistled to them and signed to them to come down to him.

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"It's all right, Percy, my boy," he announced as they joined him. "I have interviewed the owner of the innocent hair-pin and seen her picture of Minnewanka Peak. It's great! I find she is some scared about Nick-By-Night. She's got some fixings that would be worth his stealing, and—well, if you two chaps see no objection, I figure we may as well hang around hereabout until morning."

"Joining Miss Hair-pin's encampment?" questioned Percy.

"Not exactly," Silk answered, "but keeping an eye on it from ambush."

"Why did you come back along the bed of the stream?" Percy wanted to know. "Why did you bring us off the trail?"

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"Just a whim of mine," smiled the sergeant. "I didn't want to make a return track. I wanted you two to leave the hoof-marks of two horses leading off the trail. There'll be a full moon to-night, and if any one—any bandit or highwayman—should follow on our traces, he'll think just what I mean him to think, that two of us have gone off on a side track, leaving the wagon unprotected."

"Say, you wouldn't take such elaborate precautions if you didn't suspect that something was goin' to happen," declared Percy. "But, of course, you couldn't well leave a mere girl in such a situation."

"That is what I thought," said Silk. "We will lie in our blankets within close call."

He led his companions back on the far side of the stream, and they took up a position, well concealed, between the water and Miss Grey's camp fire, hobbling their horses beside them. They had food in their haversacks, and when they had taken supper the sergeant claimed first turn for a sleep.

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At midnight he was on watch alone, sitting with his back against a tree-trunk and his carbine across his knees, while Medicott and Rapson rested. The moon was shining brightly, making everything almost as clear as in daylight. All was quiet excepting for the occasional movement of one of the horses, the croaking of bull frogs, and the harsh chirping of night insects. Suddenly a new sound fell upon his ear. He put forth his hand and touched Trooper Medicott.

"You awake, Bob?"

"I am listening," whispered Medicott. "There's two of 'em. They're coming this way on the trail of the wagon. They've passed the place where we forked off."

"Maybe they're a couple of our own boys," said Silk. "But whoever they are, they'll sure pull up near the camp fire to nose around. Follow me up. Bring Rapson; but keep him well in the rear. There's the deerhound barking!"

[Pg 101] He tightened the cinches of his saddle, and, mounting, rode up very cautiously towards the fire. His overcoat covered his red tunic, and the two teamsters, who were awake and on their feet, neither saw nor heard him as he moved stealthily among the black shadows of the trees bordering the trail between the wagon and the approaching horsemen.

Nearer and nearer they came. For a long time Silk listened to the sound of their horses' hoofs, watching for them to cross into a wide stretch of moonlit grass. Trooper Medicott was now close behind him. Percy Rapson was far back.

"Here they come!" whispered Sergeant Silk. "Be ready to give chase. They're both masked."

He rode boldly out to meet them, halting in the middle of the trail and raising his carbine.

"Who goes?" he cried. "Pull up, or I fire!"

The two masked riders dragged their horses round and made off by the way they had come. They were in the full light. Silk fired two shots in quick succession. One of the horses staggered, went down on its knees, and rolled over. The other dashed on. Silk fired again, then put spurs to his broncho and rode off in pursuit, with Medicott following.

"Look to the one that's fallen!" he cried.

[Pg 102] Percy Rapson rode out also, to help Medicott. The man who had been thrown had broken a leg and could not move. Medicott quickly disarmed him and left him in charge of Percy, who stood over him until the two policemen returned with their captive riding between them.

"This chap's plug is done for, Sergeant," Percy reported.

"I'm sorry for that," Silk regretted. "Help him to mount yours and lead him to the wagon. I must see to that broken leg of his. We shall stop here until daybreak."

Their two prisoners were led into the circle of light made by the camp fire. The one with the broken limb was put to lie on a blanket until he could be properly attended to. The other was secured against escape by means of a trail rope, which was bound about his wrists and ankles. Percy Rapson watched this operation with interest, admiring the skill with which Sergeant Silk tied the knots and combined absolute security with freedom to move. It was not until the last knot was tied that the man's mask was removed.

[Pg 103] "That's him, sure enough!" declared Percy when the outlaw's face was revealed. "That's the chap who tried to swindle you, Sergeant—Nick Cutler—Nick-By-Night!"

The prisoner was writhing curiously, bending forward, and staring towards the wagon. Sergeant Silk turned to see what he was looking at so intently, and beheld Miss Grey standing in the firelight, wrapped about in a rich fur coat.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you," Silk said to her apologetically. "But, you see, we have caught your highwayman. Say, you had better get back into the wagon and finish your sleep."

She did not seem to hear him. Her eyes were fixed in blank amazement upon his prisoner's face. Silk moved aside and she made a step forward, pointing a trembling hand at the man writhing in his ropes.

"Jim!" she cried. "Jim!"

The captured outlaw drew back as if from a blow.

"Kitty!" he faltered. "Kitty! You—*here?*"

[Pg 104] The girl waved her hand to dismiss him from her sight, then turned to the tall soldier policeman who stood near her, betraying no surprise at the strange recognition.

"It's all right, Sergeant," she murmured brokenly. "You have found my brother for me, as you said you would."

[Pg 105]

The millionaire was seated close to the open window of the luxurious Pullman car that waited in Macleod Station. He was looking across the platform at a tall man in a red tunic.

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"Fine, handsome chaps, these North-West Mounted Police," he remarked to his fellow-passenger. "Look, Colonel, look at that one on the platform! Quite a picture of soldierly bearing; fit to be an officer in the Guards so far as outward appearance goes! Just a trifle too tidy, perhaps; too consciously elegant; too much as if he were intended as an ornament rather than for serious active service. There's not a crease or a flaw in his scarlet tunic, see! Hat set on at the right angle, not a strap out of place or a button that doesn't shine enough to dazzle your eyes. Even the way he carries his overcoat and holds his carbine in the crook of his arm makes one think he'd studied the effect in front of a looking-glass. Indeed, the only departure from military precision that I can detect is his wearing his chin-strap at the back of his head instead of in the regulation manner."

There was no response to these criticisms, and the millionaire went on after taking one or two puffs at his very large cigar—

"Do you suppose, now, Colonel, that he could do any serious business with that service revolver of his? You'd think by the cartridges in his bandolier that it was intended for use. And do you suppose that a dandy such as he is could do any real good in a scrimmage?"

The passenger on the other side of the dining-table sipped at his cup of black coffee.

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"I don't only suppose, Sir George," he answered slowly, glancing out through the open window. "I happen to know. The man you're looking at isn't always dressed as if he had just come out of a bandbox to parade his elegance and his good figure on a railroad platform. I have seen him looking very different, riding out on the lone patrol. If he is clean and tidy now, it is because he hates slovenliness of any kind, and, perhaps, too, because he likes to hide the fact that the one purpose of his existence is to do his duty with efficiency. You ask if he could do any serious business with his revolver. My dear Sir George, that chap is considered the best shot in all Canada. He is that, just as surely as he is the best all-round scout, the best rider, and the bravest man in the Dominion. I could tell you a lot about him, but I see by the twinkle in his eye that he knows we are talking of him, and he hates to be noticed. Ah, he's coming this way."

Sir George produced his box of cigars as the soldier policeman strode across the platform towards the waiting cars. The Colonel rose from his seat and leant his elbows on the frame of the window.

[Pg 108]

"How d'you do, Sergeant Silk?" he said in greeting, extending his hand. "Say, it seems queer to see you on foot and not in the saddle. You're off duty, I suppose?"

"No, Colonel," returned Silk, "not exactly. My broncho is in the horse box at the rear. I'm going on by this train."

"Have a cigar, Sergeant," urged Sir George.

Silk took one, biting off the end with his sharp, even teeth, as cleanly as if he had cut it with a knife.

"Won't you come in along with us?" the millionaire invited.

Silk shook his head.

[Pg 109]

"No, thank you, sir. I go third-class, and I may have to jump off between stations." He glanced at the Colonel. "I'm going west to see if I can find out something of the affair that happened along the line last night," he explained. "Perhaps you heard of it? No? Well, you see, the 7.42 was held up by a gang of train robbers, who managed to board her while she was side-tracked, waiting for the limited express to pass. The engine-driver was killed in the scuffle, and the conductor was badly hurt. I'm going as far as Hill Crest to have a word with the conductor, if he is well enough to be examined."

"It is to be hoped there's no danger of those train thieves paying us a visit to-night," said the millionaire anxiously. "I should hardly have expected to meet such gentry in Canada."

Sergeant Silk shook his head and smiled as he struck a match to light his cigar.

"They were caught, sir," he said, enjoying the aroma. "We happened—my broncho and I—to drop on them as they were escaping with the swag; and they are here in Macleod, safe under lock and key."

"What?" exclaimed the millionaire. "A gang of armed desperadoes, you say, caught—arrested—by you and your horse alone?"

Silk dropped the extinguished match and carefully trod it under foot. Experienced prairie rider as he was, he was always cautious about fire.

"You've got to allow something for my being in uniform," he smiled. "Law-breakers out here have a wholesome dread of the Mounted Police."

[Pg 110] Touching the wide brim of his hat with a forefinger, he turned away, striding along the platform with a military clink of spurs.

He went towards the front of the waiting train, where the engine had just been coupled and was being oiled up for the run along the branch line from Macleod to Crow's Nest Pass. The district superintendent stood by and was reprimanding the engine-driver, who had evidently been making some complaint about his job.

"What's the matter with you that you register for rest?" the superintendent wanted to know. "You know we're short handed, Ted Chennell bein' killed. You've got ter take Ted's place. You've only been at work twenty hours. There's Tom Morden has been on his engine twenty-eight hours, and Tom ain't askin' for rest yet. Say, some of you fellows ought to get a job clerkin' in a drug store. This yer train's got to go. You're the only available man to take her, and that's straight."

Sergeant Silk puffed for a few moments at his cigar before speaking.

[Pg 111] "Seems to me, Mr. Garside," he remarked casually, "that Halkett and his engine are about on a par. They're both promising candidates for hospital."

The superintendent looked round at him in surprise, resenting his interference.

"What's the matter with the engine?" he snapped. "Ain't she good enough? What's wrong with her? I allow you knows a lot about hosses, Sergeant. Thar's not many men in the Prairie Provinces knows as much. But come to locomotive engines, all that you know wouldn't take up much room on a news-sheet. I reckon I can give you points and get in front of you every time. What's the matter with 99, anyhow? You ain't overhauled her."

Sergeant Silk shifted his carbine to his other arm.

[Pg 112] "I happen to have had a look at her this morning when she was lying in the siding," he responded lightly, regarding number 99 as if she were a horse, "and with all deference to your greater experience, Mr. Garside, I'd say that, like Halkett, she is suffering from overwork. She wants rest. She's needing a tonic. She ought to be put out to grass. Her truck centre castings are weak; her driving wheel tyres have grooves in them half-an-inch deep; the coupling pin of the tender is worn loose; she wants a new throttle latch-spring, and some of her tubes are leaky. She's wheezing now as if she had congestion of the lungs. Dare say she'd do credit drawing freight wagons; but for passenger cars—well, it's your business, not mine."

Mr. Garside stood with his feet apart and his hands on his hips, critically watching Sergeant Silk through the narrowed slits of his watery eyes.

"If you know such an almighty lot about locomotives, Sergeant," he said, "and if you calculate as Joe Halkett ain't fit and capable to manage his own business, pr'aps you'll condescend to take the train along yourself. She's scheduled to start in three minutes from now, and there's no time to change either engine or driver, see?"

Sergeant Silk looked at the superintendent sharply.

[Pg 113] "Are you serious?" he questioned. "Do you really mean it?"

"Sure!" nodded the superintendent. "I allow there's some truth in what you say. She ain't just in the best of health, and there's room in the cab if you'll take charge. You can at least keep an eye on that throttle latch-spring, and keep Joe from droppin' asleep so as he don't run past the switches when the limited is comin' along behind."

Silk glanced upward into the cab, where Joe Halkett stood awaiting the signal to start.

Joe was looking exceedingly green and ill. He was a tallish fellow, wiry and muscular, with a hard face, dark hair, and sharp, peery eyes. He was reputed to be one of the best drivers in the Canadian Pacific Railway service; it was said that he could manage a cranky engine better than any other engineer west of Winnipeg. But Silk had already noticed that there was something queer about his manner this evening. There was a curious light in his peery eyes and a curious look on his face that did not inspire confidence.

[Pg 114] In spite of the roar made by the steam escaping from the safety valve, Joe had heard the superintendent's suggestion that the soldier policeman should ride in the cab, and he signed beckoningly with a backward toss of his head while Silk hesitated.

"You may as well come along, Sergeant," he pleaded. "I tell you straight, I ain't fit fer duty to-night, and I'd sooner take on any other trip than this one to Crow's Nest. It ain't my reg'lar line, and I'm some scared. I'm all of a tremble. I'd oughter be home in bed. Ask Dick if I oughtn't."

Dick, his fireman, paused in his work of shovelling coal into the fire-box.

"This yer train ain't anyways safe, Joe drivin'," he said, as the superintendent turned on his heel and strode back towards the rear of the train. "Dunno what's come over him."

Sergeant Silk needed no urging. He caught at the rail, mounted the footplate, and swung himself into the cab.

CHAPTER VIII

THREE MOOSE CROSSING

"All right, Joe," he said soothingly, putting on his overcoat to shield his tunic from grease and coal. "Just you do the best you can, and don't worry. I guess you'll feel well enough once you're started. There goes your signal!"

With a loud clang of the engine bell the train moved out of the station, slowly at first, but gathering speed as it left the little town with its flour mills and grain elevators behind.

Silk seated himself on the box and continued smoking his cigar. He was not long in discovering that his judgment of the locomotive had been accurate. She was certainly cranky. Her rods moved jerkily, and there was a constant rattling of loose bolts. The wheel tyres were so badly ground down in parts by the use of brakes that you might almost have believed that she had square wheels. With every revolution as the flat spots hit the metals, she dropped with a noisy thud, and then when she went over them she would raise herself bodily again, while the tender rammed her so spitefully that the worn coupling bolts were strained almost to breaking-point.

"Say, Joe," said the sergeant, "this is about as comfortable as riding a bucking broncho. How long have your wheels been like this?"

Joe Halkett looked round at him blankly, stupidly, and answered in a mazed way—

"Ever since last winter. They was ground down wrestlin' with the snow-plough in Crow's Nest Pass."

Silk glanced at the gauge.

"You're not getting much speed out of her," he said, "considering the amount of steam you're using."

"She's just obstinate," said Joe. "Obstinate an' wilful. You can't coax her nohow. I'm sick and tired of tinkerin' with her."

"She's wuss to-night than usual," declared Dick. "Reckon it's that heavy private car as takes it out of her. We've got all we c'n do ter fetch Three Moose siding 'fore the limited hustles along."

It was not a stopping train and it was only necessary to watch that the signals were shown for clear at the few stations that came at infrequent intervals along the line.

Joe Halkett appeared to be working very well. He had got the train adjusted to its gait, and the cars were thumping over the frogs and switches at a reasonable pace, labouring, panting, and grunting when mounting a steep gradient, but settling down again when there was a stretch of good running ground ahead. It was mostly cultivated prairie land, but now and again the track was through gloomy pine forests or deep mountain defiles.

Dusk had already deepened into darkness when they were rattling along the track across the Piegan Indian Reservation, and Halkett had somehow worked up his engine to such easy going that Sergeant Silk began to believe that he had exaggerated the disabilities of both locomotive and engineer, and that he might just as well have been enjoying the greater comfort of one of the passenger cars, or been seated luxuriously in the private Pullman spinning yarns with the Colonel and Sir George.

In the darkness Silk did not perceive the change that had come upon Halkett's face. It was only when Joe chanced to lean over into the light from the open fire-box that he saw the look of terror that had come into it. It was a look like that of a man who had got some terrible secret on his soul and was driven half mad by it.

"Joe? What's the matter?" Silk cried, starting to his feet. He glanced round at the fireman.

Dick had just come back from the water tank.

"Say, Sergeant," he gasped, "the water's runnin' low, an' we've passed the plug. We've got ter go back!"

Silk was alarmed. He knew well that one of the important things for an engine-driver to do is to figure out at what plugs he can fill his tank most advantageously, and that it is a high crime to run short of water.

"Are you certain sure we've passed it?" he asked sharply. He had leapt to the lever to stop the

train, and whistle for brakes.

The fireman nodded.

"Yes," he answered. "We've got ter push back. It's a good three mile."

"But we can't push back," Silk protested. "There's not time, and we shall not have enough steam. There's the limited express to think of. How far on is the next water plug?"

"'Bout the same distance," Dick told him. "We're half ways between."

"Then we'll pull ahead," decided the sergeant.

"She'll bust, sure, if we do," declared Joe Halkett, rousing himself to a realisation of the situation. "Thar' ain't enough power ter carry her through, draggin' such a weight, and, say, thar's no switch near hand, where we kin side-track ter let the limited run past."

[Pg 120] The train had stopped. Sergeant Silk stood still, hardly daring to take the responsibility. But even in the matter of managing an engine he proved himself to be a person of ready resource. He whistled for the conductor.

"Jump down and cut the engine loose, Dick," he ordered. And without questioning the motive, Dick obeyed.

By the time that the engine and tender had been uncoupled from the foremost car, the guard had come through the corridors from the brake van to know what had happened.

"All right; don't alarm the passengers," cried Silk. "We're short of water. We've run past the plug. I'm going on with the engine alone to the next plug to get some. Climb up to the roof of the head car with a lamp and signal us back, see?"

Leaving the conductor to guess how it chanced that the locomotive was in charge of a sergeant of police, he opened the throttle valve and started off along the line at the highest speed that he could get out of the cranky old kettle, arriving at the hydrant with an empty tank and a dangerously exhausted boiler.

[Pg 121] Halkett and Dick helped him, and almost before the tank was filled they had started on the back journey. Many precious minutes had been lost, but the engine had returned to the waiting train with a quarter of an hour to spare in which to reach Three Moose siding and get out of the way of the express.

"D'you reckon we can do it, Joe?" Silk asked with a quick glance at the engineer.

Halkett had abandoned his duty. He sat on a corner of the tool-box and was staring about him like a man in a fever, with a sort of wild gleam in his eyes, as if some mortal terror had taken hold of him and was tormenting him. He held a long-spouted oilcan in his hand, and the oil was dripping to his feet.

"Can we do it?" Silk repeated. And looking at Joe more attentively he began to realise that the man's strange agitation of mind was due to something quite apart from the danger of being run into by the express.

[Pg 122] "We can't get to the switch on time," Joe roused himself to say in a voice that was hoarse and unnatural. "You c'n try as you like; but, clever as you are, you'll never get this yer engine to pass Three Moose Crossing. Thar's blood on the track, see? The place is haunted—haunted by the ghost of a dead man."

"He's sure mad, now," muttered Dick. "Say, Sergeant, you'd best leave him and take charge. We might git inter the siding if we start right now."

Sergeant Silk snatched the oilcan from Joe Halkett's grip and handed it to the fireman.

"Look here, Dick," he commanded, "take this can and run back to the tail of the train and grease the metals. Oil first one rail and then the other. D'you understand? It's our only chance. Let the oil run about a car's length on the top of each rail, and come back again quick as you can."

[Pg 123] Before Dick returned, panting and perspiring, with the empty can, Silk was ready to start, with his hand on the throttle valve. He blew the whistle, and with a snort, a grunt, and a noisy rattle, the engine moved on, now wholly under the sergeant's control.

"It's no use," Joe Halkett muttered with an insane laugh. "She'll never go past that crossin'."

"What do you mean?" Silk demanded. "Three Moose Crossing?" he repeated. And then, as if suddenly recollecting something, he looked down at Joe's face in the light from the fire-box; looked at it searchingly, wonderingly. "What do you know about Three Moose Crossing?" he asked with curious directness. "You were not on your engine that night—the night that Steve Bagshott was killed. What has it got to do with you?"

Halkett laughed—a ghastly, hollow laugh—then dropped into silence, while Silk forced the engine to fuller speed. But as the train dashed through the darkness, Halkett became more and more excited.

"The ghost'll be there, sure!" he repeated again and again.

[Pg 124] "Well, and if it is," returned Silk, with his eye watchfully on the gauge, "I don't care for any of your ghosts. I don't care if there's a hundred of them so long as this train goes safe."

"But it can't go safe," cried Halkett, rising to his feet and laying a trembling hand on the sergeant's arm.

The train was covering the miles at terrific speed now as it went down the gradient. But it was not the speed that made Halkett shake like a reed and drove the blood from his cheeks.

"Sergeant," he said in a thick whisper as he clutched more tightly at Silk's arm, "that man who was run over—Steve Bagshott—wasn't killed by accident."

"What do you mean?" Silk cried. "What has come over you to-night?"

Joe bent his face forward. His hot breath was on the sergeant's cheek.

"He wasn't killed by accident," he repeated hoarsely. "He was murdered! That's why he haunts the crossing. He can't rest."

"Murdered?"

[Pg 125] "Yes," Joe nodded grimly. Then, loosening his grip, he went to the side of the cab and peered forward into the darkness. "We're gettin' near," he muttered. "We're gettin' near the place, but we can't go on. She can't go safe over the crossing to-night."

Sergeant Silk blew the whistle, asking for a signal. He did not know that he was still many miles from the siding. He turned to speak to the fireman, who was at work among the coals. When he looked back again, Joe Halkett had slipped forward and had raised his hand to shut off steam.

"Stop!" shouted Silk, seizing his arm. "Do you think you can play with this train? She's going on, and at the same speed, until I get a signal, though there were a score of haunted crossings in the way. Stand back!"

He thrust the man aside. But Joe renewed his grip. His hard face was working with terror and his eyes were starting out of his head.

[Pg 126] "I murdered him!" he panted. And by the light of the fireman's lamp Silk could see great beads of agony on his forehead. He went on jerkily, his voice rising sharp and wild as he told his fearful story of a brutal vengeance.

But Sergeant Silk flung him aside, not heeding him, thinking only that the fate of the racing train and the lives of scores of human beings depended upon what happened in the next few minutes.

"I dragged him to the crossing," Joe went on. "I laid him across the line. There was a train due in three minutes. This train—this engine. They thought it was accident. You—*you*—thought so, too. But it wasn't. I did it—I!"

His voice rose to a shriek. Then he crept to Silk's side.

"Sergeant, there's death ahead and death behind," he cried, and with a leap forward he seized the lever.

"Let go!" Silk shouted, flinging him backward among the coals. "Lay hold of him, Dick," he ordered. "The express must be coming on behind. But that oil has delayed her, sure."

[Pg 127] Once again he whistled for a signal, and this time one came, telling him that the switch was open. He slowed down cautiously. He had passed the crossing, and now with a sudden turn from the straight track, the engine panted into the siding, safe from all possible harm.

"Oh, stopping again, are we?" said the millionaire in the private car. "We've run short of water again, I suppose. I wonder that your railway companies don't introduce those water troughs on the permanent way, such as we have in England."

"We do, on some lines," returned the Colonel. "But I don't fancy it's water this time. Listen! Yes, I thought so. We've gone into a side track to let the limited express go past. Dear me, she must have been exceedingly close on our heels! But our engine-driver—a man named Halkett, is a magnificent fellow. Quite the best driver on the line, I believe."

When the express had rushed by, he lowered the window and looked out. Some one was walking along the line towards the rear of the train.

[Pg 128] "I say, there!" the Colonel called out. "Are we going to stop here very long?"

"No, Colonel; no!" came the answer. "We're changing engines, that's all. I'm going along to have a word with my mare. I reckon she's missing me."

"Oh, it's you, Silk, is it?" laughed the Colonel. "I didn't know you with your overcoat on. Won't you come in along with us here? Sir George is anxious to have a yarn with you, and I'm sure you'll be more comfortable here than in that third-class."

"Thank you, Colonel," returned Silk, "but I've changed my plans. I've got to go back to Macleod with a man who is rather ill. Good-night!"

He said nothing of who the man was, and no one on the train knew then or even afterwards

anything of the danger that they had escaped. But that was Sergeant Silk's way.

[Pg 129]

CHAPTER IX

RED DERRICK

If there was one thing more than another that Percy Rapson and Dan Medicott coveted, it was an opportunity to accompany Sergeant Silk on one of his police expeditions on the Rattlesnake patrol. But such an opportunity came very seldom, and it was quite an exceptional circumstance that Dan happened to be able to make himself of use on the occasion when Red Derrick was captured in White Wolf Gulch.

The way it all happened was this—

[Pg 130]

Two men were riding along the trail, one on a piebald broncho, the other on a black mustang. They were on their way to the meeting place appointed by their leader, Red Derrick. Everything had been well planned, but they were not fully certain that they were safe, and they were both nervously anxious. As they came out from the gloom of a pine forest into the open, the man on the piebald broncho looked searchingly into the night darkness over his left shoulder. Then he shifted his grip on the reins and glanced uneasily at his companion.

"Say, Bill," he inquired, "you plumb sure as we ain't bein' follered?"

Bill Allison's hand went as by instinct to his revolver.

"Follered, Hen?" he questioned, looking around and listening. "Did you see anythin'?—hear anythin'?"

"Well," returned Hen, "I just notioned a while ago as I caught the clip of a horse's hoof agin a stone, way back thar. Might ha' bin a' echo. Dessay it was."

"Couldn't ha' bin anythin' else," Bill assured him. "Thar's no Injuns messin' around. Th' Mounted P'lice is busy somewhere else. Nobody knows where we are, or where we're goin'—nobody, 'cept Red Derrick hisself. No, pard, we ain't bein' follered. Guess you're right 'bout its bein' a' echo."

[Pg 131]

He jabbed his pony's flank with a spurred heel and the two broke into a quicker pace. For a couple of miles or so they continued riding side by side, along the indistinct trail, neither speaking. But within the gloom of a dark, wooded bluff they slowed down, turned abruptly from the beaten track, and pursued their way quietly, stealthily, in single file, through the long grass, descending into the hollow of a secluded coulee, where they came to a halt.

"Jim said as he'd show a light," said Bill. "Watch for it over yonder. D'ye make out the old shack?"

He pointed across the coulee to a small log hut, so overgrown with tangled creepers that in the darkness it could hardly be distinguished from the surrounding bush.

Hen Faxon nodded.

"Queer sort of a crib ter bring us to," he observed, preparing to dismount. "Makes a fellow feel some scared. Why couldn't Jim ha' done the business when he was along east yesterday?"

Bill gave a sneering little laugh.

[Pg 132]

"Pr'aps you've an idea as he'd bin wiser ter discuss the biz in the public saloon at Hickory Crossing, with a crowd of ranchers an' cowpunchers, and maybe one of the Mounted P'lice fer audience?" he suggested. "But Jim Derrick ain't that sort. He ain't no novice tenderfoot ter let any trampoosin' stranger know what cards he holds. And I reckon he holds a straight flush this game, see?"

"Um!" muttered Hen.

The two men dismounted and hobbled their ponies.

"We'll wait here till he gives a sign," said Bill, taking out his pipe.

They lay in the grass, smoking, with their eyes directed towards the dark shape of the dilapidated, deserted log cabin, which was their appointed meeting-place. After a long time of waiting, Bill Allison's broncho threw up its head and stood alert with twitching ears.

"Reckon Jim's thar now," decided Bill. "Yes, he's strikin' a light, see! Leave the ponies where they are."

[Pg 133] He stood up and led the way across the coulee. Red Derrick met them at the ruined doorway.

"Yo're punctual, boys," he said. "Thought I heard you comin' t'other way. Everythin' all right?"

"Yep," Bill answered, following within the hut to where Derrick's lighted candle burnt in the neck of a bottle among the rank weeds that grew about the broken hearthstone.

"Sure?"

Bill nodded emphatically.

"It's all serene," he answered. "Nobody seen us start, and we ain't set eyes on a livin' human all along the trail."

"Good," said Derrick. "Y'see, I was some afraid as that all-fired, double-barrelled detective, Sergeant Silk, might ha' gotten wind of suthin'. Thar ain't a whole lot as he don't ferret out somehow. Say, he ain't been spyin' around any, has he?"

"Haven't seen him for weeks," reported Hen Faxon.

[Pg 134] "Reckon he's gone off on another patrol," said Bill. "Anyhow, he ain't liable t' ha' gotten wind of this yer game we're startin' on, and that's sure."

"Then we're safe ter pull it off," declared Red Derrick, "and we kin lay our plans right now. But first, I suspicion you two boys is some dry, eh? Say, thar's suthin' in the shape of liquid refreshment here."

He opened his haversack and produced a bottle and a tin pannikin, and each of the three took a long drink in his turn. One of the fallen roof timbers served as a seat for Derrick and Allison. Hen Faxon seated himself on the earthen floor, with his back against one of the upright logs of the wall.

As he did so he was half-conscious of a rustling movement at the other side of the timber against which he leant. He drew himself forward an inch or two and looked round.

[Pg 135] "Guess thar's a lynx or a fox or some sich critter sniffin' around outside," he muttered. He put his ear to a gap in the wall and listened. "Dessay it was only my fancy," he decided. "I'm some scared to-night. Allus am when thar's a risky job on hand. Give us another drink, Jim."

The sound which had disturbed him was not repeated, and his two companions paid no regard to his remark. Even if he had been correct in his surmise as to the cause of the rustling movement, there would be no possible danger in the circumstance of a fox or a lynx or any other species of wild creature sniffing around.

Nevertheless, Hen Faxon's sharp hearing had not altogether deceived him, and had his eyesight been as keen—had he put an eye instead of an ear to the open seam between the pine logs at his back—he might even in the darkness have discovered that the actual intruder was much more formidable and dangerous than was any prowling four-footed beast.

[Pg 136] "Well, boys," began Red Derrick, pulling vigorously at his pipe. "I figure thar's no p'ticler need fer me ter say a whole lot. You've both of you got as much savee as I have how the thing's got ter be pulled off, and it's up to us ter pull it off successful. Y'see that thar stage coach is bound ter keep schedule time. Alf Bulger'll see to it. Alf's our trump card. He'll join on and take charge of the stage, as per usual, at Soldier's Knee, drivin' his team clean into our arms, so ter speak. He'll be due along the Rattlesnake section an hour before sundown. Just when it's gettin' tolerable dark, he'll enter White Wolf Gulch. That's our point, see? That's whar we're shapin' ter hold him up and collar the boodle."

"Say, thar ain't no doubt 'bout that boodle bein' on board, is there?" Hen Faxon leant forward to inquire.

Red Derrick looked at him severely across the flickering candle-light.

"Not a ghost of a doubt," he said. "Not a shadder. That's the one thing more sartin than anythin' else in the whole biz. Fifty thousand dollars' worth. That's the value, 'cordin' ter Alf, and I reckon Alf should know, him bein' stage driver and in the company's confidence. And say, boys, you've got ter see as Alf don't get scratched."

"Any passengers?" inquired Bill Allison.

Derrick shrugged his broad shoulders.

[Pg 137] "What odds if thar is?" he retorted. "We kin deal with 'em, sure—three of us, droppin' on 'em unawares, and Alf helpin' us. Nat'rally thar'll be the messenger in charge of the boodle," he explained, "some quill-drivin', white-collared bank clerk from Ottawa. Don't figure as he need count for a lot. He ain't liable ter be anyways handy with a gun; and Tom Mason'll see as the skunk's shooter is empty. Soon as Alf enters the gulch, drivin' slow, he'll give us the signal. He'll crack his whip ter let us know as everythin's serene. Then the fun'll begin."

"We got ter fire in the air, then?" questioned Bill Allison. "We got ter do nothin' but fill the

atmosphere with yells an' smoke? Seems easy!"

[Pg 138] "The more noise we makes the better," returned Red Derrick. "But we've got ter do more'n make a clatter. Y'see, Alf Bulger c'n hardly make out as he's been held up by a gang of desperate road agents if we don't give him the evidence of a considerable pepperin' of bullet holes in the panels of his coach. As fer Mister Bank-clerk, if he shows fight—well, you kin leave him t' me. Savvy? Him and any other passengers, while you two make off with the swag."

His two confederates signified their understanding of the bold scheme by which the stage coach was to be held up and robbed: and they had now only to discuss the details of their plan of attack.

While they discussed, they proceeded to empty the bottle of what Derrick had called liquid refreshment, and it was perhaps because of his anxiety to secure his full share of the drink that Hen Faxon failed to detect a repetition of the faint rustling sound outside the hut which had previously caught his attention. It is more probable, however, that the movement was so slight that even if he had been listening for it he could not have known that it was anything more than the mere whispering of the wind in the surrounding brush.

[Pg 139] No Indian scout, skilled in the art of taking cover, could have accomplished his purpose more silently than did the man who had stealthily crawled up to the rear of the ruined shanty to watch and listen.

Keeping still as a rock, lying at full length along the ground with an eye at a knot-hole in one of the timbers, hardly breathing lest he should betray his presence, he had heard every word that had been spoken; and now, knowing that he could discover nothing further, he was stealing away to make prompt use of his secret.

Very slowly, very silently, inch by inch, he crawled on hands and knees through the tangled brushwood and rank grass, working his way up the rising ground until he came to the edge of the coulee. Then he rose to his feet, looked back to assure himself that he had not been seen, and strode quickly but very cautiously through a belt of trees to where his horse was waiting, watching him as he approached.

"Quiet!" he whispered as he drew near, and the animal seemed to understand, for it made no movement, no slightest sound, but stood rigidly still until the rider had swung himself into the saddle.

[Pg 140] "Steady, girlie!" he muttered. "No need to hurry, just yet."

He unbuttoned his military coat and under its cover dexterously struck a match on the milled edge of his watch. The tiny flame gleamed only for a moment upon his scarlet tunic, but in that moment he had seen the dial of his watch, with the fingers pointing to a quarter to eleven.

"Good!" he decided, as he seized the bridle rein. "We can take it easy, and yet get to Rattlesnake Ranch before sunrise."

[Pg 141]

CHAPTER X

THE OUTSIDE PASSENGERS

"Stage comin' along, boys. Fifteen minutes inside of scheduled time."

The hotel at Soldier's Knee was thronged with ranchers and cowboys who had come into the little settlement to attend the stock market.

Some of the men were gambling at the card-tables, some were drinking at the bar, others stood in groups discussing the prospects of their crops of fruit and corn or the work of the lumber camps, and the air of the saloon was dense with pungent tobacco smoke and strong language. It was one seated on the sill of the open window who reported the coming of the mail.

"Tain't often we sees sich a crowd of passengers this time of year," he added.

"Passengers? A crowd?"

[Pg 142] Alf Bulger emptied his glass, took up his long-lashed driving-whip, and strode towards the door, looking more like a western cowboy than a coach-driver, with his buckskin jacket and wide-rimmed hat, his leather leggings, and his brace of formidable-looking revolvers. He was to take

charge of the express from Soldier's Knee east as far as Kananaskis, and he was naturally personally interested in the announcement concerning passengers.

"A crowd, eh?" he repeated in a tone of surprise.

Usually it did not greatly matter to him whether there were few passengers or many, or, indeed, if there were none at all. The Government mail-bags were his principal freight. Passengers were, as a rule, a secondary consideration.

He silently watched the lumbering coach approaching along the trail in a cloud of white dust, and he drew a deep breath of relief when he discovered that what his neighbour had announced as a crowd resolved itself into three individuals.

[Pg 143] "Say, Alf," observed a young rancher at his elbow. "You'll need ter be on your Sunday best behaviour this trip. I see one of your passengers is a parson, and—yes, a female woman alongside of him. Guess she's his daughter. I allow she's the one as leads off with the camp meetin' hymns. A woman's voice fetches the boys every time. Wonder if they're shapin' to hold a revival meetin' in Soldier's Knee while the team's bein' changed!"

"Maybe they're figgerin' ter settle down right here," suggested Alf, his wish being father to the thought. "Thar's a consid'erable stock of all-round iniquity for 'em to work upon. What d'you make of the third passenger? Kinder commercial traveller, by the cut of him, I'd say."

"Yep. Guess that's his mark. I've seen him before, along this trail. Seen him a week ago, on the westbound stage. Comes from Ottawa."

[Pg 144] "Ah!" nodded Alf Bulger with satisfaction. He, too, had seen the passenger before and knew him to be the bank messenger whom he had expected. "A nice, harmless, meek an' mild sort of chap. Looks as if he didn't know a pistol from an infant's feedin' bottle."

When the coach came to a halt in front of the hotel, Bulger strode forward to superintend the changing of the horses. While he did so he paid curious regard to his three passengers.

The elderly gentleman in clerical attire and blue goggles appeared to be sleepy or ill, or to be so well accustomed to travelling that the arrival at a new stopping-place had no interest for him. His girl companion was equally indifferent to her surroundings, excepting that she leant forward on the rail of the driver's seat to inspect the new team of horses.

As for the meek and mild young man at the rear, his attention was divided between cleaning his eyes of dust and guarding the heavy box on the seat beside him, as if he feared that it might mysteriously vanish if he were so much as to lift his elbow from its iron-clamped lid.

[Pg 145] "Say, misters," Bulger called up. "Thar's time fer you ter git down if you wants suthin' t' eat. Thar's not many sich tip-top hotels along the trail."

It was the girl who answered, without lifting the thick blue gauze veil that hid her face.

"Thank you, driver," she said, "but we had refreshments at the last stopping-place, and we've lots of sandwiches. What's the name of this place?"

"Soldier's Knee, miss," answered Bulger.

"Dear me, what strange, outlandish names they do give to these stations!" the girl remarked. "Why Soldier's Knee instead of elbow, or ankle?"

Bulger shook his head and grinned.

"Dunno, missy," he responded. "Y'see, I warn't present at the christenin'."

The meek and mild young man leant over and spoke to him.

"If it's no trouble, driver," he said, "I wish you would order a cup of tea for me."

Bulger looked up at him with calculating curiosity, giving an eye at the same time to the strong box.

[Pg 146] "Guess you'd best jump down an' have it at the bar," he suggested. "That yer dressin' case of yourn ain't got wings, I reckon. Still, if you'd ruther take it in the open air, I'll oblige."

And so deciding he disappeared into the saloon.

The girl turned half round, speaking for the first time to the man behind her.

"You are wise to keep your seat, stranger," she said softly.

He looked at her sharply, almost with suspicion.

"Why?" he questioned, glancing with even greater suspicion at her strangely silent and morose companion with the blue goggles.

"Oh, I don't just know," she returned lightly. "I suppose you have your orders not to let that box be out of your sight."

The young man went very red and was obviously confused.

"What do you know about the box?" he asked pointedly.

[Pg 147] "Nothing but what I have observed," she replied. "It looks a kinder ordinary box for carrying samples. But the canvas is worn at the corner, and I can see an iron band. When the coach lurched, crossing the divide, the box was so heavy that the seat creaked under its weight. Guess it ain't likely to be packed with feathers. I've seen the address label, too, and you wouldn't be takin' feathers to a bank in Ottawa. And, again, you're carryin' a six-shooter. I caught sight of it when you opened your coat to look at the time, a while back. Say, now, is it loaded, that pistol of yours? I do hope it won't explode, and me sittin' so near! But it ought to be loaded."

"Lucy!" Her companion in clerical attire spoke to her reprovingly. "Don't be so inquisitive. What does it matter to you whether the gentleman's pistol is loaded or not?"

"All right, dad," objected Lucy rather rudely. "Keep your hair on. It would matter a heap if we was to be attacked by Indians or—or road agents; and I should be a lot more comfortable if I knew it was loaded. I'm not just sure that it is."

[Pg 148] The young man behind her appeared suddenly to be anxious on the same point, for he thrust his hand under the front of his coat and withdrew it quickly, staring in blank amazement at the weapon that it held.

"You minx!" he cried to the girl accusingly. "This is some conjuring trick of yours! This isn't my pistol at all. Mine was loaded—this is empty!"

Very smartly, very calmly, the girl's clerical companion laid a firm hand upon the weapon and took possession of it.

"Say nothing, Mr. Gaskell," he whispered. "I'll give it you back before we start. Here's the driver with your cup of tea. Don't drink it, d'you hear? It's liable to be drugged."

Alf Bulger climbed up by the wheel and handed Mr. Gaskell the steaming cup of tea. Gaskell paid him for it, thanked him, and raised the cup to his lips, alternately blowing into it and smelling at it, but not drinking.

[Pg 149] "I believe you're right, sir," he said in an undertone when the driver had gone away, "but it beats me to know how you guessed it would be drugged. Do you mind emptying it over the far side?"

"Shove it under the seat to cool," Lucy suggested. "Dad's sure to throw it on somebody's head if he empties it. He's some absent-minded, see?"

During the further time of waiting, Gaskell was occupied in closely watching his two travelling companions. He had already decided that there was something very queer about them, and he was more than a little suspicious.

The girl's voice, for one thing, had made him suspicious. It was more like the voice of a boy than of a girl, and her back hair, although hidden by the thick folds of her veil, seemed to be extraordinarily short. As for the man beside her, whom she called her "dad," it was difficult to make him out in any way, or to be sure of him.

[Pg 150] In spite of his clerical attire, his long, grey beard, and his general appearance of a respectable clergyman, it was yet possible to believe that he was an impostor—a wolf in sheep's clothing, a disguised bandit, who had boarded this coach with the secret purpose of taking forcible possession of the treasure chest.

Looking at him very attentively, Gaskell became aware that the man's eyes behind their blue spectacles were extraordinarily alert, that his face was much younger than he had at first thought, and that his grey beard contrasted rather strangely with the darkness of his hair. Unquestionably he was disguised.

Gaskell became more and more nervous and desperately anxious for the safety of the treasure that he was guarding.

What if this strong-handed stranger and his girl companion should turn upon him and upon the driver in some lonely part of the trail, and, overpowering them both, make off with the strong box?

The driver, it was true, was armed, but then this man and the girl might also be prepared with weapons. And they might even have accomplices waiting for them at an appointed spot.

[Pg 151] What puzzled Gaskell was that the stranger knew his name, and had warned him against drinking the tea, as if he were in some way anxious to protect him. But the fact remained that he had taken possession of his revolver.

Gaskell leant forward and touched his neighbour's arm. It was exceedingly muscular.

"Kindly give me back my pistol," he requested.

To his surprise, the weapon was politely handed back to him, with the remark—

"Why, cert'nly. You see, I have loaded it for you. You may need it later on. Keep it handy. Don't speak, either to me or the driver; and if anything happens, do what I tell you. I will see you through."

Gaskell leant back in his seat, wondering more than ever, but comfortably confident that whatever his travelling companions might be, they certainly had no designs against him. He resolved to trust them, while watching them carefully.

[Pg 152] After the coach had started, they paid no further attention to him. Neither did they speak to each other or to the driver.

Nothing suspicious occurred until they were galloping at a steady pace along the old buffalo trail between Hilton's Jump and Rattlesnake Ranch, when the girl with her veil partly lifted, and her eyes fixed upon the distant homestead, took out a large white handkerchief and waved it three times over her head. Was this a signal to some confederate? It seemed to be, yet nothing came of it. Gaskell's eyes were not keen enough to see a girl standing on the far-off verandah steps.

At sunset the team was changed at Mosquito Crossing. At full dusk the coach was rattling across the prairie trail, and an hour afterwards it was again among the hills, making for White Wolf Gulch.

As they entered the mouth of the gloomy defile the pace was slackened.

The driver cracked his whip with two cracks which sounded like pistol shots, and were echoed repeatedly from the cliffs; but he still held in his team.

[Pg 153] Gaskell then became aware that something was going to happen. The supposed clergyman threw off his black coat and false beard and stood up, revealing himself in the familiar military uniform of the North-West Mounted Police. He bent forward and pressed the cold ring of a revolver muzzle against the driver's neck.

"Go ahead, Bulger!" he commanded. "Keep hold of those reins. Drop them and you'll be dropped yourself. I've got you, sure."

Bulger turned and caught a dim glimpse of the soldier policeman's face, glowering at him above the scarlet tunic.

"Silk! Sergeant Silk!" he cried, aghast at the sight.

Sergeant Silk took no notice of his consternation.

"Keep him at it Dannie," he ordered.

And Dan Medlicott, who lived on Rattlesnake Ranch, and had long been a friend of Sergeant Silk, having thrown off his disguising veil and hat and cloak, covered the driver with his revolver.

[Pg 154] "And now, Mr. Gaskell," the Sergeant added, "stand by to defend that box. If any one touches it, shoot."

The four horses increased their pace to a quick trot, and the coach lumbered on.

* * * * *

Halfway through the gulch three masked horsemen rode out from their ambush and waited for the approaching vehicle to slow down and stop. Instead of stopping, as they expected, Bulger, urged by Dan Medlicott, whipped up his team to a full racing gallop. Three shots flashed from the darkness. The bullets rattled against the coach and there was a smashing of glass as three further shots rang out.

Sergeant Silk replied to them very deliberately, showing himself to the men as he fired down upon them. He knew each one of the three, even in the dim light.

[Pg 155] He saw Bill Allison's hat fall upon the trail, saw Hen Faxon's pistol drop from a shattered hand, while the third man, Red Derrick himself, plunged headlong from his saddle and rolled over, narrowly escaping the wheels as the coach dashed by.

"It's Sergeant Silk!" cried Bill Allison, in his surprise firing three harmless shots in quick succession.

Then Sergeant Silk sat down, calmly putting away his weapons, and adjusting his Stetson hat to complete his uniform.

"Your strong box is quite safe now, Mr. Gaskell," he said in his slow, level voice as he drew out his pipe. "Those three chaps will be arrested inside another hour. As for Bulger, here, their accomplice, he is already my prisoner."

"But you must have discovered their plot!" cried Gaskell. "You must have known all along that the rascals would be lying in wait for the coach!"

"Why, cert'nly," smiled Silk. "That is why I—why Lucy and I are here, your fellow-passengers."

CHAPTER XI

MAPLE LEAF'S SCAR

"I say, Maple Leaf," Percy Rapson declared with boyish frankness, "you're lookin' awfully charmin' at this moment, standin' there peelin' those apples with the light of the settin' sun on you! I don't think you ever realise how good-lookin' you are. If I were an artist, I should want to paint a picture of you; only you should be dressed in fringed and beaded buckskins, and wear a feathered head-dress like a war-chief's daughter. Of course, I should never be able to do you justice, but your portrait would look rippin' fine on the top of a chocolate box."

The Indian girl's naturally ruddy cheeks took on a deeper tinge, which was not wholly due to the rosy glow from the western sky.

[Pg 157] "Maple Leaf is glad that you are not an artist," she responded with dignity and a slightly contemptuous curl of her lip.

Percy stood near to her in the kitchen at Rattlesnake Ranch. He had one of a litter of bull pups on the dresser beside him, and was tempting the fat, ungainly animal to take more nourishment than it needed from a saucer of milk. He looked at the girl very closely and his eyes lingered, not for the first time, upon a curious scar in the smooth skin of her right temple. It was a long, very straight scar, that ran into the midst of the ebony black hair above her ear.

"Maple Leaf!" he said, after a considerable pause.

"Well?" She glanced aside at him.

"I've often wanted to ask you," he went on. "How did you get that wound on your temple? It's like the cut of a knife. It must have been a good deal more than a scratch to leave a mark like that. How was it done?"

Maple Leaf continued with her work of peeling and quartering apples. She had turned her back to him.

[Pg 158] "Don't you want to tell me?" he asked. "Indians are usually proud of their wounds. At least, the men are, the chiefs and warriors and braves. I don't know about the women. Perhaps you got yours in some childish accident?"

"I have never told any one," she answered. And then, after a pause, she added: "And I am not going to. It is my secret. It is no business of yours."

Percy laughed awkwardly, feeling the rebuff, and took up his wriggling bull pup.

"All right," he said, knowing by experience that Maple Leaf was like the rest of her race and that wild horses couldn't drag from her anything that she did not wish to tell. "You can keep your secret, for all I care. But I could easily find out if I wanted, you know. I could even ask Sergeant Silk. I daresay Silk knows. There isn't much that he doesn't know about you and every one else on the Rattlesnake patrol."

She turned sharply and her dark eyes flashed. But only for an instant.

[Pg 159] "You had better not ask Sergeant Silk," she said in a slow, level voice, which had in it something of warning. "He knows. Yes, he knows. But he would not tell you."

She watched him go out into the back garden towards the shed which he used as a kennel. When he was out of sight, she put forth her hand to the plate rack and drew a small square of looking-glass from behind a cracked dish.

Propping the mirror against the shelf, she drew aside the strands of black hair from above her ear in such a way that the scar was revealed more clearly, running upward and backward from her temple.

"Yes," she nodded with a smile of satisfaction at her own reflection, "it is still there. It will always be there. Maple Leaf is not sorry. She is glad. It helps her to remember."

She put the mirror back in its hiding-place and went to the door and looked out across the ripening cornfields and the more distant prairie to the blue foothills behind which the sun was sinking.

[Pg 160] It was just such an evening as this, she reflected. And she recalled one by one the incidents of the adventure in which she had taken so prominent a part.

It had happened that her father, The Moose That Walks, and her brother, Rippling Water, had been absent many days from Mrs. Medicott's ranch, where they lived and worked. The crops were not yet ready for harvesting, and there was not much for them to do on the farm lands, whereas the beaver were plentiful on the creeks and in their best condition; so the father and son

had gone trapping on the head waters of the Bow River.

They had left word at the ranch that if they did not return within a stated time it would mean that they were having good luck, and that Maple Leaf was to go to them with some further supplies of the white man's food—tea, sugar, flour, with rifle cartridges, not forgetting tobacco.

So Maple Leaf had filled her saddle-bags, mounted her pony, and gone off on the trail alone to the trappers' dug-out on far-away Butterfly Creek.

[Pg 161] It was a long and lonesome journey among the mountains, occupying two days; but she had the Indians' instinct for finding her way through unfamiliar places, and she reached her destination without adventure.

It was as she had expected. The Moose That Walks and Rippling Water had met with good luck. Their traps had yielded a rich harvest. Some hundreds of beautiful beaver skins had been dried and packed, and there were more to be taken. Now that fresh supplies of food and tobacco had come, it would be possible to continue trapping with success for many days.

"It is good medicine," said The Moose That Walks. "We will sleep seven more sleeps and then return with many beaver skins to our white friends. With the sun's rising you will go back, my daughter, for it is not well that you should be away when there is work to be done."

[Pg 162] "And, say!" added Rippling Water, observing that she had come unarmed with any other weapon than the knife in her belt. "Don't you reckon that you'd be some wiser to carry a loaded gun along with you? You might need it, see? There's no knowing."

He offered her his own revolver, but the girl shook her head decisively.

"What d'you suppose I could want with a loaded gun?" she objected. "Nobody's going to touch me. There's no road-agents to rob me, even if I was worth robbing; and there's no grizzly bears or hungry wolves prowling around, this time of year. No, Rip. I'm safe enough. Don't you worry."

She had no fear, because she knew of no possible danger, and she started on her backward journey as confident of her personal safety as if she were riding among the familiar cornfields and orchards of Rattlesnake Ranch instead of in the gloomy wilds of the Rocky Mountains.

[Pg 163] She had abundance of food and a good, sure-footed horse. She knew the landmarks and could not well go astray. In the noon-day heat she would halt at the side of some shady creek to rest; at night she would seek out some friendly shelter where she could build a fire, and, wrapping her blanket about her, sleep as comfortably and securely as in her little room under the roof at the Medicott homestead.

Leaving the mountains behind, she crossed a belt of old sand-drift overgrown with pine. Beyond that, for a score of miles or so, there was no bush, but only a swell of golden grass rolling away to violet distances.

Late in the afternoon she came to Emerald Cañon, where, sunk three hundred feet below the plains, there was a chain of pools and an acre or so of green meadow starred with the ashes of old camp fires.

In this secluded cañon Maple Leaf hobbled her broncho and made camp for the night within sound of a high cascade of water, which fell noisily into a pool darkened by overhanging trees.

She shared her solitude with a family of little foxes at play on a grassy knoll and with a crane, which stood on one leg at the water's edge.

[Pg 164] She watched the crane, wondering how long it would remain motionless in that position, and as she watched, a waft of smoke from her fire drifted towards the bird, which rose into the air and flapped lazily away into the blue gloom.

Suddenly as she followed its flight the girl's quick eyes were drawn upward to the rim of the shadowed cañon, where a waving line of ripened grass glowed orange against the sky, and she became aware of a filmy cloud of dust, which rose from the high plain beyond.

She clasped her fingers tightly, drew back into the shadow, and crouched there, listening, watching.

The dust cloud thickened, and above the deep murmur of the waterfall she caught the unmistakable sound of the tramping of horses and the rumble of wagon wheels.

She thought of Indians and of the need of concealing her fire, lest they should discover her and perhaps steal her pony.

[Pg 165] Earlier in the day she had come upon the marks of horses' hoofs in the prairie dust. The horses had not all been shod, and she had known by this that their riders were Indians. She began to wish that she had taken the loaded gun which Rippling Water had offered her. But her anxiety quickly left her.

Presently a mounted man came out upon the edge of the ravine. The sunlight shone warmly upon his chestnut horse and flamed upon his scarlet tunic. He had come to a halt not half-a-mile away from her, and he was looking down towards the drifting mist of her wood fire. For a moment he glanced back over his shoulder, then moved onward in her direction, followed, after a while, by

some twenty riders, each with a carbine poised across the horn of his stock saddle. They were a troop of the North-West Mounted Police.

At a word of command the riders dismounted to lead their horses, while behind them there appeared five wagons, each with a driver and an off man. A pair of troopers in the rear waited for the dust to settle before they followed down the breakneck hill into the hollow of the cañon.

[Pg 166] Maple Leaf watched them winding down the rocky slopes. Some wore suits of brown canvas, some were dressed in fringed deer-skin with grey flannel shirts or old red jackets, with long boots, sombrero hats, belts glittering with brass cartridges, and big revolvers at their sides.

Hard-featured, weather-beaten, dusty, great big men they were, all having the same clear, far-searching eyes, the same pride of bearing, and the same swaggering gallantry and wild grace in their masterly horsemanship.

The trooper who had first appeared in sight waited for a while and spoke to the officer in command, then went on in advance of his companions. Even at a distance as he approached, Maple Leaf made out that he had a sergeant's triple chevron on the arm of his dusty red tunic. When he reached the level ground he vaulted into his saddle and rode across the long grass straight for the trees where her fire still burned smokily.

"Yes," she said to herself with a thrill of satisfaction. "It's sure Sergeant Silk." And he in his turn was as quick to recognise the Indian girl who did the chores at Rattlesnake Ranch.

[Pg 167] "How do, Maple Leaf?" he cried in greeting, drawing rein in front of her as she stood up. "Alone, eh? We came upon your trail 'way back there on the plains. Been west somewhere near Butterfly Creek, I reckon?"

"Yes," she responded. "Been along to take things to father and Rip."

He glanced at her pony nibbling at the fresh grass, then at the preparations she had made for her bivouac.

"Say, aren't you a bit afraid to be camping out all alone so far from home?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Why should I be?" she returned. "There's no danger. What could happen?"

[Pg 168] "You might lose your pony, for one thing," he smiled. "For another thing, there are Indians knocking about—hostile Indians, who have broken bounds. That is why we are here." He nodded in the direction of his companions of the Mounted Police. "We are out on their trail, to drive them back into their Reservation. There might be danger from them, even for you, who are yourself an Indian; though there's not much to be afraid of while our fellows are at hand to look after you."

"I shall be all right," she assured him.

"Have you everything you want?" he inquired. "I'll bring you some cooked meat presently, and an extra blanket. It'll be cold after sundown. And in the morning you may as well fall in with our outfit, see? We shall be going along the Rattlesnake trail, after we've rounded up the Indians."

"I should only hinder you," she replied. "I'm not needing any sort of help. I shall not take any. I am going to quit."

Sergeant Silk had already moved to go away, and amid the roar of the neighbouring waterfall he did not hear her last words.

[Pg 169]

CHAPTER XII

A PERILOUS MOMENT

When he returned to his comrades the teamsters had brought their wagons down the hill, the mounted men had formed up and were unsaddling. The wagons made a second line in their rear, and a rope was stretched from wheel to wheel, to which each trooper tied his horse before the teams were unharnessed.

Three of the men had chosen a spot by some bushes where an iron bar was set on a pair of uprights five feet apart, and before the sound of the axes had ceased in the bush three full kettles

were swinging over a roaring fire.

[Pg 170] A bell tent was pitched for the officer in command; the horses were watered, groomed, and fed, then at a merry call from the bugle there was a dash to the wagons for plates and cups, while knives were whipped from belt or bootleg ready for a general assault on fried bacon, hard biscuit, and scalding tea.

After the meal, when the men were beginning to cut up their plug tobacco and load their pipes, Sergeant Silk gathered some food into a blanket and filled a flagon with hot tea. His chums watched him, curious concerning his preparations.

"You going out on scout duty then, Sergeant?" one of them inquired.

"This grub isn't for myself," he explained, nodding in the direction of Maple Leaf's camp beyond a projecting corner of the ravine. "I'm taking it to a girl bivouacking alone farther up the cañon."

"Alone?" one of them exclaimed in surprise. "Must be an Indian. No white girl would camp out all alone in a place like this."

[Pg 171] "That's so," nodded Silk. "She's just an Indian—the chore girl from Rattlesnake Ranch, daughter of The Moose That Walks. Guess you know her, most of you. She once saved me from being scalped and roasted. I owe her some special attention."

"Say, Sergeant," suggested a trooper from the far side of the fire, "mightn't you have brought her into camp? We'd have fixed up a nice, homelike, comfortable room for her in one of the wagons. And I'd have mounted guard outside to keep away the mosquitoes. No mosquito'll go near any one else while I'm around."

Sergeant Silk had saddled his broncho and was about to mount when he turned sharply at the sound of hoofs.

"Here's Denis Murphy coming in," he announced. "I'll wait and hear if he's seen anything of those Redskins. Something has kept him."

Murphy was descending from the heights by the tracks made by the wagon wheels. As he approached along the level ground the commanding officer strode out from his tent, smoking a cigar. Murphy came to a halt in front of him and saluted.

[Pg 172] "I've struck the trail of those Indians, sir," he reported. "Three miles beyond the far end of the cañon, west by south. I calculate there's between thirty and forty of them—bucks, on the warpath."

"How do you make out that they are bucks?" questioned the commandant. "You didn't see them?"

"I didn't see them, sir," Murphy answered, "but I found no marks of any teepee poles, and I reckon they're the lot we're looking for."

"No doubt," nodded the officer, puffing at his cigar. He turned to Silk. "You had better persuade that girl to come into camp, Sergeant," he said. "And then I shall want you to go out scouting, and discover where the Redskins have located themselves for the night. Take Stikeman along with you and send him back with the girl."

"Yes, sir," returned Silk.

He mounted, taking his carbine with him, and Trooper Stikeman followed, carrying the blanket of provisions.

[Pg 173] They went down the ravine at an easy trot with their faces to the west, where the sun was setting in a glory of red and gold. When they came within sound of the waterfall, the sergeant looked about for Maple Leaf's pony and the smoke from her camp fire, but he saw neither.

"Seems to me the girl has vamoosed," he said uneasily. "I see no sign of her."

He led the way to the trees and halted over the blackened ashes of the fire. In their midst was a large, round stone, with a smaller stone beside it. "Yes," he ruminated, "she's quitted and left that sign to let us know that she has made westward, out of the cañon. Say, Stikeman, you'd best turn back to camp and tell the major I've gone on the girl's trail."

He started off at once at a hand gallop, knowing that Maple Leaf could get out of the ravine only by one way, for the sides were too steep for any pony to climb.

[Pg 174] But when he came out upon the open plain he slowed down, riding to and fro, searching until he came upon the trail indicated by a faint line to be seen through the tall grasses. He followed the track quickly and unerringly, always looking for it forty or fifty yards ahead.

Once he drew rein and listened. From behind him came the notes of a bugle sounding First Post. As they ceased he heard the regular quick pad of hoofs in advance of him, borne to him by the evening breeze. The sound died away as the breeze fell, but it had told him the direction in which the girl had gone, and that she was not far away from him.

He urged his broncho forward, hardly needing to watch the trail, and at length, just for a moment, he caught sight of Maple Leaf as she crossed the crest of an old sand-drift and went over into the hollow beyond.

He expected to see her reappear on the next slope, but as he reached the top of the drift he discovered her still in the hollow, seated quietly on her horse in the midst of a colony of prairie dogs, amusing herself watching the lively little animals as they scampered about, barked, and peeped out at her from their burrows.

[Pg 175] She seemed to be aware that he had been following her, for she turned without surprise and raised her hand in salute to the brim of her wide hat.

"How!" she called to him in Indian greeting.

Sergeant Silk rode up to her, carefully guiding his horse among the dog holes.

"You've given me a needless journey," he said to her reprovingly. "Why did you strike camp? You were safe and comfortable back there in Emerald Cañon. Here you can be neither comfortable nor safe."

She looked at him with a frown of annoyance.

"There's no occasion for you to worry about me," she objected. "I'm all right left alone. I'm no tenderfoot. You needn't have come after me. Don't just know why you did."

[Pg 176] "I've come to take you back to our outfit," he explained. "The major sent me. You're to come back right now." He paused a moment, looking about him curiously, almost as if he were conscious of some impending danger. "Come," he urged, "we must get into camp before dark. I've got to go out on a big scout."

She glanced at him inquiringly.

"You going to be out on duty all night, then?" she questioned.

"Why, cert'nly," he answered, "or until I have located those Indians."

"I'll come," she decided promptly. "My pony is some tired; but he'll put on a hustle. Say, what are you looking like that for?"

His eyes were roving searchingly to and fro across the prairie. He was gripping his reins tightly with one hand, while with the other he was fingering the stock of his carbine poised in front of him.

"Listen!" he said, sitting very still in his saddle.

Then suddenly he swung over, leapt from his horse, and threw the reins over the mare's head, so that she would stand. Swiftly he went round to Maple Leaf's side.

"Here, jump down!" he commanded. "Quick!"

[Pg 177] The girl looked at him amazed, but obediently slipped to the ground.

Sergeant Silk caught at her broncho's bridle, drew the bit down to within a span of the animal's hoofs, and secured both fetlocks together with the double loop. In the same way he shackled the feet of his own mare. Leaving the two horses hobbled, he strode a dozen quick paces away, with his carbine across the crook of his left arm. Maple Leaf followed him. He looked round at her.

"Sit down!" he commanded. "Lie low!"

Again she obeyed him unquestioningly, sharing his alarm. She had heard what he had heard and knew its meaning.

She watched him go forward and saw him stand upright with his hand raised above his head, palm outward, as a peace sign. Then she followed the direction in which he was looking and gave a little start as she saw a figure on horseback—an Indian wearing the large feathered war-bonnet of a chief—outlined against a grassy slope hardly more than half-a-mile away.

[Pg 178] Silk slowly lowered his hand and strode back to where Maple Leaf was sitting.

"He doesn't answer my sign," he said, drawing down the lever of his carbine. "He's a Sioux. There's a crowd of his braves behind the rise there. It's the lot we're looking for, and they know it. They won't want me to go back. They'll rush us. We've got to fight for it. Keep cool!"

"It's all my fault," Maple Leaf regretted. "What can I do? I've no gun!"

"You can do nothing but lie low," Silk told her. "We can't escape through this dog town, all full of holes. See! They're coming!"

[Pg 179] From all around, silent as shadows, warriors on horseback appeared, each with a rifle across his naked arm. The sunlight shone upon their greasy bodies and painted faces, and the white eagle feathers of their head-dresses. They collected in a group. Some of them seemed to be speaking, to be planning how they should kill or capture the red-coated scout who had found their trail. Then one by one in turn they moved away, forming in single file, and making a wide circle round the centre occupied by Sergeant Silk and his girl companion.

Silk glanced back at the two hobbled horses. No, it was too late to think of escape.

At first the Indians rode at a quick walking pace, far apart from each other; but before the wide ring was complete they had increased their speed to a wild, racing gallop. Each warrior threw

himself along the off side of his steed, and as they wheeled round and round, keeping always the same distance away, they yelled their shrill war cry, firing no shot as yet.

Sergeant Silk's eyes were steadily watching them. He was lying at full length, supported on an elbow. His face had taken on a look of grim determination.

[Pg 180] "They're not risking to come closer—not yet," he said calmly. "The dog holes are as bad for them as for us. We're safe for a bit. You see, Indians are never good marksmen with firearms. They never clean their rifles, never get hold of decent ammunition; and it isn't just easy, anyhow, to take aim from a galloping horse. You've no need to be afraid," he added reassuringly.

"I'm not anyways afraid while you're here, Sergeant," Maple Leaf responded. "Why don't they get doing something? Why don't they shoot?"

Suddenly, as if he had heard her and understood, one of the warriors flung himself forward under his pony's neck and fired into the ring. The bullet kicked up a spurt of dust many yards away, but it was the signal for the beginning of the fight.

Yelling shrilly, the savages opened fire, never pausing to take aim. Their shots, indeed, were more dangerous to themselves than to their intended victims. One of their own horses stumbled and rolled over on its rider, struck by a stray bullet.

[Pg 181] "They're having a nice picnic, so far," said Silk, talking for the mere sake of encouraging his companion. "If they keep this up long enough, the racket'll be heard in Emerald Cañon. Wind's from the right quarter. But they're only bluffing now—playing with us. Soon, they'll rush us. It's their way. There!"

The Indian chief had suddenly wheeled within the galloping circle, throwing his pony back with a jerk on its haunches. The warriors came up to him one by one, halting all together in a compact company, with their ponies' heads towards the two figures crouching in the hollow of the dog town.

Sergeant Silk had turned to confront them, raising himself to command a fuller view of them. He understood their manoeuvre. Instead of closing in around him from all sides in broken order, they were going to make a combined frontal charge.

"Fools!" he muttered contemptuously. "They never learn how to fight. They're going to rush us in a bunch!"

Keeping his eyes fixed upon the lingering Indians, he moved backward a foot or two nearer to Maple Leaf, and slowly drew from his holster a heavy revolver, which he placed on the grass between them.

[Pg 182] "Listen!" he said in a sharp whisper, glancing for an instant into her dark, fearless eyes. "They're going to rush us in a bunch. We've only a few minutes. Maybe I can break them. I don't know. I shall try. It's a bare chance. But in this pistol"—he touched the weapon—"I shall always save two shots—for the last. One for you. One for me. Understand?"

Maple Leaf nodded.

"Yes," she answered. "You will shoot me first; then yourself. It is best. I understand."

"And if they kill me first," he added impressively, yet quite calmly. "If they kill me first, you must seize that pistol and shoot yourself. Else, they will slow torture you to death. Shoot yourself—in the head—just here."

He pushed back his hat and pressed the white part of his forehead with a finger that was as steady as if he had been merely telling of a moment of past peril instead of acting in one that was terribly immediate.

[Pg 183] Maple Leaf's hand was hardly less steady than his own as she moved the shining weapon to a position more exactly between them.

"Good-bye, then, Sergeant—Sergeant Silk," she murmured. "It will be good—I shall be proud—to die in company with a brave man."

"Good-bye!" he responded lightly, turning from her and seating himself on a dog mound with his carbine across his knees.

The band of Indians still held off at a distance of fully a thousand yards. Silk could see them slowly and very deliberately forming behind their chief, only waiting for the signal to dash off in their headlong race.

Then suddenly there was a wild barbaric shriek as they broke away with a confused turmoil of whoops and yells and the quick patter of horses' hoofs that made the ground throb and sent up a swirl of dust.

[Pg 184] On and on they came in their swooping charge, their shrill cries rending the air, their feathers fluttering, their trappings flying, their weapons held aloft as their ponies plunged forward at full racing stretch.

It seemed as if nothing could stop or divert their onward rush. It was like a resistless hurricane sweeping down straight for the dog town where the quiet man in the red coat was waiting with

the girl crouched beside him.

Sergeant Silk cleared his throat, took a deep breath, and went down on one knee. He did not yet raise his gun, although many of the warriors had opened a random fire and little spurts of dust and grass were beginning to show where the bullets were falling. He waited very calmly, knowing the habits of the Indians—knowing that although they fight hard and fiercely for their lives when cornered they shrink from riding full tilt into the fire of a well-aimed rifle.

In the long, forward race there were many moments of suspense—moments in which each galloping savage had time to reflect that when that waiting rifle should be raised to spit forth its deadly succession of bullets, he himself might be one of the first to fall.

[Pg 185] As they dashed on, one of the foremost of their ponies stumbled and went down with its leg in a dog hole. Then two others fell kicking, while more coming behind stumbled over them in confusion. The Redskins yelled more wildly than ever, firing over their ponies' ears, always too high.

When they were within fifty yards of him, Silk cocked his rifle. Instantly, at sight of the levelled weapon, every Indian flung himself over the side of his pony, showing no more than an arm and a leg. Instantly, also, the band divided itself into two sections to right and left and sped onward in separate lines, firing wildly as they rushed past like a raging whirlwind.

As the last of them flashed by, firing backward at him, Silk turned to take up a new position, knowing that they would double and renew their attack. But as he moved, the hollow dog mound on which he knelt gave way beneath his weight; he lost his balance and rolled over.

[Pg 186] Maple Leaf saw him fall, and, believing that a bullet had struck him, she caught up the revolver, pressed the cold ring of its muzzle against her forehead, and closed her eyes. She heard the Indians galloping back, bullets were dropping around her. She was sure now that the end had come.

"One—two—three!" she counted and pressed the trigger.

But Sergeant Silk had already leapt to his feet.

"Stop!" he cried, flinging out his hand. He was in time to thrust the girl's elbow aside, but the trigger had been pressed, the weapon had been fired, and Maple Leaf fell backward.

He glanced at her hurriedly and saw a splash of red across her face. Then he raised his rifle and with steady, deliberate aim, fired four shots in succession.

[Pg 187] As the warriors passed abreast of him, now at a greater distance, four of their horses ran riderless. Again they had swerved, curving off into a circle and riding round and round as before. He watched them and saw their circle suddenly break. Their yells of defiance were turned into shouts of alarm, and as they scattered there came to him the shrill notes of a bugle.

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed as half-a-dozen of his comrades of the Mounted Police galloped into sight over the rising ground. "The boys have followed on our trail! We shall be all right now."

He turned to Maple Leaf. She was on her knees, supported by her outstretched hands, staring at him while the crimson trickle from her face and hair and chin dripped upon the sand.

"I thought they'd got you," she said feebly. "I'd have done it sure if you hadn't stopped me."

He looked at the ugly score that the bullet had made across her temple.

"It's just a flesh wound," he told her. "We can soon patch it up when we get back into camp."

"It will leave a mark," she said, overcoming her faintness.

[Pg 188] "Why, cert'nly," he smiled, returning the pistol to its holster. "But your hair will 'most hide it—if you want it to be hidden."

"But I don't," she faltered weakly, closing her eyes. "I shall be proud of it—as long as I live."

[Pg 189]

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAN WHO WAS GLAD

There was just the slightest sound of a foot-tread down by the creek. None but an attentively alert ear could have detected it amid the southing of the wintry wind and the murmur of the stream over its stony bed.

Young Dan Medicott raised himself on his elbow and listened, directing his searching gaze across the moonlit grass towards the deep shadows of the bluff of birch and poplar that lay between him and his home on Rattlesnake Ranch.

His rifle was behind him, propped against a post of the stout corral gate. His hand went round to it cautiously, but only to touch it and assure himself that it was still there, ready for use in case it should presently be needed.

[Pg 190] There were Indians about—Indians and rebel half-breeds, who coveted the horses in the corral which he was watching, and who during the past month had made more than one attempt to break through the palisade and stampede the animals across the valley into their own encampment.

Dan was only seventeen years old, but he was no tenderfoot. In spite of his youth, he had already had many a brush with the Redskins of Western Canada, and he knew their subtle ways and how to deal with them.

He had been lying in wait for three weary hours, and nothing had happened until now. The night was very cold, there was a sharp frost, and a cutting wind from the mountains in the north moaned dismally in the trees. He lay with his blanket over his knees and his coat collar turned up about his ears. He listened for a long time, but the sound which had alarmed him for a moment was not repeated.

"Some scavenger dog prowlin' around, I reckon," he decided, and leant back, folding his arms across his chest and closing his eyes.

[Pg 191] He did not allow himself to fall asleep. To do so would have been neglecting his duty as a scout; but he might at least keep himself bodily comfortable, and he knew that even if he should sink into slumber no enemy would approach the gate of the stockade without arousing him.

He was still in the same position half-an-hour afterwards, betraying by no sign that he was aware that he was not alone.

A shadow moved across his closed eyes, he heard a very cautious footstep quite near to him, but he did not stir.

He remained silent and motionless for many minutes, until he became conscious of a warm breath in his face and of a hand stealing behind him towards his rifle. But before the fingers closed upon the weapon, Dan had swiftly seized the intruding arm.

"No, you don't!" he objected, with a laugh, and he looked up into the moonlit face of a man in the familiar uniform of the North-West Mounted Police, who was sitting on the end of a pine log only a few inches away from him. "Guess you figured I was asleep, did you, Sergeant?" he said, rubbing his eyes.

[Pg 192] "Looked some like it," returned the sergeant. "You showed no sign of being awake, and you never challenged me as you ought to have done. Say, it might have been an Indian sneaking up."

"I sure knew that it wasn't," affirmed Dan. "An Injun doesn't wear top boots and clinkin' spurs, nor a Stetson hat, nor a scarlet tunic. And he wouldn't have made a bee-line across that patch of moonlit grass, as you did just now. I knew it was you all the time. If I hadn't known it, you might have had a bullet in you. A nice thing it would have been if I'd had to go to the fort and report that I'd shot Sergeant Silk in mistake for a Redskin. I should have been some sorry."

"Dare say," reflected Silk, speaking hardly above a whisper. "Folks generally are some sorry after they've taken a human life. I never knew but one man who was real glad."

"Glad?" echoed Dan.

"Yes. Lean Bear was glad when he killed Tough Kelly."

[Pg 193] "H'm! Indian, eh?" said Dan. "But Indians are usually glad when they've rubbed out a Paleface. Lean Bear?" He repeated the name. "Why, wasn't that the chap you spared last week in the skirmish back of the fort? I saw what happened. I was ridin' behind you. I saw him tumble from his horse. You had the upper hand of him, and just as you were goin' to pull the trigger he yelled out to you, and you lowered your weapon, lettin' him escape, as if he'd been an old pal of yours 'stead of a deadly enemy."

Sergeant Silk leant forward with an elbow on his knee.

"Yes, that was the chap," he acknowledged. "But any other trooper would have done the same, and let him live."

"Why?" questioned Dan. "Wasn't he the same as all other Injuns—a rotten, ungrateful brute?"

[Pg 194] Sergeant Silk did not answer at once. He slowly took out his pipe and tobacco pouch and laid them beside him on the pine log before buttoning up his overcoat. He was silent for a long time—silent and thoughtful. Dan Medicott knew that this mood meant a story.

"Fire away," he urged, "I'm listenin'. I hope it's goin' to be a yarn about yourself, and none of your second-hand snacks about some fellow who isn't half so good and brave."

Silk shrugged his shoulders.

"It's just about Lean Bear himself," he resumed. "Lean Bear and—and a young trooper who had charge of the post at Rosetta's Crossing. Corporal Pretty John was what he was commonly called, though he wasn't pretty and John wasn't his name.

"Lean Bear was well known on the Rosetta Patrol. He was just an idle, good-for-nothing loafer of the plains, picking up a poor living by trapping on the creeks, doing odd jobs, sponging on people who had more of this world's goods than himself, and drinking, drinking whenever he could get hold of a drop of firewater to flush down his scraggy throat.

[Pg 195] "The missionaries could do nothing with him; they gave him up. The Hudson's Bay Company wouldn't trade with him. His own people, the Cree Indians, wouldn't admit him into their wigwams; they said his tongue was forked, it was crooked.

"The Mounted Police always kept a close watch on him, suspecting him of theft, though they never could bring anything home to him. He was too cunning to be caught. And yet it was said that he'd once led an honest, respectable life, as far as a Redskin can contrive to be honest and respectable.

"Sometimes Lean Bear used to disappear for months together. Nobody knew where he went to, and I don't think many at Rosetta's Crossing cared a whole lot. They just forgot him until he turned up again at the station like a half-starved pariah dog that had wandered back to a human habitation, cringing and fawning and begging for something to eat; ragged, dirty, almost unrecognisable except for the string of crimson glass beads that he always wore about his neck.

[Pg 196] "One time in the depth of winter he returned, riding a broken-winded nag that looked even more of a hungry scarecrow than himself. He demanded food and shelter with all the swagger of a millionaire putting up at a first-class hotel. Most of the fellows in the store refused to help him, until Pretty John gave him a biscuit, when others spared him something, too, and he ate as if his teeth hadn't had any exercise for weeks.

"All the time while he was in the store, sitting as close as he could get to the stove, he was looking about him as if he'd a mind to steal something and make a bolt for the door. One of the men recommended the corporal to keep an eye on the skunk, and the corporal did so, without seeming to be watching.

"And as Pretty John watched from the corner of his eye he thought he guessed what it was that Lean Bear was so anxious about. He wasn't meaning to steal anything. He was just waiting for some one that he seemed to expect; and after a bit, in strode Tough Kelly.

[Pg 197] "Guess you've heard of Tough Kelly, haven't you, Dan? One of the biggest rascals that ever dodged the Police. As a matter of fact, Corporal Pretty John was only waiting for just one bit of evidence before arresting him.

"Well, at sight of Tough strolling in to join the gamblers at the poker table, there was a sudden change in the face of Lean Bear. His eyes glistened with a queer, savage hatred. But he didn't speak. He just drew back from the stove and glided into a far corner, out of the light, hiding himself behind a pile of dry goods, pulling his blanket over his head and pretending to be sound asleep, the same as you did just now."

Sergeant Silk paused to load his pipe, but he did not light it.

[Pg 198]

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE POWER OF HIS PRISONER

"There was some high play that evening," he went on presently, "and most of the money that was lost went into Tough Kelly's pocket. Cheated? Well, yes, I suppose so. Anyway he vamoosed pretty quick when there was no more gambling going forward, and he hadn't gone many minutes when Lean Bear slipped out, as he said, to give his mustang a feed and find a bed in the stables.

"That same night Corporal Pretty John completed his chain of evidence against Tough Kelly, and on the following morning he rode off to Tough's lone cabin among the hills, to arrest him. But

when he got there and went inside, it was to find Tough Kelly lying stone dead.

[Pg 199] "Clearly it was an Indian who had killed him, for his scalp had been taken. But there was nothing to show who that Indian was—nothing excepting a little broken bead of crimson glass, which the trooper found on the mud floor.

"That bead was the only clue. But Pretty John didn't need to ask himself many questions. He remembered the look of savage enmity that had flashed from the eyes of Lean Bear, and although he didn't know anything of a motive, he just kind of guessed that the thing had been done by Lean Bear himself.

"So, leaving his subordinate in charge of the post at Rosetta's Crossing, he fixed up his outfit for a long journey and started off on the criminal's trail, or as much of a trail as he could find, which was precious little. Still, as you know, Dan, it's a point of honour among the Mounted Police that, once you go off on the track of a criminal, you've got to capture him. You mustn't slink back to barracks without your man.

[Pg 200] "Pretty John was on that trail, not for days only, but for weeks. It led him far away into the snowy wilds of the Rocky Mountains, where there wasn't a whole lot of food for man or beast. There was so little that it came to a matter of either giving up the hopeless chase or else giving up his life, and the better prospect seemed to be that of saving his own skin.

"Accordingly, he turned back. But he'd got within a couple of hundred miles of home when suddenly and unexpectedly he came upon the fugitive's back trail. He followed it up, and with such good purpose that at last he located his man in a trapper's dug-out on the Green River.

"Lean Bear didn't show any alarm or surprise when the hungry, snow-blind, travel-weary representative of the white man's law confronted him, but just greeted him with the Indian's usual '*How!*' and invited him into shelter.

"The Red Coat has been on a long and lonesome trail,' he said. 'Lean Bear welcomes him as a friend. We will eat together. We will smoke the pipe of peace. It is well.'

[Pg 201] "He had food in plenty, but Corporal Pretty John wouldn't touch it before he had made the Indian clearly understand that he was arrested for the grave crime of taking the life of a white man, whereupon Lean Bear permitted himself to smile with satisfaction.

"Lean Bear has no need to be told,' he declared. 'It is true that he has taken the scalp of his enemy. It is great medicine, and he is glad. His heart is light, it is not heavy with sorrow for the death of such a bad man. He has done what he has tried to do during four winters. He has done it, and he is happy. He will take his punishment. He is ready to die when his white friends will that he should no longer live.'

"So earnestly did he insist on his willingness to pay the full penalty for his crime that the Corporal began to suspect some cunning trick, some subtle Redskin treachery.

[Pg 202] "You will agree that it wasn't a comfortable situation for a trooper to be in. You see, it would have been so easy in that lonesome, desolate place for the Indian to overpower a man weakened by privation. Lean Bear was already a murderer, and one crime more wouldn't have disturbed his conscience. He would never have been found out.

"You may be sure that Pretty John kept his revolver handy in case of necessity. But if Lean Bear intended violent mischief he was certainly very slow in bringing it off. He made no attempt to rebel against his arrest, and was only silent and thoughtful. He wore no handcuffs. They were not needed. He just rode beside the Corporal, never lagging, never trying to escape, although he might easily have done so as they crossed the open, wind-swept stretches of snowy prairie, or at night when his captor was asleep.

[Pg 203] "On the second day that they were together, misfortune overtook them. They lost their way in a wild and merciless blizzard. There wasn't a rock or a bank anywhere for miles around to afford them shelter; all about them was nothing but unbroken, trackless prairie, under its covering of frozen snow that the wind caught up and flung into their faces, cutting them like knives. The sky above was shut out by the fiercely swirling clouds of icy particles that fought with fiendish anger.

"Bad medicine!' declared the Indian in a momentary lull, and as the storm grew worse, the closer he kept to the side of his morose and silent warder.

"It was as much as Pretty John could do to keep his saddle, the bridle reins hung loose from his numbed fingers. He could only sway to and fro under the cover of his blanket, now bracing himself to sit up straight, now falling sleepily forward over the neck of his jaded broncho; and it vexed him all the more to know that while he was getting gradually weaker and weaker, his prisoner was riding upright and unconcerned, never wavering, but only keeping closer to his side, knee to knee.

"The blizzard grew worse. There was no bearing up against its overwhelming anger. Death was in that biting, lashing wind, and in the swirling blasts of blinding snow, tearing and shrieking from every direction at once.

[Pg 204] "Even the horses tottered and staggered, and often stood rigidly stubborn with their forelegs stretched out to support them and keep them from falling; and at last Corporal Pretty John's muddled brain told him that Lean Bear had slipped to the ground and was walking beside him

with a hand gripping him tightly.

"And through the hissing and screeching of the ice-laden wind he fancied that he could hear some one calling to him from afar. The voice was like the voice of a weird, unearthly spirit mocking him, jeering at him from away back of the wind.

"'Pretty John! Pretty John!' it wailed faintly. 'Keep awake, you! Keep awake! You sleep, then die! That is it! You die! Keep awake! Keep awake! *How!*'

"Vaguely and in a dazed, dreamy sort of way, Pretty John then realised that it wasn't the voice of any phantom spirit, but of Lean Bear, the captured criminal, yelling into his ear, and that the Indian was roughly shaking him and pummelling him, while he dragged him forcibly from his saddle.

[Pg 205] "Pretty John fell in a helpless heap of fur coat and stiffly frozen blanket, utterly exhausted. He couldn't move; he couldn't think. He didn't want to move or to think. All that he wanted was just to lie there and sleep and forget—forget everything.

"'Leave me alone!' he pleaded. 'Why don't you escape? You've got your chance. Let me sleep—sleep!'

"But Lean Bear wouldn't leave him alone. He struck him and shook him, then flung his arms about him, and wrestled to hoist him first to his knees and then to his feet. Then, with his arms clasped around the senseless trooper's waist, he pushed him along, forced him to move.

"'Walk!' he shouted. 'You hear? Yes, now you walk. Walk! Walk—so! Yes, yes. Ah, you white man!' And again he began to strike and thump with one hand, while with the other he supported the corporal's tottering body."

Sergeant Silk paused and pulled once or twice at his unlighted pipe.

[Pg 206] "That was the only way to keep him awake," interposed Dan Medlicott. "He'd have been dead, sure, if he'd fallen asleep."

Sergeant Silk nodded.

"Why, cert'nly," he agreed. "That Indian knew what to do. But it seemed to Pretty John that all the torture he was enduring—the stinging lash of the icy snow, the choking up of his mouth and nostrils, the numbness of his limbs, and the blows that were showered upon him—were all the malicious work of the criminal savage he had tracked and was taking to prison. He hadn't the sense to realise that Lean Bear was only battling with him to keep him awake—alive.

"How long that battle in the blizzard lasted only the Indian could tell. Corporal Pretty John didn't know. He knew nothing—nothing until he was aware that a thousand needle stabs were stinging his body, and that the slow tingling blood was struggling to circulate in his numbed and frozen limbs.

[Pg 207] "There was a burning sensation across his tongue and throat. He opened his snow-blinded eyes. All around him was dark. But snow-blind men can see in the darkness, and he discovered that he was lying on his back in a room where a fire was flickering.

"There was a crowd of men around him—white men. One of them knelt at his side, supporting his head in the crook of an arm that had a red sleeve bearing a sergeant's triple chevron. He was forcing the neck of a flask between the Corporal's teeth.

"'Yes, yes, Lean Bear,' he was saying. 'We know that you're a heathen murderer. You shall be brought to justice, never fear—white man's justice. You shall get your deserts. But there's a little account on the credit side, too, and—say, don't stand there shivering like that! Make yourself comfortable by the fire. Eat, smoke, drink. Do what you jolly well please, you plucky son of a noble savage. And when I've done what I'm doing, blame me if I don't shake you by the hand.'

[Pg 208] "'Wough!' grunted Lean Bear, shuffling towards the stove, where he stood for a while warming himself. Then he turned and saw Corporal Pretty John's heavy, bleared eyes fixed upon him. '*How!*' he said in greeting as if they hadn't seen each other for months. 'Yes, it is so. Now you sleep—sleep long, sleep well. In the blizzard to sleep is to die. Here, to sleep is to live. It is good. Yes. And Lean Bear is not sorry.'"

Dan Medlicott watched Sergeant Silk striking a match and shielding it with his hand as he held it to his pipe and puffed the ragged smoke into the wintry air.

"Say, Sergeant," he said, "you were sure right when you said that any other trooper would have let Lean Bear escape last week. Any one would, knowing what he'd done for you that time."

Sergeant Silk's pipe glowed very bright.

"For me?" he smiled, looking up.

"Why, yes," returned Dan, standing in front of him. "There never was any Corporal Pretty John in the Force. You just gave yourself that fancy name to put me off the scent, and the yarn has been about yourself all the time."

CHAPTER XV

THE GREAT JAM AT STONE PINE RAPIDS

Every one who saw it declared that it was the pluckiest thing that Sergeant Silk had ever done. He himself did not consider it an extraordinary thing to do. But, then, a man is seldom the best judge of his own bravery.

The incident occurred at the logging camp at Stone Pine Rapids, where some hundreds of men—lumber-jacks, hook-tenders, buckers, and snipers—were engaged in the work of driving an immense procession of forest logs down the stream.

The camp was at a sharp bend of the river, and the rafts had become hopelessly jammed. They had been jammed for the best part of a week, and crowds of river men had gathered from far and near to give help in the difficult task of dislodging the obstinate barrier of floating timber that filled and choked the narrow throat of the waterway.

There was a lot of drinking, gambling, and quarrelling going on, and Sergeant Silk had come along in the interests of law and order.

The mere presence of a member of the North-West Mounted Police, with his conspicuous red tunic and his bandolier of brightly-polished cartridges, had almost a magical effect in preserving peace. His duties were light, and he went about the thronged encampment as a friendly and welcome visitor rather than as a stern and dreaded representative of the law.

So little had he expected to be called upon to exercise his authority that he had brought young Percy Rapson as his companion—Percy Rapson, the aristocratic English boy, who had been sent out to Canada to learn farming on Rattlesnake Ranch, and who had now sought variety from his tuition in agriculture by accompanying his friend on an easy patrol to witness the wonders of a great logging camp at work.

On the second morning of their arrival at Stone Pine they had left their mounts in stable and strolled down to the waterside to see if the workers had yet located the key logs, which held the vast mass of floating timber locked in the bend of the river.

To Percy Rapson the sight had all the interest of novelty, and he lingered, watching, in the hope of seeing the jam break loose. The breast of the barrier of logs rose to a height of some thirty feet above the water's level, in a confused pile. The giant tree trunks, flung into a hopeless tangle, were becoming with every hour more tightly crushed by the mighty pressure of the crowded logs in the rear.

As far back as the eye could see the surface of the river was hidden under its brown pavement of drifting timber.

On the great jam itself men were at work with their peavies industriously picking at the huge logs, heaving and rolling them downward into the rapids beyond, where they might be caught and swept away by the current.

But the key logs, which held the main pile plugged in its position, had not yet been found, and even an occasional charge of dynamite had so far failed to stir the barrier.

Percy had been so absorbed in watching the preparation of a new charge of dynamite that he had not noticed that Sergeant Silk had left his side. He went in search of him, and found him seated astride one of the logs that were stranded on the river bank in front of the camp.

The boy went up to him, and, looking over his shoulder, saw, to his surprise, that the soldier policeman was engaged in making a crude pencil sketch of a Canadian canoe poised perilously on the brink of a cataract.

"My hat, Sergeant!" Percy exclaimed. "I never suspected you of havin' any pretensions to bein' an artist!"

Silk held the slip of paper at arm's length in front of him, contemplating his handiwork.

"I don't pretend to be anything of the sort," he denied. He closed one eye and regarded the drawing critically. "There's something plumb wrong about that boat," he objected. "'Tisn't natural, somehow. Looks heaps more like a general's cocked hat than a canoe!"

He turned half round to a man who stood near him against the log, busily trimming an oil lamp.

"Say, Sharrow," he said, "you're a river man. You know a thing or two about river craft. Tell us what's wrong with this Indian canoe that I've been trying to draw."

Eben Sharrow took the drawing that was handed to him and held it in his very dirty fingers. He shook his head.

"I don't just know," he answered. "Seems ter me as it's all of it wrong—wrong from start to finish. Thar' ain't anythin' right about it. I've seen kids in school doin' better pictures than that on their slates."

"Ah!" Sergeant Silk took the paper back. "I guessed you'd say something like that. I was always a lame hand at fancy work. Every man to his trade, eh? We can none of us do everything."

[Pg 214] He folded the paper very slowly and precisely, as if it were of value. His boy companion noticed that as he did so he was paying curious regard to the greasy black finger marks which Eben Sharrow had left upon the clean, white surface.

Sharrow presently took up his lamp and strode away in the direction of one of the camp fires, around which a group of lumber-men stood or sat drying their wet clothes.

Percy Rapson watched the man walking awkwardly up the slope in his spiked boots.

"Sergeant?" he said.

"Well?"

"Why did you show your sketch to that lumber-jack? I'm sure you don't care a brass farthing for his opinion. And why are you so precious careful of the drawing, folding it so neatly and stowing it away in your pocket-book, as if it were a bank-note? It isn't worth preservin'."

Sergeant Silk slipped down from his perch on the log.

[Pg 215] "That's so," he said. "It isn't worth preserving. But you may have noticed that I never throw bits of paper away. They make any place look so untidy."

Percy was thoughtfully silent for a while, but at length, when Silk turned to stroll up towards the camp, he said abruptly—

"I think I can guess what you did it for. It was a jolly 'cute trick of yours."

"A trick?"

"Yes," pursued Percy. "You made that drawing and invited Sharrow's criticism of it simply and solely to get him to take hold of a piece of white paper and leave his dirty finger marks on it. I believe you want to identify him with some chap who left finger-prints somewhere else. I've heard of that method of identification. It's said to be a dead sure way of telling one man from another."

"Yet I should say it is rather an uncertain method for any but experts to follow," the sergeant observed. "I shouldn't care to trust to it myself. Certainly I shouldn't venture to accuse any man of a serious crime on such flimsy evidence as a finger mark."

[Pg 216] Rapson glanced at him curiously.

"That chap Ebenezer Sharrow doesn't look as if he could be guilty of committin' a serious crime," he ventured. "And yet I suppose you are here on his track."

"I did not say so," Silk returned sharply, reprovingly. "You appear to think that because I'm a policeman I must always be on some poor fellow's trail, hunting him down. Sharrow was personally a stranger to me until last night, when I met him for the first time in the bunkhouse."

"Then why did you go out of your way to get hold of his finger-print?" Percy insisted. "You never do anything without a reason."

Sergeant Silk did not answer him. Perhaps they were too near to the men about the drying fire for him to enter into explanations without risk of being overheard. Perhaps he had reasons for not wishing to explain.

[Pg 217] He led the way into the circle and stood there, quietly rolling a cigarette while he casually glanced round at the men. They were all of the ordinary type of lumber-jack—grim-featured, keen-eyed, weather-beaten.

All wore thick woollen trousers stuffed into the tops of their knee boots, and their boots were furnished with formidable spikes to enable them to get secure foothold on the floating logs upon which they worked.

In their perilous climbing about the jammed tree trunks many of them had got wet through, and as they sat within the warmth of the fire the steam from their drying clothes mingled with the smoke from their tobacco pipes.

"Say, we was just talkin' 'bout you, Sergeant," said one of them as Silk bent over and took up a flaming twig.

"Indeed?" nodded the officer, puffing thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"Yep," went on the spokesman. "Andy O'Reilly thar' was kinder relievin' hisself of the opinion as

you boys of the Mounted P'lice have got a whole lot too much power in your hands."

Sergeant Silk looked across at the man indicated.

[Pg 218] "Y'see," said Andy O'Reilly, "you kin do pretty nigh anythin', an' you kin do it without waitin' for orders. Nobody durst hinder you. You kin enter any house you like, an' search it through an' through. You kin apprehend a man without a warrant. You've even got authority to kill. You've got all the power of the Russian secret police."

"Exactly," Silk acknowledged, seating himself on one of the logs and making room beside him for Percy Rapson. "I don't deny we have a very considerable amount of power, one way and another. But I guess, after all, it's for the ultimate good of the community. It's all in the interests of public security. What?"

"Just my argyment," declared the first speaker, rescuing a flagon of tea from the edge of the fire. "An' them as complains, they dunno what they're talkin' about. They'd have cause ter grumble supposin' that power was abused—if ever the wrong man was arrested or if the guilty one was ever allowed ter escape."

[Pg 219] "As to that," rejoined Silk, "we are all liable to make mistakes. I have known a case or two of wrongful arrest, and I won't say that we have invariably succeeded in bringing criminals to justice. Some of them have escaped."

"Yes," resumed O'Reilly, "thar's no denyin' as some of 'em escape. With all your power and cleverness, you've let a-many of 'em slip through your fingers. Thar's was the business of Lost Horse Meadow was never cleared up. Thar's was the post-office robbery at Coyote Landing, which is still a mystery. And, say, wasn't it yourself that had that same job in hand? I kinder recollect hearin' your name mentioned."

"That is so," Sergeant Silk signified. "It happened two winters ago, and, as you say, it is still a mystery, and likely to remain one."

"Don't know as I ever heard tell of that story," said the man who had spoken first, pouring some hot tea into a gallipot. His name was Bob Wilson. He was foreman of a gang of lumber-jacks.

[Pg 220] Percy Rapson noticed that Sergeant Silk again glanced slowly round the circle of fire-lit faces, and that his gaze lingered with curious, furtive scrutiny upon the face of Eben Sharrow.

[Pg 221]

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN THAT THE WOLVES SPARED

"Won't you tell us about it, Sergeant?" Percy urged.

Silk puffed for a few moments at his cigarette.

"There isn't a great deal to tell," he responded quietly. He leant forward, resting an elbow on his knees.

"Yes," he began, "I was in charge of the case, and I failed to make an arrest. But, you see, I didn't arrive on the scene until a longish while after the thing had happened, and the culprit had got off, leaving no clue that could be of the slightest value in following him up.

[Pg 222] "I was at the depot at Soldier's Knee, alone, as it happened, except for my chum, Dave Stoddart, who was asleep in his bunk. It was a bitterly cold winter's night outside, with a wild wind blowing out of the north and whistling weirdly in the pine trees round about the old timber-built shack that served as a police station. But inside it was warm enough. I had kept a good fire burning in the stove, and I sat in front of it, reading by the light of the hanging lamp.

"There wasn't any great need for me to keep awake, and, as I'd been out on a long patrol during the day and was weary, I began to nod over the book. You see, it wasn't very interesting, and I'd read it before—knew it almost by heart. But, for all that, I didn't want to fall asleep, and there was one thing that kept me awake, even if the book failed.

"On the previous night we'd been disturbed by the yapping of a pack of hungry wolves that were nosing around the end of the shanty, where we kept our store of cariboo hams and other grub, and on this particular night of which I'm telling you I was waiting and listening, expecting those

wolves to pay us another visit. But they didn't seem to be in any hurry.

[Pg 223] "It was just about midnight when they came sniffing around. Through the little window I could see their dark shapes moving to and fro in the moonlight. One of them was bold enough to come up and look in at me with its staring, glistening green eyes, and I was about to open the loophole and fire a shot at him when from behind me there sounded the tinkling of the telephone bell.

"There was something of a command about the summons. It was unusual for us to be rung up at that time of night. I wondered what was up. I went to the instrument and took hold of the receiver.

"Yes," I called. "Who's there? I'm Sergeant Silk, at Soldier's Knee. Who are you?"

"The answer came in a strained, broken voice of agitation, beginning in an eager whisper that I could barely hear amid the sighing of the wind and the howling of the wolves, and ending on the last word in a positive scream of bodily distress and pain—

"Coyote Landing—post office—quick! Send help! There's a chap in here robbing the mail bags. Listen! Do you hear? Quick! Help! Oh, help!"

[Pg 224] Sergeant Silk paused to light a new cigarette. His listeners drew nearer to him—all of them but Eben Sharrow, who seemed to be having some trouble in cleaning out his pipe.

"That was all that he said," Silk resumed—"all the words that I could hear. But I knew his voice. It was the voice of Will Bonner, the postal agent at Coyote Landing, and he had said enough to let me know that it wasn't only the mails that were in danger. There was an awful, choking sound, followed by a piercing cry of agony. And then all was suddenly silent. Try how I would, I couldn't get another word from that telephone."

"Perhaps the instrument was broken," interrupted Percy Rapson.

"Exactly," Silk nodded. "The wires had been cut, as I found when I got there."

"Then you went?" inquired Percy. "You went, although you knew it must be too late?"

[Pg 225] "Why, cert'nly. I went right at once, leaving Dave Stoddart in charge, with his gun handy to keep off the wolves. But the wolves gave him no trouble, as it happened. They didn't hang around trying to get at pickled cariboo hams when there was a chance of their downing a live horse and an equally live human."

"Say, I guess those wolves follered on your trail," interposed Bob Wilson, blowing audibly into his pot of hot tea.

"Guess they just did," smiled Sergeant Silk. "Some of them followed me all the way, right over the mountain trail, a matter of twelve rough, lonesome miles. Others of them kind of broke off. They got lamed or maimed. There was a good many pistol bullets flying around, see? My bandolier was pretty well empty by the time I came in sight of the station at Coyote Landing."

Percy Rapson touched him on the knee and invited him to give fuller details of that exciting chase over the moonlit mountains. Percy was always curiously interested in stories of wolves. But Sergeant Silk shook his head and kept to the main thread of his story.

[Pg 226] "The shack was in darkness when I rode up to it," he went on. "But the door was wide open, and there was still a smoulder of fire in the stove. There was a smell of burnt paper. In the middle of the floor a bag of mails had been emptied, and some of the letters and news-sheets were charred, showing that the robber, whoever he was, had tried to set fire to the place, and so destroy the signs of what he had done.

"But he hadn't waited to complete his work. I guess he was anxious to quit with the registered letters that he had taken from the safe. And then there was the other thing that he must sure have wanted to shut out from his sight. It wasn't pretty. There were red stains everywhere, and beyond the pile of scattered papers lay poor little Will Bonner, with the broken telephone receiver still gripped in his lifeless fist, while his glassy, half-closed eyes seemed to be staring out at the moon."

Sergeant Silk paused once more to puff at his cigarette.

[Pg 227] "Do you mean he was dead?" questioned Percy Rapson, looking aside into the sergeant's handsome face.

"Exactly," resumed Silk. "You see, he was a weak little man, and he hadn't been able to defend himself against a desperate thief, who didn't care what he did so long as he got the particular registered letter that he was after. And Will was a peaceable, timid little chap at all times. He might have defended himself all right if he'd only remembered the loaded revolver that he kept for such occasions in his desk; but I guess he clean forgot it when the emergency came, and I question if he'd ever pulled a trigger in all his innocent life."

"Ah!" broke in Bob Wilson. "And what about the chap as done it, Sergeant? He couldn't have got so very far away by the time you came on the scene, and yet you never got on his trail, never found out who he was?"

Sergeant Silk shook his head.

"I have told you that he left no clue that was worth following up," he answered. "The ground was frozen hard, and he made no track. In a lonesome place like that, where there was no one to see him come or go, it was easy for him to disappear."

It was Percy Rapson who made the next remark.

"I should have thought he'd at least have left his finger marks on some of those papers," he said, and he glanced in the direction of Eben Sharrow, who, having at last cleaned out his pipe, was slowly loading it with tobacco. "That was a case in which finger-prints might have been useful."

Sergeant Silk's eyebrows gathered for an instant in a frown of vexation at this reference to finger-prints.

"Quite so," he said. "If one had had any suspicion against any particular person and could have examined his hand, it would have been a means of proving or disproving his connection with the crime."

Percy Rapson's eyes were still lingering curiously upon Eben Sharrow, who now bent forward to get a light from the fire. As he held the light to his pipe, Sharrow looked across at Sergeant Silk.

"Seems ter me," he said, rising to his feet, "as I kinder recollect hearin' as that skunk you're talkin' about—him as you never could find trace of—was eaten by a pack of timber wolves. 'Tain't any wonder you couldn't arrest him."

Silk dropped his cigarette and crushed it under his foot.

"Exactly," he nodded. "Such a rumour got abroad. But it was only a rumour, circulated by the express rider, who carried on what was saved of the mails. On the morning after the crime, as he rode out with me from Coyote Landing, he came upon a patch of blood-stained grass, torn about by the feet of many wolves. It certainly seemed as if the robber had, as you say, been eaten up by the hungry pack, for near by there were also found some fragments of the envelope of a registered letter. But it was curious that the wolves hadn't left even a button or a boot or some shreds of clothing that would show that their victim had been human; whereas, as it happened, I had myself shot a wolf on that very same spot, and I needn't remind you of the habit that hungry wolves have of devouring their own kind. As for the fragments of paper—the bits of torn envelope—there was sure evidence that they had been hidden where they were found a good two hours before the wolves came along at the heels of my mare."

"So?" Sharrow coughed, as if the smoke of his pipe had gone the wrong way. He turned from the fire and strode down the slope of the river bank.

Sergeant Silk, watching the direction in which he went, stood up, and touched young Rapson on the shoulder.

"If you're hankering to see the firing of that charge of dynamite they were fixing, Percy," he said casually, "we may as well get along as soon as we've been to the stables to give our mounts a feed. It'll be a sight worth seeing when that jam pulls, I can promise you, and it's likely to pull at any time."

Percy accompanied him to the water's edge, and they took up their position among the eager crowd of watchers.

The jam appeared to be upon the point of breaking without the further help of dynamite, and a new crew of drivers were at work clamping their peavies to the stubborn timbers and moving them one by one in the endeavour to get at the key logs, which had at last been found.

Already certain ominous groanings and grumblings were coming from the heart of the vast, tangled pile, and the great tree trunks were beginning to move of themselves before the pressure of the mass from behind.

Soon, when the obstructing key logs should yield, the whole bulk would plunge forward, to be swept along by the current like a wild stampede of giant animals suddenly let loose, tumbling over one another and fighting desperately for room in the onward rush.

Warning shouts from the onlookers told the lumber-jacks of their peril, and the men hastened to the banks, holding their peavies in front of them as balancing poles, and stepping smartly from log to log, keeping a secure foothold by means of the long spikes in the soles of their boots.

"See!" cried Percy Rapson excitedly, as the pile began to collapse. "The whole thing's moving now!"

It seemed, indeed, that the entire jam had started, but the watchers presently realised that it was only a section that had broken off. This section drifted downward for a distance of a hundred feet or so, and then came to a sudden stop, plugged just as tightly as it had been before, and leaving an open space of water, in which several loose tree trunks floated, just opposite to where Sergeant Silk and Percy Rapson stood with the watching crowd.

Suddenly Silk ran forward to the water's edge. He had seen that one of the lumber-men had fallen into the stream, and was clinging to one of the floating logs, struggling desperately to get a leg across it.

"Hey!" cried the sergeant at the top of his voice. "Make for the bank! Swim ashore, quick! That

back section's moving!"

Even as he shouted there was an ominously loud crunching, rumbling sound of grinding timbers, and the back section of the jam began to break away.

[Pg 233] Every one near saw and understood the man's terrible peril. He was caught between the two sections, and one of them was moving steadily towards him to crush him out of life.

"Who is it?" questioned Bob Wilson. "How'd he git thar'?"

"Fell in," answered Andy O'Reilly. "It's Eben Sharrow, and, say, he can't swim a stroke. Guess he's sure done for."

"Sure," nodded Wilson. "Ain't got a ghost of a chance. Best not look. Come away!"

He caught at Percy Rapson's sleeve to draw him from the sight. But Percy stood firm with his eyes staring wildly at Sergeant Silk.

"Silk! Silk! Come back!" the boy shouted. "You can't do it!"

Whether he heard or not, Silk did not heed the cry. He had thrown off his hat and belt and had plunged into the narrowing stretch of water. With a swift, strong side stroke he was swimming out to the man's rescue.

[Pg 234] Narrower and narrower grew the stretch of broken water between the closing walls of giant logs; but quicker still did the space lessen between the swimming red-coated policeman and the man he sought to rescue from a certain terrible death.

When he reached him at last the voices of the river men broke into a cheer.

But Percy Rapson was too agitated to open his lips. With his body bent forward and his eyes staring wide, he watched and watched.

He saw Sergeant Silk catch hold of the man's right leg and raise it upward out of the water, flinging it over the thick, floating log, then push him bodily upward until he lay flat along the spar. Leaving him so, Silk then worked his way hand over hand to the log's far end, and hoisted himself upon it as he might have mounted his horse.

Already the oncoming stack of timber, driving the waves in front of it, was forcing the log forward, and the gap was hardly more than a score of feet in width.

[Pg 235] The watchers held their breath, anticipating the moment of contact when the colliding walls should topple over and the two men be caught and crushed out of existence.

Eben Sharrow rose to his feet, and, aided by his spiked boots, walked along the unsteady baulk of timber and seized hold of Silk's uplifted hand, raising him cautiously until they stood side by side. The lumber-man was then seen to be pointing here and there to the face of the jam that they were approaching.

"That's right; that's right," muttered Bob Wilson. "They c'n do it just thar', I reckon. Eben knows. They're sure safe now, if they jump quick."

For many moments of thrilling suspense the two men were hidden from sight between the dark brown walls of groaning, splintering logs. But presently Sergeant Silk's red tunic appeared like a flash of vivid light as he leapt from point to point, scaling the perilous face of the writhing pile of logs, followed by the man he had saved.

[Pg 236] Silk's face was grim and pale, and he was breathing deeply when he strode along the bank in his dripping clothes, and he only nodded when Percy Rapson ran up to him with his hat and belt.

Half-an-hour later he was seated on a log in front of the fire, wrapped in his blanket and overcoat and sipping from a bowl of hot pemmican soup, while he watched Percy holding his steaming tunic to the warmth. On his knees lay his watch, his tobacco pouch, his pocket-book, and other possessions which he had taken from the pouches of his saturated clothes.

"Yes," he was saying. "That's the worst of getting into the water. It makes you so wet, and turns everything so messy. My 'bacca's all spoilt. Watch is stopped, too. First time it has stopped ticking for a couple of years."

"It would have been heaps worse if you yourself had stopped," declared Percy, without looking round. "You ran a frightful risk. And all for the sake of a worthless lumber-jack."

[Pg 237] "No man's life is worthless, Percy," Silk said reprovingly, putting aside the soup bowl and taking up his pocket-book and opening it. "Snakes!" he exclaimed. "The people who sold me this pocket-book swore it was waterproof, and it's nothing of the kind! The papers are all wet."

"I hope that sketch of the canoe isn't spoilt," said Percy. "I should like you to give it me as a memento. May I have it?"

He glanced round now, and saw that Silk had spread out the drawing upon his knee, together with a fragment of white paper, which looked like the corner torn from an envelope, upon which there was a dull red stain.

"May you have it?" Silk smiled, folding the sketch and handing it to him. "Why, cert'nly. You're

welcome to it. It has served its purpose."

Percy looked at him sharply. There was an expression of curious satisfaction in the Sergeant's clear blue eyes.

"Do you mean—?" he began, but checked himself.

[Pg 238] He had not known, had not noticed, that the man Eben Sharrow had crept into the warmth of the fire; but he saw him now, kneeling near and holding his trembling hands to the flames.

"Say, my man, there's a mouthful of soup in that bowl," said Silk. "You may as well take it."

Sharrow shook his head.

"I've had some," he responded, his teeth chattering. "Thank you all the same."

He said no word of what Sergeant Silk had done for him, but lapsed into sullen silence, the while he crouched shivering beside the fire. But presently he roused himself and moved half round, facing his rescuer.

"Sergeant?" he said.

"Well?" returned Silk.

Sharrow hesitated awkwardly, then spoke.

"You was plumb right when you guessed as that skunk wasn't took by the wolves," he said; "plumb right, you was. Wolves never was near him. He vamoosed. He escaped. He's alive even now. Did you know?"

Silk slowly gathered the things from his knees.

[Pg 239] "Yes, I knew," he answered quietly. "I know now—to-day—that he is here in this camp."

"An' you just saved his life," added Sharrow. "Saved it at the risk of your own?"

"It was risky," Silk nodded; "decidedly risky."

"It was brave," declared Sharrow. "Real gold brave. And now," he added, "I just reckon you're figgerin' ter do your duty right away, an' hale that thar' low-down, good-fer-nothin' skunk off ter prison—an' wuss?"

Sergeant Silk looked at the man very steadily.

"Why, cert'nly," he answered. "Duty is duty."

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Transcriber's Note.

Minor punctuation errors were corrected.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SERGEANT SILK, THE PRAIRIE SCOUT ***

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