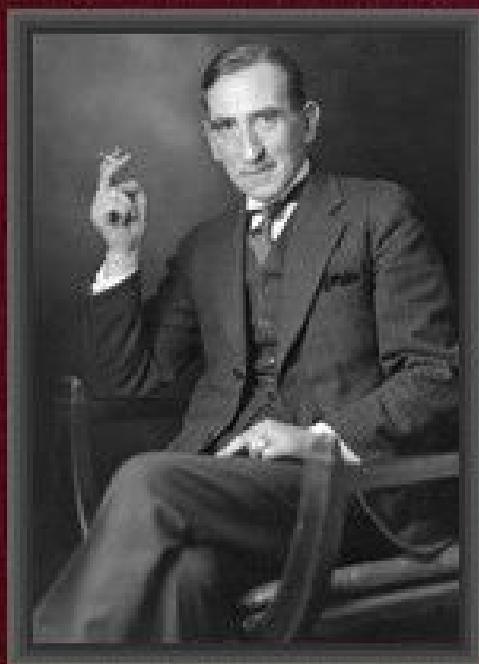


TREASURE TRAIL

BY
FREDERICK NIVEN



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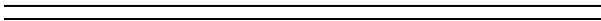
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....There was a long pause. The horses jogged on. Rounding on the herd, we turned southward.

“He did ‘get it’ finally, you say,” I prompted.

“He certainly did,” said Bunt, “and the story of it is what a man with a imaginary mind like you ought to make into one of your friction tales.”

“Is it about a treasure?” I asked with apprehension. For ever since I once made a tale (of fiction) out of one of Bunt’s stories of real life, he has been ambitious for me to write another, and is forever suggesting motifs which invariably ... I say invariably ... imply the discovery of great treasures. With him, fictitious literature must always turn upon the discovery of hidden wealth....

From: *The Passing of
Cock-eye Blacklock*
by Frank Norris.

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TREASURE TRAIL

CHAPTER ONE

“SPACAMINTS”

POSSIBILITIES of quaint histories seem to lurk in the names of many of our Western mines. For example: the *Crazy Jane*, the *Tip and Run*, the *Seven-up*, the *Good-enough*. These names arouse our curiosity; we wish to know why they are so called. The *Surprise Packet* is obvious; the *Eureka* is stereotyped. The *This Is It!*—what about the *This Is It!*? It was sold the other day by its original owners to the Columbia and Oregon River Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company for two hundred thousand dollars. Some price! Some price in these days when the lease to “try out” a property is much more usual than a big figure for an outright purchase. But that is a financial side issue you may have seen in the stocks and shares columns of your daily paper, or in the *Miner and Prospector* if you subscribe to it. “The play’s the thing,” said a character in Shakespeare. Here the story is the thing, more than the bald dollar transaction; for this, in fact, is the story of the *This Is It!*

And to begin:

A mile north of Colvalli, Washington, an elderly man sat whittling a stick on his veranda, a black spaniel dog between his feet catching fleas. A parrot, in a large wicker cage hanging from the projecting roof, now and then called in a falsetto voice: “Miggles! Miggles!” paused, and then: “Marr-r-garet! Whaur are ye?” it enquired.

This parrot the man, Scotty by name, Scot by nature, had brought from Ecuador, where he had prospected and found, and sold, a mine. The dog, Darkie by name, and darkie by hue, he had brought from West Australia where he had once dry-blown the sand for “colour.” But neither the land of Ecuador nor West Australia inveigled him. It sufficed him that he had seen them. This, where he was, was “God’s Country” to him. Yet he sat and crooned in a poignant tone:

“...oh! but I’m longing for my ain folk,
Though they be but lowly, puir, and plain folk:
I am far beyond the sea,
But my heart will ever be
At hame in dear auld Scotland, wi’ my ain folk!”

whom he had not seen for close on forty years.

“Did you call, father?” came a girl’s voice, following the tip-tap of her heels, and Margaret MacPherson stood in the doorway.

“It was the birrd!” said her father, Angus.

Then they both looked to north and saw a cloud of dust rising on the wagon-road that came winding toward them out of British Columbia, and twisted on south into Oregon, Nevada, California. Quick-stepping, bringing the cloud of dust nearer and making it seem to increase in volume, came a string of horses, in good condition. Ahead of the string was a large, heavy rider in big Stetson hat, scarfed and chapped. To rear was another man, a feather-weight, riding with his scarf over his mouth.

“Jock has the best o’t,” said Angus MacPherson. “He is ahead of the dust. Puir Piccolo in the rear maun be near

chocking.”

“Why do you speak such broad Scots, father?” asked Margaret, laughing.

“It’s the mood of the moment,” her father answered. “In another mood I might remark” (his voice altered): “Say, Jack Tremaine is sure on velvet in the van; and if Piccolo ain’t hittin’ the grit at the tail-end of that there string of cayuses you can call me a bull-frog!” and then he crooned softly again:

“Though they be but lowly, puir, and plain folk:
I am far beyond the sea,
But my heart will ever be
At hame in dear auld Scotland, wi’ my ain folk!”

and whittled his stick.

“Where have they been, I wonder,” said Margaret. “I haven’t seen them around for a long time.”

“Didn’t you hear? They got a move on at last, as soon as the snow went, to go and see where that bunch of their horses had strayed to. They must have strayed a long way to judge by the time they’ve been gone searching for them.”

“Oh, but I’m longing for my ain folk,” remarked the parrot.

“Quit, quit!” Angus addressed it. “Cut that out. Forget it. This is God’s Country, where things happen. You’ll make me homesick, give me what they call nostalgia! We’ve quit that mood, Ecuador.”

“Search me!” said the parrot inconsequentially.

“That’s better,” muttered Angus.

The horses, making dusty procession across the near landscape, changed from quick-step to lope, and Jack Tremaine, in the lead, let them lope on, reined in and turned aside till the rider called Piccolo was level with him. There they sat in their high saddles, silhouetted against that dropping whirl of dust; and Margaret and Angus MacPherson looked at them as at figures in a play. Piccolo drew down the scarf from his mouth and expectorated in the way a man does after such employ. Then the riders saw them and waved their hats.

“How is it stacking up?” hailed the old Scot.

“Fine and dandy!” came Tremaine’s stentorian voice; and a little faint sound, like the bleat of a lamb in spring, the shouting voice of Piccolo (whose speaking voice, at times, was not unlike that of a finch up a tree) wavered to them:

“Fine and dandy!”

They rode aside to MacPherson’s house and dismounted, hats off to Margaret.

“Give them a drop of that buttermilk to clear the dust, Mauggie dear, Miggles I mean,” said Angus. “Hitch and ascend,” he added to the two men.

“We’ll carry a heap of dust on to your porch,” said Jack.

“Well, I can wash it for colour,” replied Angus lightly.

They sat down, and then Piccolo, the Welshman of the high voice (Piccolo, of course, was not his name but his soubriquet because of that voice. David Thomas was his name), said, or shrilled:

“It’s good to be home!”

“I guess,” said Angus. “I see your horses think so by the way they hit the grit once they knew they were near.”

“Gee,” said Jack, “some hunt they’ve given us.”

“Gone far?” enquired Angus.

“You betchar life,” said Tremaine. “They had kept moving north these two years. That big fire on the lower Monashee range three years ago cleared off the timber. They evidently just kept on a-going. The way the fire ran directed their course. Up north further it had gone toward the tops of the hills and left the valleys, so they just continued on, mounting up and straying from one grass pocket to another. Say, it’s a peculiar formation away up on the tops of these lower Monashees. To look up you’d think there was timber all along the crests; but there ain’t a crest. It is rolling land on top, grass turned to hay, meadows, water pools and rock-slides fanning into them from the higher peaks. Guess the horses wintered in the valleys where the forest had been cleaned out and grass grew, then moved on, following the snow, to these upland meadows. They wouldn’t even have to come down every two days for water, the way they do in some places, or as you see them do in dry-belts. Thank you, miss. This here buttermilk is sure a delectable beverage. There is a whole raft of good reasons to be brought forward for running a milch cow pasture.”

“Have you been far?” asked Margaret.

“Today?”

“No. The whole trip.”

“Oh, I guess eighty miles north of the Boundary in an air line and maybe a hundred and eighty by the windings of the trail.”

Piccolo, who was nervous or shy, sat dusting himself down with his hat, but was not satisfied that he was even then fit to sit there. So he rose, and walking to the veranda’s end drew

off his chaps and hung them over the rail there. Returning to his chair he left his partner to talk social talk to Margaret and just sipped his thick buttermilk. His throat was full of dust. He murmured: "Pardon me!" and went again to the extreme end of the veranda to expectorate. Once more he came back and sat down and commenced to clear out a pocket.

It was the right-hand pocket of his coat. He took out the contents carefully, put them into the left-hand pocket, and then shook the right pocket inside-out over the porch edge. Jack Tremaine cast occasional glances toward him wondering why he thus busied himself; Margaret looked in the direction of these slightly twinkling glances of Jack's, but paid no further heed to Piccolo; Angus absently surveyed him. Then suddenly his eyes were focussed keenly on the queer shy man. There was more than dust shaken from that pocket. There was a shower of little stones that woke the retired prospector up violently.

Said he: "What were you packing the rocks in your pocket for? Surely these splinters didn't sift in from the hoofs of your cavalcade?"

"If I'd fallen into the water at a ford we had to make up there I'd have sunk I guess," said Piccolo, and smiled. "And it would have been a cold sink too."

Angus laughed lightly. He wanted to ask about the little pieces of rock again and wondered how to do so without showing that he thought them of value. The old secrecy of the discoverer of precious ore was upon him. It was obvious to him that Piccolo Thomas had not the slightest surmise of the possibilities of these little stones.

But Angus did not require to ask any further questions, leading or direct, for Piccolo returned to the subject.

“These little stones,” said he, giving his pocket a final flip and putting it straight again. “That was a long way off. We wanted to save ammunition, you see, and we wanted supper, and there were fool-hens clucking all round us in the woods. We might have waited till dusk and sneaked up and smoked some down; or we might have watched where they roosted and just crept up easily and grabbed the legs of one or two, and yanked them down; but we were awful hungry. It was cold, too. The snow ain’t all gone even in some of the lower valleys, patches still laying there where there’s a shadowed side. We had appetites all right. So I just filled my pocket with stones and went crawling along through the bush and knocked over a couple of these fool-hens for our supper. I got as near as ten feet and let fly twice and knocked over two with the first two shies.”

“Are they thick up there, then?”

“You bet. Clucking in the bush all round you.”

“I must go after them some time,” said Angus.

“Oh, they ain’t so thick south where the hills drop down. That was away north after we’d found the last bunch of horses. Jack stayed around to hold them while I went after the fool-hens. We must have been an awful way north then. We could see a lake, and I guess it couldn’t be any other than Flat-Bow Lake.”

“The fool-hens are thick up there, eh?” said Angus; and had any astute person been listening he would have known that MacPherson had no interest in fool-hens whatever.

“You bet. Up a bit. Say, it’s beautiful there now. In another two months, when the snow’s all off, it must look wonderful. It’s wonderful enough at present.”

“Uh-hu!” said Angus.

“Well, Piccolo,” interjected Jack, “I guess we got to spraddle our horses and move on again. Thanks for the refreshment, Miss MacPherson.”

They rose. Piccolo scuttled to the veranda end and shyly drew on his chaps. They stepped from the porch, mounted, and with a sweep of their hats to Margaret wheeled away and rode off, trailing a dual pennon of dust.

Angus watched them till a roll of the plain hid them. Margaret had gone indoors. He rose and descended to the ground in front of the porch, only his dog and Ecuador watching him, and picked up a handful of the stones dropped by Piccolo when clearing out his pocket. He felt the weight of them, playing them up and down in his palm like a boy at the game called, in Auld Scotland, “chuckie-stanes.” Then he drew a long trembling breath and expelled it.

“So!” he said. “Eighty miles north of the Boundary by air-line and maybe a hundred and eighty as the land lies.”

“Search me! Search me!” whooped Ecuador—and startled Angus, so greatly lost was he in a consideration of the galena in his hand.

“These,” he murmured to himself, “are what the prospectors of these parts call ‘spacamints.’ ”

When he returned to his seat on the porch he was much like Shakespeare’s Launcelot Gobbo who sat discussing with himself pros and cons as if he were two distinct characters, or like Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde.

“One hundred and eighty miles north of the Boundary,” he mused, and also: “Are ye going to look for it yourself?”

“Among the open grass-land on the summit. Rock slides fan down into them,” he mused, and also: “Are ye going to

tell Piccolo what these splinters of rock look like to you?”

“It is vague, but close enough for an old prospector,” he mused, and also: “It would be a fair thing to tell Piccolo anyhow.”

“Morally it is Piccolo’s,” he told himself, and replied to himself: “It’s nothing of the kind. He doesn’t know what he picked up.”

“You will make good through his ignorance,” something in him whispered, and something else exclaimed: “Precisely!”

“Search me!” shrieked the parrot.

Then there followed a long time during which the conflicting voices were too low down in him, ever so tenuous, fogged, to follow. They just whispered away in his subconsciousness—or unconsciousness, almost, to toy with words of the psychoanalysts. But the argument must have been going on. It bubbled up loud in Angus’s “inward ear” again. He made a gesture of impatience that astonished the dog prone at his feet, nose on paws, staring at nothing before it. It looked up startled. Said Angus to it:

“Look here, Darkie, it is fair rideeculous to suggest that Piccolo has the slightest claim to this. He picked up these stones to throw at fool-hens. They are, in his estimation, not specimens of silver-galena at all—no, not in the slightest sense. They are missiles. ‘Are,’ do I say? His claim is smaller than that. They were missiles—were, mark you, past tense—for to throw at fool-hens. They served their purpose to him. He killed his supper and his partner’s. These are the little stones cast away in the discard. Ye would be a fool to imagine he had any claim.” He rubbed a hand over his face and round to the back of his neck. “If no’ a fool ye would be quixotic,” he amended.

Then he took snuff, as was his way when perturbed, and sneezed.

“Now that’s the way the cards lie on the table, Mr. Angus MacPherson,” said he. “There is no call upon ye to say a word to Piccolo; but, being a quixotic sort of body, ye are doubtless going to do so.”

He sat back, almost contented; but only for a moment. He was a complex Scot, and anon added:

“Ye are a fraud. The truth is that ye are doubtful if ye have sufficient indication for to find the whereabouts unaided by yon Piccolo. Ye are trying to make yourself out quixotic when ye are only canny. Your righteousness is but filthy rags, as the Book says. Well, the upshot of this is that, whatever the reasons and arguments, I have a hunch, as they say in this country, that I am going to tell Piccolo.”

Ecuador threw up his head, ruffled his feathers, and laughed like a demon. Then he cried: “Miggles! Miggles! Mar-r-garet, whaur are ye?”

From the door Margaret answered: “What do you want, Polly?”

She had been in the doorway, then, thought her father. For how long? Had she been there while he examined the stones? He was very fond of Margaret, but he had a view of her sex—that its members should not be told of anything till it was done. That view amounted almost to superstition.

“Hullo!” he said. “I didn’t hear ye. Been there long?”

“I came out just now while you were—what’s the word, dad?—havering to the dog.”

“Oh! Ye did, did ye?” said he.

It struck him as highly probable that he had been talking aloud. He knew that to be a habit common to prospectors who have lived much alone—but it pleased him to consider that Margaret thought he had only been “havering to the dog.” That was satisfactory.

CHAPTER TWO

PICCOLO'S LEFT-HAND POCKET

WHEN they had ridden well out of earshot Jack Tremaine dropped the lines to the horn and producing his pipe filled it with the last grains of his tobacco store and some shreds of birch bark to eke it out.

“Hospitable old son of a gun that Scotty,” said he. “I’d have asked him for a fill of my pipe but, as the saying goes, ‘avoid the very appearance of bumming.’ ”

“His Margaret is sure a beauty. I was up there one night when Movie Bill was showing the old man a collection of Indian arrowheads, and say—that was beauty and the beast all right,” said Piccolo.

“I guess,” agreed Tremaine, “Movie Bill is sure homely to look upon.”

“Homely!” piped Piccolo. “I wonder why they call him Movie Bill. Has he been mixed up with these flicker pictures?”

“Why, you Welsh innocent, don’t you know? Don’t you cotton to it, take a fall, see light, without asking?”

Piccolo opened wide his eyes and shook his head.

“It’s because he’s so tough-looking, man,” explained Tremaine. “He’d make the star bad man for the star movie outfit. Got that?”

“Well, how foolish of me!” said Piccolo.

He too had dropped the lines to the horn. When shaking the stones from his right-hand pocket he had put all its contents, as we know, into the left side pocket; and he began,

as he rode, to take inventory of what bulked him out so greatly to left. A jack-knife, an aluminum tobacco box, a pipe with dust in the bowl, a stub of pencil, grey with dirt. He held them in his hand and put them in the empty pocket to right. Then he delved again into the left pocket and rummaged.

Tremaine waved a hand in air and struck a match on his thumb-nail in an easy gesture.

“Benwell once said to me,” he remarked, “that he didn’t think Movie Bill was as tough as he looked. Guess he imagined I was kind of leery of him. I guess Benwell knows Mark Bantling’s record, and don’t think much of that man Greer that’s been hanging around there on and off, and something I said seemed to him aspersive of Movie Bill. Maybe he naturally wanted to dissipate this here suggestion that there were toughs around his house (though I don’t see how he could help it if there was, his being the only hotel in Colvalli), or maybe he surely believes in Movie himself. Anyhow he said to me that he wouldn’t be at all surprised if in below that there Movie Bill was a quixotic character.”

“What in thunder is that?” enquired Piccolo.

Tremaine had had to ask Benwell and took, & great pleasure now in informing Piccolo.

“He’s a fiction character, one of the greatest in all literatoor,” he said. “Don Quixote. He’s a man who does things for no commercial gain or ends, but only for the impracticable idee-lism of it.”

“Bugs!” said Piccolo.

“A bit that way, I guess. Bugs, and yet a darn fine man from the heels up.”

“And was he supposed to have a face like that?”

“Oh, he had one hell of a face, as long as yourself and as long as a jackass, as the saying goes.”

They were by that time near to the scattered houses of Colvalli, the road winding away to West and South. Some one hailed them from the Benwell House as they rode past. Across the short distance they could see a row of little figures in tilted chairs, heels on rail.

“Seems we’re home again,” said Piccolo. “Who hollered?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” answered Jack. “I’m going on. Tell them how-do for me if you want to stop.”

Far south a faint falling haze of dust indicated the horses ahead.

“I’ll just side-step, then,” said Piccolo. “I’ll catch you up.”

“Take care of yourself, you innocent Welshman, though I don’t see you can come to much harm.”

Tremaine rode on, and Piccolo turned aside to the scatter of houses called Colvalli—a general store, a drug store with a few magazines in the window, and a hardware store, each with a ringed hitching pole before it—for Colvalli is in the beginning of the rolling prairie country of Washington beyond the Rockies and before the Coast ranges.

“I see you got your horses,” said a man who has nothing to do with this story except that he was the boob, as one might say, who stopped Piccolo.

The fact was evident, the remark uncalled for. Piccolo did not know what to reply; so he said: “Oh yes, got our horses.”

“Well!” said the silly fellow.

Piccolo, absently clearing out his left-hand pocket, stared at him.

“Well,” he said genially.

Tremaine would have said, in response to the first remark: “You see them, don’t you?” and in response to the second: “How many wells would make a river?” But Piccolo was not that kind of man—with no aspersion on either. They were made a shade differently, that was all.

All the men on the Benwell House veranda were made a shade differently too. Some grinned at the fool, some at Piccolo, some at both. Some didn’t grin at all. Some paid no attention, or appeared to pay no attention.

Piccolo could take care of himself in an emergency, but he did not like “toughs,” and he was sorry he had drawn aside from the road, for on the veranda were two definite toughs, to wit Alfred Greer and Mark Bantling whom Tremaine had mentioned but a few minutes before. Of the latter it was common knowledge that he knew all about the menu in the penitentiary, and of the former that he ought to if he did not. And Mark had clearly had recent traffic with a bootlegger. He was in the condition known as “lit up.” He looked as if he was on the point of speaking to Piccolo; he had a grin of the kind a certain type of man shows when he thinks some one has come along who can be made a jest of.

But suddenly that look passed. He glanced down toward some fragments of rock that Piccolo, with almost a shy gesture, had flicked to the earth, foolishly clearing out that left-hand pocket.

At the veranda’s end, a little apart, sat, with a book in hand, surely the plainest man—to a superficial first gaze at any rate—that you ever clapped eyes on. He was a daring man to be reading a book when Mark was around; for Bantling, in that condition, was ready to haze men he thought weaklings; and he was also the kind of man to think reading

anything beyond a catalogue of six-guns a simpleton's employment. But the face of the man at the veranda's end was, whether a bluff or not, not a face to inveigle Mark, drunk or sober. He could even have read a book of poems, with a face like his, in security from Mark's joshing. He held the book with a finger in place and under his brows considered, not the boob who had sidetracked Piccolo, but Mark Bantling. Those deep-set grey eyes saw much. A lonely man he by reason of his features. He was plainer than the famous Cyrano de Bergerac—to a superficial consideration; though once, to be sure, in a pullman of the Great Northern spinning through Montana, when Frederic Remington got on at Glendive and saw that face, he produced his notebook and sketched surreptitiously. "Isn't it fierce?" asked his companion. "Fierce!" said Remington. "Why, that's character! Character! That's what he has. It's not a bad face. For myself, I'd trust myself in the last ditch with him but," and he laughed, "he'll remain a bachelor I expect."

Movie Bill, he of this interesting countenance, had noted Mark Bantling's smile. He felt perhaps more pity than contempt for Piccolo's shyness. If Mark should try to haze him he, Movie Bill, would act in that play. He might, or might not be a tough too; but whether he was or was not he felt a sense of antipathy to Mark Bantling, seeing him leer on the young man of the high voice. He was no self-analyst like Angus MacPherson. He did not ask himself whether dislike for Mark or pity for Piccolo the more moved him.

Then he saw a change of expression on Bantling's face. He saw him glance towards his partner, Greer. He saw the fragment of a nod Greer gave, subtle, tiny, little more than a

drop of eyelids; and he saw their eyes on the stones dusted from Piccolo's pocket.

"Been far?" asked Greer.

"Oh, quite a ways."

"Where did you get them?"

Somehow it came easier to Piccolo, thus cross-questioned (and inwardly just a hint annoyed at being cross-questioned), to repeat Jack Tremaine's way of telling of the distance of their journey than to give it counting the miles from Colvalli.

"In an air-line maybe eighty miles north—," he began.

"Gosh!" broke out Bantling, and so interrupted Pete's thin voice which was going on to say: "...of the Boundary."

"That ain't so darn far!" Bantling went on. "You were just a little way over the Boundary into B. C, I guess. Colvalli is about fifty miles south of it."

"I guess!" piped Piccolo.

That slight annoyance at having been called over for nothing and a little additional annoyance over interrogations by these men whom he had always avoided, made it a matter of moonshine to him, of no consequence whatever, that they had an erroneous impression of how far the bunch of horses had strayed. Then, his pony fidgeting, he took the advice of its impatience, flicked a line and rode on, back to the road and went lippety-lope away off after his partner, Jack Tremaine.

A bell rang indoors. The men came down from the tilt one by one. Chairs scraped, feet shuffled. They moved off to eat. Alfred Greer and Mark Bantling and Movie Bill alone remained, the latter with his finger still in his book, eyes shut now, legs extended, at ease.

The two toughs—more than alleged—looked at him. Then Mark took off his hat, tossed it spinning up in air, caught it, repeated that action once or twice till the hat fell over the veranda, then lurched down to retrieve it. As he stooped Movie Bill rose so as to be high enough to see what he did down there. And so he saw him pick up not only the hat, but as he stooped for the hat, pick up also a little bit of rock and slip it into his pocket.

When Bantling stood erect again Movie Bill was stretching his arms up in the air, extending his muscles, and with a yawn murmuring:

“Oh-hi-ho! Guess go eat.”

CHAPTER THREE

ANGUS DRIVES TO THE "T. T. RANCH"

THE bunch of returned horses was down in the home pasture. They were whinnying to their old fellows by the time Tremaine reached home. And by the time Piccolo got to the ranch-house Tremaine had let them all in.

It was good to be back, in Piccolo's eyes, to see again the foot breadth of water running along in the irrigation ditch. Even the stovepipe sticking up out of the roof it was good to see again! When he had hung his saddle on its peg he went indoors to find his partner filling his tobacco pouch at the big tin.

"A smoke, Pic, my lad," said Jack. "A smoke before anything. No more kinick-kinick muck."

Piccolo flung off his heavy coat and went out for cordwood to start the stove, and Tremaine smoked meditatively. He had something on his mind, but it was not till after supper that he spoke it, pushing back his plate.

"That old man Angus MacPherson is sure all prospector," said he.

"I guess he is. He's not so very old, Jack."

Puff-puff went Tremaine.

"You didn't notice the way he looked at the bits of stone you threw out of your pocket, Pic?"

"Stone?"

"Yes. When you were dusting out your pocket like a kind of a shy school kid under the eyes of his daughter."

"Oh, gwan!" said David Thomas.

“I guess there’s nothing in it,” said Tremaine, “and yet I don’t know. I’ll be turning into a writing sharp if I get imagining. But there seemed more than him just being bugs on looking at rocks. Got any more bits in your pocket?”

He stared at Piccolo. He frowned. He wondered what was the meaning of his partner’s expression. Really what Tremaine said had conjured back a picture into Piccolo’s mind, a picture hardly noted at the time. He remembered how Mark Bantling had watched him when he sat his horse before the Benwell House veranda answering the silly questions of that fellow What’s-his-name.

“It’s queer, you know, how mineral has been found in this Western country,” Tremaine remarked, persistent. “Most unexpected ways. Accidents! Devil’s own luck, as the saying goes.

“Guess I wouldn’t know paying mineral even if I saw it,” said Piccolo. “Copper in a stone don’t always look like copper in a penny piece. Silver in a stone don’t always look like half a dollar. Might be tin for all I’d know. Once I thought I’d got gold and a darned old prospector laughed himself red over me. Mica it was.”

“Well, man, tin’s valuable. Mica is valuable if you get the right kind and in the right quantity.”

“Oh shoot!” said Piccolo. “Above ground for me! No delving like a mole.”

But though the subject seemed to be thus dismissed it stuck in Tremaine’s mind, in Piccolo’s. He could not rest. Supper over that night, because of his thoughts set a-going by Jack’s remarks, he came to a decision regarding a course of action. But shy of telling what he was about he announced:

“Guess I’ll saddle up and go back to Colvalli. I want some cig papers.”

“Smoke a pipe, man,” said Tremaine.

“No. I want some papers.”

“There’s some there, then. On top of the grand piano.”

Grand Piano was their name for an old packing-case turned into a cupboard.

“Ah, but they’re white. I want wheat straw.”

“Gee, you are surely particular.”

Piccolo waited for no further repartee, strolled leisurely out. To ride five miles for (ostensibly) a packet of cigarette papers—brown, when white were procurable, as well as a pipe—was perhaps odd. To ease his conscience, rather than to have them to show to Jack, he certainly bought wheat papers in Colvalli before doing aught else. Shades of night were taking the gold light out of the rolling prairie. Distances were purple instead of green, sifted with blue. He left his horse hitched at Inman’s Store, and strolled along to the Benwell House. There were few men there, so he sat on the veranda edge, legs dangling over, and rolled a cigarette. Then he dropped his tobacco sack—and the papers. He had to light a match to find them. When he had found them his face, to the considering gaze of Movie Bill, sitting there again (reading no more, the dim light forbidding), had a worried look. An ingenuous sort of man, thought Movie.

“Looking for anything?” he asked.

“Me? Why no.”

“Oh!” said Movie Bill.

Piccolo eyed him sidewise in the dusk.

“I saw a man pick up something there just after you went today,” Movie added, “and I wondered.”

Piccolo thought he had better be clever before those deep-set meditative eyes.

“Guess it was nothing I dropped,” said he.

“All right,” replied Bill, laconically.

Whistling gently, hands in pockets, Piccolo strolling round the gable, lost in thought, came to his horse. There might be something in what Jack imagined, thought he. What should he do? So he wondered. The notion took him to ride back to Angus MacPherson’s and—he hesitated. What could he do there? They might not sit on the veranda so late. How, even if they did, would he see? He could not pretend to drop things there and light matches. He would be ashamed to seem clumsy, “all thumbs,” before Miss MacPherson. For a moment he thought of going up to the MacPherson house quietly and examining the ground stealthily before the veranda, for the dropped stones. Then he remembered the dog. It would, for sure, give tongue if he prowled about that way.

A gentle night breeze fanned down the straggling street, stirred the dust, was cool on his cheek. He felt himself a fool. Stupid notion, that of his partner’s! He wondered if he should go back and ask Jack’s advice; but to do so he would have to tell of dusting out his pocket before the Benwell House, and Jack somehow seemed always able to see inside him. Jack would say: “That was what you remembered when I was talking about you dropping the stones at MacPherson’s!” Piccolo had a sensitiveness in his make-up, his constitution, his harmless ego. He had always dreaded not being able to play the man in an emergency; and yet in all the emergencies

he had met he had done so. Still, he had that sensitiveness. He would go home, he decided—and sleep on it.

“To sleep on it has helped many a man,” he mused.

If he had only known it Angus MacPherson was quoting the very same adage to himself scarcely a mile to north—and quoting it without avail.

Slowly homeward rode Piccolo through the dusk, the red glow of his cigarette rising and falling from his silhouetted head to his silhouetted saddle-horn as he took the twining road along the bench-tops.

And Angus, in his buckboard, saw that figure as he drove south also, on one of the backward loops of road.

“Eh man,” he murmured, “a wonderful land for what the painter bodies call ‘effects’. What a figure is yon against the last of the day! What would we call it? The Last of the Cowpunchers. Eh man, a caller air; a grand atmosphere!”

He flicked the whip and hummed a few bars of his favourite song:

“...my heart will ever be
At hame in dear auld Scotland, wi’ my ain folk!”

The last of the cowpunchers (that Angus, joggling along in the buckboard did not recognize as Piccolo in that light, or lack of light) drifted down beyond the roll of plain. A sickle of moon showed like a paring of silver in the deep blue sky. The Dipper was bright, with its pointers pointing to the North Star, and over against it belted Orion stood above the rolling world.

“It’s better to be quixotic than close,” thought Angus; and he arrived at the T.T. ranch so little in rear of Piccolo that the

latter stood waiting to see who came, framed by the oblong of lit ranch door.

“Good-night,” said Angus.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Piccolo, and his voice at that moment was scarcely higher than a whisper.

“I beg your pardon?” said Angus.

“I said, ‘Oh, it’s you’!” repeated Piccolo.

“Ay, that’s right. Oh, it’s me, and no doubt—no doubt.” He sighed, as one sighing over his own folly. “Could I have a word wi’ ye, Pic?” he enquired.

CHAPTER FOUR

“MAPS AND SMELL OF WOOD SMOKE”

YOU’VE only to hear something new to you once and then you are always hearing it, thought Piccolo at Mac’s first words.

For this was his speech when he entered:

“I do not know whether I am about to show myself a fool, or quixotic”; and under his tufted white brows he blinked at the light.

Tremaine had risen and bowed to the visitor. Piccolo stood a step behind him, having ushered him in, round-eyed. For something to say in response, rather than to air his recently acquired knowledge, he informed Angus: “I know what quixotic means, sir. Jack mentioned that Don Quixote this very afternoon.

“It wasna apropos of me, was it?” enquired Angus with the slightest of pawky smiles. “Most people, after they leave a house, clatter about the folk they’ve been calling upon—sometimes for good, sometimes for ill.” He beamed genially upon them, lest they might think him cranky and highly serious. “It is a human frailty I greatly dislike. Ye’ll notice too that when a party has left a room there are folks that at once begin discussing him—or her. Yes, quite so, that’s the way it goes,” he growled on.

But he was speaking for speaking’s sake, to break the ice, thinking the while of other matters, a way very common to him as Piccolo was to discover.

Feeling a certain deference to him because of his age neither Tremaine nor Thomas attempted any speech, just awaited some words from Angus that would seem less like a talking to himself, monologue. And Tremaine thrust forward the chair on which he had been sitting, their most comfortable chair, and clapped the back of it, with his best bow, as indication to their visitor to be seated.

“Thank ye,” said Angus, nodded, and slowly sat down. Then he remarked, or it may be said, enquired (the upward Aberdonian lilt was at the end of the words): “I suppose you two are both good partners?”

They looked one to the other.

“I mean in the sense of ‘What’s mine is thine,’ as you nicht say,” Angus elucidated.

Tremaine smiled. Piccolo smiled.

“Ay, I thought so,” said Angus. “Thank you, sir.”

This last was to Jack who, not flabbergasted-looking like Piccolo by the unexpected evening call, had pushed forward a tobacco tin, seeing Angus dive a hand down into his pocket, and presuming it was for his pipe.

But it was not his pipe he produced. He drew his hand from his pocket and, lying in the palm, was a little stone the size of a lump of sugar, but not four square, a jagged little stone. He held it forth for their view. It glittered in the lamplight with a myriad pinpoints of light.

“Do you ken what this is?” he asked, as they looked at it. Then the Scot suddenly went in abeyance. “Say, fellows,” he said, “this little splinter of rock—do you know the first thing about it?”

Silence.

“It was double the size when you dropped it today in front of my veranda, Pic. I cleaved it with a hammer. Do you know what it is? Say! This is an awful quiet assemblage!”

Jack looked from the stone to Piccolo and, sitting down, pushed well away from him on the table the book he had been reading. His face had the expression of: “I told you so!”

“Well, evidently you don’t know,” said Angus, “Evidently I am all quixotic in coming to you. You don’t deserve to be told! It’s a galena.”

He set it on the table.

“There,” he said, “it’s yours! You go back to where you got it from and look for more, follow it up. Go hunt for more to see where this came from, whether fallen from above near at hand, or washed to where you found it by freshets. And when you find the mother-lode stake it.”

“Mother who?” said Piccolo thinly. With an absent gesture, like an automaton, he drew a stool toward the table and sat down, elbows on table, to stare at the little stone with a rapt expression.

“Did ye think I said Mother Hubbard!” ejaculated Angus. “Hosses, hosses, hosses! Man, do you not know that this is a meeneral country as well as pasture land for cows and cayuses? To sit there staring at that bit of stone as if ye were a crystal gazer will not avail much. Go and get it, as ye might say, and to quote the title of one of these movies I saw in Spokane. Go and get it, lad.”

Piccolo was mute. He gazed at his partner as though desiring a prompting.

“Neither Pic nor I know the first thing about ore,” said Jack. “I once washed a little gold dust out of a creek when I

was up after stock in the Cœur d'Alenes—just for fun, but I don't even know bluestone out of a drug store window.”

“What have we to do?” piped Piccolo. “We go to the place where I got that and—” he paused.

“Look for floats,” his partner chipped in.

“Ay, that's it,” said Angus, pleased to find some hint of knowledge.

Jack laughed and disillusioned him.

“I've only heard them talk,” said he. “I don't know how to go about it.” Then he added: “It is sure white of you coming along with this news to us, Mr. MacPherson.”

“Oh pshaw!” exclaimed Angus. “Our righteousness is filthy rags. I've only a bit of a notion where you got it. About a hundred and eighty miles north of the Boundary is all I know.”

There was a long pause.

“Would you,” began Piccolo and paused, then tried again, “would you come in with us, go out with us, I mean?”

Jack raised his head and laughed, and slapped Piccolo on the back.

“Would I come in with you and go out with you?” enquired Angus. “It's a good thing I'm gleg in the uptak'! I get you, as they say in God's Country, all the same. Would I come in as a member of the prospecting party and go out into the land northward with you?”

“That's it,” said Piccolo.

“Virtue has its reward,” said Angus. “Man, ye have proposed just what I hoped ye would propose.”

“All right,” said Jack airily, “it's yours, Pic,—yours and Mr. MacPherson's if you find it. I can't help you to round-up

floats and corral Mother Hubbard!” He laughed again. “Go to it! I’ll stay home and mind the ranch. We got that alfalfa to put in.”

Angus nodded at the little splinter of stone on the table.

“If we get a seam of that of any proportion worth talking about,” said he, “we have a proposition that would support a large family.”

“Well, you two go in,” said Tremaine. “You’re liable never to find it anyhow! I guess Pic don’t know where he picked up the stones. But you’re the experienced prospector.”

Angus bowed his head.

“That,” said he, “is a matter for you two to settle. I come from Aberdeen.”

“Well, what does that mean?” asked Jack. “I only know ‘I’m from Missouri.’ ”

“Oh, Aberdeen is entirely different. When I see a chance of having a half-share instead of one-third I feel in my bones that I come from Aberdeen. To translate: I have in me the quality known in this part of God’s Country as squeezing a quarter hard enough to make the eagle squeal.”

“You have—like fun!” said Jack.

“You have—like fun!” piped Piccolo, simultaneously.

“Ye haven’t gone strewing other specimens of this around, have ye?” enquired Angus.

Piccolo blushed and—“No,” he said.

Jack frowned at him. Angus’s brows came down and his bright eyes looked piercingly at Piccolo.

“I seem to remember you dusting away at your other pocket after we left Mr. MacPherson’s today,” Tremaine remarked.

“I was just putting the things back from my left pocket to the right,” answered Piccolo in a voice like that of a school boy explaining away some deflection to a school-marm.

He rose abruptly and went to the little bookshelf above the Grand Piano, and there educed an atlas, came back to the table and opened it before Angus, turned the pages, and found the one showing the Northwestern states.

“There’s Colvalli,” said he, dabbing a fingertip on the page. “Well, look: we went in this way.”

Tremaine rose also and came to bend beside them, moved by the delight in maps of the average open-air man as much as by interest in their especial interest in this map.

“That fellow Movie Bill,” he remarked. “I once heard him say: ‘There are two things I can’t resist—maps and the smell of woodsmoke.’ ”

Angus paid no heed to that, engrossed by the map; but although Piccolo made no reply to it either (taking it as a mere aside by his partner) it was to come back to his mind later.

“There,” said Piccolo, “we went into B. C. thereabouts.” He frowned, worried.

“Ye said ye saw Flat-Bow Lake,” said Angus.

“I thought so,” said Piccolo.

“How did it run, the lake you saw?” asked Angus.

“East and West,” Piccolo answered promptly, and then: “I see Flat-Bow runs North and South,” he added in accents of one puzzled, almost piqued.

“Oh, this is not a big enough scale map. There’s an arm to Flat-Bow Lake, and ye doubtless saw it. There’s a lot of wee lakes in there that are not on the map. See here: this might

just be a river according to this map, but it's a lake—Trout Lake. A bonny lake. I've been up there. Glaciers, and big timber, and grizzly bears! Ay, ay. Here's Kootenay Lake, ye see. That's clear enough. And there's the Okanagan. That's marked clear enough too. They're turning that into a fruit country now and all the cattle will be gone soon, I suppose. I washed gold dust there once in a creek to the South end. It was a small bar but fine while it lasted. Give me a piece of paper and I'll just try to draw from memory the lake and river systems there where you've been in the lower Monashees. I've not been through it all, but many a time have I pored over the maps. Grand things, maps! Good maps, I mean. Not but what this is a fine atlas ye have," he added quickly, for courtesy's sake. "Ay, a fine atlas. I see Lake Angus MacDonald is indicated and St. Mary's Lake. That's a great place for towerists now. The paper—ay, that will do fine. Thank you. A pincil. Now I have a pincil somewhere. It will be in my last pocket, as Margaret says when I'm looking for things. And often it's in the first! But I only find it in the first on the second expedition round. Ay, there—I have my pincil."

He began to draw, Tremaine and Piccolo greatly interested.

"You must have been there," said Jack.

Angus looked up at him.

"Sir, I have not," he answered. "I went up the Kootenay Lake only, to the head of it, and through the valley up to Trout Lake. I had a mineral claim in there, but I let it lapse. Good! Fine! But transport was the trouble. And then once I went in from the Skagit end to the South of the Okanagan country in British Columbia, washed a bit of colour and came out again. Well, see here: that's the way Flat-Bow lake runs

as far as I can remember from the maps. I've seen of that bit of country."

"We couldn't have seen that, then," said Piccolo. "The lake we saw where we turned ran like in there," and he indicated.

"Fine!" said Angus. "Or, as ye might say, Tremaine, fine and dandy! Flat-Bow has an arm running about East and West. I see by the *Spokesman Review* that there is a lake and river steamboat connection installed now on Flat-Bow Lake, to that new discovery at the camp they call Kokanee. I believe 'Kokanee' is a Kootenay Indian word for a fish they catch there. Ay, ay! So."

He went on with his topography till Piccolo suddenly interjected a finger over his shoulder and said:

"Now that fits it. That is how the West arm of Flat-Bow lies. That is about where we found the last of the horses and saw a lake to North."

"Fine," answered Angus. "Then if ye were at any altitude to speak of ye could see the arm of Flat-Bow. Ye were there when?"

"About two weeks ago," said Tremaine in response to Piccolo's enquiring turn to him.

"Yes," Piccolo agreed, "about a fortnight ago."

"About a fortnight ago," echoed MacPherson, "and there was still snow on the sheltered places. So you would maybe be up a matter of two thousand five hundred, or three thousand feet above the lake level. If I mind the big map I saw rightly the lake is about seventeen hundred."

"That's the place we came to all right," said Tremaine. He had been cleaning out his pipe and, bending forward, he tapped the point of his knife blade on the sketch.

Angus raised the paper up between their gaze and the lamp.

“So we begin to see light,” he said, and laughed happily. Then he sat back, grabbing his beard. “It’s a wee bit cold tonight,” he remarked. “It’s spring by day but winter by night still. I should have put a blanket over my horses,” and he rose.

“I’ll see to that,” said Piccolo. “I’ll cover them.”

“No, man, no. I’ve said what I came to say. You come over to my place before long and see about this. I’m wondering if we should send out this to be assayed; but man, I have a kind of a hunch, as they call it, that ye have strewed other samples from your pocket somewhere. I don’t definitely say that ye seem not to be frank with me, Pic, but I feel we should get after this smartly. An assay would give us the exact proportion of the contents, but even without it I’ve seen enough of rocks in my day to know that it is a remarkable discovery of yours,” and so saying he took the fragment of galena from the table and put it in his pocket as if unconscious of doing so.

Piccolo wet his lip. He frowned. He seemed as if desirous to speak, and yet held mute—oddly sensitive.

“Yes,” said he, “I think we should start right away. We don’t need an assay, seeing you know about mineral.”

Angus peered at him, frowning, nodding his head slowly.

“I must get back to Margaret,” said he. “I didn’t tell her what I was going out for. In a thing of this kind—” he waved his hand, “mum! I have prospected in Rhodesia, Australia, Alaska, and I have learnt. Not a word till the chickens are hatched. There is nobody can give the thing away if nobody

speaks, and then—if any one else gets on to it—ye don't need to wonder who blabbed.”

“Sure!” said Jack.

“Sure!” echoed Piccolo. “I'll come over, then, and we'll discuss.”

Angus stood plucking his beard, his mouth listing, meditating.

“Ay,” he said, “quite so,” and was lost in thought, staring at the dual twinkles of light on the bells above the telephone box. “Ye're on the telephone I see. Man, there are folks back East and in the Auld Country who think we have no conveniences in the West. But this country is growing up in the age of electricity so it just naturally uses it. Well, I just told Margaret I was driving over to Colvalli for some tobacco; I had some in my pouch but—well, ye see—she will wonder what's keeping me. I wonder why Americans call Margaret Miggles. Maybe it was a custom in the Auld Country, for a lot of American ways are Auld Country ways transplanted and kept alive here though they have been forgotten in Great Britain. Ay, quite so,” he talked on in a monotone. “Miggles! I like Miggles though, the name I mean, ever since I read yon story of Bret Harte's. It's the way the stage driver calls: ‘Miggles! Mig-gels!’ that caught me, and I canna tell why.”

Piccolo sat looking at him with head down, but a keenness in his eyes. He had a surmise that when Angus talked on in this fashion, as in soliloquy, monologue, he was thinking but little of what he said, was really thinking of other matters.

“Well,” said Angus, “we'll leave it like this till I see you again. Come soon and,” he paused, “tell me anything you

have to tell me. But I expect we'll simply arrange about the starting out."

As one tidying up he lifted the map, folded it, and laid it in the open atlas, closed the atlas, then thrust it across the table.

"Good-nicht," he said.

Piccolo went out to hold the horses' heads while Angus laboriously put foot to hub and clambered to his seat, and Jack stood in the doorway seeing him off. The pit-pattering of the hoofs in dust, the frou-frou of harness leather and squeal of wheels went away in the dark under the big blue vault, the tilted Dipper, tall Orion, all the twinkling worlds.

"Cold a bit," said Piccolo, and turned back into the house.

"Gee," said Tremaine, "I wonder what age he is. When he was drawing that map he looked like an old man, but he looked like a bright kid when he held it up to the lamp so that the little hole I made with my knife point showed light. It's a queer spell that prospecting has for the men it grips."

Piccolo laughed.

"We are talking about our recently departed guest, all right"; he paused; "but only good of him," he added. "He's a wonderful man."

"You betchar life," said Jack Tremaine. "He was straight about it, anyhow, Piccolo, whatever his reasons for coming to you. I ain't the Angel Gabriel; I don't see in his heart, so I give him the credit of doing it so's to do the fair thing all right. But, oh shoot! That's the best policy. Nothing like being frank."

"That's so," said Piccolo, and replaced the atlas on its shelf.

CHAPTER FIVE

VOICES ON THE WIRE

“IT seems,” mused Movie Bill, “that whether I want to or not I’ve to butt in on that squeaky-voiced fellow’s affairs.”

He was supposed, in the phrase beloved of Mr. Micawber, to be waiting in Colvalli, “for something to turn up.” It had turned up too, but not in the usual sense. He was really held thrall there by Margaret MacPherson—she of: “Miggles! Marrr-garet, whaur are ye?” He was, in the vernacular, “just batty” about her; but sooner or later, he felt it in his bones, he would have to go.

What avail to stay? He knew what he looked like; for he shaved himself every morning. He knew that he was ugly, ugly facially, not in temper. But he delayed and delayed, and made deep plans to allow of visits to the house a mile out of “town” there, northward, that would rouse no suspicions regarding his state. He knew that she would never be his to care for; but to see her, just to see her, to be near her, held him in Colvalli—ostensibly waiting for that something to turn up.

Now, the day being hot and the veranda in the afternoon, despite its broad eaves, sultry, he lay on his bed, the window wide open and the shades drawn, reading. Books were his consolation, his anodyne. Down on the sidewalk someone who had been to the coast and heard the touring D’Oyly Carte Opera Company, passed humming:

“Hey dee, hey dee,
Lack-a-day dee, misery me;
He sipped no sup and he craved no crumb
But he sighed for the love of a lady.”

Movie Bill sat and threw the book he had been trying to read on to the bureau. The wild rhythmic prose in the form of poetry, by Carl Sandburg of Chicago, had been helping him; but at that pathetic stave of song, sifted up from the sidewalk in the crystal afternoon, he knew he was a fool.

“I’ve got to get a move on,” he told himself. “What’s the good of hanging around just to see her face, just to see her now and then? It will only make it worse for myself when I do go or,” he gloomed at the drawn shade and the slit of gold light below it, “she gets married.”

It was then that what had been only a hum of voices in the next room, punctuated with occasional clinks of a bottle on a tumbler’s edge, rose up clearly.

“I tell you, by heck, I’m going over to haze him if necessary into telling me just where he picked up that galena. One way or another I’ll find out.”

Thus came to Bill one voice and, lower, but still clear, almost in its entirety the speech in response:

“Oh shucks! Foolish to ... cut out the hazing ... don’t know what he dropped anyhow. Pump him. Don’t haze.”

“What was he bringing the specimens back for?” the first voice roared, as of one in a combative state.

“True, true!” spoke the other, consoling. “But don’t you ask about them straight. Pump him.”

“Pump him! By heck, I’ll pump lead into him if he don’t talk well. I’ll handle him easy no more than five minutes, and then—”

“You be careful, Mark. You are liable to shoot a man up before your mind has a chance to imagine ahead and see the electric chair.”

A door slammed. Feet clumped away down the corridor.

Movie Bill raised the shade and stepped out on to the narrow balcony, lit his pipe and leant his elbow on the rail. He saw Mark Bantling make exit on the sidewalk, balancing slightly, resting a hand a moment, fingers spread drunkenly, at the doorpost. He watched him walk across to the livery stable. He watched him ride out. In a saddle Bantling showed no hint of inebriety, but Movie Bill was not unfamiliar with the sight of a man who could scarce walk yet riding passing well. The nature of the man Bantling showed itself to Movie in the callous, bullying manner in which he handled the horse that he rode.

Movie Bill descended to the bare sitting-room and shut the door, for he wished not to be heard speaking on the telephone. He consulted the card of subscribers on the wall and found what he wanted—the T. T. Ranch (Tremaine and Thomas), 6. He took down the receiver and—

“Six,” said he.

“Six,” came the acknowledgment.

He waited.

“’ll ring again,” said the voice.

He waited. There was just a hum suggesting the big space of the range lands, wind in the grass.

“’ll ring again,” came the voice.

Nothing happened. Movie Bill hung up the receiver. An hour later he tried again.

“Six,” he said.

“Six,” replied the voice on the wire.

Nothing.

“’ll ring again.”

Nothing but a faint hum as of the world spinning in space. Then—

“Hullo! Hullo!” came suddenly another voice.

Movie Bill was on the point of saying: “That the T. T. ranch?” but he frowned and did not.

“Do you know who’s speaking?” he enquired.

“Yes, of course I know,” came the voice again; and he recognized it as Bantling’s.

He stood waiting, wondering what to say—decided to say nothing, just wait for the click of the receiver at the other end being hung up.

“Hullo! Toot-toot!” came Bantling’s voice, oddly horrible on the ’phone. “Wrong number. You got the wrong number, old bird. Try Long Distance. Try a heck of a Long Distance. Mine will be gin, thank you!” and then a demoniacal laugh.

Movie Bill’s face showed even more wrinkles than when it was in repose. That disembodied voice on the wire! Horrible! It was as if he had been connected by Central with a lunatic asylum. Then suddenly a little flame of rage rose in him at being thus spoken to by any one, drunk or sober.

“Darn you!” he said. “Can’t you be civil on the wire? What in thunder are you doing in there anyhow? Have you got the information you want, you darn claim-jumper?”

“What? How’s that?” asked Bantling thickly.

“If you touch that fellow Piccolo—” Movie Bill hesitated. He was puzzled. He wondered if the madman had perhaps killed Piccolo. “He’s the goose with the golden eggs, you know,” he said. “Go easy with him.”

“Who the —— are you?” Bantling roared so loudly as to fuzz his voice on the wire.

“Me!” Movie Bill was furious, absurdly furious. “I’m the man that’s going to register that claim—not you!”

Then his rage ebbed. He hung up the receiver so that Bantling would not hear his mirth, for the last words he spoke shook with laughter.

“All the same,” he considered, “he’s in the T. T. ranch house. He’s liable to have killed young Thomas.”

He walked slowly from the Benwell House and crossed the road to the livery stable where he kept his own horses.

The liveryman helped in the saddling, and when all was ready Bill drew the lines over the horse’s head, grabbed a bit of mane and the horn in the quick gesture of an experienced rider. As he swung to the saddle and settled in one movement Baldy stepped up. He rode out into the full blaze of sun again.

“Yes, whether I want to or not,” he mused. “I am sure butting into the life of that fellow Piccolo. That hootch-sodden maniac is liable to have plugged him if Tremaine wasn’t around. Sounded as if he was doing a glorious mad dance at the ’phone. Hope they were either both out or came home heeled.”

He rode on along the winding main road till he came to the two ruts leading to the Tremaine and Thomas ranch, swept

his line hand out to the offside and the horse veered round. He dropped the lines once again, and again, on its neck, In a tap-tap-tap to indicate a lope, and then, as one in a moving easy chair, rode on to the house.

“Hullo! Hullo!” he hailed. “Anybody around?”

“Around?” echoed the big empty barn, and that was all.

He dismounted, left the lines “tied to the ground,” and stepped to the door and knocked. There was no answer. He put his hand in his pocket and with the nose of his little automatic pointed ahead, but still in the pocket, he tried the handle sharply, flung the door open, and stood pat. Nothing within! For only sound a natty little nickel alarm clock tick-tocked atop the Grand Piano.

Bill stepped in and stood thoughtful in the big central room. He stared at the telephone box and its two bells, each with a point of light, like big round metal eyes. If only the thing was alive and could speak of itself! Then, right hand still in pocket, holding his automatic, he stepped to a curtain and raised it sharply, very alert. He looked only into a small empty room like a ship’s berth, with two bunks and a window, a dimity curtain on the window’s lower half, and a white cirrus cloud like a feather adrift in air crossing the blue sky beyond the upper half.

The photograph of an elderly gentleman in a tail-coat, holding a plug hat in his hand, and with an elbow on what looked like an unfinished sundial, was on the wall above one of the cots.

“Piccolo’s pa, I guess,” said Movie Bill. “Wonder if he too had a high thin voice when he was excited, like as if he was going to break into a tenor song.”

He had not been smoking as he rode over to the ranch, and so was able to smell very distinctly an odor of tobacco—to be precise, a cigar. He paused at the row of books. Books interested him. He considered their titles, even took up one or two and glanced at them, and was so employed at the shelves when a horse's whinny caused him to replace the volume in his hand and step outside again.

And there was Piccolo riding into the much-trampled yard between the house and the barn. Piccolo's eyes were wide, staring at the open door behind the strange horse.

"How-do," rumbled Movie Bill. "I just came over to see that you were all right."

Piccolo seemed puzzled.

"I rang you up on the 'phone to see if you were all right," said Movie, seeing that Piccolo made no reply, "and either I got the wrong number or you had a visitor who answered, and he sounded to me drunk or batty. It worried me. So I rode over to see that you were all right."

Piccolo looked suspiciously at him.

"Well, that was surely kind of you," he said.

Movie Bill saw the expression of suspicion and being "all too human" he resented it—and then told himself it was but natural for Piccolo to be "leery" of him. So—

"You see," he explained further, "I heard a man say he was coming over to see you; and he was pretty well lit up with jig juice. After he was gone a spell I thought I'd just 'phone you to see if you were all right."

Piccolo was still suspicious.

"That was very kind of you," he said again, guardedly.

That look of suspicion still remaining, despite the attempts at explanation, Movie Bill was annoyed.

“Yes,” said he. “I don’t mind you losing out, but I don’t want to see you planted. It’s a darn pleasant world to ride around over. I thought to myself: ‘That wisp of a fellow would stand a poor show before a man of that size and weight.’ ”

“Wisp of a fellow!” came from Piccolo, in a very high shrill note, like that of a blue jay.

“That,” said Movie Bill languidly, “was my consideration translated into words, though maybe I did not speak aloud. But I see you are all right now, so I am satisfied.”

He drew the lines over Baldy’s neck, grabbed a lock of mane, grabbed the horn and swung to his seat as the horse stepped up.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “*Adios* as we used to say in Arizona.” He did not raise his voice. “Tat-ta, as the Welsh say. And to Hanover with you!”

“Who do you claim was the man who came over to see me?” Piccolo shrilled after him, standing in the yard in a belligerent attitude.

“Claim?” enquired Movie Bill over his shoulder. “Claim? I’m telling you. I’m not laying a story before you to argue about and sift in your sieve of a haid! Claim!”

He rode away, and a hundred yards off called himself a fool. That phrase came to him: “Human, all too human.”

CHAPTER SIX

PICCOLO MANAGES TO TELL

PICCOLO, who had been out with Tremaine all the afternoon “riding the fence” drew off his work gloves, marching into the house, and laid them on the table deliberately, wire-pliers on top. Angus’s “last of the cowpunchers” in those parts and the modern epoch, though still competent to build a pole corral, or the lazy snake fence, was well acquainted with wire.

He stood there sniffing slightly and staring round to see if anything was missing. The little clock tick-tocked, like a mechanical friend. It was still there! He stepped to the shelf where the books were. One had been put in upside down. It was his atlas. He took it in hand absently to put it in correctly, and then stood holding it, frowning.

“Now,” he thought, “we left that sketch map sticking in this atlas last night. I remember well. It stuck right out.” He slowly scratched a temple, brow furrowed. “Or did Angus take it with him at the end? No, I’m sure I remember seeing him put it in. He only pocketed the ore sample. I saw him do that sure. But what did that fellow Movie Bill want with the map? Why has he stolen it? ‘Maps and the smell of wood-smoke,’ by heck! What does he know?”

He sniffed strongly. He too, like Movie Bill, had not been smoking and so his olfactory nerves were alert to the odour of the tobacco smoke of others. He smelt the odour of a rank cigar.

“Rotten stinkadora of a cigar he smokes too,” he said.

He was not as able a detective as Movie Bill. He jumped to a conclusion. But doubtless wrong clues and faulty evidence have sometimes led to the arrest of the right man. It was a case of what in the law courts they call *parti pris*. He knew, just knew, that that fellow Movie Bill had stolen the map.

To be quite sure, however, utterly sure, to make assurance doubly sure, he rang up Angus on the 'phone. He was going to say: "Did you, or did you not, take that little map with you last night?" but, just as he got the connection, up came in the ascendancy the Piccolo who was timid about showing himself in a scrape. He thought he would find out by subterfuge instead of asking direct.

So he merely said:

"Say, Mr. MacPherson, how about my coming over to fix up our hitting the trail?"

"Speak louder," rumbled Angus's voice.

Piccolo repeated his words, high and shrill.

"Oh, it's you, Pic," said Angus. "Then speak lower."

Piccolo tried again.

"The sooner the better," came the old prospector's voice accentuated basso-profundo and no shout, as if to show Piccolo how to talk on the wire; and to Thomas these words carried the suggestion (whether Angus meant them that way or not) that MacPherson thought his last of the cowpunchers might blab the whole secret away if they did not speedily depart.

"All right," said Piccolo. "I quite agree. I'll come after supper."

And to the preparation of supper, for which he had come home in advance of Tremaine, he set himself. Jack came in

when its odours were drifting out to blend with the faint aromatic scent of the early spring sage—yellow sage they have there; but to his partner Piccolo said not a word of their recent visitor and what, in his mind, he had classed as “a hot-air spiel.”

So that night Angus MacPherson and Piccolo sat with heads together under the hanging lamp and growled and piped one at the other.

Angus wet the end of a pencil and wrote on a sheet of paper: “Flour, bacon, sugar, tea—

“Do ye care for coffee?” he asked.

“Oh, not specially, thank you,” answered Piccolo.

Angus’s mouth twitched at the “thank you.” His sense of humour was very much of the dry “pawky” Scots order. It sounded as if Piccolo was responding to an invitation.

“Tea is the dope, ye ken,” said Angus in blend of his two languages.

“Yes,” agreed Piccolo.

“Blankets. I think a couple of blankets would suffice. I have my Hudson Bay four-point that served me at forty below on the Parsnip River. Two pair of four-points, and a bed of balsam boughs; one ply of the blanket under me, three layers on top, a wind-screen of boughs and a fire in front, and I slept fine.”

“It’s not like that up there,” said Piccolo.

“No, no. I know. I’m no’ saying it is. Man, I’m not outfitting now—I’m being reminiscential.”

“Oh, I see,” said Piccolo.

“By the way,” said Angus, “that map I drew. Have ye it on ye?”

So Piccolo did not require adroitly to work the conversation round to that.

“Well, no. Er—didn’t you bring it with you last night?”

“Bring it? No!” answered Angus. “I put it in the atlas for safety. I just wondered if ye had brought it along.”

“No,” said Piccolo.

“No matter,” said Angus. “Let me see. We’ll have to consider how long we may be gone so as to compute the amounts.”

“Pardon me, sir—”

“Eh?”

“That map—”

“Oh, it’s of no amount. Now bacon. Let me see.”

Piccolo wondered if he should say nothing of the map’s loss; but he had a dread of the fact that it had gone leaking out later, and getting into a foolish position by being blamed for not having said it had been taken. He frowned. He scratched his temple vigorously.

“It’s not in the shack, that map,” he said.

Angus sat back.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Why so tragical? You’ll find it sticking in the atlas, and if you don’t—why then you’ve burnt it, I expect. We can draw another if there’s any need. But there is no necessity. You are coming with me. You will find the place where you picked up the stones at.”

“Yes, of course we don’t need the map.”

Angus frowned under his bushy grey brows.

“Piccolo,” said he, “there is something in your manner that suggests a thought withheld, a lack of full openness.”

Piccolo blushed.

“Well,” he said, “when I came home from work today there was a man in our shack. He had a cock-and-bull story —”

He paused.

“Ay,” said Angus. “What they call a hot-air effort in this part of God’s Country. What man? What manner of hot-air?”

“He had a hot-air effort, as you say,” echoed Piccolo, “about having rung me up on the ’phone to see if I was all right, and not getting a reply from me but hearing another voice and wondering at it—whether he had got the wrong number, or whether some one was in our house and had done anything to me. He said the voice sounded mad or drunk. And when he saw I was suspicious he got very nasty—threw it up at me that I was a Welshman and slight of statue, and told me to go to h—l.”

“Dear me. An outrageous character! And what did you say or do, might I ask?”

“I remained dignified.”

“Ye did! Who was the gentleman?”

“That fellow with the diabolical face called Movie Bill.”

“Oh! And did he tell ye to go to h—l? He has a great way of saying ‘Hanover,’ I’ve noticed.”

“Well, that was what he meant!”

“Maybe so. But I would just point out that your evidence lacks exactitude. And who was the other man that he knew had gone over to your house, and that he thought might do you in?”

“That was all my eye and Sally Martin.”

“I’ve never heerd that one before,” said Angus, “but I can understand the signeeificance of it. Now why are ye so positive it was all your eye and Sally Martin?”

“Well, he’s a blackguardly looking fellow.”

“Maybe to you, Piccolo; but if ye’d sat on a jury as often as me ye’d not think so, perhaps. He’s a long ways bonnier to look at than many a railway magnate, or steel king, ye see the face of in the papers. Now, I’m no’ arguing with ye. I’ve had my doubts of the fellow myself—and that’s why I will have no imaginings, but sheer evidence, if you please. Who was the man he thought might have done ye an injury?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Well, I have to admit that of him. That is like him too. If ye didn’t deliberately ask he wouldn’t say. I expect you ruffled his temper to make him tell ye to go to Hanover.”

“I said hardly a thing. I was just dignified.”

“Maybe your dignity ruffled him.”

“Huh! Coming in there as bold as brass when we were away. Cool too—smoking his cigar.”

“Eh? Did ye say cigar?”

“Yes.”

“Now that’s curious. I have on more than one occasion offered him a cigar, and he always says: ‘Thank you, I either smoke a pipe or a cigarette. Cigars get my throat.’ ”

“I didn’t see him smoking the cigar. You Scots are awful to argue. I smelt it when I went into the house.”

Angus gave a little chuckling laugh. Then he sat back and held his head in his hand a long while, and Piccolo remained mute. Angus moved, took up the paper with the beginning of the list of supplies on it, and turning thrust it into the stove.

“What is it?” asked Piccolo. “I’m frank with you, sir. There is nothing like being frank. Surely you don’t intend to give up the undertaking?”

“Undertaking? It’s a good word for it. I believe you’ve been blabbing about your find. Ye’ll have an undertaker measuring us both if you’re not careful. No man, I’m coming in with ye and going out with ye, as ye once expressed it. But being unable to come to a decision whether ye have blabbed or not I can see that somebody else is on to it. That is enough for the moment. But we’ll change our plans. We will go to Bonnington Landing and go in by stern-wheeler as if we were going to the new Excitement at Kokanee. We can outfit there, and go into the country from North. Oh!” he abruptly shot out the exclamation. “That reminds me! We canna stake a claim there without a B. C. miner’s license. There, there. We may as well go to Kokanee for that too. In the Northwest territory it used to be ye had to write to Ottawa for one; in B. C. ye can get them at various centres. There will be a gold commissioner, a registrar and all at Kokanee by now. That’s all right. From all counts that’s where we should go. My brain must be slipping cogs, as might be said, not to have thought of that before. I have a Washington State license, ye see, and that made me forget. It’s Kokanee—for all reasons. But obviously someone, maybe several, are already cognizant of your find. Now, keep your mouth shut till we go. There’s a stage starts tomorrow for the railroad, and there we’ll get the train to Spokane. Then we’ll go on to the Landing and take the river steamer. All ye have to let out of your mouth is that Mr. Angus MacPherson has been reading in the papers about the Excitement over the gold strike at Kokanee, and being too old to go out alone has asked you accompany him. We start

tomorrow. The stage goes daily to Eagle Bend now. Repeat your lesson.”

At these words the parrot, covered though he was with a bandanna handkerchief, in a sleepy voice said:

“Search me! Search me! Search me!”

Piccolo started.

“It’s just the birrd,” said Angus. “Repeat your lesson.”

“I’m going out with you,” said Piccolo. “You have been shooting off your bazoo to me about the mining excitements and all about prospecting and the old days, and I’m going to have a flutter at it anyhow, for the fun of it if not for the fortune. Here’s us for the Kokanee boom!”

“Fine!” said Angus. “Fine.”

But after Piccolo had gone he sat a long while pulling his short beard and musing on old stories, in his experience, of more than one man seeking for the same treasure; musing also on what he had heard of Movie Bill in the T. T. ranch house, and the missing map.

“I wonder if that man Movie Bill is not the kind of man I imagined,” he thought. “It’s awful to be disappointed in our friends and he is a man I like. He has an interest in more than poker and bridge. Ye do not need to bring out the cards when he calls. He has a gusto for the world God gave us to live in. He can talk, and he can listen. I wonder who the other man was, if there was another man. Maybe if I tell him I’m interested in Piccolo he’ll tell me the full significance of Piccolo’s story.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

MOVIE BILL CONSIDERS SOLITAIRE

“YOU darn fool,” Movie Bill addressed himself, riding on. “If you want to help anyone you ought to consider first whether you are ready to get kicked in return, metaphorically speaking.” He rode on a little further, and then “No.” he said, “that’s not true. That’s cynical!” He rode on further, and then—“Though the cynical is sometimes true,” he added.

He felt highly incensed at everything in general by then, even more than at Piccolo in particular. He reined in and looked over the long quiet rolls of Colvalli plains that expand there between the two far-distant ranges of mountain, east and west. He felt utterly unfit for converse with his kind. Perhaps the cause of this mood of irritation was in a growing sense he had of the ineffectuality of his remaining in Colvalli. The tiff with Piccolo had not created his discontent; the tiff was indeed perhaps partly due to the fact that he was troubled.

In the old phrase of the love stories, he was certain Margaret never could be his. According to his own deep thoughts, how could he expect a girl to look at one with such a face and such a rolling record? He had always been the black sheep of his family. The others had “made good” back east. They had their names either on the headings of their own memorandum forms, or else figuring in the small print to the left hand side where one reads: “Treasurer”—“President.” What he had acquired in his roving life, he considered, was of little value when a girl

came drifting into it. To have seen the Mogollons; to know how the road looked, as in the old cowpuncher ballad, out of Holbrook, Arizona-o; to be able to talk in their own tongues with Chiefs Young Whirlwind of the Southern Cheyenne or Kicking Bull of the Sioux; to have a collection of Indian arrowheads, the low-grade ones of the Kootenays, the exquisite ones of the Umatillas—what was all that? Arrowheads were not a balance at the bank! A fine specimen he, to wish to take under his care a woman!

He looked over the long unfenced leagues of the prairie. He wondered where Mark Bantling had gone and then mused: “It does not matter anyhow. That darn fellow can take care of himself. Ungrateful squeaker.”

He suddenly raised his arms in air, elbows out, in sign to his horse; and off it shot like an arrow from a bow, with a gathering and flying whirl of its hoofs, leaving a wavering pennon of dust behind, rub-a-dubbing the faint scent of the yet flowerless yellow sage into the air. He had turned away from Colvalli. The gallop! The gallop was the thing to re-oxygenate the blood, to clear the head, to forget!

He dismissed Piccolo. That was easy! But no sooner had he done so than Piccolo was thrust upon him again for there, as he came bobbing up to the crest of one of the rolls, out of a clump of cottonwood that ribboned along near an irrigation ditch to south, he saw a rider emerge; and that rider was Mark Bantling. Movie Bill recognized him at half-a-mile distance—recognized the lines of the horse, the shape of the man. He reined in, dropping his elbows to his sides, and canting back in the saddle.

There was nothing astonishing in the fact that, in a region so open, Bantling should not have ridden back from the T. T.

ranch by the wagon road. There was also the possibility, which Movie did not ignore, that he had been given a mistaken connection by Central, that perhaps Bantling had not been at the T. T. ranch at all, that it was only by a coincidence that, ringing up Piccolo to warn him of the coming of Bantling, he had got in touch with Mark elsewhere. That was hardly likely.

Much more probable it was, thought he, that Bantling, alarmed, even in his drunkenness, by the result of his answering the telephone call when in the T. T. ranch house, had chosen to return by another way than the road. That strip of trees gave good shelter. Perhaps he had even gone down into the belt of cottonwoods to rest a while, wash in the ditch, cool himself among the shadows. With the first leap of spring on Colvalli Plain the trees were already all sifted over with little leaves, not green yet, but like a sift of bright yellow over the twigs. Movie Bill watched Mark Bantling ride on, headed then across the open in the direction of Colvalli. He was riding at a tangent that would take him past the northwest corner of the Jarvis and Benwell horse ranch home pasture fence. Bill sat motionless. Not once did the diminishing figure of that rider turn to look round. It showed sometimes high, man and almost all horse visible, then dwindled down till but a dot of shoulder and broad hat showed along a ridge.

Again Movie Bill dismissed Piccolo—Piccolo and Mark Bantling. He shook the lines and rode on, for the mere pleasure of riding in the good air. And well on in the afternoon he returned to Colvalli, the Piccolo episode dismissed, but not utterly dismissed his uncertainty as to whether he had not better get him gone from the place—

forget Margaret MacPherson instead of, love-sick and dissembling his love, tarrying on indefinitely, hopelessly.

Deep in reverie that night after supper, he told himself, sitting aloof on the upper balcony, that he was by nature a lone man, a man who should not mix up in the affairs of others, even in the mood of Good Samaritan. He went a step further. He told himself that he should get away—away—from Colvalli; and then he went to bed.

“Oh you ugly-faced son of a gun!” he addressed himself in the morning, shaving. “I’m going to take you out a-riding again today—a-riding and a-thinking.” (Evidently the matter was not settled after all!) “I guess you’ll come back to pack your little grips, and roll your little blankets, and pull your little freight. You have a face like a bad man, a tough; and I guess you better go be a tough instead of sentimentalizing around here.”

He went down for breakfast and paid no heed to anyone in the room. He saw only the splashes of light on the floor; he felt only the freshness of the air fanning at an open window. Half-an-hour after breakfast he was riding south out of Colvalli, picturing all open America to himself, thinking of the grey-green rolls of Alberta, north, the mountains of British Columbia; the dry belts of Washington; the sandhills of New Mexico—the big open west he knew. Where, in all that west, he wondered, should he go?

He had a lunch in his pocket to left and his automatic in the pocket to right, a pipe in his vest pocket, and a pouch of tobacco in his hip pocket. There were still some savings in the bank from his last long spell of work before chance led him to Colvalli, chance or perhaps a memory of days when

he had been there before. When love comes in at the window self-analysis is a difficult matter.

By noon he was well down south of Colvalli Plains, where the benches lie in their long yellow bastions, and the bull pines dot the scene, and Pauline Creek twists, silty, and with changing opalescent colours, to join the Columbia. There he halted for lunch—sandwiches, and water from the creek. On the bench opposite to him (the Indian Reservation side of the river) a democrat appeared, full of squaws and papooses, and with an old braided Indian driving. Bill raised a hand and wagged it, and the old Indian and all the papooses replied. Everyone of them knew him.

It was that soft sound of horse hoofs kicking sand that made him look round again to see what Baldy was about. But it was not Baldy that made the sound. Baldy was standing demurely with his nose against a bull-pine as if he thought it was the hayrack in the stable. The sifting of sand by hoofs came from two riders on the road behind him. They were Bantling and Greer.

They were riding toward Colvalli. He considered that he had not seen them at breakfast, and he wondered where they had been. They must have started off long before he rose to have gone far; and there was a steadiness in the gait of their horses, that automatic appearance that comes of miles, that suggested to him that they had been riding so for some time. Maybe they had been to Placer, the next station on the railroad. It was further than to Eagle Bend, Colvalli's usual railroad stop; but Placer was a larger place. A few more reputed toughs in Placer! More probability of replenishing supplies of hootch! They spoke one to the other, he saw; and

then they rode aside to where he sat on the sandy yellow bank.

“How-do,” said Bantling.

“How-do,” said Greer.

“How-do,” said Movie Bill.

They dismounted, throwing the lines over their horses’ heads, and squatted down beside him.

“Say, Bill,” said Bantling, “I got a proposition to put to you.”

“Bill” seemed highly friendly for one he hardly knew—knew but by sight, and had exchanged no more than a nod with at the hotel; but he would accept it as friendly, although to begin with, Allardyce—even without the handle of Mr.—would have seemed more fitting.

“Yep?” enquired Movie.

Bantling made a sudden movement of his hand from his right side coat pocket, where it had reposed. Bill had noted it there and wondered if Mark also, despite the law regarding concealed weapons, had a tendency toward being “heeled.” Bantling’s hand shot out, and the palm opened; and lying in it was a piece of sparkling galena, a stone splinter that fitted just the cup of his palm.

“Do you know what that is?” he asked.

“That,” answered Bill, slowly, “looks to me like the biggest piece of the little bits of rock that Piccolo Thomas flipped from his pocket at the Benwell House a few days back”; he paused, then decided to say it: “and you picked up then.”

Greer and Bantling exchanged glances; and Greer’s was of “I told you so!” almost as plainly as though he had spoken

the words.

“Oh!” said Bantling, wagging his head. “You saw.”

“Sure I saw; but it doesn’t concern me. What do you show it to me for? I can’t assay it. You could get an assay in Placer, or from Fred Stand in Jaffery.”

“Ever prospected yourself?” asked Bantling.

“Oh, yes,” said Movie Bill. “I’ve read, till I got a headache, about mineralogy; and then I went out once or twice with a prospector who had practical knowledge too.”

“So you know an ore like this when you see it.”

“Yes. And I think even a novice ought to recognize it as maybe valuable. That fellow Piccolo Thomas gets my goat slinging samples around that way. Or maybe he’s trying to have you on a string, pull your leg. I saw from the way you asked him where he’d been that you were on to it. What I think is that he just picked it up on some road they crossed. Guess it dropped from an ore wagon. Maybe it slipped off an hide in winter, when they were rawhiding. If you knew the look of the ore of claims being worked up there in the parts they passed through you’d maybe see that that is only a specimen from a working mine after all.”

This was clearly a new suggestion to both Greer and Bantling. It was, however, but a momentary glance of doubt they gave one to the other, or that Greer gave towards Bantling. Bantling’s glance at Greer may not have been of doubt at all. If Movie Bill’s suggestion shook him it was only for a second. But quickly he pretended that he accepted such an explanation as feasible.

“Sure, sure!” said he.

They should have ridden on then; but they did not. They sat and studied Bill's lined and, at that moment, blank face. They were deeply desirous to ascertain just how much he knew.

Said Bantling, baffled by that mask-like expression: "Now I guess you don't believe that at all. What did you go to see Piccolo Thomas about yesterday?"

(The fact was that, leaving the T. T. ranch house, Bantling had just passed into the strip of cottonwoods when Movie Bill arrived there; and there he remained until after Bill departed. Unseen he had seen, and been sufficiently sobered by the talk over the 'phone to keep away, not plunge drunkenly back as the lees of the mad fumes prompted him to do.)

Movie Bill's face did then, it must be confessed, look a mighty "tough" face.

"Do you want me to repeat to you the Declaration of Independence?" he asked gently, and yet with an edge in his tone. "This is the Land of the Free. I can make a call without having to report, I hope?" and as he said these words his hand in his right pocket gripped the automatic. He was prepared for Bantling's reponse to that being the sudden drawing of a "gun" from somewhere, though no gun was in his belt.

"What do you mean?" blazed Bantling.

"Well, I don't know either of you well enough to tell you if I went to play poker or craps with him. What's your game?"

"Game?"

"That's what I said."

Bantling frowned.

“It’s like this,” he said. “We don’t believe that fool Piccolo has the first notion of what he picked up.”

“Guess I agree about ‘fool,’ ” said Movie Bill.

“You do?”

“Sure. He’s no friend of mine.”

“All right. I see. I didn’t think he was, somehow. Now I guess I get you better. You saw what we picked up. And what I think is that you went to see Piccolo to pump him about where he got it.”

“Same as you,” remarked Movie Bill.

“Oh, was it you talked on the ’phone? I thought so, even the way I was then, kind of lit up. If I hadn’t been that way I would never have answered it.”

Movie Bill smiled his queer smile.

“By your intellect you’re a prohibitionist,” said he.

Bantling paid no heed to that aside.

“Now I want to ask you,” said he: “Did Piccolo give you any further indication where he got it?”

“Not a particle,” answered Movie Bill.

“You said on the ’phone you were on to it yourself.”

“Shucks! That was just my danged temper, without being lit up with either actual or alleged whisky,” said Bill.

Bantling laughed, unbelievably.

Greer, thinking the conference went wrong, put in:

“What’s the matter with you coming in with us?”

“What on?” asked Movie Bill.

“Finding this ore-body,” said Bantling in reply, instead of Greer, which showed their unanimity in that suggestion.

“Why should I do that? It’s there somewhere. I don’t see that it belongs to anybody yet—that is, granting he didn’t just pick up some bits that had joggled off a rawhide during some hauling from a mine in operation up there. If he didn’t pick it up as I suggest, then it’s free to anybody to find. You’re making an awful sewing circle fuss about it all. That’s the way trouble comes. Life is simple enough, and it’s just the way danged fools of people go complicating it that makes trouble. Go and get it—if you can. It is only when you begin to talk about hazing Piccolo into telling you where it was he found the samples that the crooked begins.”

“Crooked!” snapped Bantling.

“I said so—without heat. This is an ethical discussion.”

“You got me on ethical!” said Bantling. “Sounds like a word out of a book. But talk on anyhow. You was about to remark?”

“Well, go and look for it. That’s all,” said Allardyce. “I don’t say there is anything crooked in even picking up that bit of rock and saying nothing to Piccolo about it. I don’t say there is anything crooked even in not drawing his attention to what he dropped—unless he knew what he dropped. Funny! But there seems to be a difference. So far as I can see it was nothing to him, just dust and splinters in a pocket that he cleaned out.”

“That’s straight talk,” said Greer to Bantling. “You can’t ask more than that. You’re all right, Mr. Allardyce—Bill.”

Movie Bill just looked at him with a gentle smile.

“You don’t really believe, as you said, that he dropped it to have some of us on a string?” Bantling the quarrelsome growled.

“No, I don’t really,” said Movie Bill, with the frankest of expressions on his lined face. “I was just considering it from all possible standpoints when I said that.”

“You’re not going to do anything about it yourself, are you?” asked Bantling.

“Me? Do anything? I was never much struck on ore prospecting. Horses are where I usually live. A little placer excitement might tempt me away but the once or twice I’ve gone looking for floats I’ve spent more of the time fishing.” He smiled pleasantly, to Greer it seemed dangerously. “Thank you for inviting me to come in with you. Nothing doing.”

“What are you going to do?” persisted Bantling.

“My great game—I’ve just been thinking it over all this day, oddly enough—my great game,” said Movie Bill, “is solitaire.”

His lips closed together rigidly. He looked, then, more like Geronimo than anyone Greer could think of. There was a glint in his eyes too, almost as if the pupils were of obsidian.

Greer rose, eager to end the matter that he thought should never have been pushed so far. Bantling followed doubtfully. Then he decidedly spoiled all. He turned back.

“Well,” he said, “we’ve invited you to come in with us, seeing you saw, and seeing that maybe you know more than we do! And now we just advise you to keep out.”

Movie Bill said nothing—nothing at all. His silence was so pronounced that Bantling waited to see if he had anything to say. No, nothing! He just sat looking at the two men, grim, and otherwise expressionless. All Bantling could do was to turn away with his head still toward Movie Bill, his jaw shot out, his eyes under lids a trifle drooped, meeting Bill’s steady

gaze in a sidewise fashion of unspoken threat that made Bill's eyes harder still.

While Movie was considering them they mounted and rode on. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He had too much to say. They had gone a long way, far enough for the dust to be all settled on the road, before he found the words; and then they were just:

“To—Hanover—with—you!”

And this all explains how it was that Angus MacPherson did not see Movie Bill before departing with Piccolo. Movie Bill was away from Colvalli, meditating and, in the midst of his meditation, when he sought peace, receiving such a stirring up that he knew he was going to take some hand in the game. Mark Bantling and Greer had more recent news of Piccolo than he. They had heard Piccolo—on the previous night, when he paused at the Benwell House on the way home after his visit to Angus—tell that he was off to Spokane, en route to Kokanee with old man MacPherson. They had ridden to Placer to see a friend there, and send him on the train to keep them company. Had they only realized it they knew more than Bill did. But a man of his type is of the order of “dark horse.” Even his direct and truthful answers to some of Bantling's questions gave the latter the impression that he was not truthful but cunning.

“Deep man that,” he said to Greer about a mile along the road.

Movie whistled to Baldy who came to him. He clapped the horse's neck gently. Whatever he was, for good or ill, he was not the kind of man to rough-handle his horse because of a rage in him at something else. Maybe Piccolo's manner to him had exasperated him more than it might have done had

he not, about that time, been somewhat ragged over the course of his life. But Baldy did not suffer because Bantling had infuriated him, above all, by that last side-long passing stare.

“The biggest fun of all,” said he, “would be the lone hand, Baldy—the lone hand. It’s like me. Solitaire! Patience! That’s about it for your boss. Yes, sir, Movie Bill will show them.”

He swung to the saddle and rode slowly up the bank, then on, toward Colvalli, riding easily as a man conserving himself, quieting himself. But when his hand, thrust in his pocket, encountered the square little butt of his automatic he considered how near he had been to trouble.

“Baldy,” said he, “nothing happened in the sense of the smell of powder, but it was surely tense at moments. Here’s your master out pondering on the wisdom of never getting tangled up with anything at all. And he rides back surely determined to get tangled all right. He’s in on this. It looks to me as if a good heavy Colt or Webley would be more to the purpose than this little automatic. It’s working up that way.”

And then he added:

“Well, dang it, this will help me to forget fooling my life away. Baldy, Baldy! We’re going prospecting. Say, ain’t I the boob? Ain’t I the boob like the down-turned lover in the old story books who joins the army and goes killing Pathans and Afghans in the Indian northwest? No siree,” he told his horse, “that last look was a challenge. I’m going to find out about these specimens, and I’m going to go look for the mother-lode, and we’ll call the prospect the Lone Hand.”

But that was not the name that Destiny had in store.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHADOWED

THUS Angus MacPherson had no opportunity, either covertly or directly, to interrogate Movie Bill. Haste was the essence of their journey now. He did not see Movie Bill when they set out on the stage to Eagle Bend from Colvalli, for no Movie Bill was among those that clustered, as the way is, to watch its departure.

By the evening Piccolo and old man MacPherson sat in the train that roared through the rock cuts and rumbled over the trestles, on the run to Spokane. The Pintsch light glimmered in the roof. Piccolo, sagged in a heap, snored a faint snore like a Hawaiian guitar heard from a distance. The journey was too short for a sleeping berth and too long for comfort in the Pullman. What weary attitudes! Angus MacPherson sat bunched up, and the shadow of his hat brim and of his bushy brows made it hard to tell if he slept or not. True his head was pressed upon his chest, but he looked, to the gaze of the perambulating conductor in the aisle, more like one patient than asleep.

He was more than patient; he was wide awake; the brain part of him was all alive. His body rested, but his mind toyed with possibilities. He was memorizing all the faces in the coach. He had mental note of all who had boarded the train at Eagle Bend, whether in that coach or another.

One face that he had seen before came glimmering down the aisle. Drought seemed to weary that restless all-night stroller in the coach. He had lurched, bored and touselled-looking, thrice in an hour to the tank at the car end for a

drink. He strolled along looking down at the sleeping faces, the twisted attitudes. He paused beside Angus, and nodded. Angus merely looked up under shaggy brows without moving.

“Going to the Fair at Spokane?” the man enquired.

“How’s that?” asked Angus, for time to think.

“Going to the Spring Fair at Spokane?” repeated the man whom Angus knew but by sight.

“Fine!” said Angus. “I hope ye have a good time.”

The young man looked at him doubtfully, strolled on, had another drink of water and came strolling back. At Angus’s elbow he again stopped.

“I meant were you going to the Fair at Spokane,” he said, stooping.

“No sir,” replied Angus. And then he added: “I seem to know your face. Have I seen you before?”

“Maybe. I’ve been around at Placer and Eagle Bend for a spell.”

Being interrogated, however, seemed less to his mind than interrogating. He stood erect again, looking along the car each way, sighed and returned to his seat.

“I believe,” thought Angus, “I have merely crushed a young gentleman who is tired of his own society. I don’t think he is an undesirable in any other sense than that we should have little in common, although he is a kind of loose-jowled, easy-led looking young rascal. It’s none of his business anyhow where I’m going!”

An hour passed, and the thirsty one rose, strolled back again and, possibly to atone, thought Angus, for having asked another’s business, announced his own:

“I’m going to take in the Fair and then I think I’ll go up to this here new Excitement at Kokanee. What’s your opinion of Kokanee, sir?”

“I’ve heard some fine reports of it,” replied Angus. “Some may strike it rich and others come out poorer than they went in.”

The youth mused on that.

“Things are kind of worked out round Placer and Colvalli,” he said, “I thought of trying Kokanee. Would you advise one to go?”

“A man that understands mineral—yes; but there’s no washing for gold there anywhere, I believe,” said Angus. “These creeks up there have all been tried by placer-men long ago.”

“You going yourself, sir?”

Angus looked at him thoughtfully.

“I am,” he said. “I’m getting auld for such things, but I want to have a visit, anyhow, to an Excitement just once more—”

“You will prospect?” asked the man.

“I was going to continue to say—whether I do any prospecting or not,” Angus went on. “I’m just visiting the Excitement at Kokanee much as you are presumably going to the Spokane Fair, for relaxation. It’s a kind of a holiday for me. I may go up into the mountains, or my partner here may do so, or we both may do so. Anyway, we are going to Kokanee where we will stop a spell, look, and listen.”

He tucked his head down again, content that if he was inhuman to have snubbed the young man earlier in the evening he had amply atoned. The enquirer went back to his

own place, rubbed the glass with his sleeve and shading his eyes from the light within looked out at the night.

Angus considered that if anyone was interested in him in a sinister way that person would not speak to him at all. Those he should look at and memorize were the people who were most invisible, or as if trying to obliterate themselves, with hats over faces. With dawn breaking in the coach, under the influence of the wan spreading light, he thought he was doubtless over-prepared for being watched by whoever it was who had taken the map from the T. T. ranch. That Movie Bill was not on the train he was certain.

“Next stop Spokane!” the conductor chanted, meandering past them.

Piccolo wakened up, said: “Oh my, I’m stiff!” and, rising, urgently rummaged for his grip as though a-dread lest the train should not give him time to alight. He knew nothing of Angus’s midnight thoughts, nor of the young man athirst. The possibility that they might be watched never occurred to him. He had given out in Colvalli that he was going to Kokanee with Angus MacPherson, and he was sure that that was enough to put Movie Bill off the scent—that villainous-faced Movie Bill, who had been on the veranda when he returned, and had asked (obviously a bluffer!): “Are you looking for something?”

Piccolo had decided that Movie Bill would very likely come to the opinion that these little stones were merely specimens of Kokanee ore that he had had from some one. He was all content that, going out by this route, any damage done to the secrecy of their true quest was mended. He had no faintest notion that he should be reckoning with more than Movie Bill, that it was Mark Bantling who had culled the

dropped splinters of rock before the veranda of the Benwell House.

As for Angus, he kept alert enough for two while continuing to seem, to any casual scrutiny, just a stolid and travel-bored elderly gentleman in serviceable non-showy clothes. And indeed and in truth Angus had to admit that he had reached an age when train journeys made him cranky. It was with joy he went aboard the big white-painted stern-wheeler that lay beside the track at Bonnington Landing, one of that breed of vessels (if one can speak of a breed of vessels) that he had seen in many parts. Spick and span relatives of this one breathe grandly up the Oregon, wake the mountain echoes with their whistles, make Columbia River landings, carry tourists spell-bound under the peaks over Flathead Lake, break the reflections of Kootenay Lake like big swans by day, flare up their two searchlight eyes to dusk arrivals, illumining a jetty, a circle of houses, roofs, and a patch of firs. For Angus the romance of reality was aboard these boats. When he mounted the companionway and read the notice: "Lumbermen wearing spiked shoes not allowed on this deck!" an old thrill was revived in his heart. He felt like one going home, although going further from home.

A great medley of men were on the boat, and their faces, the manner of them, also woke old thrills for Angus MacPherson. He knew their type. He had lived with such men at Forty Nine Mile, at Dawson, at Wild Horse, over the seas at Calgoorlie, on the Veld. Old ecstasies of youth returned. He tapped their eagerness, their desire more for the quest than the getting. It was always like that for him. The quest was the fun. His own quest was different from theirs.

They were going to Kokanee, just boomed. He had his secret. Kokanee was but a bluff.

Or was it a secret? He considered the faces on the boat to see if any of them had been on the train, and if so, how long. There were but three that he recognized as having come all the way from Eagle Bend, and these were already on the train at Eagle Bend, when he went aboard, had come from beyond.

And then he wondered. It was a trifling thing that made him wonder. He was looking at a man, and conjecturing about him—where he had first shown up in that bunch of pilgrims. The man turned, caught his gaze (Angus surmised it had doubtless been very keen) and looked away again abruptly.

“Now,” thought he, “if a body is caught staring as I was caught staring at yon fellow, he generally gets a wee bit of a gaze returned to him, kind of in the way old Cobbett looked at the squire.” (Some literary allusion this, doubtless, from Macpherson’s much reading.) “That fellow looked as if he wanted me not to remark him. It may signify nothing. It may be but temperamental to him to look away like that when observed. He may have a guilty conscience. But I certainly saw him in the depot at Spokane talking to that thirsty lad who was going to take in the Spring Fair.”

He visualized the incident: the thirsty and loquacious young man at the Spokane depot, talking to that man, and how their glances drifted to him with what, looking back, seemed an exaggeration of the casual.

The steamer whistle roared and she churned off. They went down to the saloon for lunch, and when they returned to the deck she was still leisurely yet surely breathing on, her wake, along the near west shore, smashing on lonely granite cliffs,

or rolling up on shingle beaches at the end of long gulches that came spreading down, with a creek in their midst.

Well on in the afternoon she suddenly turned inshore, just where the opening begins for the West Arm of Flat-Bow Lake. She headed for a sandy beach, stuck her blunt prow in; a gang-plank was thrust out, two deck hands ran down with a bundle that looked like a rolled tent. They were at once followed by two men in prospector's high boots, grey-shirted, slouch-hatted, carrying blanket rolls.

“Say,” growled Angus, “this is really where we should have got off—here, before we cross the Arm. You see I never thought of it till I saw these prospectors landing. We should have outfitted in Colvalli after all. But then, of course, I'm forgetting. We must go to Kokanee for to get our miners' licenses. Well, well, the new Excitement up yonder seemed the most feasible reason for leaving home. And also,” he lowered his voice and passed on to Piccolo what he had kept as a private belief all day, “I think we are under surveillance, Pic.”

The steamer chugged back, with the plank being drawn in. On the beach the two landed men gathered up their belongings, and marching up the shingle disappeared among the edge of shore willows, came back again, and carried up more bundles. The steamer sighed gently out, and then again headed north. The West Arm opened with a long vista to its first bend. Again the wake broke against rock fronts and backward iron-like cliffs, where precarious trees gloomed along the edge.

“No landing place here,” said Angus. “We shall not be able to walk along the shore south from Kokanee, and then down

the Arm to opposite the place where we begin our southern investigations.”

Piccolo was lost in thought. When he spoke he enquired thinly:

“What do you mean by saying we were under surveillance?”

“Oh, I thought ye had missed that remark and I wasn’t going to repeat it. Never mind if you haven’t seen. Maybe we can start out from Kokanee just like any other prospectors for to explore the hills. Then we’ll get away over those awful peaks southwest on to the West Arm again to right opposite where, as I say, we begin to mount south—homewards, as ye might say. I see the water is pretty high. The snow is melting quick up in the high parts. We can’t walk along the beaches anyway.”

“But who has got us under surveillance?”

“Never mind. If ye don’t see, all right. I may be wrong.”

The steamer at last turned a bend and there, before them, was a scattering of brand new unpainted frame houses, of more elderly log shacks, of white tents, and a plume of steam from a small sawmill. All that collection of human dwellings was small, insignificant, under the tremendous soaring of the firred leagues of slopes, and the prying, behind and over, of sheer rock precipices, five, six, seven thousand feet aloft into the sky. A donkey-engine puffed and a pile-driver dropped its weight with a whack on the shore, but for the time being a jetty did not exist.

Down the cleated gang-plank the motley crowd went with grips and camp-sacks, and blanket rolls. The deck hands, like ants on an ant hill, ran up and down their planks depositing stacks of cases, white sacks, dark sacks, on the small piece of

shingle not yet covered by the freshets from the melting snows on the peaks.

On the way up to the collection of tents and houses, Angus stopped.

“Let me help you carry your load,” said Piccolo.

“You have enough of your own,” answered Angus. “I’m not stopping because I’m over-burdened. I’m stopping to see what hotel is patronized by yon man in the brown suit.”

“You’re suspicious of him? Is he the man you thought was watching us? What would he watch us for? It couldn’t be in connection with our find.”

“What way no’?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why not?”

“Because they knew in Colvalli that we were coming to Kokanee.”

“Innocence, thy name is Piccolo,” said Angus.

The man in brown passed on well beyond them, and then lowered his suit-case and mopped his brow.

“He’s waiting to see where we go,” said Piccolo.

“Hoots man! How do ye know? You have seen nothing, not even what I’ve seen, and I’ve had a wee, wee bit of indication—indication of maybe nothing.”

“Well, we’ll wait and see where he goes; and then we can go to another hotel anyhow, now that you make me suspicious of him too,” said Piccolo, and bending down he employed himself re-adjusting the rope of his blanket roll.

“No, no,” said Angus. “I want to go to the same hotel, for further observation of him.”

“O—I—see,” said Piccolo. And then he had a thought. “Well, then,” said he, “what’s the matter with us going ahead and letting him follow us to our hotel?”

“How do you know that he would? It may suit him better to go elsewhere.”

“I never thought of that.”

“Ah, but I did! There, he’s going on. Follow easily.”

But when they came to where the choice presented itself of a big canvas tent with the word “hotel” painted on a card hanging upon it, and a new frame house with the words “Kokanee Hotel!” on the front, the man in brown halted again and lowered his grip.

“Ye’d think he was packing ore samples into Kokanee,” said Angus. “Never mind. Let him go his way. I believe he’s a nothing. Come on—” and he chose the tent hotel for the sake of days in old camps from Alaska to the southwest of Australia. “I believe he is a crook, but I believe we have no interest for him,” he declared.

They had their cots allotted to them, and washed at one of the basins at a trestle table outside, and then sat down on a log to look at the scene, listen to the water lap and gurgle past. The pile-driver stopped thudding. The saws ceased their buzzing that had been rising to a scream, and ebbing to a hum, and rising again since their arrival.

It was the end of the day’s work. Other men came and washed. Some few went down to the lake and plunged in there. Then a bell rang and Angus and Piccolo went into the big tent again and passed to its far end. Outside, under a big cottonwood, were stoves and two cooks, and waiters standing by in shirt sleeves. The tent dining section was crowded. The men sat down and kept silence, as though to eat were a sacred

rite. Then came the waiters with no menu cards, but to patter off, like a nursery rime, the culinary possibilities. Some sat rigid as in church; some sat with elbows on table; some smoothed their hair; here and there partners sitting together talked in low voices.

The man in brown was at their table, playing with his knife and fork. He toyed with these a while, waiting for his order, and then, holding the fork edge on to the table he inserted his knife blade between its prongs and played with them so.

Piccolo made a wheezing sound.

“Eh?” said Angus.

“I beg your pardon?” said Piccolo.

“I thought ye spoke,” Angus explained.

“No,” said Piccolo.

Then the soup was whipped down before them and the cracker bowl proffered.

It was Piccolo who noticed another man, as well as the man in brown, who played with his knife and fork in the same way. He did not play long, however. He just flicked his knife blade once or twice in between the prongs of his fork making a sharp ticking, and then desisted, looking round for his soup, it seemed. And then it came.

The man in brown was by then at his second course—of steak and potatoes. Having finished that he took up a teaspoon from his saucer and, head on side, like one in a muse, toyed and tapped with it on the cup for a spell, then replaced it in the saucer, blew on the tea, and drank.

All through dinner neither Piccolo nor Angus spoke—till Angus said:

“Well, Pic, we have no table conversation as they have in polite society. Our adage seems to be: ‘Eat first and talk after.’ ”

“Oh, we have table conversation all right, you bet,” murmured Piccolo; but when Piccolo murmured his voice was indeed tenuous.

“What?” said Angus.

“I’ll tell you after.”

“Oh!” said Angus.

Then came prunes, and thereafter the ritual of rising, bending forward to select a wooden toothpick from a small stack in a cup in the table center; and then the slow march out of the tent.

“Ah well, here’s our two cots,” said Angus, as they came to the dormitory portion.

There they were, each with a stool between for guests to sit upon, and every here and there along the wall was a card tacked up which read thus:

GENTS ARE REQUESTED NOT TO SET ON
THE BEDS TO TAKE THEIR SHOES OFF. SET
ON THE STOOLS PLEASE.

“Bad grammar,” growled Angus, staring at one of these, toothpick between teeth.

“We’ll set outside,” said Piccolo.

“As you please.”

So they went out into the open where a golden evening light was over all the big silent sweep of mountains, and a great quiet dwelt, threaded with the sound of plashing and

falling streams and the ceaseless sigh of a thin wind, high aloft in the trees that did not bend.

“Did you hear me say in there I had something to tell you later?” asked Piccolo.

“I did.”

“Well, Mr. MacPherson, we’re watched all right.”

“Oh?”

“I never told you I was once a telegraph operator.”

“Ye never did. Is the time ripe for telling me?”

“Well, I was. And that man in brown tapped out a message with his knife blade in between the prongs of his fork.”

Angus just turned his head and glared at Piccolo under those bushy grey brows of his.

“What he tapped out was this: ‘Is there a man here called Hawke?’ and then another man tapped back to him: ‘He’s right here.’ And then the man in brown stopped.”

“Ay. Well, I guessed he was crooked, but he may only be a hootch carrier looking for the man to deliver to here. They have a kind of prohibition in this country now. You can send out for large quantities, but you may not buy a drink in a saloon. It’s funny, but so it is, I hear. Yon grip of his he handled awful careful. Maybe he’s in the bootlegging business.”

“Oh, yes,” said Piccolo, brightening up, “I should not be suspicious, and so on, I know; but then the man you suspected—you suspected—”

“Uh-hu!” said Angus, and his grey brows came down in a frown.

“Then he tapped it out with a spoon, longs and shorts: ‘Come to me after supper. I’ve something to put you on to

about that old man and the twig beside him.’ Twig, sir, he coded me!”

Angus’s mouth gave a wry twist. He blew smoke. He took a new and thoughtful look at his partner. He said in a low rumble:

“Ye have the quality, Piccolo, of unexpectedness. You rise in my regard. Don’t address me any more, despite the fact that I’m aulder than you considerably, Piccolo, either as sir or Mr. MacPherson. Call me either Scotty or Angus. Scotty maybe, let us say. Here is another proof of the contention I have against the Auld Country ideas. I say the more things a man knows, the more jobs he has tackled, the better. And the West says the same. In the Auld Country—or so it was when I was a laddie—man, if you had done more than one kind of work you were suspeciously regarded. If you had done a matter of three different kinds of work you were looked upon as a vagabond, as ye might say in the nature of a bum or a hobo.”

“Yes sir—I mean Scotty. But what do you think of what I’ve told you?”

“I’m thinking—thinking hard!” replied Angus. “Let us rise up and walk. I think better walking.”

CHAPTER NINE

PICCOLO THOMAS—FEATHER-WEIGHT

THOUGH already warm by day it was, after sunset, a trifle cold thus early in the year, yet many men sat in the open and there was no sound of sneezing. Perhaps the balsam scent, rich, thick around them, antidoted any tendency to chills.

After a slow ramble to the verge of the cleared space, Angus sat down again on a log. The big half moon swam up, or the world rolled to meet it. Its coming began with a glow like fire in the sky, an aerial incandescence, and then the ridge behind which it came was shown all tipped with fire. Angus gazed soberly at that display, and then he said:

“With how sad steps, Oh moon, thou climb’st the skies,
How silently, and with how wan a face.”

He was thinking. It was clear of the ridge when again he spoke:

“There is nothing much to do, Piccolo, that I can see. I hope you don’t talk in your sleep. That’s all. But even that doesn’t maybe much matter. This is a kind of House-that-Jack-built affair I can see now. A thirsty lad on the cars—of whom I told you nothing, so as to keep you from looking suspiciously at him—was sent along with us by somebody who remained in Colvalli to point us out to somebody else in Spokane while we were waiting for our connection.”

“You saw we were watched even then!” ejaculated Piccolo. “And you said nothing!”

“Oh, that’s just the way I am by nature, Piccolo. It’s easy to me. I’m from Aberdeen. In a phrase of this land I am naturally as close as bark to a tree. I saw him; I watched him talking in Spokane with the man in brown—looking at us. That’s all. But it was what ye might call some look, followed by a pretence that it was not. Ay, somebody in Colvalli has, as ye might say, put them wise to us.”

“Movie Bill,” suggested Piccolo.

“I don’t know,” answered Angus, and shook his head sadly. Then said he: “The first link in the chain was only an emissary, not an organizer. He has disappeared. I was right in being suspicious of him. The man in brown clothes from Spokane I think is of a tougher quality. He has come on with us and, I fancy, is more than an emissary—a bearer of news. There are gangs of such fellows all over the country, looking for business in their own line, anything crooked. It’s a great deal more dangerous than the most dangerous of honest work!”

His head gave a slow little nod.

“And we may show them that too,” he went on. “Ay, even us. Being a crook is to follow a risky calling, but some turn to it by reason of a kink. Describe Mr. Hawke to me, Pic. Oh well, you needn’t. You can show him to me without letting him know you are doing so tomorrow morning if not tonight,” and then absently he fell to whistling the air of *My Ain Folk*, stopped abruptly as one put out, and looked over his shoulder.

“They have phonographs up here,” he remarked.

Blent strains of one or two came to them on the edge of the bush. They sat without speech a while longer, but each very thoughtful in the deepening night.

“Well, how about bed?” MacPherson broke the silence.

“All right,” said Piccolo.

“I’m getting up in years. I can do with a sleep after travel,” Angus announced in a tired voice.

They rose and strolled leisurely in the moonlight back to the tent hotel. Some of the guests were already a-bed, men maybe whose labours called them early, teamsters who had horses to see to an hour in advance of the time for the general morning movement to the day’s work. As they lay in bed they saw the man in brown come in. He passed them as if unaware and went to a far cot, but though Piccolo lay awake some time hopeful to be able to “show” Hawke to Mac that night the pleasure was denied him. His lids grew heavy, dropped. He looked at Angus and saw that he was already asleep.

Thus, on his side, cheek on hand, MacPherson slept till morning and wakened to find Piccolo up.

“Good morning, Pic,” said Angus.

Piccolo nodded abruptly, drawing on a shoe.

“You’re setting on your cot,” observed Angus mildly.

Piccolo glared at him.

“Sit! Set! Sit!” he said. “I’ll sit where I dam’ please. I’ll sit! By heck, I’ll show you something!”

The last of sleep went from Angus’s eyes and he stared. Men cranky in the morning he had met, but he had never imagined Piccolo a bad awakener. Indeed it was not a subject that had crossed his mind.

“Twig, by heck!” thinly muttered Piccolo.

“Eh? Do I twig what?” asked Angus, thinking his partner had something in the way of news to communicate.

“I didn’t ask if you twigged anything,” snapped Piccolo. “That man! He’s an early riser or I would have beat him up in his pyjamas, long shirt, or whatever he sleeps in, when I woke and thought of him! I’ll show him whether I’m a ——”

“Sssh!” warned Angus, realizing. “He’s not supposed to know that you could understand his tip-tapping.”

“He’ll understand what’s coming to him when I’m through.”

“Be careful,” said Angus.

“Bitter, bitter!” said Piccolo, on a low note.

“What’s bitter, lad?”

“To think that, after I’ve beat him up, he won’t know why I beat him up.”

“Oh, Piccolo, you can’t beat up a man like yon! I beseech of you not to go and——”

“You too! You’d call me a twig!”

“Sssh! I beseech of ye.”

Piccolo’s mouth shut tight. Angus rose and, half-dressed, went out to wash at the trestle ablution quarters. When he came back Piccolo was still sitting on the cot instead of the stool, chin out-thrust.

“He minds me,” thought Angus, “of our national flower’s remark: ‘Touch me wha dar’, or of the MacPherson motto: ‘Touch not the cat but in glove.’ Terrible, and withal comic!”

Piccolo glanced impatiently at him, eager to go into the dining section, and as soon as Angus was ready, Piccolo marched ahead, strutted into the further part of the tent with chest chucked, hoping to see the man in brown there and evil-eye him. But no man in brown was visible.

“He’s not here,” said Angus, relieved.

“No,” said Piccolo.

“And him we will just call the bird because of the way a name carries to the ears of its owner—is he here?”

“No,” snapped Piccolo again. “I could beat him up too! I’ll show you.”

Angus sighed and said no more.

Breakfast seemed to mollify Piccolo; and, breakfast eaten, they went out, firstly to take out miner’s licences, then gun licences, then to hire a pack-horse to carry their outfit into the heights as far as roads, trails, or open stretches with feed for horses would allow.

To the livery stable proprietor they were nothing unusual. Yes, he had horses for hire, saddle and pack-horses. They knew the woods to the upper land above timber. It was sure a young camp, but they had been up often, his horses, up the Tea Creek trail, up the Kokanee mine road, and the Olsak trail. All that was necessary was to let them loose at the last fixed camp, when they would be wanted no more, un-bit them and tie the lines to the horn so’s not to trip ’em, turn ’em around, give ’em a flip on the haunch. They’d come home, you bet. He charged five days’ hire in advance and left it to prospectors to settle up when they came back if they kept them longer. You betchar! Great thing to have one’s grub, and blankets, and truck packed up hill. One could pack oneself coming back—all the eats gone. Sure, you betchar!

They led the pack-horse selected to the grocery store and there began to load. Into the skin-covered panniers they packed their food and (as a further load of small folded canvas tent and their blankets would have to go atop) to hold all secure Piccolo was throwing out a rope preparatory to making a diamond hitch, taking the twists out of it.

Angus watched him. And it was just then that the man in brown went past. He looked at them with less seeming interest than many of those passing by. There is something about seeing a train off, seeing a steamer sail, seeing men depart into the hills that has a lure for most.

To MacPherson's mind, or eye, it was then very deliberately that his partner did what he did. Piccolo flung out the rope's end so that it gave a flick round the legs of the man in brown. He glanced round, glared, and then—to Angus's relief—passed on. Forward leapt Piccolo.

“Do you want to speak?” he snapped to the man in brown. “What do you glare at me like that for? Got any kick coming?”

The man paused and looked down at him.

“I didn't say anything,” he replied.

“Say! I didn't say say! You looked!”

“A man can look around, can't he?” and the man in brown walked on.

“I don't want any back chat,” piped Piccolo, waltzing after him.

“Come here,” growled Angus. “Don't make a fool of yourself.”

“You too, Scotty, you too think I'm a ——”

Piccolo said no more. Having to bottle up the word added to his rage, and he leapt after his insulter and swinging his hand hit him with the flat on the back of the neck.

“Here quit, you mosquito!” said the man in brown, and turning delivered a blow.

But the blow missed. Piccolo had bobbed down. Angus stared. He wondered whether Piccolo had learnt boxing in the

ring or from watching a Charlie Chaplin film. The man in brown swung another blow at him, and Pic twirled, leapt aside and, more astonishing still, hit—and hit home. It was not a strong hit, but it did that: it got home.

Laughter broke out on the street. A crowd gathered. The man in brown aimed to smash down his assailant, but his assailant was not where he had been, and once again got home.

The crowd whooped with joy. The noise it made was, to Angus's mind, not the noise made at a boxing contest, but at a movie house, at, in fact, the unwinding of a Charlie Chaplin film, or reel. Reel was the word. These two reeled back and forth. The big man drove sledge-hammer blows upon thin air. Piccolo was ubiquitous.

“Oh, ten to one on the humming-bird!” called a man, chuckling with laughter. “Ten to one on the humming-bird for half-an-hour. I don't know which will tire first, but ten to one he ain't hit in half-an-hour!”

The crowd shouted with joy.

“Five to one on the feather-weight!” shouted another. “Go to him. Oh, go to him, you feather! Punch him. Punch him soft if you can't punch him hard!”

Piccolo heard and was furious.

“I'm a ——” he piped, dancing round his man, but he throttled the word on his lips.

Angus sighed, glumly considering him.

That a serious matter like this should be looked upon as a mere comic display by the crowd further enraged Piccolo. Then whack! He received a blow on the forehead and went

down flat on his back without bending. The onlookers were hushed for a moment.

“Gee! You shouldn’t have hit him!” was hardly spoken when Piccolo was erect again. He came up so swiftly that it seemed he had rebounded like a cootie. He had gone down without a bend, and was up without a bend, it appeared, from the sudden horizontal, flat on the ground, to the abrupt perpendicular again. The way he rose made the whole affair once again comic. The hush of horror when he fell down was ended; there went up a roar of merriment. The tears were in some men’s eyes: some held their sides.

Up came Piccolo like that, then, and so suddenly as to take the man in brown entirely off his guard. He came up and leapt forward, and landed a hard punch under his opponent’s chin. Back the man in brown staggered—and recovered. Then the crowd surged between them, slapping each on the back, shouting with amusement.

The man in brown walked on, grinning, but it was a mere veneer of a grin, a distorted grin, over an expression of chagrin and rage. Piccolo returned to Angus’s side somewhat blown.

“A twig, indeed!” he remarked. “A twig!”

“That’s all right! That’s all right!” soothed Angus. “Man, ye have held up business in this Excitement. Do you know that the pile-driver stopped? The mill would have stopped too if the man at the saws was not hidden from view! Oh Pic, you are surely the white-haired boy. You are awful unexpected. A cowpuncher; then you spring it on me that you are a telegraph operator; and now—now a contortionist!”

“Contortionist!” yelled Piccolo.

Angus made soothing sounds.

“I didn’t hit him hard enough, that was all,” said Piccolo.

“Ay, ay. That was all. But you did wonders.”

The newly appointed policeman of Kokanee had done nothing to stop the fight. In such places the police exercise their discretionary powers. They step in when they think the psychological moment has arrived. All was going well, it seemed to him. The moment had not arrived to be more than a distant unobserved tiptoeing spectator.

When the fight was over he strolled along meditatively, watched Angus and Piccolo a moment interested. He walked on, and beyond the last house halted till they overtook him.

“Going far?” he asked as they passed.

They did not reply.

He smiled, and brushing aside his coat showed his star. Angus stood thinking, pack-horse abruptly halted at heel. He considered the policeman thoughtfully, noted that he was a short square man, like two squares indeed, the lower square cut in two for legs, with a tremendous depth of chest. From front to back he was almost as broad as he was in the wonted sense of the word broad—that is from shoulder to shoulder. He stood with no swagger, his head a little forward instead of held back taut. Dark piercing eyes, a humorous mouth, a short hook nose, a complexion as of smoky ivory: that was the policeman of Kokanee. Angus trusted him, and stepping closer, in a low voice, he said:

“We’re supposed to be going up prospecting on the Olsak range, but we are going clean on over and down to the West Arm of Flat-Bow Lake.”

“You’ll never make it. Too much snow up there.”

“Been up?” asked Angus.

“Not this year,” admitted the policeman.

“Well, we’ll try,” said Angus.

“It’s up to you. Good luck, Sourdough.”

“Good luck to you, constable.”

CHAPTER TEN

SCOT MEETS SCOT

THE pack-horse had clearly been upon that road out of Kokanee before, for at the first trail it turned aside from the grade of the wagon road. The two men watched him, uncertain. Piccolo glanced at Angus; Angus looked on along the road.

“Let him go,” said he. “It looks as if it was a cut-off.”

And “cut-off” it was. Following the horse they came out, a couple of hundred feet higher up, and no more, upon another stretch of road. Opposite was another entrance to a cut-off, and on went the horse. After about half-a-dozen of these arrivals at the zigzagging wagon road the horse refused to heed at all the next apparent cut-off. But as that one was near the end of a switch in the road the two men considered that perhaps it was not really a cut-off but a trail leading sharply away from the road altogether. Not so, however. The explanation for the horse’s ignoring of that cut-off was merely that it was a very steep and rocky one.

The road ran for half-a-mile athwart the hill, bent sharply and came back over half-a-mile; and then they saw, coming to where the cut-off entered the road below, just how steep it was. No wonder pack-horses had been allowed, there, to take the long way on.

The climbing to their unaccustomed legs was weariness. They trudged slowly and the horse, looking round on them, went leisurely too, tearing grass, eating all the way. Thus, sometimes by the road, sometimes by cut-offs they mounted till there came to their ears the hush-sh-sh of a creek, a little

later the roar of it, and shortly after a rub-a-dub and waltzing sound of machinery. There, perched on the edge of a brawling water in a gorge, a falling stream that leapt, foamed, down under the spread branches of tamarack and spruce, was an air-compressor plant.

Angus went to the door. Piccolo, halting, watched him. The horse tore grass.

“Hullo Jock! Hoo are ye the day?” Angus roared in a voice to penetrate the sounds of water power and machinery.

“He’s got a friend here,” thought Piccolo.

To the door came a man who rubbed a bunch of cotton waste between his grimy fingers preparatory to shaking hands. He pump-handled Angus and these two stood there with the black cavern of the power house behind them, shouting to each other. Piccolo thought he might have been introduced, felt dejected, despised. His face showed this dejection when Angus, all radiant, turned and nodded toward him and called:

“Friend of mine—Mr. Thomas.”

Piccolo advanced to shake hands, and to his amazement heard Angus enquire of the engineer: “Your name, sir?”

“MacBride,” said the man, grabbed Piccolo’s hand and each assured the other of the pleasure of meeting.

“MacPherson is my name, Angus MacPherson,” said Angus.

Then he shook hands again with MacBride and he and Piccolo turned back to the horse. There was a “Git up, you cayuse,” and they continued the ascent.

Piccolo was puzzled; but when the roar of the place decreased, Angus explained.

“Ay! When I see machinery I try that,” he said. “I just put my head in the door and cry out: ‘Hullo Jock. Hoo are ye the day?’ and man, it mostly is successful. Yon Scotland is an awful wee bit of an island, or part of an island; and an awful lot of Scots fall off. And an awful lot of them are engineers. He tells me he has a telephone up to the mill and to the mine, and he said for the sake of Auld Scotland he would let me know if I ’phoned him from above if anybody came up after us. He’s going to watch out during the day. I know his home, you see, which is Glasgow, as well as I know Aberdeen. We mentioned a few names probably meaningless to you, Piccolo—the Broomielaw, Argyll Street, the Tron, the *Clutha* boats on the Clyde. He was engineer once on a *Clutha*; and then I said: ‘Man, an absurd idea has got around in Kokanee that I have struck a fine lead up in the mountains here, and the truth is I was never here before; but I believe the rumour is so strong that I may be followed and watched. I’d like to know just for fun.’ I’d seen the wire coming out of his house, you see. And the sensible body understood, Pic. ‘You go into the mill, or at the mine,’ he said, ‘and ask to speak down to the compressor and I’ll tell ye who has passed up, if anybody.’ That was when I called you to be introduced, so that I could have his name. A fine gallant! A fine laddie!”

It was about noon when they reached the mill. They came upon it suddenly, round a hump of hill where was nothing in the way of view at all, they tramping behind the dawdling, grass-plucking horse in deep woods. And there it was, on a cleared edge of hill, half-a-dozen frame houses, and the great ore bins, and the big barn-like edifice of the concentrator.

Here they stopped to eat a packet of sandwiches, the first meal, as is the wont on such trips, having been put up for

them at the hotel of the “jumping-off place,” so that they could make some distance before halting to cook. The shingle roofs basked in the sun, squirrels chirped now and then, the horse continued to tear grass near them, culling all the tufts by the road edge. No human being showed anywhere. The only human movement was of two stretched wire ropes that disappeared uphill along the timber. Ore-buckets pendent from these on one side came drifting across the scene into a high building and, equi-distant, others came out and drifted away empty upward through the woods.

“I wonder which house we go to to ’phone,” said Piccolo.

“Oh we’ll ’phone at the mine,” said Angus. “I was casual in my remark to yon Glasgow lad at the compressor. We’ll not excite him by ’phoning twice. I just said to him I’d heard that some silly bodies thought I had already found a bonanza whereas I had never been here before. ‘It would tickle me,’ I says, ‘to hear we was shadowed.’ I would be tickled only, Pic, amused—no more. That was my attitude. Says he: ‘I’ll watch and report to ye if anybody does go up that I don’t know is just going to the mine.’ Says I: ‘Oh there’s doubtless a few folk going up into the mountains this way prospecting in the ordinary way—but yes, I’ll ’phone you anyhow to let you know we’ve made the mine, and you can let me know if any suspicious comic characters have passed up.’ Casual, casual, you see, Piccolo. Well, we’ll take the road again.”

Piccolo nodded and rose and clicked to the horse.

From the mill onwards the road was rougher, less travelled since the installment of the gravity-tram between mine and mill. It was less road than trail; or a compromise between the two. The rich odour of Linnæus’ emblem, the American Twin-Flower, every here and there was like a pool of strange

sweet scent among the rougher scent of the firs and pines. The firs stood with boughs less wide-spread, indicating a higher level, the level where either they had more need of steepness to shoot the weight of snow, or were trained to that angle by the weight of winter snow. Mounting, as they were, the eastern slope of a steep mountain they were in shade by afternoon and, turning, could see the range across the lake all ablaze with sunlight. But even over there the dark began its upward course. The main lake ceased to sparkle like mackerel scales when they glimpsed it between the tree boles. The lower hog-backs turned to dark brown while still the high peaks gleamed blue and white.

The way twisted and twined, now athwart the slopes, and anon definitely ahead across a plateau where horse and man made no sound, passing, treading on a carpet of fallen tamarack needles.

“One thing Mr. MacBride told me,” said Angus. “It was the same as the policeman told me at Kokanee, and that was that we could not get over the top yet for the snow.”

“You told him where we were going—that we were going over the summit?” asked Piccolo.

“No, no. He told me indirectly. Says he: ‘I suppose you’ll prospect upward, following the snow. There’s a pass or two over to the other side. You go over all right in summer. I have na been up,’ he said, ‘but so they tell me. There is the glaciers and passes though, on south, and one between them and one north of the north one. Tea Creek comes out of a lake below the north one.’ So you see he told me, without knowing, what it is supposed to be like on top. Says he: ‘There’s a prospector gone up to a claim he was working on last fall. He went up past here a fortnight ago, and I noticed he had snow-

shoes on his pack.’ Snow-shoes, Pic. Well, we could make a makeshift snow-shoe out of string if the snow is soft; but my own impression is that we’ll be able to make it, either on the edges of the rock slides, or by keeping up to where the snow is hard. Our boots are not the best for the job. It’s a pity I did not think to tell you to bring shoe-packs. I’ve brought an old pair.”

“Me? I’ve brought three pairs of moccasins,” replied Piccolo. “Got them at the Colvalli reserve. I always like to have them to put on round the campfire evenings, all the same as slippers.”

“Hech sirs!” said Angus, laughing. “Piccolo Thomas—telegraph operator, contortionist, outfitter! Moccasins will be fine with two-three pair socks inside to keep your feet warm. But we’ll not meet trouble halfway. Many and many a time, from many and many a place, have I set out with the words of the storekeepers and town bodies in my ears: ‘You’ll never make it.’ There was always a reason. In one place it was: ‘The ice is breaking.’ In others it was: ‘The pass is full of snow.’ In others: ‘There is not a drop of water.’ This is undoubtedly our best way—above timber and, if possible, between snow and timber. We haven’t the time to break a trail all through the woods to the place on the West Arm where we cross. I’m too auld.”

“It would tire you too much,” said Piccolo.

“It wouldn’t do that,” answered Angus slowly. “I’m speaking somewhat metaphorically. I mean that the job would be too long. I want to get to our goal before I’m absolutely ancient and decrepit.”

“Oh, I see,” said Piccolo, and obligingly smiled.

“MacBride told me they had some snow-shoes stored up at the mine; but I think we’ll not borrow them now. It would suggest over clearly that we are thinking of going high indeed. Man, you can see the way the water is full and roaring in that creek that the snows are going rapidly up above.”

Then before them was another steep ascent and they heard a cheep and chirp not of squirrel or chipmunk, and there, as the trail bent, over their heads swung the ore-buckets.

“Man it’s wonderful!” exclaimed Angus. “In the midst of the wilderness they trestle towers and the buckets dangling along! The romance of it! The romance of it! And what is romance? Romance is just reality, Pic. I say romance is but reality.”

“By heck,” observed Piccolo, “I could do with supper, a pipe, and a darn good sleep.”

And there in front of them were suddenly roofs among the high trees; and above the roofs jagged edges of treeless rock with patches and veins of snow, and an exquisite light was in that upland valley. The horse quickened its pace into a lush meadow just beside the mine buildings. On the edge of the mine dumps men sat in attitudes of waiting, infinitely small-looking under the tremendous flaring ridges.

“Good evening, lads! Good evening, gentlemen!” Angus hailed the miners and muckers of the day shift waiting for their supper.

“Good evening,” they replied.

“I want to telephone down to Mr. MacBride,” said Angus. “Where do I go, if you please?”

“Right here, old timer,” answered one of the younger men, rising. “I’ll take you to the house.”

Angus turned to Piccolo and murmured: “You stay with the horse, Pic, and don’t talk at all except about the weather. That’s safe.”

But Piccolo did not trust himself before all these curious eyes. He knew his weakness for letting secrets out even when desirous to keep them.

“The horse won’t stray,” said he, “not from grass like this”; and he followed Angus to a long, low building from which came a wire that dangled away down hill, insulated on a bottle neck stuck to a looped tree branch. Their guide opened the door and nodded toward the interior.

“There’s the ’phone,” said he. “Two rings for George MacBride.”

He turned away and went back to rejoin his comrades. Piccolo stood in the doorway and watched those who loafed and those who came to a door, obviously of the wash-house, towelling themselves after ablutions.

“Hullo,” said Angus, “That Mr. MacBride?... yes, yes, this is MacPherson.... Oh no, we’re right up at the mine ... indeed it is a trivial matter. I just thought of it when you mentioned it, but maybe it was foolish ... indeed ye can never tell ... no, we’ve not had supper yet.” (Piccolo was interested in that!) “We can, can we? Well, I’m much obliged to ye, Mr. MacBride. I just rang up because I promised. There is maybe nothing in that silly half-idea I had ... so-long, and thank ye, and luck to ye too.”

As he hung up the receiver a man came from one of the buildings and beat with a stick upon an iron triangle hanging at the door. Piccolo, sniffing, could disentangle the odour of

hash from that of balsam. He could whiff a T-bone steak among the scent of the spruce.

“We can eat here, it seems,” said Angus. “So we will. And we can put our horse in the stable.”

They returned to the meadow and the last of the men in the string hurrying supperwards told them where the stables were. There they led their horse and unpacked in haste, then crossed to the dining-room.

“Ay, we were rightly informed,” said Angus, pausing to read the legend on a card tacked upon the door whence came the appealing odours:

TRANSIENT GUESTS: MEALS 75¢

They entered a long bare room where trestle-tables and forms stood in rows and waiters rushed agile at the back of the big hungry miners and muckers. They stood a moment waiting, looking for a vacant place; and a man at a side table called to one of the waiters: “Bob!”

He who was called Bob, a youth like a dancing master, in light shoes, whirled toward them on receiving a nod in their direction from the boss who had called him.

“How-do, gentlemen?” said he.

Angus turned and first courteously bowed to the boss who, with a twinkle, bowed in return. Then he bowed (to quote his own words) to, as ye might say, the hash-slinger and enquired: “Can we eat here?”

“You bet your life,” said Bob.

“Any special table for transients?” asked Angus.

“Oh, I guess anywhere, sir. You set there. Both together?”

“Yes.”

“You set there, gentlemen, and I’ll fix you up.”

As they followed him to their places Piccolo remarked in his thin voice:

“I don’t care if every tough in America is piling up behind us. Let them come. A raft of ’em. Me for a T-bone steak.”

“Did ye speak?” asked Angus.

Piccolo shook his head. The worst of his voice was that if he tried to talk high in a low voice—if you get the meaning!—he talked as high as a bat, for his voice would persist in going up as well as going thin. When he was distended like a pouter pigeon he sighed, let his belt out two holes, took a toothpick, looked at Angus. Angus nodded. They rose. Each tendered his “six bits” to the waiter and strolled out.

As they walked over to the stables Angus explained that MacBride had seen no one go past uphill all day, and had continued to look out ever and again.

“Well that’s all right, then,” said Piccolo. “We are not being followed after all by that man Hawke and the fellow in brown who coded me a twig to him.”

Angus looked at him thoughtfully.

“You have an interesting jack-easy and ingenuous character, Pic,” he said. “I have made a study of you already. You were going to damn yon Movie Bill at a venture, as ye might say, without proof; and now you are going to imagine that the gentleman in brown is going to have no connection with you just because we’ve not heard already that he is after us.”

“You forget the way I beat him up,” said Piccolo proudly.

Angus MacPherson's mouth twisted. He restrained the laughter that bubbled within him.

"True," said he, "he might be afraid of getting the same again."

He said it to mollify Piccolo; but Piccolo suddenly realized there was no great weight behind that beating-up.

"You're joshing me!" he exploded, and flushed like a school-girl.

"No, no, man," said Angus. "But I can't think that word would be passed up by yon thirsty lad from Eagle Bend to Spokane, and the man in brown play telegraph operator for to find an agent of his crook-society in Kokanee, and all for nothing, as ye might say—nothing happen, nothing happen. It is neither like life nor like books. But maybe so. I wonder why it is that I am fair haunted by that redeeculous rime:

‘Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water;
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling after.’

Man, Piccolo, have you ever noticed that the rimes of the people as they call them, are unco' bad? *After* doesn't rime inordinately well with *water*."

Piccolo perked up his head.

"I've been studying your make-up, sir—Scotty," said he, "and I've noticed one thing: and that is that when you start up talk like this here about nothing to the purpose you are thinking away deep below."

Angus wagged his head sideways at him, elevated his bushy brows.

“We’ll know one another real well afore we get through this trip,” said he, and then sat murmuring:

“Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail o’ water;
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling *oughter!*”

but his eyes had an absent and considering expression.

“Well,” said he, “if you’ve shaken down your seventy-five cent transient meal I think we might as well push on a wee bit before nightfall.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SNOW-SLIDE

TIPS of a million trees below. Just above, acre after acre of that little low inches-high growth like heath, called bryanthus. Fanning rock slides lying in great wedges, butt ends down into the topmost timber, apexes lost in snow of the summit range. Sunshine, and a cold wind blowing down from the glaciers, glaciers draped between protruding bastions of rock. Pinnacles of rock like pumice-stone or coral in the light, stabbing up through the high snows, dizzying to look at, like windowless Woolworth buildings.

The horse, very lively in the keen, rare air of that altitude, his packs taken off, rolled in the last grass. They had made the end of the timber after the night camp not far from the mine, made it about noon of the succeeding day. Here was the Olsak range in all its grandeur—and with its dangers—before them. Now and then a ptarmigan scurried over the fields of false heath, visible there, against that background, and flew on over the snow, hardly to be picked out against its white unless noticed when flying over the darker tracts and keenly followed by the eyes.

“What worries me,” said Angus, “is that we have heard no single whistle of a marmot. They are the great weather prophets and none of them are out and about yet! Not even for a peep to see how the year is coming on.”

“No matter. We’re not marmots; we’re men,” said Piccolo. He had been musing on how he discomfited the man in brown, forgetting the laughter of the spectators and considering that, rightly recalling that joust, he had really

“beaten him up,” punished him for the aspersive description: twig.

“Ay, we’re men,” said Angus. He looked round him. “And we are awful small against all this immensity. Yonder’s a smoke away north. That will be about the head of Tea Creek. Some lone prospector pottering there after floats, I expect. They say there are a lot of prospectors up here already this year.”

He unslung his binocular-glasses and carefully focused them.

“Ay, I can see another smoke below. Another prospector, I should say. Now for us the question is: should we make a camp here and send the horse home, or should we keep the horse in case we can use him to pack round the edges of these peaks? We’re surely high enough here to see the West Arm of the lake, but it is hidden from us by that long scaur of ice and snow. Think you we could get the horse round?”

Piccolo surveyed the unheeding range and had no answer except, after long scrutiny: “Search me!”

“Well, we’ll make lunch and then just see how yon wedge of bare hill looks,” Angus decided.

Lunch over they picketed the horse lest they might again require it, and then set off south to find if there was any feasible way to coast the range between timber and glacier.

“To go through the woods below would be the work of months,” said Angus, looking down at them. “Thick! Man, they’re a fair jungle, as ye might say.”

On they tramped over alternating areas of rubble, of snow, of bryanthus. Then they came to what was not just a field of snow but ice, and Angus shook his head.

“If it extends far round the horse might not make it,” he said. “He’s not rough-shod. It was summer almost where we got him down below there. Leave this to me, Pic. I’ve done it before.”

Then abruptly he turned to his partner, brows raised in enquiry.

“But maybe so have you,” he said. “Telegraph operator you spring on me. Then prize-fighter. Maybe you are an ex-member of the Alpine Club?”

Piccolo, staring ahead at the wedge of ice, smiled.

“No,” said he.

“All right. I’ll go on a wee bit anyhow and see how it goes.”

Ax in hand, clipping footholds, now and then hitting the frozen snow with the back of the ax and listening to the sound of his blows lest there was but a crust over a cavity, he went as far as to the angle of the slope. Then he came back to say:

“We’d better get down into the edge of the woods to camp. We’ll make it in the morning. It gets cold up here when the sun is going.”

“You bet,” said Piccolo. “It is just my ears that get it. Funny! It’s like summer, as you say, down in Kokanee and up here—it’s my ears get it; and at night I have enough blankets for everywhere except the small of my back.”

“Quite so,” said Angus MacPherson.

So down they went into the shelter of the timber, filled their cans with water at a creek brawling out from under a complete arch of snow and ice. Early in the morning they

were up, saddled and packed the horse and had the beast carry their load to the glacier's beginning.

“If only he was winged like the horse called Pegasus, Piccolo, we would find him still useful. As it is he may now as well go home. We'll cache part of our supply here and see about packing round as much as we can and getting over ourselves.”

So the horse was unladen for the last time, then led back to the beginning of the timber, headed downhill. Both of them went down with it. It was chill at that early hour. For one to wait by the cache would have been a cold employ, and there was that in the vastness of these upper regions of the world (to Piccolo at any rate an unexpected and appalling vastness) that made human companionship good. He wondered how prospectors could go alone, for months, among such scenes. He looked at his grim partner and understood better that air he had of patience, restraint.

Angus took the bridle off the horse. The lines and it he tied securely to the pack-saddle; then he gave the horse a clap on the haunch. It looked round at them with its big understanding eyes, and went away stepping daintily, head lowered, down the declivity through the woods.

Angus turned from watching it go and noted the expression on Piccolo's face.

“What are ye thinking?” he asked.

Piccolo sighed.

“Oh, just that we are all alone now—just us two with these awful up-ended rocks,” he replied.

“Ay. It was a kind of symbolical picture, yon horse giving us that look and then—gone away through the woods. There!

I heard his hoof click on a stone! You are accustomed to the society of horses, Pic. Ay, horses and dogs are fine company. I wish Darkie was with us; but he's company for Mauggie—Margaret, you know, Miggles. Yes, all alone now.”

As he spoke a sound like a wind passing rose above them. It changed into a noise like a steam exhaust; it increased in volume; it was suggestive of a thousand giants putting up a thousand parcels in tissue paper. It rushed towards them, and was followed by a rumbling that finished in a series of stony reports. It was an avalanche on the slopes somewhere, ending in a rock slide. But they did not see it, only saw a sift of snow rise and fall beyond a protruding rib of rock, like flour in air when a flour bag is carelessly emptied.

The last of it came to their ears—the rending of wood, trees being broken by the roll of the rocks below timber-line. Then silence for a moment, and then a great chirping of squirrels in the forest, perturbed clucking of grouse down there in agitation.

They returned to their cache and making up as heavy loads as they could conveniently carry, with these well packed, and their rifles, proceeded across the frozen snow where Angus had cut the way.

“And now,” said Angus, “there's where we've got to go. You wouldn't ask even a mountain horse to do that—only a mountain goat or me!”

Piccolo frowned.

“All right,” he said thinly but with vigour.

“Yon is just like a cornice of ice hanging over us,” Angus remarked, and he pointed. “But we are early enough in the day; there is no great chance of it all falling—like a broken cornice. We're really a good month too early attempting this.

That Kokanee policeman, with the dark eyes and the fist like a ham, knew what he was talking about. But I think we will make it. I come from Aberdeen!”

So saying he strutted off, planting his feet with vigour, ax in hand. They headed south, across the lower snows, cutting steps for themselves where-ever there was a possibility of glissading down. They crossed intervening rock slides cannily, not to start the boulders going; and then suddenly round the knife-edge of the crest they saw the woods below to south, and had a glimpse of the West Arm nine thousand feet beneath them, peaceful, awesome, quiet.

A flight of Clark’s crows rose from some trees and drifted like motes in a sun ray. Piccolo’s heart was thumping vehemently, but he said not a word about that, considering that where Angus went without a rest he could go. They rounded the hill’s edge; and there before them was a field of ice. The lower edge they could not see over. It might go on in easy grades, or it might drop hundreds of feet.

“Up or down?” asked Angus of the vastness.

He dropped his pack and carefully scrambled along on the near solid rib of rock. Piccolo saw him lying down and looking over. He came back very serious of face.

“It’s a sheer drop of a thousand feet,” he said. “The bits of ice falling off at the edge go plunk down on what looks like the peat of Auld Scotland, a black-looking earth; and the lumps of ice when they fall off are white, but lying down there on that black soil they look like amethyst brooches for to clasp a highland plaid. There’s no way for it, Pic, but to go up and cut steps along under yon big eave of snow.”

Piccolo actually stammered: “But if it falls?”

“The edge will hardly fall till the afternoon warmth. Any slide from above will shoot over us,” Angus assured him. “That’s why I suggest doing it right under the cornice. It’s the only way. Halfway down, if there came a slide of snow, it would shove us off the slope the way you brush the crumbs off your knees after a meal. Ay, right at the top, if there is a slide, it will shoot over us—like the way the water shoots over folks going under the falls of Niagara.”

Piccolo drew a long breath.

“If you can do it I can,” said he. “You’ll have to lead, Mr. MacPherson—I mean Scotty—”

“Call me Angus,” said MacPherson. “I admit we’re up against a wee bit of danger here together; but we are not going back.”

They climbed on, as high as they could among the rocks, and then set out across the hard ice-cruled snow, straight under the eaves of snow, where the falling of them, ever and again, had left a hump like a new bastion, or breast-work, on the lower side. But that bastion was about a foot away from the cliff front.

Piccolo heaved a sigh of relief when he saw this wonderful natural path and, above all, that ice balustrade. Its firm presence there made a vast difference, steadied the nerves. Without it, he felt, he would have been too dizzy to move on. With it there, even though never once did he actually step against it and require it to prevent a headlong slide, he went easily.

Angus too shared that feeling. He looked up at the curve of cliff and snow eaves over him, but that ridge to the lower side gave him confidence. It was solid. He knew that if they

slipped against it, it was amply strong enough to support them.

Suddenly the full day was shut out for them—a rushing sound was in their ears, a queer white shadow engulfed them and passed. It was as Angus had said it would be in such a contingency in the event of a snowslide higher up; the little avalanche had shot clear over them. They looked down on the last of it rushing on its way.

“It’s begun early,” said Angus, over his shoulder. “But there will be no big one till the sun gets warmer, however.”

They went on quickly, to get their passage over. They reached the further end of that high cliff, and to their delight saw that the base of the next stretch was not simply a drop—space. Along the butt-end were trees, the edge of the timber, low steep-eaved spires of hardy firs.

“If we slide, we slide; but we’re round the bend,” said Angus as if thinking aloud rather than addressing Piccolo.

He bent down and, thus humped, moved on, cutting steps all the way. Moving like crabs, atilt to the slope, their feet planted solidly in the steps, steps with a good inward dip to them, they adventured onward. But the day was wearing on. Above them suddenly came that sighing sound they knew. And they were on a long polished incline.

“Pray! We must pray!” cried out Piccolo.

Angus glanced round at him.

“We must keep moving,” he shouted. “We can render up thanks afterwards. Come on.”

He gave but one look upwards and then flinging his pack sidewise from his shoulder he shot forward with it, as if it were a toboggan. Piccolo, with a gasp, understood his design

and followed. Behind them rushed the snow while they, sliding and kicking out, tobogganed at a tangent on their packs across the last of that slope. They came, blown and staring, to rest against the roots of the hardy little pinnacle-like firs below.

Angus sat still upon his pack. Then very sincerely he looked up at the awesome white stretches, and—

“Thank God!” said he. “Thank God!”

He mopped his forehead.

“Man, it’s astonishing how hot a body can be in a seemingly cold seetuation like this!” he remarked.

They sat there to breathe some time, very hot; but anon the cold chilled them.

“Pic, my lad,” said Angus, “would ye step back and bring the rest of our grub from the cache where we left it? You are younger than me. We needn’t both go.”

Piccolo’s jaw dropped; he stared. He thought to say; “It is late in the day, and would it not be better to go early tomorrow?” Angus’s eyes were keenly gazing upon him from under the grey tufts of brows.

“All right,” said Piccolo, and rose; and taking up his ax made the first clip for a foothold in the front of the frozen snow.

“Fine, man! Fine, man!” said Angus. “Come back. I have not entire patience with Lord Tennyson’s words about:

‘Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do or die....’

The day is coming, though it's a long way off, I fear, when we will all reason why. But of course we must have our leaders to hold us together. It seems to me that you have elected me leader; and if I wanted that grub, and thought it worth the risk, I'd go for it myself. That's the kind of leader to have! I wouldn't do it myself, and so I'll not ask you. I was joking; but it was maybe over Scots for you to catch. Come back, Piccolo. Man, ye are certainly a fine little twig of a body," and his eyes were so full of friendliness that Pic's, for some reason—he was perhaps a trifle unstrung by their experience—filled a moment with tears.

"What do we do it for, I wonder?" asked Piccolo later, as they sat by a roaring fire and devoured flapjacks and bacon and swilled hot tea. "There's no ore worth it."

"No, that is so," agreed Angus. "We do it for the fun of the thing."

Piccolo raised his head and stared.

"Ay, man, we do," said Angus. "Even so. We kind of get in touch with the eternal in our searchings for our earthly Golcondas and Eldorados. You know that thing of Edgar Allen Poe's:

'Over the mountains of the moon,
Beyond the valley of the shadow,
Ride, boldly ride, the Shade replied,
If ye seek for El Dorado.'

Ay, ay!"

He sighed and stretched and drew off his shoe-packs, and took out the insoles all very carefully, like an old maid, and hung them on forked twigs to dry before the fire.

“It’s grand to have dry feet,” he said. “We are getting along fine. Get your feet warm and it is wonderful how it improves the whole man. Here’s a splendid shelter for us. It is more cosy here than anybody who has not done the like of this would imagine. Just a bit fold of a hill against the wind and a screen of trees”; and he suddenly broke again into verse:

“ ‘Confide ye aye in Providence,
for Providence is kind,
And bear ye a’ life’s changes wi’
a calm and tranquil mind.
Though penned and hemmed on every side
ha’e faith and ye’ll win through,
For ilka blade o’ grass keps
its ain drap o’ dew.’

Is the phrasing of that too Scottish for the sentiment to reach you? It’s a real helpful sentiment, Pic.”

“I understand it all right,” said Piccolo. “It’s fine and dandy. Your Rabby Burns wrote it, I suppose.”

“You may well be excused for supposing so,” said Angus, “when there are uncounted Scotsmen who would suppose the same. Ay, ay. Even in the face of avalanche and rock slide, and many a grievous thing, I cannot make myself believe that by and large, as the sailor bodies say, it is not a good world, a grand world; it is all most mysterious, but splendid and wonderful at base. Ay questing! We’ll know the meaning of it all some day.”

Piccolo did not seem to understand. He sat staring at Angus as though he thought him a little bit “queer.”

Socks and insoles dry again, Angus put them on—and in—and went along the timber edge to survey the land before them. He returned to report:

“We’re facing south now, Piccolo. We are only over the ridge of the mountain that runs down to the main lake. I doubt we have another spur to circumvent before we get on to a creek running down to the West Arm.”

“And more of these places to cross?” asked Piccolo, not as one fearful, Angus thought, but as one desirous to know the worst so as to be ready to face it.

“Maybe we’d be better,” said Angus, “to lose the time that it would take entirely to circumvent them; maybe we’d be better to work down to the bottom of each, and even break through the timber. Now that we have no pack-horse, and only can pack a limited supply of grub, time is the essence of the contract; but by the same token we could get through the dense timber below easier than with a horse.”

“We’d better take time,” agreed Piccolo. “Going along right over the tops here we might do your Jack and Jill game and both feed the coyotes down there. What’s that?”

His eyes, staring towards the place to north where they had crossed the slopes, focussed on two black dots moving under the cornice.

“Goat? Goat?” queried Angus, and then told himself: “No, man! Goat would be white.”

He fumbled out his binocular glasses and focussed them.

“They seem to have known better than us what it was like on the tops here, Pic,” he said. “They both have woolly caps on like Arctic explorers. Try your eyes on that. You’ll have to

re-focus, for your eyes will be stronger than mine. See what you can make of this Nansen and Stefánsson outfit.”

Piccolo took the glasses.

“Why!” he exclaimed. “It is the man Hawke in front and—it’s that man in brown who morsed to him with the knife and fork.” He kept the glasses upon them. “They’ve come to the end of the cornice,” he reported.

“What have they stopped for?” asked Angus.

“I guess they’ve come to where we did that toboggan on our packs and they can’t see any more ice steps.”

“No, to be sure they won’t see any steps! That snow-slide would cover up the last at the other side and, at this side, even the marks of where we kicked along.”

“I guess they think we got under the avalanche,” said Piccolo. “They can’t have seen our smoke or they wouldn’t have come so close on our heels.”

“They may think they can intimidate us in the midst of these solitudes up here into telling just where we are going.”

Suddenly Piccolo leapt to his feet and gasped.

“Look! Look!” he cried.

Another hanging eave, or cornice, of frozen snow toppled; and, as the snow glides from a roof, so from the long acres of the sloping shelf above, the snow at once slid. The broken cornice crashed on the two dots of men up there and the avalanche followed.

“One of them’s engulfed!” ejaculated Angus.

“No. That’s his pack!” shrilled Piccolo. “He let it go. There, he’s gone now. Oh! Oh, he’s covered!”

The snow ran, crisp and dry, in layers, like flat waves, down the slope. They overlapped, one upon the other; they

rushed forward and down. It was, to those two up there, like having their feet knocked from them by a ton weight, sliding raft. The snow shot down, fanning to north of the knoll that Piccolo and Angus had reached. Trees were rent and crashed. There was a rumble of large boulders. Then the very powdery snow followed, billowing and puffing over the slope.

And then nothing—just the serene ridges, toothed edges of rocks showing through the snow, pinnacles too abrupt to hold snow in the sun rays.

Suddenly Angus, gazing heavily across that scene again so quiescent, exclaimed:

“There was a third one! They brought another man with them. Look yonder!”

Piccolo looked at him to see the direction of his eyes, and turned the glasses to the place.

“Gosh!” he said. “He’s lost his nerve, that one. He’s seen it all. He’s seen what they got up against. He’s sitting down.”

“Let me see,” said Angus, and took the glasses that Piccolo, still staring at the lone man across the slide, surrendered to him with a sidewise motion of his arm.

The truth was that Angus’s sight was keener than Piccolo’s, despite his age. He decreased the strength of the focussing and peered.

“Give me your shoulder to lean an elbow on, Pic,” said he. “My blood beats so that I get off the mark.”

Piccolo stood before him, and Angus steadied an elbow on the young man’s shoulder as he gazed.

“Ay, yon man is either hit by some bit of rock or ice, or is overcome by nothing but his feelings. That’s all right—he’s rising. He’s looking up at the eaves again. He’s stopped. He’s

turned back. There, he's gone from sight. And now," he turned round, "do you know our duty, Pic?"

"No."

"To see if we can get these two out. We must work down to the bottom of the slide and see if they got under it, or if they were sent sliding away on the surface of it. Now mind, we'll not kill ourselves doing this. But we will do our best. After all, men are men, in the high mountains or in the deep seas. We have no snow-shoes and we cannot go in soft snow. I was whelmed once in but twelve feet of snow and fought in it, to climb up, like a squirrel on a wheel. But we must see if they were shot down on the surface, and are lying injured at the foot. We'll take a blanket rope to hold between us, so that the one of us that's testing the way ahead can be pulled out by the other if he gets in over-deep snow."

The whole butt-end of the slide they could see in one glance as they turned the hill below. It must have taken them a couple of hours to make a quarter of a mile round the edge of that deep snow. They had to feel every step at some places. At others they worked themselves along by grabbing the branches of the trees, the top branches, that would be high above reach when the snows were all melted.

Intent upon their progress, step by step, they did not, for some time, look ahead. A whistle attracted them simultaneously, and there was a man on snow-shoes dragging what seemed at first glance like a sleigh along the lower flare of the slide. He signed to them to stay where they were, raising his hand and throwing the palm forward toward them.

"He'll do it on snow-shoes," observed Angus. "Where are the glasses? I have them. I seem to know his build. I do too! It is the man who saw it from the other side and turned back.

He has been working down on his side while we've been working down on ours. More dangerous for him, too. If another slide had come—" he paused. "Kiss me good-bye, as ye might say. We have trees here to stop us till we get right out; he had nothing all the way, just yon drop I got a peep at. I can't hold my hand steady enough, for a good sight, my blood heats so hard. Ay, I've got him again. Man, Piccolo, it's the Kokanee policeman!"

And he it was, dragging at the end of a rope the already frozen body of none other than the man in brown.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TWO WHO WENT UNDER

THE Kokanee policeman came to their side of the avalanche, his snow-shoes sinking to a foot where the snow was still powdery, at others with but a sift of snow between the meshes.

“I couldn’t search him out there, on the snow,” were his first words. “He’s a member of a gang of crooks, and it would mean a whole lot to me if he had any papers on him—letters—anything. I want to know more about them in the worst way.”

“There was another man,” said Angus.

The policeman shook his head.

“I’ll come up in two or three weeks to see if I can get his body,” he replied. “He was snowed right under.”

He came to a halt beside them and drawing off his gloves began to search. But Piccolo, watching him, turned away suddenly, crying gently like a child.

“What is it, Pic?” asked Angus, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“It doesn’t matter at all whether he coded me a twig!” said Piccolo. “It doesn’t matter at all. And to think that the other day I felt I could kill him! Now he’s dead, and we’re here so short a while anyhow. It doesn’t matter, Scotty. It doesn’t matter that he called me a twig!”

Balancing himself from protruding rock to protruding rock, clinging to the fir-branches, he went back to the camp on the clear knoll.

“What’s wrong?” asked the policeman. “Something wrong with your partner?”

“Oh, it’s just the altitude affecting him,” said Angus, casually.

The policeman went on with his search, culling, as well as a pathetic pipe and a knife, to be used no more, a sheaf of letters in a wallet.

“Well,” he said, rising from his knees, “these two fellows were after you all right. That man Hawke we had our eye on. Anything crooked: a poker joint; a bootlegging outfit— anything crooked for Hawke. You spoke to MacBride at the compressor on the way up, and when he saw Hawke and this man going on to the mine he ’phoned me, thought I’d like to know. I asked him why, and he said he had a hunch. So had I then. I remembered your partner waltzing round this fellow, and I knew they had that between them, whatever else. Hawke made me think there must be more. What was the trouble?”

“You’d better come over to our camp and I’ll tell you all I know,” answered Angus.

“Maybe these letters I have will help to tell something too,” said the squarely built policeman with the humorous and grim mouth, and the face like smoky ivory.

Piccolo, a meagre, melancholy figure, was mixing flour and water for a meal when they came to the camp.

“Well, you got a great camp here,” said the policeman. “It is surely amazing how one can get out of the snow. Look, there is a cut-bank all earth already. You can even see the old fir cones laying down there below. Right sheltered here.”

Spring was truly taking these heights by assault. Swerving around the knoll to lee of which they camped ran a small creek; but it was covered all by ice, not snow-laden ice, but glare ice, clear as glass. They could see the water rushing below as through a natural window (and not roily water—the creek-bed pebbles were visible under its rush); and, that water, compressed there, running full, carried bubbles of air of various sizes that flew past constantly, pressed between the hurrying stream and its ice lid. Yet maybe but a thousand feet below they could glimpse, between the boles of the forest, a flicker of foam showing where the creek ran uncovered. At one place Piccolo had cleft a hole in the ice with an ax, where he could dip a can for water instead of using snow.

As Piccolo acted as chef, the policeman and Angus sat down, and the former fell to examining the papers he had taken from him who was so far known to Angus and his partner as the man in brown. The envelopes he first looked at.

“Mr. John Grafter was his name, it seems,” he remarked. “A good name too!” Then, in a changed voice, he added: “Well, he is dead.”

He considered one or two of the letters.

“This one,” he said, “to somebody else, but with a memo, scribbled on it for him, seems to me, by a process of deduction, to refer to you gentlemen. Listen”; and he read:

“ ‘Dear Cyrus:

‘I am giving this note to Bob Merritt to hand to you. He is to show you the two guys it refers to. They are supposed to be going to the new camp called Kokanee on Flat-Bow Lake just in a natural way to see how chances are up there, but

there is more in it than that, I think. The little cuss, called David Thomas, with a squeaky voice which makes him known as Piccolo, has some floats of ore from somewhere between the boundary and the West Arm of Flat-Bow Lake. They will very likely get a canoe at Kokanee and row back to the West Arm and down it, to pick off south to the place. You can haze them off when they get to their location, or jump the claim and register ahead of them so as to have the law with you. They can only say their say and you can deny. Your word will be as good as theirs. Keep track, anyhow, at your end, however you work it. Send somebody after them to Kokanee. I expect you will know someone up there to help. If you can go yourself so much the better. The ore the squeaky-voice brought in looks like Ophir all right. So-long.

“ ‘M. B.’ ”

“The incompetent tools of this Cyrus followed too close,” rumbled Angus. “I suppose they were afraid of losing our tracks. Incompetent!”

As for Piccolo, by the time the policeman read the initials “M. B.” the flush that had come to his face over the words “squeaky-voice” had gone. It was maybe more a flush of self-consciousness than rage over a soubriquet not to his mind, smacking of contempt; for the death of the man in brown had strangely affected him, eliminating rage.

“I see it is written across this letter,” said the policeman, “ ‘Pass to Grafter.’ Quite a governmental kind of crook this Cyrus is. I know now who Hawke was in with. There is only one Cyrus down there that this means—Cyrus Oggstein. Guess Grafter must have had a talk with his boss, for there is a note in another writing, here at the bottom of the letter:

‘Walter Hawke, Kokanee, big dark man, grey eyes.’ Guess Grafter wrote that when he had his pow-wow and marching orders from Boss Cyrus.”

But Piccolo was hardly listening to all that. He noted, but did not remark, that the boss of the “crook outfit” had probably, at that interview, told the man in brown that Hawke was conversant with the telegraph. What mainly caught him in the epistle was something else. He had a finger up pointing triumphantly at Angus.

“Now Scotty,” said he, “I don’t want to seem opinionated to my elders, and I don’t want to go scrapping with folks any more—life being so short among these almighty mountains—but you see I was right about Movie Bill, whether he smokes cigars or not, mark you, and always says: ‘No, thank you, a pipe or a cigarette for mine. Nix on cigars,’ or whatever you brought up as proof that he was innocent. There’s the M. B. He put that Cyrus crook, whoever he is, wise to us.”

Angus nodded his head up and down several times, mouth twisting, as one accepting unpalatable truth.

“It certainly looks like it,” said he. “I only stood up for him because almost any one would condemn him for anything, without listening to the evidence, on the strength of his face; and it always seemed to me that there was a good expression among what ye might call—or I might call, I should say,” he altered the phrasing with hard voice, “superficially a tough look. Well, say no more. We do surely get disappointed in people.”

“We surely do,” agreed the policeman.

Piccolo tried to renew his good cheer and with forced air of gaiety chanted: “Grub pile! Grub pile!”

Over the meal Angus, after long thought, saw fit to acknowledge the truth of their odyssey in its entirety to the policeman.

“The fact is,” said he, “we are heading for a bit south of the West Arm. We come from Colvalli, Washington State. But we did not come in overland, north, because we had indications that a person, or persons, were on to it that Piccolo here had found some jim-dandy floats, as ye might say. We wanted to put them off. So we came to Kokanee.”

He told him, in short, all the story as we know it from the incident of the fool-hens and the missiles that proved to be “spacamints.”

The policeman nodded, lifted his tea pannikin to drink, and held it away from his mouth. It was of tin, and hot.

“Say,” he said, smiling, whimsical, “ain’t it astonishing how hot that water got when we boiled it?”

That was all he had to say!

Angus eyed him thoughtfully. For himself, such a remark was entirely in his vein when thinking about something else and not ready for speech upon it. He wondered if the policeman was similarly inclined at such moments. It appeared that he was, for thereafter he mused a long spell and they ate in silence.

Then said he: “I told you that you could not make the divide yet.”

Piccolo waved a hand toward the lower forest. He seemed desirous to stand up for, to defend, MacPherson.

“It would take about three months to cut through that forest,” he shrilled.

“Yes,” said the policeman, “but long before that, if you sat here waiting, you could get over the divide all right. And now you’ve got so far—Oh, you’ve done darn well!—now you’ve made this far all you’ve to do is to get round the next ridge. Now I wouldn’t try it on top. You can’t do that for another fortnight. You’ll lose only a week by working down to the bases of the slides here, and then working back up on the west side. Once you get round, move up again. Don’t forget; move up again at once. If you kept low you’d have to cut a trail all the way; but if you keep up you will strike an old Indian trail.”

He jabbed a finger before him in air, pointing at the rib of mountain, white wedged, where they were.

“It is right through there. If you could tunnel through you’d come out at it—there,” and he dropped his hand again. “Kootenay Indians made it. They were never great on going up after grizzly; they preferred easy fishing, and deer down below; but now and then one of them had the craze for a necklace of bearclaws—grizzly ones—for the fun, or to show the sand he had in him. Maybe he had seen some Blackfoot east of the Rockies honoured for a grizzly bear necklace, and he got whetted up too, to go and do likewise. Oh, they did some travel in the old days. Up on Kootenay Lake, now, the railroad from Kaslo into the Slocan country practically follows an old Indian trail. That road to the mine you came up,” and he jerked a thumb over his shoulder, “was once Injun trail. They came up from Flat-Bow up this side of the Olsaks; then they went over the divide, later in the year though, and down to the West Arm to where they used to have fishing camps for the red-fish. The trail may be grown over a bit with willow-bush, but you can get down by it all

right. It goes beside a creek, the white man name for which I only know as Creek Two—that's counting from the beginning of the arm. The Kootenays call it Salmon Berry creek. They used to go up it a long ways, from the other side, after salmon berries, consequently the further down it you go the better it will be." He paused. "That cache of yours back there," he went on, "it seems a pity to leave it. How about me helping you to tote it across to here tomorrow, and you could tote it around and leave it to the other side of the ridge in case you needed it."

Angus looked at Piccolo; Piccolo looked at Angus. Then Angus shook his head.

"It seems awful extravagant to leave it," he answered, "but it is only one extra sack of flour and one whack of bacon, and one bag of beans. And forty years ago I left Aberdeen. To go for it, and come back again over these snowslides ..." he shook his head.

"All right," said the policeman. "I don't hanker to do it more often than necessary, but I've got my snow-shoes, and in the morning before more slides begin I could go back and bring it this far for you."

"Thank ye, but we'll leave it," said Angus. "We're loaded to the limit now. 'Waste not, want not,' I know; but there's the other adage: 'Time waits on no man.' And whoever knows our business at Colvalli did not come with us. They sent a message for their cronies to dodge our steps—to dog our steps I should say. That might only be because we knew them by sight."

"Know him," put in Piccolo.

Angus looked at him and sighed.

"Don't rub it in," he said. "I thought he was a friend."

The policeman drew forth his pipe for a postprandial smoke. "If you don't mind," he added, "I'll camp with you till tomorrow and be up good and early before the sun gets on that slope, and skim back lively across it."

"If we don't mind!" ejaculated Angus.

"How about your horse?" asked Piccolo. "You didn't walk up, did you?"

"No sir! But he's all right. I left him at the mine stables and hiked on with my snow shoes under my arm till I hit the snow. I knew I was near the end, near finding out whatever I had to find out when I heard at the mine that Hawke and Grafter had had the gall to ask leading questions about you, and how far ahead you were."

As he spoke there was a sudden whispering sound that increased in volume. They stood up in their little close grove of firs, and saw as it were the surface of the mountain sliding forward.

"That covered him again, I guess," remarked the policeman. "And I guess that one has been getting ready to come for a long time, and will be the last for today. It is getting kind of cold again."

Piccolo looked very grave.

"Would Grafter have a hard death?" he asked.

"No, neither of them. I saw them go. They had their feet knocked from them by the fallen ice, and got knocked on their heads too. Stunned—and then suffocated by the snow before they could come back to consciousness, I guess. It just poured over Hawke like emptying a sugar bag on a fly. The old mountains are terrible, but they are merciful too in their way." He looked along the fan of snow. "That will be all right

for me to cross in the early morning. But mark you, you fellows can't cross the next ones. They are fierce—on the south slope. Get the sun there a lot. You have just got to go down, as I say, and around their butt-ends, if it takes you all of a week. Then up to the creek that runs south and west out of the glacier on the other side. You maybe won't pick it out at once—the trail I mean; but as you go down creek there, and the timber thickens, you'll see it all right. It's wonderful. Here's the end of winter up here and the thermometer going away down to below zero at nights; and down in Kokanee, by gollies, the grasshoppers are out. By the time you reach the West Arm the bluebirds will be there.”

Angus did not notice the laughter in his voice, taking it all, from beginning to end, for a serious speech, not knowing him well enough to realize that he had (that little policeman of the blent grim and humorous) a way of finishing the serious with a jest.

“I hope not,” he said. “Bluebirds around by then! I hope not!”

Then he saw that the Kokanee policeman was smiling.

“Ah well,” said he, “I feel serious about the question of haste for I have that premonition—what we might call a hunch—that as well as sending folks following us to Kokanee to spy upon our business, that fellow Movie Bill” (there! he had said it) “might quite readily go out himself overland north to look for the place where Piccolo made his ore find. Man, Piccolo, you are over simple. You blabbed, I believe.”

He was irascible. He was annoyed that the policeman had spoken the truth regarding the high snow, and that they could not make the divide and travel speedily on their way. His

pride was hurt, the pride of the old prospector. He was downcast in the matter of Movie Bill. And finally he was chagrined with himself for having admitted that he had come to believe that Movie Bill had been traitor to their friendship. There were the definite initials to be sure; but Angus was “thrawn,” in the Scots word. He was enraged with himself for having voiced his agreement with Piccolo’s reiterated suspicions. Then he made Piccolo as near an apology as his annoyance—not yet anger—allowed.

“And yet, Piccolo, man,” said he, “secrets will leak out. I don’t blame you. But, dang it, I blame myself for not getting a boat the way Bill—the way the writer of the letter imagined we would do. Now, I am not—definitely—convinced he wrote that letter. I never saw his caligraphy, but that does not look to me as if it would be his hand of writing!”

And even Piccolo (dense though he was in some matters), perhaps because of a recent softening of his own heart, suddenly realized that here was not evidence of argumentativeness in MacPherson, but evidence of his refusal to believe in the treachery of one he had treated as a friend.

While they were setting up their tent as a lean-to to shelter all three, a roaring fire before it, turning it into a very cave of warmth, night poured up and enveloped them, a night of deep blue with the glimmering whiteness of the upper snows oddly illumining it; and overhead, as if frosted, slow-moving tall Orion, the tilted Dipper, and then the ghostly moon with its influence of unearthly quiet.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STAR OR CAMP-FIRE?

LONG and long before Lewis and Clark or Alexander Thompson came this way, long before Columbus found a Carib Isle, or Leif Ericson his Vinland, long and long ago again, immeasurable ages, the Olsak range had stood to the sun and the moon and the uncounted stars, as it stood then—a vasty range, a surge of ice and rocks above green woods.

To east of it one small man, like an ant in grass, his horse taken out of the stable at the mine, rode down toward Kokanee under the big trees where the squirrels chattered about his passage.

To west of the range, a square-set elderly man, and a slender but wiry young one, perspired under their stuffed pack-sacks, rifle-slings galling their shoulders, each with a branch of a tree for a staff to propel upwards or to ease the descent, crossing the heights of the high southerly ravines. They perspired even in close proximity to the snows and the big glaciers that are there draped as in the laps of the mountain rock. They were all alone with the peaks, an occasional drifting shadow of an eagle's spread wings passing over the ground toward which their faces were bent, as they hunched under their burdens. The Kokanee policeman was home again in Kokanee by the time they came, coasting the slide edges and cutting trail through the woods, to the western side and looked down on the Spring there, the spires of yellowy new cottonwoods among the lower reddy-green of firs.

Bears were coming out of their lairs for their first strolls, their tracks here and there visible, but as yet no marmot whistled. They came to the creek that poured down from under arches of ice high above them. They staggered down among its boulders and slush; only the highest hog-backs below them still showed snow. The West Arm, six thousand feet down, blinked and glittered in the sun in revealed stretches like spread silk. At the beginning of the woods they halted and looked back, by a mutual impulse, at the great bastions and high chasms, the windowless Woolworth buildings up there, the natural spires and castles of ancient stone.

“I believe it was better, after all, to come the way we came than taking a boat,” said Angus. “We can’t pack so much grub; but we can live on the land, what with ptarmigan here and the grouse that I’m pretty certain we’ll find lower down.”

On they trudged and found themselves walking clearly where others had walked before them. They had just naturally, by the lie of the land, strayed on to the old Indian trail. At first it wound clearly along the bare bouldered edges of the creek, but lower they lost it among willow scrub, new sprouting willows, all dotted with little tufts as of white fur—hence “pussy willow” maybe. At first, indeed, they thought the flicks of white on the branches were just of snow.

To Angus of the poetic heart there was something deeply moving in these exquisite white tufts of a new spring. They had left Colvalli in Spring; they had left Kokanee in Spring; here, in the high parts of the Olsaks, where they faced south and west, was Spring meeting them again. He did not talk of the thrills that came to him from the new pussy willow, the

emotions that he could not wholly fathom; but he looked on the scene with a face illuminated, in an ecstasy.

On they pressed, found the trail again, a clear narrow ribbon of tamarack needles winding on and down. Lower still the trail was again less trail than a strip of willows through the forest.

“What do we do now?” asked Piccolo. “I’m more used to open country.”

“We just keep shoving on through the willows,” Angus replied. “The willows are the trail; they are the first thing to grow up in paths here. Look below you.”

And sure enough, when Piccolo looked below, he saw that the thin strip of willows twined on down hill in among the firs, and the spruce, and the balsams. But in a hollow between two long hog-backs Angus lowered his arms that he had held up across his face, pushing his way through.

“It is all willows in this dip,” said he. “We must go canny.”

“All willows?”

“Ay. Peer through and you’ll see. We are in a whole little valley of them; and the trail has left the creek, so we have not it to guide us. We must think”; and he proceeded to do so, standing bent forward on his staff, weighted with his camping load.

“Ay,” he said, “we came in to this copse at a tangent. We will keep to the tangent. Let me see the ground at my feet.” He thrust aside the branches and peered. “Well, I’ve seen Indians, and Australian black fellows, and white men too, who might tell if we were on the trail by looking at our feet here; but I cannot. We’ll just continue the tangent. Do you agree, Pic?”

“Sure!” piped Piccolo.

Again they passed on, with a space between so that Piccolo should not be whipped in the face by the branches as they sprung back from MacPherson’s passage; and the brittle husks, or sheaths, over the new buds, as they disturbed the trees there, fell in a crisp spattering over them. Arms up before their faces, as one may shield the eyes from a too bright light, they pressed on against the willow tangle, shielding their eyes so from the twigs. After another half-hour’s trudge Angus again stopped.

“We’re back in a close strip of willows again,” he said. “We’re on the trail.”

A few feet behind, but out of sight in that lace work of branches, Piccolo answered squeakily:

“Fine and dandy!”

Angus waited till his partner urged close beside him.

“Piccolo,” said he, “would ye mind seeing if the safety-catch of your rifle is on? These twigs are apt to catch in the trigger—stick in between the trigger and the guard.”

Piccolo dropped his thumb, felt the safety-catch, which was unlocked, and bit his lip.

“I saw that it was on when we started,” he declared.

“Ay, ay. Just give it a feel with your thumb now and then. A good wrench of a twisted twig can even unlock the safety-catch. That’s all right. That’s all right.”

Old traveller in the wilderness as he was he desired to keep the peace, a pleasant feeling, and he thought he had been rather harsh to Piccolo—when he was downcast over the apparent final proof of Movie Bill’s treachery—at the camp they made before the Kokanee policeman left them.

They came to where the jays darted like flung blue stones through the green quiet and pierced it with their raucous screams. They passed down, through the silence accentuated by the roar of the creek to which they had come close again. The little poignant pipes of the junkos were there round them also, tiny notes in the loneliness. A red-headed woodpecker came fluttering and enquiring round their first camp place on that slope, friendly, strutting, dancing close. The creek broadened, and where the trail wound on its banks they saw that its gorge was all criss-crossed with trees fallen in many a storm. They lost sight of the West Arm to which they descended, it being summarily hidden by the tall trees by which they trudged and the ridge of the next hog-back.

The next day they came to where were many berry patches in a stretch where an electric storm, making a belt of fire years past, had thinned out the timber. Thence onward the trail was more clear. The tangling willows ceased to impede their progress. They came down to cottonwoods and maple trees, the latter covered with what Angus called "flourish," their bright flowers. "Flourish" was the word. It was the flourish of spring in the high hills. In the light winds the blossoms danced as if free in air like butterflies. The fine twigs that bore them could not be picked out at a little distance; but as they were moored by these twigs, and the branches, to the tree in every eddy of wind they tossed in air; and seeing them the face of Angus MacPherson was again illumined.

They plunged on, and all around them the grouse clucked. That evening, so quick was their descent that it added to the impression of night rushing up to meet them, they came to where frogs croaked and a moth or two brushed past them on

the trail—and then the gulch of the creek fanned wide and the West Arm of Flat-Bow lake was as a mirror before them, peacefully reflecting the end of the day on the peaks.

They threw down their packs and sat on them a little spell before making camp. They said not a word for some time. Then Piccolo pointed to the opposite shore and ran his finger upward to indicate a cone-shaped peak with only a small wedge of snow upon it.

“It’s up there,” said he, and rising he began to whittle a stick to start the evening fire.

“Well, Pic, tomorrow I’ll show you how to build a raft,” said Angus. “I see the freshets are leaving logs for a hundred rafts all along the shore here.”

Piccolo stopped in his task. He had lit the whittled end of the fire-lighter.

“Wouldn’t the canoe be better?” he enquired. “I don’t want to seem argumentative, sir—I mean Scotty—but—”

“I have no skill in canoes,” said Angus.

Then said Piccolo, lightly: “Before I came west, because I had seen photographs of high-saddled horses, I worked at Peterboro’, making canoes. I could make one out of birch-bark—”

“Piccolo, Piccolo! Oh, you interesting twig of a body! Telegraph operator, contortionist, outfitter, canoe specialist! You are, as ye might say, a jim-dandy!”

The day ebbed away from the peaks. All the humps and rolls fell into one tone of darkness. Then, supper over, Piccolo, who had strayed some way from the little flame of their fire, called to Angus:

“Is that a star or a camp-fire?”

Angus rose and walked away from their own light.

“Where?” he asked.

“Yonder! Opposite. On the crest of that range,” said Piccolo.

Away off, on the ridge of the hills to south, something twinkled—star or camp-fire. They could not tell. They watched it. It seemed stationary. Then it seemed to move. But that might only be because they moved slightly, involuntarily, as they stood staring.

“It’s gone out,” said Piccolo.

At the same moment Angus was saying: “It’s gone down beyond the ridge.”

Then Piccolo added: “Perhaps it was a star.”

And at the same moment Angus remarked: “Maybe it was a camp-fire and has been let low, dwindled down.”

Then he laughed.

“We’re both trying to keep the peace and not argue,” said he. “I see you feel the clutch of the big silence and the awful boredom of packing making you cranky, and consequently you feel the need of controlling your crankiness.”

“It’s not that,” said Piccolo simply, “It is just all so big and lonesome, and we’re so small among it all that—that—well, that’s how I feel!”

“I understand that too,” said Angus MacPherson.

They went back, uncertain whether they had seen the light of a camp-fire or star, to the friendliness of their own little blaze of logs in the darkness. Whatever it was Angus said no more about it.

“Ah well,” said he, as the darkness deepened and the fire brightened, “this is a cosier camp than those we made on the

summit. I did not say much about them, but, man, it was cold. Just round my waist I felt the cold running even under the blankets, like a draught round a corner.”

Piccolo merely smiled at the leaping flames.

“Yon sad end of the man in brown,” Angus went on, “reminds me of the writing on the backs of all the forms you have to sign at shipping offices when buying your tickets, all about them carrying you subject to this and that; and it ends with saying they are not responsible for pirates and the Acts of God. It was an act of God, Piccolo. It minds me of the auld Scots ballant:

“ ‘Ah little did my mither ken
The day she cradled me,
The lands I was tae travel in,
The death I was to dee.’

The end of those two fellows up yonder was an act of God.”

“What are you thinking about?” asked Piccolo. “I don’t mean on top—what you are talking about; but what are you thinking over in below?”

Angus leant forward and took a twig from the fire to light his pipe.

“Man,” said he, “you can always tell a cheechacko from a sourdough by that. A cheechacko lights his pipe with a match while he’s sitting beside a fire with all kinds of twigs to pluck out for the purpose. A sourdough never wastes a match. He knows he may need them—and that’s not because he comes from Aberdeen!”

“Yes. But what are you thinking about?”

“Me? Oh, I was thinking about my Margaret—otherwise Miggles, wondering how she was faring this night; and I was feeling awful disappointed about Movie Bill, as they call that William Allardyce. And to think that he has acted as a friend to me, coming over with auld Indian arrowheads, and showing me a calumet he got from Chief Young Whirlwind. Things like that. And to think he would go and act against us. If ever I see him again I’ll say: What rake-off did you expect from your friend Cyrus Oggstein?”

Both sat thinking a space. Then Piccolo said:

“But there is surely something else on your mind?”

“It’s that light,” said MacPherson. “I don’t think it was a star. Shield your eyes from our own fire, and see if you don’t see it still.”

Piccolo moved clear away from the fire to stare at the black bulk of the rolls of hill to south.

“Can’t make out anything now,” said he. “But who do you think it would be? Movie Bill? Do you think he would come overland himself, the way you suggested to the Kokanee policeman?”

Angus frowned.

“What puzzles me,” said he, “is how he knew to say in that letter that we were going not to Kokanee but to south of the West Arm here.”

Piccolo looked troubled.

“You forget the map he stole,” said he.

“No I don’t,” said Angus. “But I don’t see how it could tell him. I drew a big bit of the country in that. And, besides, it was not until after the map was stolen that we made these plans.”

“Perhaps I gave it away a bit at the Benwell House the day Jack and I got back,” suggested Piccolo. “Some fool called me over from the road to say nothing at all except: ‘Well, you are back!’ I remember that fellow Greer asked me where we had been.”

“And you told him?”

“I said: ‘About eighty miles north by air line—’ I was going to say north of the Boundary but I was interrupted, so left it at that. Now I remember that clearly.”

“Hoots, man! Then I don’t see how you can blame yourself with having given any locality. Anyway, that light—if it was man made—might be of some wandering prospector who knows no more of us than the babe unborn.”

Piccolo wondered if he should tell of dropping the fragments of stone from his pocket at the Benwell House. He shielded his eyes from the fire-glow, thought it over—then decided not to tell.

Angus, talking then, changed the theme slightly.

“I wanted to think well of Allardyce,” said he. “So many folks were ready to think him a tough because of his face. No, no!” he suddenly broke out. “There’s more than that. You see—” he paused. He tried again. “You see,” said he, “I never saw his face as a bad face. I pride myself on being a student of physiognomy. Out here, in the big timber, we get simplified, Piccolo. I feel simplified. I confess my inmost heart to you. I am hurt. I’m peeved, as ye might say. I’m disappointed doubly, and sorely, for I thought I was a student of physiognomy.”

He rose and moved from the fire and stared at the mountains across the lake, into which they would soon be journeying.

“No, I can see no fire now. Maybe it was a star, maybe it was not. Of course, as I say, it might be a prospector.”

“It might be those two men who went ashore from the boat to the south of the Arm.”

“Man, I doubt it. They could hardly break through all the woods up to that peak in so short a time. Well, it doesn’t matter—star or camp-fire, it doesn’t matter. I’m just peeved about Movie Bill. You see—” and then he heaved a sigh. “I’m going to turn in,” he said.

They slept soundly and woke to the gentle plash of lake water on the shore, and the discs of sunlight dancing on the little ripples. It was while they were at breakfast, discussing the day’s work (Angus was to fish while Piccolo cut “plates,” as he called them, of birch-bark from the trees) that Piccolo suddenly said:

“What’s that miniature warship?”

Angus looked in the direction of his gaze over the water.

“Ah-ha!” he broke out. “You never saw a canoe like that turned out at Peterboro’, lad. That’s a Kootenay Indian canoe—made of stretched hide over a frame, and they have bow and stern sloped forwards into the water. They are kittlish boats for to get into. I once tried six times in succession and every time rolled her over, and had to swim out. And the auld Kootenay that let me try just stood watching me, with a glint in his eyes and the wee-est twist to his mouth.”

“There’s a whole fleet of them,” said Piccolo. “They are going to the south shore.”

“There’s our ferry!” ejaculated Angus, and rising he shouted: “Ho Tillikum!”

Then he turned to Piccolo.

“I can’t talk Kootenay, but most of them talk Chinook,” he explained.

The hail was heard and one canoe turned toward them while the others went to the south shore half a mile away, and there beached. The canoe that came to their side of the lake contained three old men who seemed in the same world with old buffalo bulls, or very aged eagles. They came ashore and shook hands; and, in Chinook, Angus asked them to act as ferrymen.

So it was that half-an-hour later Piccolo and Angus were ashore on the south side, where the creek now called MacPherson Creek sends its foam of silver ripples on to the shining waters of Flat-Bow lake. They got out, and as they were unloading their belongings, one of the Indians—the oldest looking—saw the binoculars and was aware of their service. He said something to Angus, who handed them to him.

They were then about a quarter of a mile below the beach where the other Indians had gone ashore, and the old Indian, focussing the glasses, looked back at the camp. Then he beckoned to one of his fellows, and handed him the glasses. Number two looked awhile, and beckoned to number three. There they sat like effigies on a log, the binoculars passing from hand to hand, without a smile, each looking at the Indian camp a quarter of a mile away about the same length of time, then passing them on. Then the first one laughed, and called something to Angus who was re-strapping his pack-sack ready for the trek.

Angus replied, laughing too.

“What does he say?” asked Piccolo.

“He says that they can sit there and watch if the women work well. They will be Big Medicine Men when they go back and tell them all they did in their absence.”

Piccolo had his pack-sack on his back, rifle swung to his shoulder, ax in hand.

“How long will they want to sit there looking?” he said.

“Children! Just children like the rest of us,” observed Angus. “We’ll give them another peep or two each and then we’ll go.”

He strolled over to the point where the Indians sat on their log, talked with them a spell; and Piccolo was relieved when he saw the binocular glasses returned to their owner without protest.

Angus came back to him. The old men in the dungarees and battered hats, with the thin braids of hair hanging down, got into their canoe to paddle along to their camp.

Piccolo and Angus marched into the scrub of willow and cottonwood along the south shore—unaware that a mere fifteen miles south, and four thousand feet above them, Movie Bill sat by a lonely camp-fire, pondering many things; though it was not his camp-fire they had seen twinkling from across the lake.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GIVE-OUT CREEK

IT was at about four miles inland from the lake, and maybe fifteen hundred feet above the shore level, that Angus MacPherson, who was in the lead there, abruptly went down upon his knees as though in adoration of the soaring of the tamaracks, the green of the balsams (some with a wondrous sift of blue, related, it seemed to the bloom on peaches), the waving leaf-clusters, like maidenhair fern, of the silver-stemmed birches.

Piccolo hastened after him and bent over him, a look of alarm on his face.

“What is it, Scotty?” he asked.

Under the weight of the pack-sack and rifle and blanket-roll, bowed forward, thus kneeling, Angus looked up. The sweat was in his eyes, blinding him; it was salt on his lips.

“It’s nothing,” he said, “it’s only that I’m tired.”

“My God!” exclaimed Piccolo, in treble. “Drop your pack, sir. Drop your pack, Mac—Angus. I can hear the sounds of a creek running close by. Drop your pack and sit on it. I’ll leave my kit with you and go ahead and get you a drink.”

“I will go on,” said Angus, “if you’ll give me an ease up to my feet. I—am—tired!”

Even without aid from Piccolo he rose and lurched on; but Piccolo, with a quick glance at him, dropped his own pack and, pannikin in hand (they always carried a pannikin easy of access, lest wanting to drink from a creek while tramping),

and rifle still slung from shoulder, went crashing rapidly ahead.

“You wait,” he yelped over his shoulder, and hastened through the scrub.

Angus sighed and sat down on his partner’s pack. He moved his arms backward and loosened his own load from his shoulders; he let it sag back; then he too sagged to earth. He put his head on Piccolo’s pack and immediately fell asleep.

Thus Piccolo found him, returning in haste a few minutes later. Angus opened his eyes.

“Man, that was a grand nap!” he ejaculated. “How long have you been gone?”

“Why, not five minutes. Have a drink of water.”

Angus drank eagerly and then poured some of the water into a palm and ran it, thus wet, round behind his ears and neck.

“It has been a long and arduous business,” said he. “We did a great part yonder across the lake in winter.” He paused for breath. “And, man, it is awful close and summer-like by contrast here. I’ll be better when we mount higher.”

“There’s a dandy camp-place right here, Scotty—fifty yards ahead, cool and shady, beside a creek.”

(It is the creek called Give-Out Creek today. Some people think that it being so called is evidence that it gives out occasionally, that its flow stops; but not so. It comes from springs, and drains vast upper areas among big cedars and velvet moss. It was there that old-timer Angus MacPherson gave out. That is all. Such is the derivation of that place-name.)

Piccolo was overjoyed, full of a sense of relief (for he had dreaded a dire calamity on seeing Angus suddenly go down upon his knees) by the effect of that wonderful forty winks of exhaustion. A leaden hue he had noted had gone from MacPherson's face.

"You wait there," said Piccolo. "I'll just go ahead and fix a camp while you rest, and then come back to pack your load and mine. Now don't you stir, Scotty."

Leaving the pannikin of water, still half-filled, by Angus's side, Piccolo went on again to the creek. Angus could hear the clip of his ax, making camp, sound muffled through the woods. He cut down two forked two-inch, or thereby, trees; he lopped them into poles. He cut another slender tree down and lopped it. Then between two big trees he raised, horizontally, the plain pole, supported and leant against them by the forked ones, the butts of the latter thrust in the earth. The branches he had cut from all three trees he criss-crossed and tossed down, as a mattress, under that skeleton prepared for the canvas. Then he returned to Angus. By the time he reached his partner, MacPherson had risen and was lifting his pack.

"No, no," said Piccolo, "I'll take it."

So Angus just followed him to the camp-site and, seeing it, gave Piccolo a nod of thanks, a growl of: "Fine, man! Fine twig of a body!" and straightway sat down, then reclined, propped on an elbow on the fir-bough bed.

"Ay," he said. "I'll leave the rest to you."

"Sure!" said Piccolo shrilly, for his voice to pierce the creek's rumble to which they were not at once accustomed. Back he went for the other pack and, returning, wisely left

the casting of the canvas over the framework until a meal should be prepared for Angus's refreshment.

"I feel too tired to eat," said the old prospector, seeing the preparations.

"Have a snack anyhow, and some tea," Piccolo advised.

He worked like a troubled schoolboy. He prepared the meal, very solicitous; and when Angus had eaten a little, and looked better, he said, in that innocent way of his:

"Oh, yes, you are looking better, sir—Scotty, I mean. You surely gave me a turn when you said you were tired that way. They were my poor uncle's almost last words. He came home one day (he used to live with us when he was old) and he said: 'I'm tired'; and he went to bed; and in the morning he was dead."

Angus gloomed at him, censure in his stolid gaze.

"Piccolo," said he, "you are a poor nurse. Rideeculous to recount such an incident to me now! If I was an imaginative man—a man susceptible to impressions, as ye might say—why, dang it, man, I might just go and die by morning myself!"

"Oh, don't talk about it, sir!" ejaculated Piccolo, very high and thin of accent.

"Then don't tell such stories to me," said Angus. "You should know better than talk that way to a tired auld man. Where did your respected uncle die so suddenly—in this country?"

"No, in Wales, on the Isle of Anglesey. Near to Llanfairpwllgwyngyll."

"Eh?" said Angus, rising on an elbow.

"Near to Llanfairpwllgwyngyll."

Angus stretched out again.

“It sounds a damp place, a poor place for a rapid recovery,” said he. “Give me another cup of tea and put a guid jolt of sugar in it, laddie, to give me energy, as ye might say.”

It was only afternoon but Angus’s condition prevented any further travel that day. In the exquisite late gold light Piccolo produced his fishing tackle and went downstream to where Give-Out foams into the creek now called MacPherson; and the old-timer, whose name the larger creek now bears, reclined on the fir-boughs, a blanket drawn over his legs, just resting.

In the dusk Piccolo returned with a string of little cut-throat trout. The quiet of the late day was round them, their ears were accustomed to the unceasing brawl of the creek now called Give-Out. A drizzle of golden light out of the sky strangely lit the great woods. The eddies in pools of the creek were opalescent. The same tone crept over all—except up at the Olsak range. High above the jumble of hog-backs across the lake it reared its everlasting rocky teeth to the immensity and shone as in full day over the lower twilight.

“Yon ridge of the Olsaks,” said Angus, “is much like the Grampians of Scotland, but higher—ay, considerably higher. It’s a bonny place, Scotland, but it’s more damp than here. There is real heather there, and it’s purple in the Fall. I don’t know how it is, but the names in Scotland go right into my heart. The Hill of Fare! Do you not find something awful enticing in the Hill of Fare, Pic? It’s a wee bit knoll beside the Rockies, but, man, it’s bonny. I have not been to Skye, but I never hear the words ‘the Isle of Skye’ but I’m home again spiritually. I can see the stone houses and the peat-reek—that’s peat smoke, you must understand. They burn peat in

the country places there. In a still afternoon it's grand to see it going up like a blue column from a wee theeckit house—that's a house thatched, you know, with a roof like one of the Wichita Indian houses down in Oklahoma. I'll sing you a song about it. I heard Clara Butt sing it in Melbourne, Australia, and I couldn't see her, or the grand piano, or the folk in the hall for seeing Auld Scotland through a haze like peat-reek."

And he sang softly to the fire his favourite song of *My Ain Folk*.

"Ay, it's a bonny song, but my voice is getting kind of cracked. I suppose, Piccolo, you remember Llanfairpwll—no, I can't say it, but I have no disrespect for it."

"How would it be, Scotty," said Piccolo, after a pause, "if you stayed here tomorrow? I've been looking at the lie of the land from down in the bottoms there, and it is undoubtedly up this creek-side that we should go to get to the place where I went after those fool-hens. It's a long steep gulch. I could go ahead light in the morning, with just enough cooked grub for a couple of days, and my blankets, and see how the land lies, see whether we can shove through or will have to make trail."

Angus nodded slowly.

"It will be lonely work for you," he said. "It's lonelier than riding the boundary, Pic. You're liable to go along talking to yourself, like a blue streak, as the saying goes."

Piccolo looked up at the ranges of the tree-clad hog-backs, tall, lonely, almost sinister, yet very grand. The last light was upon the million branches of the still trees, made them seem lonesome indeed, that haunting, that evanescent light so strangely beautiful at that hour above the lower glooms.

“I prefer rolling open country,” he admitted. “There’s no use denying it; but it would be a good way for me to go alone. I think you could rest and then fish. We’ll need more grub. We had to leave some to east of that awful Olsak range, you remember. If you fished a spell tomorrow while I was away we could have a fish mess to last a day or two and save the bacon.”

“A good plan,” agreed Angus. “Do you know, Piccolo, I’m sixty years of age.”

“You’re a wonderful man for your years.”

“That’s the right thing to say. That is the correct remark when you hear from a man that he is sixty years of age.”

“Well you’re a wonderful man for any years. That’s no josh, Scotty. That’s no frill speech.”

“Piccolo, compliments are flying, and sincerity too, I believe; so I’ll say you’re a wonderful man for your weight—you are a wonderful man for any weight.”

They “turned in.” They fell asleep lulled, not disturbed, by the rub-a-dub of the creek now called Give-Out. How it rub-a-dubs! An eternal tom-toming! It is a minor note, maybe, but not really sad, no more sad than the sigh of wind in the tamarack tops on days seemingly still. They were wakened at intervals not by it, but by the whimpering sobbing complaint of coyotes in the big woods. There might have been two or twenty. The bark and wail broke out, and was either echoed or answered. The impression was of a coyote barking and yapping and complaining, then rushing wildly a hundred yards in the undergrowth to bark, yap, complain again. But waking to these sounds, and knowing them of no consequence, they sighed, fell asleep, again lulled by the creek; and woke to the primrose light of morning on the tree

stems, and the tipping of the firs' reddy-green spires with gold.

An hour later little Piccolo, with blankets tight rolled on his back, and two days' cooked supplies, and rifle on shoulder, and ax in hand, set off up creek.

"Pic!" called Angus as he went.

"Yes?"

"What was the name of yon place in Wales where your respected uncle expired?"

Piccolo, laughing, came back.

"I'll give you the whole name," he said slowly. "I gave you only the abbreviation—

Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllsantysiliogogogogh, near Bangor, North Wales."

MacPherson stared.

"There is nothing in my own tongue," said he, "to express my astonishment. I can only say: for the land's sake! I could never repeat all that in your absence to amuse myself. Give me the abbreviation, Pic."

Piccolo, his mouth corners twisted whimsically, said: "Llanfairpwllgwyngyll."

Angus sat frowning.

"Even that, I think, is beyond me," he said. "If we ever get home again you will have to teach it to Ecuador, and he'll maybe teach me. It was wonderful how quick I taught him to say Ecclefechan."

"What are you thinking underneath?" asked Piccolo.

"Nothing, Piccolo. Nothing. I'm just trying to be cheerful, seeing you going. As they say in Auld Scotland when seeing friends to the door, *haste ye back*."

Piccolo nodded, and turning plunged away into the scrub.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“PUT UP YOUR HANDS!”

ANGUS had not told Piccolo all that was in his mind. He thought it better not to. He was inclined to be reticent in matters affecting his feelings. He was hurt regarding Movie Bill, more hurt than angered. Bill’s dereliction was the theme on which he mused, on which he was “thinking underneath.”

The truth was that for Movie Bill, Angus MacPherson had certainly held what is called a sneaking regard. He had a shrewd suspicion that Movie Bill was deeply attached to Margaret—his Miggles. For himself he had liked Movie Bill. The latter had travelled, if not beyond the western continent, certainly over its wild west. And that is at least a large and diversified tract of the earth’s surface, from the bunch-grass and tumble-weed of Alberta to the cactus and gramma grass of Arizona’s end. He had travelled with observation and affection for the land. He knew its history—the history of the Old MacLeod Trail, the Oregon trail, the Santa Fé trail. He knew the land of Wister’s “The Virginian” and of Norris’s “The Octopus.” He had placer-mined on the Pend d’Oreille in Idaho, and punched cattle in the Little Missouri country. He knew the Indian sign-language, and could talk many Indian tongues. When he went to Seattle (that was on his first stay in Colvalli) he came back with a Curtis photograph of Old Red Cloud, lined, blind, a wonderful thing, as a present for Angus. He had given Angus a bronze buffalo, bought in Calgary, when he came home from a trip up into Canada that ended there—cast in Yokohoma, maybe, but souvenir of the

old plains days. The names of Young Whirlwind of the Southern Cheyenne, and of Kicking Bull of the Sioux were familiar to him not from cigarette box cards; he knew them both—they called him friend. He was a man, it seemed, after old Angus's heart. As for his face, that was no bar of villainy to MacPherson.

"I'd never any use for a pretty boy!" he said aloud, out of his deep thought. "I always thought Bill was straight as an arrow, and now—now, as they say in this country, it seems he is so crooked I guess he couldn't lie straight in bed even."

He thought of Margaret. She would be cut to the quick. For though Angus was sure that she had no notion of Movie Bill's devotion to her, and no reciprocation—was merely friendly toward him, hospitable, as the host's daughter, when Movie called—he knew she did not think him a "crook," *as ye nicht say*.

Sitting there feeling as one convalescent, resting after the weariness of travel, returning to the world again, he recalled his wife. This would have hurt her—the original Margaret, good American, her mother of Pennsylvania-Dutch stock, her father a "Lower Canada" Scot. She, in the old Scots phrase, was long in her resting grave, or what was mortal of her. She had been able to recall coming west over the prairies when every night the wagons were parked in a square because of the Sioux raiders harrying in the Platte sandhills and on into Wyoming. He had spoken of her to Movie Bill on talking of the old days: that hurt him, seeing how Bill had turned out.

Well, he would go fishing. It was not good to sit alone brooding on a false friend, an illusion smashed.

And all down Give-Out creek, and at the creek now called MacPherson, as he bent under the willows and looked for

places to cast without tangling his line in the branches, it was as if the original Margaret was with him in that quiet valley where only the creeks tom-tommed. Dragon flies shuttled up and down over MacPherson creek; and yet, turning his head, he could see, far north, among high blue rocks, the white snow-wedges of the Olsak range peeping over the hog-backs of the north shore.

He had come to an age when he could live with his memories. His recent weariness made him feel slightly disembodied. It was as if already in that sequestered broad valley of British Columbia he touched Eternity. At any turn he might see the original Margaret, with her sunbonnet and her big round spectacles. Piccolo seemed further away than she.

But ever and again, all day, his mind reverted to its sad theme and he spoke aloud:

“That man Movie Bill, as might be said, has eaten of my saleratus. He has discoursed upon many themes with me: the origin of the American Indian—whether from Asia, or descended from an earlier race upon this continent. Arrow-heads he has given me, and calumets he has shown me. He has even discussed with me the eternal theme of the survival of personality after our bodily death. It seems inconceivable to me that he would, as might be said, cold-deck a friend.”

He fished till noon and went back to his camp, ate lunch, and then cleaned all the fish. In the afternoon he fished again; but the sun was by then full on the water, and the fish had eaten enough, it seemed. They would not rise to any sham fly or any bait. In pools he could see them, like gold-fish in a bowl, but they were leisurely, uninterested even in their favourite diversion of snatching at a bit of red wool, from the

cuff of a sweater, twisted round the hook. So he went back to smoke the morning's catch Indian fashion over a criss-crossing of sticks.

And all day not a sound but that of MacPherson creek and its tributary Give-Out, and now and then that gentle sigh of the wind in the tops of the western larches. He smoked a pipe at evening, much in the mood in which the old Greeks made libation to their gods—smoked to the reddy-green of the firs, the blue-dusted balsams, the spurts of new green, yellow green, of the cotton-woods.

Piccolo did not come back that night; but Angus had hardly expected that he would. Piccolo did not return all next day. The sunlight at morning, when he woke, was exquisite on a high green bluff of the mountains up which Piccolo had gone; the gold light ran down to him. The sun swung high and filled the valley with warmth, and brought a chirr of insect life among the bushes. He thought of Cowper's lines on the original of Robinson Crusoe, and:

“The sound of the church-going bell
These valleys and rocks never heard,”

came into his head. It was a day of rest. Every day there, at that season, was a Sabbath Day. He rested and just watched the light swing round as the world rolled, till the hill at his back (out of which Give-Out poured down unceasingly) went dusky. The shadow of it on the range to east slipped slowly upward; the light went out on the summit.

Angus listened for the crack of twigs to announce Piccolo, but no Piccolo. And then the dark came, and the stars, and moon enough to give light for a man accustomed to the

mountains, perhaps, to continue travelling in them, granting, that is, a trail; but Angus recalled that Piccolo was more at home in open lands. He peered, at a distance from his own fire, up into the hushed altitudes of black behind for the spark of a far camp-fire; but there was none. He thought of the Margaret who was still under these “glimpses of the moon”—at Colvalli. He smoked his second evening’s lonely pipe and turned in.

Next day he rose refreshed, cooked breakfast, packed a lunch of flapjacks and fish, and filled his canteen with water, slung his rifle, and set off uphill in the track of Piccolo.

But he had mounted no further than a hundred yards, guided by the first clip of a blaze that his partner had made on a tree, treading slowly upward on the tamarack needles, leisurely, aware that there might be a long tramp before him, when he heard a dull sound that fell echoless in the woods.

Then up swerved a jay, screaming. He halted, feeling not altogether sorry that here would come Piccolo doubtless, and a trudge in search of him be unnecessary. No other sound followed for a space; then he heard the swish of backward swinging branches.

“A bear maybe,” thought he, and loosened the safety-catch of his rifle, but did not unsling it.

“That you, Piccolo?” he rumbled; for if it was a bear he knew it would rush off at the sound of his voice—which would be pleasanter than having it blunder on to him and see him only at close quarters. At close quarters it might slap!

“All right!” came a voice in a high falsetto that puzzled Angus. It seemed not to be Piccolo’s falsetto.

The bushes parted and there plunged down toward him a big loose-limbed man, who thrust at him the end of a rifle

and said:

“Well sir! Well met! Just unsling your rifle and drop it right there.”

“What the—” began Angus.

A hold-up in back streets of big cities was not unexpected; a hold-up in the midst of the woods made MacPherson stare unbelieving. Then he saw the man meant his words. Behind him came another, and the latter he recognized.

Then Angus knew the truth. For the man he recognized was Alfred Greer of Colvalli. Angus had sat upon a jury once when Greer was in the prisoner’s place. He dropped his rifle to the earth, and Bantling said to his companion:

“Just see if he’s got a six-gun.”

Greer came close, drew aside MacPherson’s coat, clapped him over hip and side pockets.

Angus realized who the other man was. He had never seen him before, to his knowledge, but had heard of him. This must be the man Bantling, Banting, Bant, some such name, who had served a term for a hold-up southward, on the Nevada border. Since prohibition days it was supposed his income had come chiefly from bootlegging. There was a rumour that he and Greer, in an automobile with a few marks of bullets on it, had been seen just south of the line near Grand Forks. That sort of employ did not seem to Angus as bad as the hold-up business, perhaps because of a legend in his family that his grandfather, when a boy, had once in a prank had a trip with the smugglers who ran gin and lace ashore on the old Aberdeen and Forfar coasts under the noses of the excisemen.

But Greer's partner looked to him, in the full sense of the word, a "tough." Greer, he remembered, had got off in that case on which he had been a juryman. In his heart and mind Angus had believed him implicated (it was a whisky-running case in which there had been gun-play), but the evidence was not sound enough to bring a verdict against him.

"Your camp near here?" enquired Bantling.

"Not far back," replied Angus.

"Well, just mosey along to it, then," said Bantling. "Lead on, old timer. Don't hurry. We don't mean to worry you unduly. Just a little pow-wow we want with you."

Angus turned and trudged back to his camp. Behind him the two men exchanged a whisper, of which he only caught: "...Piccolo ... leave it to me ... speak."

"You doused the fire well, old timer," said Bantling. "We'll light her up again for you if you want to sit here any length of time; but maybe you won't."

Angus merely gloomed on him, sitting down stolidly on the fir-bough mattress.

Bantling sat on his heels facing him, rifle at his side, and Greer, a little way back, sat hunched on a fallen tree, till the ants in it walked out over him.

"Now, old timer, let's get to business," said Bantling. "We want you to give us the exact location of this Kootenay bonanza you've got on to."

"A fine sound it has," said Angus. "Kootenay Bonanza! But I haven't got on to it."

"Sure!" replied Bantling. "You are on your way to it, though. Now, Mr. MacPherson, it is going to be ours instead of yours."

He took from his pocket some fragments of ore.

“You see,” he said, “we have floats of it as well as you.”

“So!” observed Angus, and nodded. “Ay, quite so! I thought Piccolo had dropped some more somewhere. I begin to see light.”

His bushy eyebrows contracted in the centre and, so doing, thrust up at the edges, somewhat mephistophelian. But he dropped his lids to hide the fire that he knew blazed in his eyes then, the evidence, the outward and visible sign, of interior rage.

“Where do these floats come from, old timer?” asked Bantling.

Angus did not reply at once, and then—“Search me!” he said. “Out of Piccolo’s pocket I should imagine.”

“Well, Mr. Angus MacPherson, you are going to take us to the place.”

“I am!” said Angus, evenly.

“You sure are.”

“I can hardly take you to a place of which I have no cognizance.”

“How’s that?”

“I can hardly take you, when I don’t know where it is myself.”

Bantling laughed, and again plunged a hand into a pocket, this time his breast pocket.

“You old liar!” he said. “Look at this.”

He held out the sketch-map that Angus had drawn, part from the atlas at the T. T. ranch, part from Piccolo’s

descriptions, part from his recollections of maps of these parts that he had memorized from poring over them.

Angus considered it. It was then that the ants crawled on Greer's thighs. He rose, switched them off, and came closer. He entered the discussion.

"You drew that," said he. "I know, for I've seen your handwriting. I recognize it. Piccolo didn't do it."

"You might just as well have torn the page out of the atlas for all the use of that to find—" Angus paused—"anything," he ended. Then he sat glooming and thinking that Movie Bill must have given them this map.

"You just get up and lead the way, old timer," said Bantling.

"I can lead no way," replied Angus, "for I don't know the place. Now I'm honest with you. I don't pretend not to understand you. You are after what your friend Oggelstein sent the man Grafter and the man Hawke to find. Bob Merritt got through with his message fine and dandy, as ye might say."

This he said as a result of his glooming and deep thought. He wanted to know if Movie Bill, alone, had put Cyrus Oggelstein in touch with the matter, or if Bill was with these two men who also had scouted out the discovery. It was just possible that they, in their turn, had stolen the map from Bill, though that was unlikely.

"What are you giving us?" asked Bantling. "I don't know anything about your friend Hawke."

As a student of physiognomy Angus thought he lied.

"Oh! So! Well, you may not know about Hawke but you certainly know about Cyrus Oggelstein. Hawke was the man

he deputed to handle this case.”

Bantling made no response to that.

“And as for your pal, your letter-writing friend ‘M. B.’ ” Angus’s eyes blazed.

“Here, what do you know? Or what do you think you know?” asked Bantling.

“I know a whole lot, as ye might say. I know enough to think it very unwise for you two gentlemen to try to intimidate me.”

“Intimidate you!” cried out Bantling. “This is no intimidation. This is no bluff. This is the goods! You know enough to be put out of the way.”

“No, no,” replied Angus, without flinching, “I know just enough to be worth leaving intact if you only knew the whole story—if you only knew what I know.”

“He’s bluffing, Bant!” muttered Greer.

It was at that moment a thought suddenly leapt in Angus’s mind, and he said:

“Bant! Bant your name? Might I ask what is your Christian name?”

They both stared at him because of the unexpectedness, and also the unintelligibility of the enquiry. But Greer laughed.

“Christian name is good!” he commented.

Bantling paid no heed to the enquiry, sat sucking the ends of his moustache aware that he was having little effect on MacPherson. Then he said:

“Our word is as good as yours, old-timer. We found the ore deposit before you—see?”

“You’ve found it!”

“We will find it when you lead us to it. Now, don’t fret. This is the fortune of war. We’ll stake her. You can say what you like after, but our word is as good as yours.” Bantling paused and then said: “We have your squeaky-voiced partner trussed up, and he can stay trussed, and coyotes can have him if you don’t lead us to the place.”

Angus peered at his eyes as that speech was delivered, then looked at Greer.

“He bluffing now, ain’t he?” he asked Greer.

Greer only puckered his eyes, inscrutable.

“Piccolo wouldn’t tell you, then?” Angus enquired, addressing Bantling again. “So you trussed him up and came to find me.”

“I’m the enquirer,” answered Bantling, “not you.”

“So!” said Angus. “Well, if you’ve left Piccolo trussed up the coyotes may get the courage to eat him, or the bob-cats might see he was unable to defend himself and not pass by on the other side as their usage is with men. Then your goose with the golden eggs is done for. Ah well. But perhaps Movie Bill is looking after him?”

Bantling’s eyes blinked rapidly.

“Movie Bill?” he asked. “What about him?”

At that Angus shut up like a clam. He sat very still, staring at the ground. What, he wondered, was he to believe? He had a terrible dread that perhaps Piccolo was no longer a living man, that they had caught his partner, held him up, tried to get the information they wanted from him—killed him. So ended his dark fear. It was a dread that possessed him so strongly that he said, to test, to seek evidence:

“You went the wrong way about this. I certainly drew that map you have, but only to help Piccolo give an impression of this country, and because I’m accustomed to drawing maps. It is of no service without Piccolo. If you wanted to be the bold bad bandits like what you read about in the Sunday editions you should have held me up as the hostage, or ransom as they say, and said to Piccolo: ‘Blab it out, Pic! Show us the place where you got these bonny specimens or we’ll blow out the brains of your auld friend.’ ”

He spread out his palms in a frail-looking gesture before him.

The two men frowned, then looked one to the other. Angus felt sure then that his guess that they had done away with Piccolo was correct. Dimly to his ears sounded the tomtoming of the creek, although truly it roared on loud enough. A great weariness filled him again. He felt less enraged than broken. It seemed a bitter and callous world.

And then a high shrill voice pierced the minor-key brawl of the creek:

“Put up your hands! Both of you! Smart!”

Angus’s heart clutched. He looked up, and there was Piccolo, a meagre little man on a rock, like a caricature of the central figure in pictures called *The Last Stand*, rifle tensely in his hands, finger on trigger.

Greer wheeled, raising his arms high in air. The crazy Bantling turned with his gun up to fire. And fire he did, but only with the involuntary jerk of his hand as he fell. Pic had fired first.

The detonations in that compressed place at the gorge of Give-Out creek were deafening in their ears, two thuds of sound that made the ear-drums, for a moment or two after,

register nothing; and then the roar of the creek came back by degrees. There was no smoke, just a waft of acrid odour.

Bantling lay on his face. Greer, hands still in air, quivered perceptibly. But for that matter so did Angus, swallowing with difficulty, not as young as he had been; and so did Piccolo.

“By your leave, sir,” said Angus, and stretching out his slightly shaking hand he annexed Greer’s rifle.

Piccolo was no movie hero. He was certainly trembling like one of the aspens by the creek side as he came close to them.

“For Heaven’s sake,” said Greer, “slip your finger off that trigger. I ain’t heeled now. She might go off.”

Piccolo gave a shrill little laugh.

“Sure, she might!” he said. “Now what’s the game? See if he has an automatic in his pocket, Scotty, or any other shooting iron—or a knife, or anything.”

His voice quavered high, very tremulous, and with a note of almost crazy exultation.

Angus felt Greer carefully, and was satisfied that the rifle he had annexed was his only lethal weapon.

“Well? What’s the game?” asked Piccolo. “What were you hazing my friend Mr. MacPherson for?”

Greer said not a word.

“He wanted me to tell him where the location is where you found your specimens. He has some of them. I don’t know how he got them,” Angus explained.

Piccolo looked ashamed. In the stress of the moment he confessed.

“I guess I dropped them at the hotel veranda at Colvalli,” said he. “Movie Bill had picked them up by the time I went back for them.”

“So!” said Angus, but in a very absent voice.

He bent forward and felt Bantling’s heart. He opened one of the fallen man’s eyes, and then rose. He was again trembling.

“He’s dead!” he said.

Give-Out creek roared on with a note unchanged, but to Angus it seemed that its note had changed. Piccolo stood very white, looking down at the body.

“I suppose,” said he, “we should go through his pockets for more evidence—the way the Kokanee policeman went through that man Grafter’s pockets.”

The voice of Greer astonished them both.

“Is Grafter dead? Did he get it?” he asked, sepulchral, almost unaware.

“Oh, you knew Grafter! Well, that was an act of God,” said Angus. “He was overtaken by a snowslide. Him and Hawke.”

Greer just stood staring.

“I don’t like doing this,” Piccolo’s chirping voice rose up, as he searched Bantling’s pockets. “No, he has no letters. Look—chewing gum!” His lip quivered. There were queer sensitive streaks in Piccolo. “What does a dead man want with chewing gum? The sugar coated kind too!” His voice quavered tensely.

“Here you!” roared Angus. “Keep a grip on yourself.” He was master of the situation. “You,” and he glared at Greer, “get that little shovel and pick there and dig. Dig good, or I’ll

show you how. Step lively; shake a leg. Bend to it. Dig and get your partner to his bed.”

The blaze in MacPherson’s eyes made Greer work hard. Piccolo looked like one on the verge of breakdown. In that thin voice of his he said:

“He should have a board or something over him. He should not have grabbed the rifle. I had to shoot.”

“Sure you had to! Sure you had to!” cried out Angus, in a tone like a Nova Scotia skipper in a fog. “We’ll get a bit stick up to him. I’ll carve his name to please you. I’m a grand hand at the whittling. What was his name again?”

“Bantling. Mark Bantling,” said Greer, digging hard, for Angus stood four-square and grim, rifle in hand, above the hole he dug.

“Twelve letters. Huh! Here, you Piccolo, cut out your false sentiment. You acted like a man in the circumstances. He was a sure-thing tough—a sure-thing tough. Brace yourself. I can’t carve twelve letters on a stick; the initials will have to do. And take back what you pumped into my head about Movie Bill!”

He was going to add: “It was this man Bantling who wrote the letter!” but Greer, climbing out of the hole to drag his fallen partner into it, in some emotion of chagrin over having lost perhaps, and desirous just to contradict the sturdy old man who had won, snapped:

“Oh, Movie Bill is on to it all right!”

Angus’s voice sounded old and petulant as he cried out at that:

“Confound you! Confound you both! I’ll believe Movie Bill is crooked when I have proof. I have no proof now.”

“That’s all right,” soothed Greer, “he told me himself. He told Bantling over the ’phone that he was on to it.”

“Over the ’phone?” shrilled Angus, almost as shrill as Piccolo. And then: “There, there! No more, either of you. Leave calumny to the sewing circles when the towns are built. No more about that man Movie Bill. I keep an open mind!”

Piccolo, calmed down, but annoyed then by Angus classing him and Greer together, gave a little laugh, a slight sneer. He muttered: “You’ll find out about—” and the rest tailed off indistinct.

“What’s that?” asked Angus.

“Nothing,” said Piccolo. “You’ll see.”

“That’s what I say: I’ll see!”

And never a word of appreciation to Piccolo for the splendid way, like a hero in a movie, in which he had come to the rescue! After all that he had done for him too! Made a camp for him when he gave out; brought him water; rescued him from two bad men! Did Angus think it was nothing to him that he had been forced to shoot one of them? Even to shoot up a man like that was an ordeal. No sympathy with him when he was unstrung afterwards. Classed him with Greer! Oh, a snappy, crochety, cranky old man!

Piccolo was “peevd” indeed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CONFLICTING EVIDENCE

“HOW did you get free of your bonds, Piccolo?” asked Angus.

“Bonds? I didn’t have any bonds. What are you talking of?”

Piccolo had a sudden horror that his partner’s mind was upset, as well as his body wearied, by their arduous journey. He could only think of “war bonds” in connection with the word at the moment.

“The bonds with which this gentleman here and his late friend trussed you up.”

“Trussed me up?” piped Piccolo, singing it like a Chinaman.

“Yes, this Mr. Greer here and,” he paused. “M. B.” said he, in a firm accentuated tone to see if Piccolo would not find a new significance in these letters, recalling the note the Kokanee policeman found in Grafter’s pocket.

But again their possible association—or disassociation—with Movie Bill did not flash on Piccolo, nor did he realize why Angus had suddenly formed the impression that Movie Bill was not mixed up in the affair, an impression that Greer had contradicted.

“I don’t understand,” said Piccolo. “I got up to the north side of the gulch and saw the way clear higher up in the big timber on the summit. So I started back for you. It looked easier on the south side of the gulch, so I came down that way, but I was not sure when I was opposite your camp. I

never saw them anywhere. I hollered” (Angus’s mouth twisted at the thought of Pic “hollering”), “but I guess the creek made too much noise for you to hear, so I climbed a tree. Look, it was that tall fellow there. It was just like walking up a spiral staircase,” and he twirled a finger up in air. “And then I saw you, and saw you were in some fix, so I came down, crossed the creek jumping from one boulder to another, and—” he stopped, “you know the rest. Trussed up nothing!” he snorted.

Angus gave a grunt and turned to Greer.

“You maybe ain’t as tough as you talk,” said he. “I always believe in giving a man the benefit of the doubt. When did you invent that lie? How did your partner know to say what he did?”

“Well, we knew you were out with him. When we met you, you sung out: ‘Is that you, Piccolo?’ so Bant worked his line of talk on that.”

“Very clever,” said Angus. “More clever than I thought. He did the way some of these fake character readers do. They get their clients to tell them, without realizing they are doing so; and then they tell it back. Very clever of him. ‘Is that you, Piccolo?’ and so he knew I was alone, expecting Pic. Well, you did not keep a good look-out for him, considering you knew I was expecting him.”

“I sure did. But not to the south side of the creek, right behind my back.”

“What made you come down here?”

“We saw the smoke of your fire.”

“Who’s the ‘we’? How many of you are there?”

Greer did not answer at once. Then—

“Just the two,” said he.

Angus looked at him thoughtfully. He found his face shifty.

“That’s the number there are,” he said, stressing the last word. “Were there three of you before Bantling behaved as if he did not understand: ‘Throw up your hands’?”

Greer went glum, and it was as if a film obliterated his gaze.

“Well, Mr. Greer, I won’t ask you any more questions. You can tell the truth; also you can lie. You might fool me between lies and truth. But we’ll take you along with us. And yet I don’t know!” he ejaculated. His eyes blazed suddenly. He bent forward again. “Just one more question,” said he. “Have you, or have you not, any other partner now in the hills with you?”

Greer thought hard. He looked down. Then he stared straight at Angus, meeting his gaze.

“Yes!” he said, spitting out the word as though, thought Angus, in a rage at being questioned.

Angus rose.

“We’ll hit your trail, Pic,” he said. “You say the best way is up the south bank after all?”

“Yes, once you get across. It is much more open going. But you have to cross on the boulders.”

“That’s all right,” said Angus. “You will go first. I will wait on this side till Mr. Greer gets over with my kit. You’ll look after him till I get across with my rifle. He shall pack my kit for me. You can leave your rifle and Bantling’s here, Mr. Greer. You will have no more need of a shooting iron than he has. Pic and I have enough for this little expedition. Ay man! It is wonderful how our prayers are answered. You wanted to

see the location of these wonderful specimens. Piccolo will lead you to it; I will come in the rear. If we encounter your other friend, advise him to drop his shooting iron.”

Greer looked at the gun in his hands and obeyed. They walked up stream to where were the boulders on which Piccolo had crossed on his return to the camp.

“Lead on, Piccolo,” said Angus. “No, no, Mr. Greer; I said you’d wait on this bank till he gets across. Stay with me. I will tell you when to start over.”

Piccolo leapt with his load skilfully balancing from rock to rock. The water sprayed them, but he kept his feet. When he was on the south bank he unslung his rifle and waited.

“You can skip over now,” said Angus to Greer. “And don’t try to skidoo, as ye might say. Maybe Piccolo is shaken overmuch by ridding the world of your partner to wish to polish you off, but I am not. I am in no way desirous to have your blood on my head, Mr. Greer. You have every chance. But it is not time for us to part yet. If you tried to leave me you would not go far. I can shoot.”

Greer believed he probably could; and so, having taken the series of leaps across to the south bank, he merely sat down there to watch Angus make the crossing, with an ardent hope he would slip on one of the boulders and fall into the creek. If that happened, thought he, Piccolo would certainly leap to assist, and then—!

Half way over Angus paused, upright on a stone, the spray wetting his legs, a green cauldron as if boiling below him, for the creek was full from the recent meltings of snow on the peaks. He stood there staring stonily at Greer then, wonderfully agile, he leapt on and came to the south bank beside them.

“Ay!” he said, and bent toward his captive. “I didn’t fall. So Piccolo had no occasion to drop his rifle and come to my aid.” Under his bushy brows he peered at Greer. “I pride myself that I am some slight student of physiognomy. Your face was like a book as I balanced on yon mid-stream rock. And it wasn’t like the Book of Saints, Mr. Greer. Now try to be a good lad. No tricks.” And again he said: “Lead on, Pic.”

They had started late, so there was no stop till dusk. Ahead, Greer trudging between them with MacPherson’s pack on his back, Piccolo turned and called to his partner:

“Here’s a good camp-place. Will we stop here or go further?”

“Is it far to the next good camp-place?” asked Angus.

“Quite a ways; and it would be an easy trip to the top tomorrow. I cleared it a bit coming down.”

“We’ll stop here, then,” said Angus. “Drop your load or my load, I should say, Mr. Greer, and help Piccolo to make camp.”

He sat down on a fallen tree, rifle across his knees, and taking up a piece of stick whittled the end for kindling wood. When the meal was cooked, in a voice that would have seemed mockingly courteous from any one else, he said:

“Be seated, Mr. Greer. Yonder. Kindly take the end of the table, so to speak.”

Had any one watched from a distance he would have noted nothing odd. The billy of tea circulated from one to the other. All ate as if contented.

But when the meal was over Angus said: “I’ve been thinking. In this kind of affair I have no previous experience to go upon, but yon story of your partner’s about trussing up

Pic gives me an idea. Pic wants a sleep; so do I. I have no intention of mounting guard on you, Mr. Greer. You will sleep in between us, but you will sleep with your hands tied behind your back.

‘I do not trust ye, Dr. Fell;
The reason why I cannot tell.
But this I know, and know full well—
I do not trust thee....’

Mr. Greer. It goes against the grain to talk in this way to an unarmed captive; but we must have a thorough understanding,” he rumbled.

“Oh, pshaw!” exclaimed Greer. “You might just as well let me go. I’ve lost.”

“No, sir,” replied Angus, “not yet; we’ll not let you go yet. You might rejoin your other partner.”

“Shucks! I have no partner around now. I was only bluffing.”

Angus nodded at him.

“So!” he said. “Well, I do not trust ye, Dr. Fell.”

Piccolo did not relish the idea of them both going to sleep.

“Hadn’t we better take turns about keeping awake,” he suggested. “His partner might be around and see our fire and ___”

“Man, man,” said Angus, “don’t you know that I waken at the slightest sound? A man can be over-careful. It’s not the Anglo-Saxon, nor yet the Celtic way, to be over-careful. The over-careful man will not go to sleep, sits up watching, and is

tired in the morning. You have no blanket, Mr. Greer. You can have one of mine.”

Greer looked at him, with a brief lift of his brows as of astonishment. He took the blanket, however, without a word.

“I’ll give him one of mine,” said Piccolo.

“That’s all right,” said Angus. “I’ve only used one since we got down in these low valleys.” He turned to Greer. “When you are ready I will just tie your hands behind your back,” he said.

For a brief moment it looked as though there was going to be trouble. Greer’s fists (he had stood up, the meal over) clenched at his sides. Angus stood four-square before him, looked down at the clenched fists frowning.

“You seem kind of tense, Mr. Greer,” he remarked. “I notice your hands are clenched.”

“Hell!” said Greer, and submitted to being handcuffed.

As soon as they lay down Angus fell asleep. Piccolo, he knew, would lie for hours with eyes open, ears alert, and only succumb at last, overcome, to the urgent pleas of sleep. For himself he slept sound till perhaps four of the morning, when he rose and put more wood on the fire for warmth.

Greer was fast asleep. Piccolo did not move. Angus had then another nap, and wakened with the first of the day, first up. When Greer and Piccolo opened their eyes it was to find him tossing a flapjack in the pan with a deft accustomed twist of the wrist from a hundred camp-fires in many lands, and to see the lid of the billy dancing up and down over the boiling water.

“Gee, you’re a wonderful man, old-timer,” said Greer.

“Good morning. I’m all that,” said Angus, “and I’m awful easy flattered.”

Greer, though perhaps he was not adopting a wrong attitude to his captor, thought he had and relapsed into silence again.

The sun was high over the eastern fir-frilled slopes that rise above Give-Out when again they were in line of travel, trudging up the quick rising edge of the creek; and about noon they saw the boles of the upper timber that stood like some wild cathedral pillars round them. Onward there was a spread of light, the last stately columns, by contrast, dark upon their side and as if stencilled trees, or silhouetted, against a blaze of gold. A few more yards of tramping and they came out to these upland meadows of which Angus had been told at Colvalli by the astonished Tremaine, rancher, amazed at that high “feed.”

And there before them was a little bunch of horses grazing. The three men stood clustered, coming out of the woods, staring at them. There were three horses without saddles—riding or pack-saddles; presumably, thought Angus, pack-horses these—and there were three all saddled for riding, two unbitted, one all bridled.

“Why didn’t you unsaddle the saddle-horses?” asked Angus.

“We rode down on them as far as the going was good, and then just took the bridles off and turned them around to go back and join the pack-horses. We knew they wouldn’t go further than this grass and the other horses,” said Greer.

“I see. And what might be the explanation for the dark horse being bitted? Whose horse is that?”

He asked; but he knew! He thought he had misjudged Movie Bill; he would not misjudge again. He would be told; he would hear, not hazard—even though he knew! He did not look at Greer. He looked stonily before him.

“Guess you’ve seen it before,” answered Greer. “It’s Movie Bill’s all right.”

“So!” said Angus. He turned to Piccolo. “Ah well,” he said, “this lets me out, as Flynn of Virginia said. You were right—I was wrong—and be ready for him, Pic. He’s a crack shot. I know that. He can shoot, can that glum-faced fraud and imposition.”

And then Greer spoke again.

“Yes, b’gosh!” he ejaculated. “That’s Movie Bill’s hoss, all right, all right. He said solitaire was his long suit.”

Angus turned to him.

“Solitaire? What do you mean? He’s—not—in—with—you?”

“He’s sure not in with you, anyhow!” said Greer, who had lost.

The thought pleased him that these two might not win after all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DON QUIXOTE OF WASHINGTON STATE

“NOW Piccolo,” said Angus, “it behoves us to be watchful, to be on the alert, or to keep our eyes skinned, as might be said. You, Greer, you are in a different case from Movie Bill. You have never eaten of my saleratus and given me gifts of arrowheads. I do not feel hurt by your behaviour. You are reasonably far less a subject for my rage than Movie Bill. But oddly enough I could blow off the top of your head without compunction if you got up to any capers. With Movie Bill—if there is to be any shooting it will go hard against me to draw a bead on him.”

“I’ll see to that!” shrilled Piccolo. “He has never eaten my saleratus! He called me a Welshman and told me to go to h—’ once; and the way he looked at me! Huh! I don’t forget!” (He had evidently forgotten how remembered grievances seemed a small thing to him under stress of an emotion but a short time previously.) “I can shoot too. I took a prize once at the Cheyenne Fall Fair for rapid fire.”

“You did!” murmured Angus. “You are a wonderful twig indeed.”

That word “twig” had its effect on Piccolo. It recalled to him the feeling of utter lack of resentment he had felt when the man in brown (who had called him “twig”) came to his end. His face was suddenly elongated.

“I hope, I hope,” he said, “there may be no more shoot-ups.”

Greer laughed outright, a callous laugh.

Angus turned to him, gazing sternly under his tufted brows. The edges of his mouth came down grimly.

“You are a poor sort of a body, Mr. Greer,” said he. “Dang it, despite what he’s done to me, that Movie Bill is a better man than you. He has streaks, sir; he has streaks! He has qualities, sir; you have none. Now I tell you, contemplation of you gives me a pain in my neck, as ye might say; you afflict me with that tired feeling; you get my goat, as might be said. Any tricks from you, should we meet him, and I shall surely put you out of harm’s way. Your first name is Alfred, isn’t it? You will be planted before you know where you are if you get up to any tricks, and your initials ‘A. G.’ will be on a bit stick set up over you for the squirrels to sit upon and crack nuts.”

“Oh, you don’t know what I’m laughing at!” said Greer, and was shaken with interior merriment.

It was at that moment that a whistle sounded beyond them from the trees on the far side of the meadow. Angus raised his head, hearkening for a repetition.

“Was that a marmot?” he asked.

But Movie Bill’s saddle horse, a step or two from them on that upland meadow’s edge, turned, ears erect.

Piccolo had initiative upon occasion. He dropped his pack, and grabbing up his rifle stepped quickly, but without a rush that would excite it, to the doubtful horse, caught the lines. One of the other horses, apparently a pack-horse (which Greer mediatatively considered, as Angus and Piccolo might have noted had they been looking at him then, instead of at Baldy), at sound of the whistle had also seemed to be interested; but on seeing the little man step toward the saddle-horse and catch the lines some thought evidently passed

through its equine mind that all was well. It paid no more heed, went on grazing.

The whistle was repeated; and Baldy started off toward the place whence the sound came. But Piccolo forced him sidewise in among the border of scrub between timber and grass where only the head and withers could be seen. Among that scrub Piccolo bent low; Angus and Greer watching saw only the horse moving away from them—or only his head and withers, the high-horned and cantled saddle.

“Canny, Piccolo, canny!” called Angus. “Hold him up. Disarm him. Don’t shoot unreasonably!” And then he turned to Greer. “If you let a whoop out of you your name, I might remark, will be Dennis. You tell me he is not in with you, but I don’t believe you, Mr. Greer.”

Greer dropped MacPherson’s pack that he had been carrying, sat down on it—

“I ain’t butting in,” said he, and chuckled on.

“Well, just you stay with that resolve,” Angus told him. “And your joke you can either pass on, or just lay aside till you get home where you can send it to the comic papers and see if it will win a prize. Your merriment is ill-timed. Dang it, I do not want to see Piccolo Thomas killed. I should be there with him if I was half a man. But it is a fact I could not go. What are you grinning for? Have you no bowels of compassion at all, as the Scripture phrases it?”

Greer suddenly became solemn, but not through dread of MacPherson’s anger.

“You are a—fine old son of a gun. You are a short man, Angus MacPherson, but you are all Angus MacPherson from the heels up!” he said in his sincerest manner.

And behold, it was as though Angus had not heard! He could only hear his heart thump. He could hear the blood in a vein somewhere, an ageing vein, pulsing roughly. For him an infinity of silence passed, and then there came to their ears, in rapid succession, six shots, quick as the patter of a machine gun.

“Your partner has no six gun,” remarked Greer in an even low voice.

Angus, with his rifle resting on his crooked right arm, stood staring in the direction that Piccolo had gone with the horse.

“He was a wee man to allow to go on a job like that,” he muttered. “And yet he’s a wonderful wee man too.”

They waited and listened. Greer, glancing at MacPherson to see how he took the uncertainty, thought he looked, standing there, grim, like the carved figures on the Indian totem-poles he had seen at the coast. As for himself, he was resigned for whatever was to come. He was now but a blasé spectator.

There came to their ears, at last, the click of a horse hoof on a stone, and then a crashing of bushes. They saw, suddenly, the tossing up and down of a pony’s head—Movie Bill’s pony it seemed. Unexpected, it looked at first like some prehistoric monster come alive in these queer upland solitudes, for a moment in their tensity hardly recognizable.

And Movie Bill’s horse it was; for then they saw two men, a lithe man of medium height and a slender one walking together toward them. They were Piccolo and Movie Bill. They came directly to the edge of the forest where Greer sat on Angus’s pack-sack, and Angus stood, rifle at the ready,

beside his partner's. The old man did not tremble then. He stood rigid, square, waiting.

With his easy swinging stride from the hip, Movie Bill advanced, one hand behind his back holding the lines of the led horse. Piccolo walked a pace behind, to the near side, his rifle pointed at his prisoner. Despite his grimness there was something almost comic in his attitude.

"How-do, Mr. MacPherson," said Movie Bill, cheerfully.

Angus merely stood pat, staring at him.

Movie Bill's eyebrows elevated a moment as in astonishment; and then he saw Greer.

"Ah-ha!" he said. "Hullo, Mr. Greer? Well, I got ahead of you all right."

Greer said not a word.

Movie Bill turned to take the bridle from his horse. As he did so it opened its mouth and let the bit fall out. He clapped it on the neck and finished that caress with a thrusting motion of the palm.

"Go feed," said he. "Now I know where you are, all's well. Of course you were lonesome, and had to go off with the pack-horse to join other members of your species. Darn bad company, though!"

He turned from addressing his horse, ignoring Piccolo and his rifle, to Angus.

"Say, Mr. MacPherson," said he, "that's a cold welcome you give me. Your rifle is not pointed at me like Squeaky's, but it is in your hands! Are you mute with astonishment to find me in these altitudes so far from home? What's taken you, sir? This little gentleman with the .303 I expect such treatment from. He has not the imagination of a flea, though

he has the freshness of a chipmunk. Alert! Oh, alert—yes! And that’s all. Pray be seated, gentlemen, and somebody explain. The squeaker won’t. He has no vocabulary beyond: ‘Hands Up!’—and ‘Now, dang you, come along with me.’ When I asked for the explanation to which I felt entitled he said: ‘Go on, keep on a-moving. Don’t get fresh.’ I was over at the end of this meadow, and with my coat off at that. Found the horses had gone. I whistled for them, and one of them came—through the bush, and with him this Welsh gentleman.” He paused and looked at Piccolo from toes to crown of hat. “Easy!” he sneered. “Anybody could hold up a man in his shirt-sleeves. Oh, agile! An agile brain! He kept me covered and backed up to where my coat lay, and felt it with his foot. Very well done indeed. Felt my little automatic. Extracted it. Shot it off against a rock wall only twenty feet away. Might have got a flick of spattered lead; but no matter. What’s the explanation? None forthcoming. He just said: ‘And now, dang you, come along with me.’ Well, I came. Can you explain, Mr. MacPherson?”

Angus tried to speak. He wanted to say: “And you have eaten of my saleratus, as ye might say, and ...” but he said nothing. Something Movie Bill had said had revived a faint hope. He had remarked to his horse that it was in bad company.

“Are you with this fellow?” he asked, wagging his head toward Greer.

“Oh, MacPherson!” broke out Movie Bill. “Don’t act like your friend. I went to him once to help him, and he treated me as if I was a darn house-breaker. I have a twist in me. We all have a twist I guess. I try to combat it; but when a man takes me for a burglar he just—well, he just can. He got my

goat. Don't you go and talk so that you get my goat, Angus. Shucks, man! Have I not eaten salt with you," he smiled a wonderful smile over his lined face, "*as ye might say?*"

Angus sat down on Piccolo's pack-sack and gazed up at his friend. His rifle he laid gently beside him, leant against the load.

"It's all very puzzling, Bill," said he. "Elucidate. Elucidate, if you please."

Movie Bill sagged slowly down to a sitting posture upon one heel. On a bent knee he rested an elbow and, chin in hand, he gazed at Angus. The ease with which he sat so—in one of the poses of the accustomed camper, a pose that may be seen in many an Indian village, and at any congeries of cow punchers where the ground is damp—had its associations for Angus. It reminded him of all their travel yarns, of his tales of the Veld and Kaffirs, of Australia, dry-blowing, black-fellows, snakes (Movie Bill was a "grand listener"); it reminded him, that pose, a confirmed camper, of Bill's tales of soda-springs he wot of fizzing and bubbling in wilderness valleys, of stones of the mesas, stories of the sagebrush, his recounting of talks he had had with Chief Young Whirlwind, or Kicking Bull's philosophizings and views—the kind of knowledge such men (for in this they were of the same order, the same type, despite their different ages) care to gather, find fascinating.

"Why elucidate?" asked Bill Allardyce, in a low voice, the even voice that is usual to men of his kind and often maintained when they are under stress of emotion. "To clear myself? That's what gets my goat! When I was a boy I was everlastingly being asked to elucidate. I had years of it

among uncongenial relatives not of my choosing. It gave me a kink. I do not like to elucidate. I like to be believed in.”

They were silent for some moments, and then Movie Bill said: “And yet you have reason. I certainly have a tough face. I am more than homely. I am more ugly—in the exact sense of the word—than Cyrano de Bergerac!

“Oh, don’t be flippant!” cried out Angus. “I have no doubt all is clear, Bill, but make it clear. Man, I’m not a god! I am but an ordinary man—an auld man who has been disappointed in many folks.”

“You don’t think my name should be Skin-Game Bill, then?” asked Movie. “You believe in me, then?” and he seemed to wait a response as though all depended upon it.

Slowly staring at him, Angus replied: “I—do!”

“Oh, well, that’s fine!” said Movie Bill. “Because I’ve staked your claim.”

“You’ve staked it!” exclaimed Angus.

“You’ve staked it!” exclaimed Piccolo.

The voice of each rose shrill, but with a leap up of an octave that signified in each a different understanding of the remark. As Piccolo shrilled: “You’ve staked it!” he flung up his rifle, and Angus was afraid he would shoot Movie Bill in the moment’s rage.

“Put down that rifle, Piccolo!” he roared.

Piccolo did lower it, horrified at his own nearness to being a murderer.

“Oh, well,” he said, and his voice sounded thin and poignant as the note of a junko in the hills, “if you’ve staked it, you’ve staked it.”

Movie Bill ignored him.

“I’ve staked it on behalf of you both. I did not know the number of your miner’s license,” he said to Angus, “but I’ve bluffed whoever—if any one—might come along before I found you, or you got here. I just happened to know that the B. C.’s miners’ licenses are all in five figures. I’ve invented one to bluff anybody who might come along before you did. I’ve made 18976 on the note I left on the discovery post; and I’ve made your partner’s 18977 as I guessed you’d take out licenses together. It looks good on the paper I left. I did not know how the law was up here, and if you could take one out for Tremaine by proxy or not; and I did not know if he was in your venture at all. That is up to you.”

“Tremaine was to be a shareholder all right,” said Piccolo. “He watched the horses while I went after the fool-hens.”

“Well, I guess you fix that between yourselves. Anyhow I have staked your two claims. As well as I could pace it out I’ve got a base line just twice fifteen hundred feet in length where there is a sign of mineral. That’s your two claims; and they take up all the space wherever the mineral shows according to the meaning of the act. I’ve written both your names and given you, as I say,” and he laughed, “temporary license numbers. All you have to do is to rub out these numbers and put in the right ones—unless I was telepathic and got the right ones.”

“I’ve a bad memory for figures,” said Angus absently, doing what he did to fill a gap of dumfounded silence. He drew forth his pocket-book and looked at his miner’s license. “No, no, man. You are wonderful, but you are not as wonderful as that. The number is not what you wrote.”

But at the same time he knew the number was not essential on the scene of discovery. He did not, however, tell Movie

Bill that. Perhaps, he thought, in some states of the Union where Movie Bill had prospected with an old prospector (he recalled stories of that adventure after ore) such was the regulation.

At that moment Angus was more engrossed in other considerations. He turned to Piccolo.

“Pic,” he said, “you may have thought you were the hero of this journey when you listened-in on yon telegraph talk at Kokanee, or when you beat up, as ye might say, Grafter; and I may have thought I was the hero when my agile brain sent me on my pack-sack, as if it was a toboggan, kicking sidewise away from yon snowslide. But here’s the real Don Quixote of Washington State!” He drew a trembling sigh and murmured: “Man, it’s a great relief to the heart!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

EXPLANATIONS—ELUCIDATIONS

IT was Movie Bill who first regained equanimity. He was more accustomed to his own romanticism than were the others. It left them speechless.

“It looks as if Greer was more or less a hostage, a prisoner or something in that vein,” said he. “Where’s his partner?”

But it seemed that neither Angus nor Piccolo had recovered from their stupefaction over the quixotry of Movie Bill. They had the appearance of men gathering their attention. It was Greer who answered.

“M. B.” said he, “has gone to what Mr. MacPherson here calls his lang hame. His brain sure side-slipped. He forgot the significance of the words: ‘Throw up your hands!’ ”

“Ah-ha!” said Movie Bill.

“Say,” said Piccolo to Movie, “how do you sign your letters?”

“I’m afraid I don’t get you.”

“Do you sign them ‘Movie Bill’?”

“I might if I was in the mood,” answered Movie. “After the way you’ve treated me, and with not so much as a chirp of, ‘I beg your pardon’ I’d be more apt to adopt the highly formal third person that a peppery old uncle of mine back east used to adopt to people who got his goat. I’d be inclined to write that Mr. William Allardyce presents his compliments and would be glad to receive some sign of contrition.”

“It was Mark Bantling wrote that letter to Cyrus Oggelstein,” said Angus, in his rumbling voice. “I started to

tell you so once, and then—Oh, well, that's all over now.”

“What's it all about?” asked Movie Bill.

Angus turned to him.

“It's like the house that Jack built,” he said. “Bantling gave a lad called Bob Merritt a note to take to Cyrus Oggstein in Spokane, telling him that Piccolo and I were going to Kokanee ostensibly to prospect there, but much more likely to locate a mineral deposit of which Pic brought back specimens. Cyrus was to have us watched to Kokanee. If he could go himself he was asked to do so as the thing seemed worth while. But he did not go himself. He deputized the job to one of his gang called John Grafter. Then he went his way. Grafter came with us to Kokanee from Spokane and got in touch with a crook called Hawke there. They followed us.” He rose. “Look,” he said, “see, away over these first hog-backs and ranges north, that long blue and white range of mountains above the forests? Yon is the tombstone of both Hawke and Grafter.”

“You shot them up?” asked Movie Bill.

“No. It was an act of God. They were overcome by an avalanche, a snowslide.”

“How do you know Bantling wrote to this Cyrus Oggstein you mention?” asked Greer.

Angus looked at him a moment as though wondering if he should reply.

“Because the Kokanee policeman, who was suspicious of Hawke, followed him and Grafter into the hills. He saw them enveloped by the slide when they were trying to cross a slope after us. It was well on in the day. The sun was sending the slides down. We saw it too, and a narrow shave we had

getting across. Hawke was under a hundred tons of it. Grafter was sifted down on the surface after being stunned by a chunk of solid ice, what they call a cornice that fell and rushed down. The policeman examined his pockets. He found the letter. And I might mention that he seemed highly interested in discovering who was the king-bolt of the little bunch of crooks drifting through this country alert for—I won't say easy money, but crooked money.”

Greer gave what is called a mirthless laugh.

“You're right, old timer,” he said. “Crooked jobs are often more difficult than straight ones. I don't know why we go in for them.”

“Well you're honest enough about that,” said Angus.

“Bob Merritt,” said Movie Bill. “Bob Merritt, you mentioned. He used to be around Placer. Ah, that's what you and Bantling had been up to that day I saw you and we had our little pow-wow beside Pauline Creek. Just how that kid struck me—easily led astray.”

“Oh, he knew darn little of what he was doing. He was just to take the letter and make the connection.” He turned to Angus and blandly enquired: “And what about me now?”

“Bide a wee! Bide a wee!” said Angus. “Or, as ye might say, stick around. You will come up and see the claim with us.” He turned to Movie Bill. “How did you find it? What are you here for anyhow? How are you, as might be said, in on this? This is more like a detective story than a prospecting trip.”

Movie Bill pondered a spell.

“Well,” said he, “you heard me mention a pow-wow I had with Bantling and Greer near Pauline Creek. I had ridden out

there—to have a day off, and they rode past and stopped, and invited me more or less to join them in search for the place where Piccolo had found some stones he dropped in front of the Benwell House. You see, I had seen Bantling pick them up, and Greer had seen me see him do it. It is house that Jack built on my side too, Angus. But Bantling was no diplomatist, and I have a twist in me as you know. He got my goat. That goat of mine! I'll have to tether it good in future. Oh well, I guess as we get older we get mellow. There were other side issues. This is synopsis. There was a certain little telephone-call, for example, when Bantling was in the T. T. ranch house during its owners' absence." (Piccolo sat fidgetting his fingers, eyes wide, listening like a child to a fairy story.) "And he got my goat then. I told them that seeing Piccolo did not know what his stones were, that they were not lost by him but just flung away, I didn't see anything crooked in their going out to find the place; but planning to intimidate Piccolo into telling or any hanky-panky tricks like that seemed to be a different matter. But Bantling wasn't content. He told me: all right, if I wouldn't come in with them I could just keep out; so I came in—to play a lone hand."

He paused.

"A lone hand?" enquired Angus.

"Yes," said Movie Bill. There was another pause, and then: "Well, I got back to Colvalli that night to find that you and Piccolo had thrown in your lot together. You were off—to Kokanee, I was told. Why Kokanee? I asked myself, in view of what I had heard from Bantling and Greer, and Piccolo's remark about where he had been—only eighty miles north of Colvalli. Then I thought; 'Of course, they've to get licenses!' I supposed you could procure these at almost any town of

British Columbia. Oh shoot!” he broke off. “You force a man to wear his heart on his sleeve, MacPherson, with your darn curiosity. When I heard you were in company with Piccolo I amended the lone hand idea that Bantling’s threat had wakened. Well—well—don’t you see? You and I have had some darn pleasant pow-wows, Angus. Whatever you had gone to Kokanee for, with Piccolo, Bantling and Greer were on to Piccolo and consequently you. I knew they meant business. I knew they were tough, and unscrupulous. You were by then too far off for me to get in touch with you and warn you. So I had to keep in touch with them.” He hated wearing his heart on his sleeve, and so he ended: “For the sake of your danged old carcass.”

Angus said nothing for a time; and then:

“Ay, ay!” he murmured. “But how did you find the claim?”

“And why didn’t you stake it for yourself?” shrilled Piccolo.

To that Movie Bill gave no reply.

“You ask me how I found it,” he said to Angus. “Well, you see, I was just keeping tab on Mark Bantling and this gentleman through the hills, and I got so close on them that I couldn’t risk a shot, and my store was getting depleted. I decided I’d have to work back a bit and fish a creek and chance a fire. I thought of cooking at night down in a draw back there, where they would not see the light. And then I came on a fool-hen. She ducked and scuttled away about thirty feet from me. So I lifted a stone to throw at her, and I never threw it. I looked at it and saw where I was. You see, Bantling had not picked up all the splinters that Piccolo dropped at the Benwell House. He pocketed the big bits, but there were one or two small ones left and I picked those up

later; so I knew what you were all looking for. ‘*This is it!*’ I said. That was when my horses strayed; I was too excited to think of horses or anything.”

“Pic,” said Angus, “did you find Movie at the place where you got the stones, or is it another place he’s struck?”

“Oh, it’s the place all right. The other end of this meadow.” Piccolo suddenly rose and came to Movie Bill, his hand outheld. “If this is quixotry it is sure something finer than craziness,” he said. “Tremaine told me that Don Quixote was maybe crazy, but a fine man from the heels up. I want to apologize right here. I am sure sorry I suspected you.”

“Oh pshaw!” exclaimed Movie Bill. “With a face like mine you have every excuse.”

But he shook hands with Piccolo, lightly, as though there were no need for any very ostentatious making of peace.

“And still I cannot understand,” said Piccolo, “why you made out the location of the claim for us. After all, you see, there was no call for you to do it.”

“No call?” said Movie Bill.

“No. I don’t see it. I gave the show away myself at Colvalli. You didn’t even take the map.”

“Map?” echoed Movie Bill, puzzled.

“It was Bantling took that map out of the T. T. ranch,” said Greer. “That’s how we got the location, more or less. We thought it was only eighty miles north of Colvalli, but that map told us different. What between it, and a jab of a hole in it, and us being able to track back pretty well on the way the horses had been druv south, we knew we were pretty close. But we couldn’t find it.”

“Still I don’t get you,” persisted Piccolo to Movie. “You did not butt in on Angus and me. You got on to it all, it seems, first because I dropped those little specimens at Colvalli, and then by observing Bantling and Greer here.”

“What’s the word, Mac,” asked Movie Bill, “What is the word, would you say, for all this turning the thing one way and another? Casuistry? Sophistry?”

“Something like that, maybe,” answered Angus. “Either might serve.”

“Piccolo, I’m too straight for all these arguments,” said Movie Bill, “or too quixotic if you prefer the word. Bantling and Greer were after you and Angus. It seemed a long way over land to Kokanee, but they clearly knew more than I did. They might have got faulty evidence, but I knew something of Bantling’s record. (I’ll say nothing about you, Greer—present company!) When they outfitted and set off north right away I began to think. That made me go and study a good map. That you had gone was the gossip of Colvalli, of course. I rang up Miss MacPherson—”

“Miggles couldn’t tell you anything,” said Angus.

“Well, I rang her up and just asked if she knew where you had gone. She merely verified the gossip. To Kokanee, she said. I suppose she did not trust me enough to tell me the truth.”

“She didn’t know otherwise,” said Angus.

“Didn’t know!”

“No. I thought once, when she came on to the veranda while I was having a consultation with myself about a course of action, or inaction, and saying bits aloud to help me, the way many an old prospector gets into—but a bad way, not

good for a man—I thought then she had an inkling of something afoot. But no! And I did not tell her later. You see, it is not that I doubt the advisability of telling women folk secrets. It is not that. It is just that I have one crank amounting almost to superstition, though I'm not superstitious, mind you. It is just that I can never bring myself to count the chickens by the eggs in the incubator. That was enough to tell Miggles. To Kokanee. And we were going to Kokanee.”

“And, you mean to say,” said Piccolo, “that when you started out trailing after Bantling and Greer you did it all the time with this crazy idea? You did not start out to—”

“To what? See them find the place and then plug them? It is not done, Piccolo. As a matter of fact I never thought of staking the claims for you until I had the actual specimen in my hand. That was a sudden brain wave. I wanted to be around, Piccolo, in case you and MacPherson were hazed by them, or had your claim jumped. I thought it likely that in this year of grace it would be a case for a witness rather than for a six gun; but I brought shooting irons all the same. I could just see a darn fine dust-up if Bantling and Greer and you met up here.”

Piccolo having been the one chiefly explained to, he having had the baffled enquiries to put, Movie Bill, thus ending, sat staring and smiling at him.

Piccolo shook his head.

“And now I'll be jiggered if I can understand, seeing none of us were there, and seeing you found it—and b'gosh, just in the same way as I did—”

“That's history repeating itself,” Angus put in.

“I’m darned if I see why you didn’t stake it for yourself!” said Piccolo.

“I don’t see either that there was any need for you to be so quixotic,” said Angus. “It is a hard world. It was up to us, as ye might say. You are a better friend to me than I ever supposed, or than I deserve.”

He looked at Movie Bill thoughtfully. And as he looked Bill seemed put out, self-conscious, fumbled forth a tobacco sack and wheat papers, and rolled a cigarette.

“Well,” said Angus, “confession is good for the soul. When Pic dusted out his pocket and left some specimens of ore with me, all unconscious of what he was doing, I thought I would hit out my lee-lane, as they say in Aberdeen, to look for the place. I could never decide whether I went and told him what he had found so as to be sure of getting the right location, or so as to feel I was being honest and straight with him.”

“There generally is what the French call an *arrière pensée*” said Movie Bill. “We don’t know why we do the right thing sometimes.”

“Yes, that’s it. An *arrière pensée*, a thought behind the thought we acknowledge to ourselves or, as the Scripture says: ‘Our righteousness is filthy rags.’ Well, I’ve decided that the main reason I went and told Pic what he’d found was that I doubted if I could find the place without him!” said Angus. “But you are all quixotic, Bill. There was no *arrière pensée* with you, despite all you say. You did it just out of real friendship.”

Movie Bill lit a match, lit his cigarette, and blew so great a cloud of smoke that he hid his eyes from the gaze of Angus MacPherson.

“Oh shoot!” he said. “That’s all right.”

To change a conversation not at all to his mind, rather than because he was urgently anxious to know, he turned to Greer, asking:

“What did you and Bantling intend to do if you found the vein? It’s a question that’s been in my mind all the way, as I followed you camp by camp. And, by the way, you did not douse out one of your fires very well. Back there three camps you’d left it smouldering away among some old roots and moss. But what was your idea? You are not miners. Was one of you to sit right at the place and hold off everybody else with a gun till the other went out to Nelson, or Rossland, or somewhere for a license?”

Greer laughed.

“Oh, we have miners’ licenses all right,” he said.

“For B. C?”

“Yes sir. We’ve had miner’s licenses ever since we went into the boot-legging business, Mark Bantling and me—licenses for both sides. They are fine for allaying suspicion in mountainous countries. When any bull got dubious of us, and began instituting enquiries, we explained we were miners—prospectors. ‘Oh, you are!’ he’d say, glad to have us pigeon-holed. ‘Might I see your licenses? Not that I don’t trust you, but—you understand.’ Sure we understood. Policeman must do his duty!”

Movie Bill nodded his head, smiling slightly.

“Very interesting,” he said. “It is all interesting, the ways of all trades, the little ins and outs of this old world. Well, where is your last camp?”

“Just on a little way,” said Greer.

“Mine is just back a little ways. You really came up too far north. That rock-slide over there sent you coasting down it and up again, too far north. I looked at it and saw it was mighty recent, and thinks I: ‘I’ll coast up it to south and get above them.’ Also I was getting darn hungry—but I’ve told you all that.” He turned to the silent, still astounded Piccolo and to the marvelling—it might be said admiring—Angus. “What’s the matter with going over now to that claim and putting the numbers right?” he suggested.

He was the only one to whom there was not something of the quality of a dream in that last short march. But he was accustomed to his own craziness. Piccolo could not fathom it at all. He had met many different kinds of men with unexpected facets to their natures, but never any one like Movie Bill.

Angus MacPherson wondered if Bill would have acted as he had, on their behalf, a knight errant in a high Stetson, had there been no Margaret in the background—and was of the opinion that he would!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A DEPARTING HORSEMAN

FOUR small men, “transient guests” indeed under the vast inverted blue bowl of the sky, up there on the height of land, four small men dwarfed by the scene! Over them a hawk, a mile above, poised in the ambient space, volplaned and returned and trembled the tips of his wings. He dropped and swept over them so that they could see the under pattern of his feathers.

They were high enough to look over a great stretch of the West Arm of Flat-Bow Lake, four thousand feet below to north. It shimmered like blue silk between the greeny-red hills. They were high enough to see the Olsak range in all its length, like a cloud descended to rest on the lower mountains. Far south they saw the cone of Mount Jaffery (like a Japanese print of Fuji Yama) in the blue haze of utmost distance. It looked much the same when seen from just outside Colvalli. They could pick out the ranges that divide these border valleys over hundreds of miles: the peaks above Arrow Lakes; the Valhalla range with its wedge of glacier opposite the little town of New Denver. They could see the dome of Mount Nelson over Kootenay Lake. But up there they were cut off from humanity.

Greer stood looking at the corner and discovery posts that Movie Bill had driven in, glum, motionless. Movie Bill, sitting on a cut-bank looked left and right at the torn aspect of the scene.

“There’s been a silver-tip around here recently,” he remarked. “It has either been after roots or digging here in the

belief there were gophers underneath.”

Piccolo (like a lean Sancho Panza) followed Angus (like a short broad Don Quixote) up and down, clambering around. Angus smote with his short heavy prospector’s hammer that he had brought along with him. He took up specimens in his hand.

“Yes,” said Piccolo, “this is the place. The hens I potted were in that tree there.”

“Man, man,” said Angus. “Look! The bits you picked up had just been strewed by some gale, maybe in a cloud-burst up here, from yon projecting rib. Ay, ay, Movie Bill. I see you have staked it fine. You’ve got a bit of the visible ore within both the claim boundaries. It’s *in place*, all right. This slide here reveals the lead. I wish I had some dynamite to put a shot or two in.”

He stepped it out, counting from stake to stake that Movie Bill had driven in, making the claim. He took the paper out of the inverted tin mug atop one of the stakes, which Bill had left as record for any who might come there.

“You have a characteristic hand of write,” he said. “It is the first time I’ve seen it.” And to himself he muttered; “It is not at all like Mark Bantling’s—not at all.”

Then he turned to Piccolo and with a backward jerk of his head and a droop of his lids indicated that he desired his closer presence. Together they conferred, pacing it out again, examining the papers left by Movie Bill.

“I should certainly say he has secured the claims for us,” said Angus. “What is additional to the regulations would not make these papers null and void. We’ll put the right numbers in. But we should have a name for them; that is one of the regulations, though as I say the lack of it would not be

excuse, I should think, for a body jumping the claims. You see, a name is a great help for identifications. A man might get an erroneous measurement and have his north and south and east and west kind of dubious; but a name is a name.”

They stood talking quietly. Movie Bill, glancing in their direction, saw them standing there and saw how Angus’s hand fell on Piccolo’s shoulder and gave a venerable and kindly brief clap. They had, it would appear, come to some understanding that pleased the old prospector.

“In a very little while there will be houses all dotted here,” said Movie Bill, gazing round the scene again. “You’ll put in your assessment on her, but you’ll sell her easy if I’m any judge. Look at the easy transport. It must be no more than five miles in an air line to the Flat-Bow lake arm down there. You notice that I’ve given that as location: ’...a height of land south of Flat-Bow arm...’? Look at the power in that creek down there for a compressed air plant.”

“Quite so! Quite so!” came MacPherson’s voice.

Greer, mute the while, now rumbled in a low voice to Movie Bill:

“It’s yours more than theirs. You found her. You must be bugs to go and do a thing like this for that batty old man and for the squeaky voice. I wouldn’t stake a porcupine pasture for the squeaker anyhow. Not on your tintype!”

Movie Bill might not have heard. He sat considering the scene.

“Yes,” said he, “first a shack where they’ll live to put in their assessment, and then all kinds of houses—bunk-houses, cook-houses. And the stamps will rub-a-dub; and the drills will roar into the rock; and they’ll have a city down on Flat-Bow Lake where their wives will come. Progress!”

Angus came back to them, Piccolo astern, and abruptly held up a hand.

“I have a brain wave,” said he. “I am going to Kokanee to register this. Piccolo, you will convoy Greer back to Colvalli.”

“Shucks! I’m not going to Colvalli!” said Greer. “I won’t go. You have no case against me.”

“Case! Why of course not. But I just don’t trust you. Long before you get to Colvalli I’ll be at Kokanee and the claim will be registered. That’s all.”

“I see.”

“How are you going to get to Kokanee all alone?” asked Movie Bill.

“I’m going with some Indians who are fishing down there,” and he pointed towards the lake. “They will paddle me there for five dollars, you bet. They’ll still be there. They were mending canoes too, and there is no speeding up in the dockyards when Indians are working. They take things easy.”

“Pic can go with you,” said Movie Bill. “I’ll see Greer south.”

“We are already sufficiently beholden to you,” replied Angus. “Though to tell you the truth I was hoping you would go south with Pic too. It sounds a rude way to speak of a gentleman; but I do not trust that Mr. Greer. Piccolo is a wonderful man, an experienced boxer though you might not think so. By aid of the ju-jitsu of it, and the knack of it, he can throw cattle, but Greer is a big and powerful man,” and he nodded to their prisoner, and even smiled.

“Trust! Huh!” Greer laughed drily. “I’ve lost out on this. And say, if I go back alone to Colvalli they’ll ask where

Mark is. Have you thought of that? If neither of us go back—neither Bantling nor me—there will be no wonder about us. Nobody in Colvalli will think of us again.”

“Something in that,” agreed Angus, nodding his head up and down slowly several times. “And it saves us all kinds of trouble in giving evidence. Where do you propose to go?”

Greer shrugged his shoulders.

“You’ve confiscated my rifle,” he said. “I can’t live on the land without it.”

“We’ll give you grub,” Angus promised. “We have enough still. We eked it out with fish.”

“Away south there’s a trail to Republics,” said Greer. “That will suit me nicely, thank you, your worship,” he ended gaily.

“We’ve got to see you down to the lake, Scotty,” said Piccolo. “The Indians might be gone.”

“All right,” said Angus. “So be it. But it is my opinion they will still be there though we cannot see any camp smoke from here.”

In the camp they made, back near the timber, they discussed details. Angus would go by Indian canoe (if the Indians were still on the lake shore) to Kokanee; Piccolo would ride Mark Bantling’s horse as far as to where Greer knew of a trail crossing southwest to Republics, south of the Boundary. Then he would ride on Movie Bill’s pack-horse.

And so it was done. Next day they departed from the scene of the discovery to the lake. Angus went first, Greer trudging next, Piccolo next, Movie Bill in the rear. They stayed, on the way, at the camp where Angus had rested.

In the middle of the night, the fire dwindling low, Movie Bill said:

“Greer! You awake?”

“Yes.”

“Guess you’re the fire-tender. Get up and put a log on.”

“You bet you,” said Greer.

As it happened all were awake. A nip of night chill had broken their slumber. They watched Greer as he dragged a big log to the fire. The sparks showered up. Then his bulk, between them and the further, the far off shower of stars in the big sky, bent and wrestled with what seemed to be a stump. He dragged it up and, coming back, tossed that also on the fire and then sank down with a growl of content to roll in his blankets again.

It was the board, with the initials “M. B.” upon it, that he had committed to the flames. There would never be any enquiries. He would ride south with Piccolo and Movie Bill to beyond the Boundary, and then—then the trail to Republics and the incident would be closed. He had not forgotten that the Kokanee policeman was ferreting news regarding the little company of crooks to which he was affiliated.

In the morning they continued their way to the lake, MacPherson in advance to set the pace, unhampered by any load, then Piccolo with his partner’s blankets, then Greer with a sack of ore-specimens for Angus to take with him, then Movie Bill with the food for the old man’s trip, and his rifle.

The Indians, as it happened (Angus’s hazard was proved correct) were still on the beach at their canoe repairing, and they knew the value of five dollars—if not of a five dollar bill. Angus, forgetting that not all by these out of the way lake sides are mission and school Indians, tried two of the

elders by showing a five dollar bill as payment for the passage he asked of them.

He had to get change from Piccolo when they put the price up. They put it up to four one dollar bills instead of the one five dollar bill. They had not been to the mission school. They wanted to have the four bills on the spot, but Angus made them a sporting offer of four there, or two there, and three on arrival. He might “come from Aberdeen,” as he so often said, but he had a pity for them in their ignorance, and he thought the trip well worth five dollars.

They understood that and, each pocketing a bill, bade him embark. It would take them, they said, only four sleeps to reach the camp the white men had made, where the big boat came.

“I’ll be home as soon as you fellows,” said Angus, “if there is a big boat going out of Kokanee soon.”

The three on the shore stood a while watching the paddles dig in, the square back of Angus MacPherson in the stern. Then they turned and broke back again uphill.

And so it was that by the time Angus reached Kokanee—four sleeps—there wound along the great slow slopes, dropping down into Washington, a string of horses, three riders and three pack-ponies. They rode easily. None who might have met them would have surmised any adventure out of the way. But they met no one.

On the afternoon of the fifth day Movie Bill, who rode in the lead behind his pack-horse, suddenly reined in and sidled Baldy to and fro, stopping the two pack-horses that belonged to Greer. These had been following, between him and Greer, Piccolo in the rear.

“Is this where you leave us, Greer?” asked Movie Bill.

“Yep,” answered Greer casually. He fumbled in a breast pocket and produced a leather cigar-case and slipped the slide top off. “They are kind of crushed,” he said. “I have just two left. Have one?”

“No thank you. You keep them. I’d take one to show there is no ill feeling now,” said Movie Bill, “but to tell the truth cigars get my throat. A pipe, or a cigarette I roll myself, is all I use.”

Piccolo had ridden up close enough, as the procession halted, to hear the end of this remark and to recall how Angus, defending his friend, or at any rate refusing to “damn him at a venture,” had told him of this peculiarity. He felt “mean,” thinking of how all his cumulative evidence against Movie Bill was erroneous and how, in what Angus would call his “thrawnness,” he had refused to see any possible evidence in the other direction.

The cigar-case was still in Greer’s hand. He glanced at Piccolo, hesitated, then put it back in his pocket. After all he had but little tobacco left; he would want it all, and the two cigars also before he came to where he could replenish—at Republics. There was no store, not even a trader’s store he knew, until then.

Piccolo’s eyelids drooped. He bit his lip like an ignored child.

“This is where you pop off M. B.’s horse,” said Greer to him, and laughed. “I sure enjoyed myself over the way you fellows would persist in believing Movie Bill was in our outfit.”

Piccolo slipped from the saddle.

“Give you a hand at fixing that pack-horse of yours for riding,” Greer offered.

“Thank you,” said Piccolo.

But Movie Bill had swung from his saddle to look after that matter.

No passer-by would have tapped any strange tale. It was just three men in a valley’s bottom beside a southwest trending creek that brawled along full and dancing, in polished glides, and riffles, tossing spray in the sun glow, and on one bank a trail winding along, and a mark of hoofs going down into the water and visible across it, indicating a ford.

Blankets were rolled afresh and tied behind Movie Bill’s saddle, and behind the pack-saddle.

One was folded and set in the crotch of the pack-saddle for Pic’s comfort. The pack-boxes were tossed away—to puzzle, some day perhaps, other travellers in these lonely stretches of the border.

Greer looked at the two men who had been his warders for the past days. He stepped to his horse and caught the lines, turned back, looked at them again. They stood watching him. They had been cast together in the big hills; they had camped and ridden together; they had watched one another’s ways with horses. A city man may not understand, or he may. Having a sudden impulse Movie Bill and Greer stepped forward, each holding out a hand.

“Well, so-long,” said Greer.

“So-long and good luck,” said Movie Bill.

Little Piccolo looked from one to the other, drew himself up to try and seem as tall as they; breathed deep to try and seem as deep chested as they.

Greer gave a laugh and held out his hand.

“So-long,” he said, smiling humorously.

“So-long,” said Piccolo, “and good luck,” he added.

Greer swung to the saddle, whirled the slack of his long lines round the heads of his two pack-ponies, herding them along the creek-side trail. Movie Bill led the way down into the creek.

“I’ll go in first to lead,” said he. “It is pretty full. We don’t want to be washed down. That pack-horse you’re riding is all right, Pic. Give him his head and he’ll follow.”

In mid-stream as the two horses were plunging down their hoofs, stepping gingerly, a tilt to the rush of the waters, Movie Bill’s head flicked round, as if drawn round—and there he saw, in a curve of the north bank, almost out of sight, Greer’s two pack-horses and Bantling’s saddle horse trudging southwest. Greer, behind them, had halted, half turned in the saddle to see how his two late companions made the crossing.

Against the yellow bluffs (for there is the beginning of a dry belt, sand bastions pushed into the hill) he craned backward, watching, although almost too far round the bend to see. His horse had gone on a step or two belike, not halted at once when reined in by the rider to look.

The horses came out of the creek. Movie Bill’s arm, as he looked round again, went up in air, palm outspread. Greer replied at the same moment, arm slowly raised, palm open; then his heels flicked his horse’s flanks, and he rode out of the story.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SO-LONG ALL!

AND the story nears an end; for this is not a yarn of the ultimate city on Flat-Bow Arm; the smaller life of parties and petty scandal and all that from which broad gauge people long to get away. Flat-Bow Arm has now a stern-wheeler of its own that churns down daily from Kokanee, waking the echoes of the surrounding hills with a roar, at three forty-five every day, coming into the landing to west of MacPherson Creek, near where the Indians camped.

There is busy little Thomas Avenue, and Tremaine Street, and two hold-up three hundred per cent., and the normal hundred per cent., stores, millinery windows, churches, two movie houses; and there are Sunday School picnics to—to where, think you? To Silver Beach. That's what they call the beach where Piccolo and Angus, dropping down into summer by the old Indian trail on Salmon Berry creek, from the winter's end on the Olsak range, looked across the lake and wondered if star or fire was on the black hump of the ridge opposite.

As Greer went, so all are soon to go from sight, back whence they came—as automata of a dream.

That the prospect sold, later, for two hundred thousand dollars to the Columbia and Oregon river Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company is in the old files of the *Ledge* and *The Miner and Prospector*. This is but the yarn, the story behind, that few of the Flat-Bow citizens think about now. But in its own way it is a Historical Romance.

In the event old Angus MacPherson was home in Colvalli the day before Piccolo and Movie Bill arrived. He had a lift in an automobile all the way from Eagle Bend to his door; and as he stepped out the little black spaniel—Darkie—leapt at him, a wriggle of wag, a wag from his shoulders to the tip of his tail, though the tail was but a blur because of its quick movement.

Margaret, in a dusting cap and long water proof apron over her house dress, came to the porch and stared. Caress—kiss—reunion; with Percy, the driver of the car, bending down and examining his gear as though something was wrong with it, though it was in perfect order.

Margaret grabbed the blanket roll.

Percy lifted a sack and said: “Gee, it’s heavy!”

“You bet!” said Angus MacPherson.

That was his bundle of ore specimens destined to bring the Consolidated representative to Colvalli ready for a long trip into the hills northward.

Then Percy climbed aboard again and the automobile purred away; and Margaret and her father went indoors, tripping and stumbling over the whirling dog.

“Search me!” shrieked Ecuador. “Well, what do you know about that? ‘Oh, to be in Scotland wi’ my ain folk!’ Hullo, you old sun of a gun!” all its repertoire, indeed, in a high voice and with a deranged look.

“I can hardly believe you’re home,” said Margaret. “And how are you, dad?”

“I’m a wee bit tired, lassie. It’s fine to be back. I have just been longing for it these last days—to have my slippers on, and to sit on the porch whittling a bit stick and thinking.”

And that indeed was the employ he was engaged upon next afternoon, or early evening (watching the mosquito hawks wheel and fall and recover against the fading gold away westward toward the Pacific), when there was a dust to north, and the familiar sight, in its midst, of loping horses and riders.

There were two riders. They came side by side, rocking down the road, each with a wake of dust at heel. Angus stopped his humming of:

“...oh! but I’m longing for my ain folk,
Though they be but lowly, puir, and plain folk:
I am far beyond the sea,
But my heart will ever be
At hame in dear auld Scotland wi’ my ain folk!”

whom he had not seen for close on forty years.

He turned, and——

“Margaret!” he called, “Miggles! Whaur are ye?”

“I’m here, dad. I’m ben the hoose, as ye nicht say!”

“They’re coming.”

“Who?” and she came out.

“Bill Allardyce and Piccolo.”

He had been on the verge of saying not Bill Allardyce but Movie Bill, or just Movie; and as he said the real name his grey eyes, searching, were on her face. He saw the colour mount even to the lobes of her little ears.

The horsemen came to a halt at the porch and swung off, or at least Movie Bill swung off. The pack-saddle caused Piccolo to have to scramble off.

“Well and hoo are ye?” said Angus. “Or, in other words: How are you making out?”

“Fine and dandy,” said Bill. “We’re travelling light the nearer home we come. It has been excellently managed. We’ve only our blankets left now.”

“We’ve eaten nothing all day,” said Piccolo, in a voice thin through weariness as well as natural accent.

“Come in and eat, then,” roared Angus.

No. They would get on. But MacPherson would not hear of that. So the horses went round into the little yard, or miniature corral, to the cackling annoyance of some hens.

Bill and Piccolo washed outside, dusty from the day’s travel, and by the time they entered a meal was ready.

“Could I telephone to Tremaine, please, miss?” asked Piccolo shyly.

“Sure,” said Margaret.

“There’s the ’phone,” said Angus.

“Hullo; it’s Pic ... Pic ... Piccolo!” very high. “You bet you ... and are you all right?... you’re a mine owner ... I said a mine owner ... yes, sure ... all right, I’ll be along later. I’m at Scotty’s eating supper now ... so-long.”

He came back from the ’phone.

“Well!” he exclaimed. “Do you know what he said? ‘Speak up. Speak up.’ And when he heard me at last he told me he’d nearly rung off because he thought it was a grasshopper on the wire! Me! Twig! Grasshopper! What do you know?”

“Never heed,” Angus advised. “You are a mine owner now, or part owner.”

“I forgot,” said Movie Bill. “Let us drink to the *Twosome* mine—or *Threesome* I should say, for you’ve taken Tremaine

in, I gather.”

Piccolo looked at Angus and smiled.

“Foursome it is,” said Angus.

Movie Bill jumped to the conclusion that Margaret had been made a part owner.

“You should call it the *Miggles* mine, then,” said he; and looked perturbed. It had a double significance in his ears, and in Margaret’s too, it seems, for she blushed.

Piccolo gave him a glance that he misread, as he was to discover. At the moment Bill considered that Piccolo thought him “fresh.” How this tale of a treasure hunt swings into a tale of love! Movie lifted the glass at his elbow—of elderberry wine—to toast the property.

“We had to have a name for the claims,” said Angus. “I hope I did right. It just came to me how you told us, Bill, the way you lifted the rock and sang out: ‘*This is it!*’ On the spur of the moment I filled in the name on yon paper for the claim ye made for me as *This is It!*, and gave them that name at the record office in Kokanee. I hope you like it.”

Movie bowed, delighted.

“Why,” he said, “I’m tickled. Tickled! It will please me always to know I’ve got a name in it. Thank you—Angus.”

“Yes,” said Angus. “Piccolo told me to put down Tremaine as his partner, half-owner; and I’ve put you down as mine.”

“Me!” said Movie Bill. “You!”

“Ay,” said Angus. “Me and you.”

Movie Bill stared, unable to speak.

“And,” said Piccolo, “seeing that Scotty said he was going to call his claim *This is It!*, he was tickled at what I suggested, Miss MacPherson, for mine—I mean my mine.

You see, I like a lady's name for mine. There is the *Molly Gibson*, and there is the *Milly E.* and the—”

“*Crazy Jane*,” said MacPherson, chuckling.

“Well, well,” said Piccolo. “I suggested for my claim to your father the *Miggles*.”

“Oh!” said Margaret.

She had no more to say, but the accent of that brief ejaculation supplied the lack of much speech.^[A]

[A The property, as sold by the original owners (MacPherson, Allardyce, Thomas and Tremaine) is known, in its entirety, as the *This Is It!* The lowest tunnel, it may interest readers to know, is called the *Scot* tunnel; the one above the *Welshman* tunnel; and the original name of one of the claims remains in the designation of the top tunnel: the *Miggles*.

And thought Movie Bill: “That’s what Pic’s brain wave was when the old man put his hand on his shoulder as they stood conferring like owls, I remember.”

“Piccolo and I talked it all over,” said Angus, “while we were pacing it out afresh.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” said Movie Bill, in a low even voice.

“You found it!” said Piccolo, in a note so much like that of Ecuador’s natural voice that at the first effort the parrot, repeating, caught it to a nicety, shrilling:

“You found it!”

“The birrd agrees,” said Angus. “It is ratified. What Ecuador says goes. Come out to the veranda,” he went on. He glanced at his daughter. “You look awful hot, Margaret.”

“Oh, it’s the range, dad. We should get a coal oil stove for the summer.”

“Of course it’s the range,” said Angus, and preceded them.

They sat down, and then Margaret turned to Piccolo.

“What was this about *twig, grasshopper?*” she asked.

“It is too long to tell, miss,” said he.

“It will take a long time to tell,” said Angus. “You will hear it all in time.”

Ecuador, screaming within, made him rise and bring the “birrd” out to its peg. Up rose Piccolo and walked over to it.

“Say Llanfairpwll—” he began.

“Oh, stop there!” cried Angus. “That’s enough at a time. Give the bird a chance. Have a heart, to speak the speech of this section of God’s Country.”

“Ecuador, say Llanfair,” said Piccolo.

“Go to hell!” remarked Ecuador.

That made Piccolo blush, Margaret being present. But she laughed, and looked at Movie Bill to see how he enjoyed the fun; and found his eyes on her with so tender and serious an expression that—she knew. But there! It is not a love story. It is only the story of the *This Is It!* So it can end now.

Piccolo said:

“Well miss, and Scotty, I’d better git.”

Movie Bill rose.

“Bide a wee,” said Angus.

“I should go too,” said Bill.

“You have nothing to call you,” said Angus.

“I’ll have to ride over with Piccolo,” answered Movie, “so as to bring back the pack-horse he’s riding.”

“Oh, he’ll find his way back to the stables. I’ll turn him around,” said Piccolo. “You need not hurry off for me.”

Movie Bill sat down again. Piccolo went for his horse, and riding round to the front, hat in hand—

“So-long all, then!” he said.

“So-long. See you later.”

He rode off south on the long white road among the rolls of the open land he loved.

Angus rose. The bats wheeling round made Ecuador perturbed. He screeched anathema at them so that no one could speak.

“I’ll just take the birrd in and put the bandanna over him for the night,” said Angus; and he went indoors leaving, as a “dissolve” in the twilight, Bill Allardyce and Margaret alone.

And, as Piccolo said—So-long all!

FINIS.

[The end of *The Treasure Trail* by Frederick John Niven]