

BLUE PETE: REBEL

LUKE ALLAN

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Title: Blue Pete: Rebel (Blue Pete #6)

Date of first publication: 1940

Author: Luke Allan (ps of William Lacey Amy) (1878-1962)

Date first posted: May 23, 2026

Date last updated: May 23, 2026

Faded Page eBook #20260536

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

As much to serve his own ends as to help the authorities Blue Pete went to the aid of the Mounties in rounding up a mysterious cattle rustler who did not shrink even from murder.

How, with his characteristic genius for finding trouble, Blue Pete was soon at grips with his old friend Sergeant Mahon; how he saved the Sergeant's life and all but lost his own; and how as a result of his efforts he was himself arrested for murder only to be ultimately vindicated are stirringly told in this grand, hundred-thrills-a-minute yarn.

“The most popular cowboy character in fiction,” is how *Truth* describes Blue Pete. “Mr. Allan has the technique of the *Wild West* at his finger tips”—an opinion which is amply confirmed by this rollicking, swift-moving narrative of the great open spaces.

By the same Author:

THE TENDERFOOT
THE VENGEANCE OF BLUE PETE
BLUE PETE: HORSE THIEF
BEYOND THE LOCKED DOOR
THE GHOST MURDER
THE MAN ON THE 24th FLOOR
THE WESTERNER
THE MANY-COLOURED THREAD
THE LONE TRAIL
BLUE PETE, HALF-BREED
THE RETURN OF BLUE PETE
BLUE PETE, DETECTIVE

BLUE PETE: REBEL

BY

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HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
3 DUKE OF YORK STREET, ST. JAMES'S
LONDON, S.W.1

A
HERBERT
JENKINS'
BOOK

First printing, 1940

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY THE GARDEN CITY PRESS LTD.
AT LETCHWORTH, HERTFORDSHIRE.

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All the characters in this book are purely imaginary and have no relation whatsoever to any living persons.

Blue Pete: Rebel

CHAPTER I THE THREAT

It was the dark of the moon. Over the great Western prairie even the stars hid their faces. The sun had gone down hours before behind a film of clouds, interposing between the blinding sunlight of the prairie day and the normally abrupt darkness of the Western world a few moments of a strange, threatening, semi-luminous and distorting dusk. Since then the clouds that had masked the sun as it sank had drifted up across the sky. It was very dark.

Even the cattle, dozens of herds of them of varying sizes and brands, succumbed to the darkness, restlessly aware of it, their nerves on edge. They knew what it portended. It might not come tonight, might not for a week, but a storm was in the making far to the west where the invisible Rocky Mountains made the weather.

A storm in September. Every creature that roamed the prairie knew what that meant. It might take any form, from a hurricane to a blizzard, the more dangerous that a stifling heat had wilted the Western world and its denizens for weeks.

And so the cattle crowded instinctively into the coulees, avoiding the windswept heights—the wind that came in such unexpected swoops of driving force, only to be temporarily smothered in wailing dead grass and riven cactus, like suffering wild things glad of any refuge. Now and then, as if resentful that any living things should think to escape its fury, mustering its full strength, it swept downward into the crowded coulees, massing the cattle more tightly together, crowding the outer rings recklessly against the inner, urging the whole herd to drift before it. And so, crushed flank to flank,

heads forced high over the rumps ahead, they turned their backs to the wind and snorted, half in terror, half in irritation.

The night-herders, sometimes called the night-hawks, ceaselessly riding the rounds as silently as they could, swore under their breaths and welcomed one another as they met on their beats, lingering for a resentful or commiserating word; holding their breath as they passed on, listening for the last evidence of companionship and hurrying to meet the next.

It was a “mucky” night for everything abroad, human or animal.

For the three men who rode the cheerless round of one of the Triangle H herds that night there was more than the gathering storm to rasp their nerves. Even with their full quota the night would have been a strain. For all summer a curious form of rustling had made of night-herding a nerve-racking experience.

Of course, in a cattle country some form of rustling always exists. Where scores of thousands of more or less wild cattle roam the open prairie, with what few buildings there are cuddled in the deeper valleys, and with the Border of the United States within a night's travel, even the alert and sleepless Mounted Police could not hope to eliminate the expert cattle and horse thief. And when in a couple of hours' run the fastnesses of the Cypress Hills offer haven to the largest rustled herd, the task of protecting the cattle was certain to be incomplete.

The added difficulty of that summer's experience was that the rustling had not been in herds. It puzzled everyone—except, of course, the unknown rustlers. A missing cow or steer now and then might be no more than a stray. To provide against that the two newspapers in Medicine Hat, the nearest town, carried long lists of brands, so that everyone might know to whom the stray belonged. But when a steer or two were missing night after night from one or another of the many herds, even the rawest cowpuncher knew that it was not to be explained so easily. Such petty pilfering was a new experience for the district, and ranchers and Mounted Police were worried.

Until recently there were not a few ranchers who persisted in ridiculing the idea that rustlers would waste time and effort in such trifling operations. But that attitude was well understood: few ranchers wished to admit the facts. It was, indeed, embarrassing to admit them, for not a rancher in the district was particular enough about mavericks that strayed from other herds or were (inadvertently or not) rounded up by his cowboys to exert himself unduly to trace their rightful owners. It was part of the system and worked out fairly uniformly in the long run.

But the petty rustling had gone too far. Singly or in pairs cattle were silently cut out from the herds in the darkness of night and driven away, until at last the rustler (or rustlers) became so bold that the herders were aware of what was going on without the power to prevent it. The rustlers were much too clever to risk their skins. Either the herders were too distant to intervene or, as had happened twice now, pursuit was abruptly cut short by a volley of shots that no cowboy could reasonably be expected to face when he could see nothing at which to return the fire.

The situation was unpleasant and nerve-racking even to a full quota of herders. But that night the Triangle H herd had been robbed of two of its guardians by a not unusual accident. Buster, in a moment of peevishness, had assayed to rope a recalcitrant steer that persisted in straying, and the jerk of the rope had torn the buckle from the cinch, piling the unfortunate cowboy with such violence that a bone in his leg was broken. And Dago, his special friend, had been ordered by Mike, the foreman, to take the injured man to the ranch house for treatment.

The three herders remaining on guard on such a dark night were not happy about it.

Naturally, as they rode their rounds they reflected on the summer's incidents. A half-dozen of the ranches had reported thefts—the Double X, the Lazy M, the T-Inverted-R, the Diamond K, and the Double-Bar-Y—and strays, as if the cattle themselves realised the danger, had been fewer than usual. (Though the Mounted Police were prepared to believe that it was only the reports that were fewer.) In rapid succession during the past two weeks ranchers had howled to the Police for protection and the capture of the rustler, for his operations had become almost a nightly affair, as if with the thought of forestalling the approaching winter.

Through it all one thing, and one alone, was evident: this was no band of organised rustlers. It would not pay a band to operate in such a small way. Besides, no organised band would bother to work in such a furtive manner. Never once had there been the rush of suddenly cut-out bunches; and not a single stampede, the distraction arranged by practised rustlers, had taken place. Everything pointed to a skilful cowman working alone.

That was why so many minds had turned to Blue Pete, the half-breed. Blue Pete had admittedly lived a life of rustling across the Border. Even in the not-distant past there was a time when, single-handed or assisted by his white wife, he had been the terror of the ranchers north of the Cypress Hills. He was almost a superman; there was little he could not accomplish single-

handed. And so every crime in the district was first blamed on him, awaiting proof of innocence.

For this condition no one was to blame but Blue Pete himself. Of course more than once he had popped up as protector of the prairie herds, and now and then in some vague and puzzling way he appeared to co-operate with the Mounted Police. But that was only his instability, his love of excitement; and it was so much less spectacular than his rustling experiences, so much less exciting and fantastic, that it was readily forgotten. For the half-breed made no effort to win friends, to give the lie to his reputation. He appeared, indeed, to have a scarcely veiled contempt for the ranchers about him, even the wealthiest of them; and stubbornly—even insultingly or indifferently—he refused to associate with them.

All this did not, of course, add to his popularity. Nor did the fact that on occasion he appeared to work with the Mounted Police. The ranchers, as everyone else, were afraid of the law, and Blue Pete's connection with its enforcement was mere bravado, or perhaps even a delight in getting someone into trouble.

Long before the ranchers had swallowed their fear and set up howls for protection, Inspector Barker, at headquarters in Medicine Hat, had set the forces of the law to work on the problem. With a finger on the pulse of the district, with sources of information unsuspected by the public, he knew what was going on and had gone into action. But as yet nothing had come of it.

And so, with the night dark and full of invitation to the mysterious rustler, the three night-herders of the Triangle H rode with their hearts in their mouths. Cautiously they approached one another, suspecting a foe and prepared to shoot at a hint of strangers.

“That you, Tiny?”

The whisper through the darkness was answered by an audible sigh of relief.

“Sure is, Mike. God, I wisht I could smoke.”

Mike grunted irritably. “What I wish is I was back in my bunk, an' Dago an' Buster was ridin' herd 'stead o' me.”

“Wonder if Buster was hurt bad?” said Tiny. “Looked like a bad leg. Bet my best chaps Dago won't show up till daylight, now he's got away.” He sighed. “But twenty miles each way, with Buster done in—it'll take seven or eight hours. What time is it now?”

Mike cupped his hand about the luminous face of his watch and held it to his eye.

“Quarter ’fore midnight.”

“Time when ghosts prowl,” laughed Tiny. “Or rustlers.”

“What the hell!” snapped his companion. “An’ say, ’long where yu’re goin’ keep yer eyes peeled. Them cattle’s startin’ to drift a bit. Once they git goin’ they’ll crowd up before the wind, then all Hell can’t stop ’em.”

Tiny shivered. “Devil of a night. I’m all goose-flesh.”

“Scared, eh?” Mike sneered audibly. “Keep yer shirt on, kid. Yu’ll git used to it—won’t think nothin’ of it. All in the day’s work.”

But Tiny was not to be ridiculed out of his uneasiness. “Sure I’m scared. An’ somehow it ain’t only the dark. Just the sort of night anythin’ could happen, ain’t it?”

“Yu should be on day-herd till yu grow up, kid. Night-herdin’s real man’s work.”

“It wouldn’t be so bad,” Tiny ventured modestly, “if we had Buster an’ Dago. Just the three of us—there ain’t much we could do if the rustlers picked tonight to raid us. I ain’t hankerin’ for no bullet comin’ out of the dark into my teeth. If I— —”

Mike closed him off with a brutal guffaw. “Bet yer hair’s stickin’ up straight right now, kid. All jus’ ’cause there ain’t no moon. Say, yu got a gun, ain’t yu?”

“Sure. But I ain’t used to it yet. I’d hate to shoot—anybody.”

“Hate to shoot a rustler? Good God, kid! Rustlers ain’t nobody. They’re jus’ things made to shoot. What the hell yu got a gun for but for things like them? He’d hate to shoot a rustler, he would! Haw-haw! Jus’ gimme the chance once. Chap don’t git much chance to shoot around here, an’ I’m hankerin’ for the practice. Been layin’ for them rustlers all summer, rarin’ to — —”

He stopped abruptly and whirled his bronco about to face across the herd.

“Hear anythin’?” he whispered.

“Sure did.” Tiny reined up close beside him.

“Where’s Flat?”

“Should be somewheres over that way.”

A revolver-shot split the night.

Almost with the shot both riders were off, tearing in opposite directions about the herd.

CHAPTER II

THE RAID

The cattle, surprisingly enough, showed little alarm. It was perhaps explained by the fact that the shot had come from downwind, the direction in which they would have stampeded, for they would never face the gale that blew. Nevertheless, shifting restlessly, they snorted, heads raised, waiting for what might happen next.

Tiny, driving his mount at full speed, cut down through the coulee beside the herd, distracting its attention. In two minds it held its ground. The running horse they understood.

On the other side Mike was less active. For only a few moments he raced along, his mind working rapidly. Then he drew up and sat listening, bent low over the horn of his saddle, his eyes staring fiercely into the darkness in the direction from which the shot had come. Old hand that he was, with his keen, practised ears he could follow every move about the herd. Away on the other side something was happening; two or three cattle were moving away. He knew, too, that they were being driven.

For a moment the instinct of his calling brought a flame of anger to his coarse face, and his gun came out. But a moment later he dropped it back in the holster attached to his belt.

“What’s the use?” he murmured. “I’d jus’ be startin’ a stampede . . . an’ I’d give ’em somethin’ to shoot at . . . an’ maybe they got rifles. . . . Somebody’d maybe shoot a steer. . . . An’ I ain’t hankerin’ for no funeral o’ my own, not Mike Sanford ain’t.”

He remained where he was, listening with bated breath. He knew as if he could see it that the main herd was still bunched together below him, and his ears told him something of the scene beyond, with the small bunch that was cut from the main herd increasing its pace. The pound of Flat’s flight had ceased, but the thunder of Tiny’s passage was so distinct that he could follow it at every hoof-thud. Tiny was riding hell-for-leather to the attack.

“Damn’ crazy loon!” muttered the foreman. “An’ all he’ll do is git hisself filled with lead. No sense in that. . . . An’ him so plumb scared!” He spat noisily. “I ain’t scared, but I got some sense. I ain’t buttin’ my head into

trouble I can't handle. No, sir-ee, I ain't. Jus' three of us. What could we do?"

The bronco moved restlessly, and as if it were accusation he drew it in with brutal hand, swearing under his breath. "Yu ain't even got hoss-sense, Biddy. Yu wanta make a fool o' yerself, same's Tiny. Well, yuh ain't goin' to make no fool o' Mike Sanford. 'Tain't nothing to do with us. . . . Not now," he felt compelled to qualify, "not on a night like this. So easy down, yu fool, an' listen."

He had read the whole story. The rustlers had approached the herd, only to be blocked by Flat, but when they shot at the cowboy he had chosen discretion and fled. And that the shot had not taken effect Mike knew by the character of the sounds made by his bronco as it raced away. Flat, too, had played safe. Sensible fellow. Not a fool-tenderfoot, like Tiny Cooper.

For Tiny was still audibly in pursuit of the rustlers. He was up on the opposite slope now, tearing away after the rustled bunch—riding his hardest, straight into trouble. . . . The beat of his bronco's hoofs became fainter.

Suddenly two shots rang out. They came, Mike knew instantly, from where Tiny would be.

He knew it more definitely when he heard Tiny cry out. Or was it only a gust of wind through a cactus plant . . . or his own nerves? Mike frowned and shook his head. Of course he wouldn't be able to hear Tiny cry out from such a distance, and against the wind. Impossible. It wasn't Tiny, it couldn't be.

Lifting his shoulders, he turned back. With an exaggerated sense of doing his duty he skirted the herd, riding to its head. That was his job—the herd. All right for a new puncher to go dashing off after a steer or two, leaving the herd to stampede in the darkness if it wished. Tiny was new at the job, excitable, thoughtless, with no sense of proportion. If it weren't for old hands like Mike Sanford—

A shape loomed before him in the darkness, and he ducked his head and drew in sharply.

"That you, Flat?"

The third cowboy came nearer; he sighed. "Gosh, Mike, they sure got to us tonight. A'most got me too. I thought I was shot sure—"

An oath from the foreman stopped him. "Damn you, Flat, don't come prowlin' about like this in the dark. I had yu covered. I wouldn't 'a' missed

yu neither, like the rustler done. Why donchu stay around ahead o' the herd an' stop 'em driftin'?"

"They ain't driftin'. They're close-herded if they ever was, tight as a drum." He laughed, and the laugh had a sly significance. "Yu took the safe side to head 'em off, I see."

"Hell, whachu mean?" Mike snorted indignantly. "I was on this side all the time. If I'd been where you was they'd never 'a' got away with it. Besides," relenting a little in fear of a further analysis of his movements, "I was afraid they might 'a' got yu, an' I was lookin' for yu. Anyways, I got my job, an' it's here, not off there after a steer or two, like Tiny's gone an' done. If he— —"

A shot far away in the darkness stopped him, and for several seconds the two sat facing toward it, holding their breath.

It was Flat spoke first. "Tiny sure headed for trouble that way," he whispered.

"Bes' git over there an' see the herd don't do no shinnanigans," Mike ordered casually. "Hustle."

But Flat had not yet unburdened his mind. He edged his mount nearer. "Didya—didya—sort o'—sort o'—hear somethin', Mike—back there when them other shots was fired?"

"Shure I heard the shots," replied Mike shortly.

"Yu didn't hear—like a—like a—yell or nothin', as though—as though maybe Tiny was hurt?"

"If I thought that, yu fool, I wouldn't be here, would I? Tiny was too far away to hear him, besides it was downwind. It was only the wind. Now, skin away. I'll hold 'em this side."

Flat rode reluctantly away. "I'll keep an eye out for Tiny when he comes back," he called.

"He'll be back, all right, when he gits cooled off," replied Mike easily.

Tiny did come back, but under peculiar circumstances. At that moment he lay on the prairie, more than half a mile away, a bullet through his thigh. He was bleeding badly. Not that there was anything peculiar about that. He had taken a foolish risk and had paid the penalty that might be expected.

What was peculiar was that a man knelt over him in the darkness, a mere blot against the sky.

Earlier in the night, under cover of the darkness, three riders had crept out from the shadows of the Cypress Hills and had struck across the prairie. Two were Indians, silent, riding close together on their wiry Indian ponies. The third man rode before them. No one spoke for a long time. They rode as if they not only knew where they were going but had gone that way for the same purpose many times before.

Suddenly the leader raised his nose and sniffed at the air. He drew in and waited for his companions to join him.

“They’re close by now,” he whispered. “Just over the ridge. Wait here.”

Dismounting, he handed a rein to one of the Indians. A moment later the night had swallowed him.

For a time the Indians waited in complete silence. Then, drawing nearer together, they conversed in angry whispers. The leader came out of the darkness as a vague shape. He was chuckling.

“Great night for us, boys!” he exulted. “Things have come our way. Only three riding herd tonight. We’ll make it a real haul. I’ll cut them out and drive them this way. Spread apart and let them through, then close in. You won’t need to hurry them; we’re not likely to be followed.”

Again he vanished. The Indians bent their heads together. They conversed in the Blackfoot language.

“No haul for us,” said one.

The other grunted agreement.

“We do the work. He gets it all but the little he pays us. He cheated us on that last lot. He has cheated us all summer. He must pay for this.”

Again a grunt of agreement, this time more eager.

“We’ll run the cattle off for ourselves,” suggested the one who had done most of the talking. “If you do as I say— —”

A shot rent the darkness. A horse could be heard galloping away. A few moments later a bunch of cattle moved toward them. The Indians separated. The cattle passed between them, their leader at their heels.

Presently from beyond the ridge came the pound of an oncoming bronco.

The leader drew up and turned in his saddle.

“The damn’ fool!” he exploded. “What does he think he can do? Surely no one thinks to follow us in the dark. Keep them going, boys. Swing them a little to the left—further toward the Hills. . . . Damn you, Grey Coyote, why don’t you— — Where the hell are you?”

Two quick shots rang out close behind him, followed by a cry of pain. The leader whirled his horse about. One of the Indians came racing out of the darkness and passed him, making toward the cattle.

“Was that you fired those shots?” demanded the leader.

“No follow now,” grunted the Indian.

“You mean, you shot him, you devil?”

“No follow now,” was repeated from the night.

The leader hesitated. Then, kicking his spurs into his bronco, he rode back toward the herd.

The two Indians had come together. The cattle, already excited, had scattered at the sound of the shots. In the night they were lost. One of the Indians snarled.

“Now it’s the Mounted Police we have to reckon with.”

He raised his gun and fired straight back in the direction the leader had taken. Then the pair struck westward, rounding back to the north toward Medicine Hat. The summer rustling had run its course.

CHAPTER III

THE RESCUE

Back on the soft dead grass of the prairie Tiny lay gritting his teeth against the pain of a badly torn thigh. The shot had reached an artery and had knocked him from his horse. His gun had fallen from his hand and, ignoring the gush of blood, he clawed frantically about in search of it.

But he could not find it, and a helpless fury fought with the pain, closing his mind temporarily to the fact that he was bleeding to death unless help reached him quickly. His first thought was to call for help from his companions, and for a few moments he listened for the sound of their coming. Hearing nothing, he had sense enough to realise that to call out would only locate him to the ruthless rustler who had shot him, a rustler who had attained, too, something of the haunting terror of the supernatural.

And so he lay still, listening with all his ears. A sudden faintness came over him, and he realised that he could not move, that something he did not understand was happening to him. He closed his eyes.

He opened them as a slight sound near at hand reached him. Between him and the sky a shape took form. He held his breath and waited. It could not be a friend or he would not be so still. The shape came nearer; it bent over him. It knelt beside him and a pair of hands wandered gently but swiftly over his body.

Tiny shivered. This the supernatural and more. He was not surprised; it all fitted in so well with the picture he had had of the rustler no one had ever seen. But the hands were so gentle, so soothing.

They reached the blood-soaked chaps and stopped, and a sharp breath broke the stillness.

A match flared suddenly, nicked with an expert thumb-nail into flame. Tiny blinked against it, and a hand touched his eyelids and closed them. He knew what that meant, and he kept them closed; it was the only decent thing to do.

A knife slit away the chaps and the pants beneath, exposing the wound. Tiny laughed vaguely.

“’Tain’t too bad, stranger,” he murmured. “’Tain’t got a bone or nothin’ like that, but—but—I reckon it’s taken my—my nerve or somethin’. I feel so damned weak.”

One of the hands came up and closed his lips. It dropped to the handkerchief about his neck and swiftly untied it. And those gentle hands wound it tightly about his leg above the wound—tighter—tighter. It cut into the flesh. The flow of blood decreased but it did not quite stop. The stranger’s hand ran through Tiny’s pockets but came away empty.

Tiny understood. “I ain’t bleedin’ so much, thanks, but it don’t seem—like—’sif—I can stand much more.”

One of the stranger’s fingers pushed inside the tourniquet and twisted. The flow stopped. Tiny laughed weakly.

“Reckon you can’t sit there holdin’ that thing till help comes, stranger. ’Twouldn’t be healthy. They’ve been lookin’ for you all summer. It’ll be daylight some time, then the boys’ll come searchin’ for me. They’ll be shootin’ mad. Reckon I just got to lie an’ wait an’ trust to luck. Anyway, you done your best. An’ I don’t believe it was you shot me.”

But the unknown had another plan. Taking Tiny’s hand, he thrust a finger of it where his own had been. Tiny drew a long breath and hung on. No blood flowed.

“Stranger, you’re white. You’re runnin’ a fool-game, but you ain’t all bad. Best skin away now. You got to be out of sight by daylight. I won’t shout till you’re well away. Reckon the boys’ll hear me.”

But the stranger had something better in mind. Tiny felt himself lifted and gently eased over a broad and powerful back. And, so carefully that he was conscious of little pain from the movement, he was carried back and back through the darkness and laid tenderly down close to the herd. He could smell the cattle and hear them snort.

“Thanks, stranger.” His finger clutched firmly at the tourniquet. “Best clear out now. An’ I ain’t seen or heard nothin’. I’m—I’m— — Aw, hell! You know how I feel, that’s all. Get goin’, pal.”

And then he was alone.

The stranger hurried back to his horse. He mounted and for several seconds sat motionless in the saddle. Far off he discerned the sounds made by the scattering cattle that had escaped his companions. Then, with a wan smile, he set off toward the north-east.

Long afterwards his keen ears made out Tiny's tardy call for help.

CHAPTER IV IN THE "TIMES" OFFICE

It was Monday, the day before publication, and the *Times* office and work rooms throbbed with excitement and nervous energy. Every member of the staff, from Steve Claver, "editor and proprietor," down to John Pol, the "devil," was in irritable humour. Even Laura, Steve's wife, whose position about the office was outwardly honorary but in reality almost managerial, had lost some of the customary equanimity that had so often steered the *Times* and her husband through emergencies. She sat in her usual seat beside a small table near the window of the front office, a piece of fancywork in her hand. But she did not take a stitch. Her ear was turned to the uneven chug of the natural-gas engine in the basement.

For the engine, as so often happened in time of stress, had been temperamental that morning. And Campbell, the Scotch foreman, exasperated at its defiance, had given notice again. The curious part of it was that this time the engine had completely baffled him. And every nerve of his boundless pride had protested when Steve, knowing nothing whatever about any sort of engine, had wandered down to the basement, had fiddled with something, had tinkered with something else, had touched casually another gadget, and the engine had set off on a day's smooth run as if it had never thought of being maddeningly refractory. Now, from the exhaust pipe thrust through the brick wall came the cheery explosions that told of an industrious engine, and from the basement the rattle of machinery rose soothingly to the worried staff on the two floors above.

In the room behind the office one of the small presses clattered steadily. John Pol, the devil, four feet nine at his straightest, elevated on a box, ran through a rush order of letterheads, hypnotised as he always was by the machinery but never missing a movement of his dexterous little hands as he inserted the paper when the platen opened. John could be depended upon to perform all that was expected of him, and much more. Often too much more. From the floor above came the click of the monoline, the thud of the plunger, while Campbell pounded irritably at a balky quoin, swearing round Scotch oaths the while.

Steve Claver himself, sleeves rolled up, a smudge of engine oil on his forehead as outward evidence of his proud accomplishment below stairs, sat

sideways in the inner office, still afraid that the infernal contraption below stairs was preparing to go on strike once more.

As he listened, his eyes drifted out to his wife where she sat in the outer office. She felt his gaze, and her fingers commenced to move over the fancywork at a breathless pace. Then she looked up and smiled through the open door. Steve responded instantly. He rose, strolled out to her, and seated himself on the long table that filled the rear wall.

“If that darned engine goes off once more before we have the paper out,” he hissed through gritted teeth, “I’m going to run amuck and slay someone.”

“So little ballast, such weak nerves!” teased his wife. “If I were you — —”

Someone was ascending the short flight of stairs that led from the street to the office door. Husband and wife listened in silence. The door opened and a shambling, embarrassed cowboy entered.

“Mornin’, ma’am! Mornin’, mister!”

Claver smiled a welcome. He liked the cowboys to visit the office on their trips to town. Indeed, it would have made little difference had he disliked it. It was Laura they came to see, many of them having been denied the sight of a woman since their last visit. Claver saw that Laura too liked them, that they introduced a new and amusing interest to her life. But, best of all, they often brought front-page news.

“Good morning!” he replied cheerily. “How’s the weather out on the prairie today? It’s darned hot in here.”

“Storm sure comin’!” declared the cowboy. He grinned and dropped his eyes. “Say, I’m from the Double X. Thought you might like to know there’s hoss-rustlin’ goin’ on. We lost eight th’other night.”

“You don’t tell me! That’s bad. With the cattle-rustling that makes something serious to talk about. Have you told the Mounted Police?”

“Reckon the boss has done that. Fust hoss-rustlin’ this summer, they say.”

Claver considered. “Let’s see, the Double X is off west of the Cypress Hills, isn’t it? That’s the danger-spot, they tell me. The rustlers will have run the horses to the Hills, of course.”

“We can’t find no trace of them, an’ we s’arched everywheres. O’ course we couldn’t s’arch the Hills. There’s only one man knows them Hills.”

“You mean Blue Pete? I suppose you couldn’t get him to help. I’ve never met the breed, but everyone seems to think him something of a superman.”

“That damned breed— — ’Scuse me, ma’am. I mean, he knows them Hills an’ a damn’ sight—’scuse me again, ma’am—he knows too much more. He ain’t likely to help to find cayuses he stole himself, is he?”

Claver whistled. “You think he stole the horses? Do the Police— —”

The cowboy coughed behind his hand. “No, I didn’t say he stole ’em. I just meant—I just meant he ain’t likely to be no help to nobody. . . . But he could be,” he added, with a cunning shake of the head.

“All this is very interesting,” said Claver, as the cowboy started to edge toward the door. “The Double X, you say. That’s Ford Welch’s ranch— though he isn’t a subscriber of mine. That’s one way he saves money,” he laughed, for Welch’s parsimoniousness was a local byword. “What’s your name?”

The cowboy caught frantically at the door-knob. “That doesn’t matter, mister. Reckon them Mounties don’t like us talkin’ too much to the papers. Thought yu’d like to know about the broncs, that’s all. Bye, ma’am!”

He shot through the door, his high heels clattering down the stairs, spurs jangling. Laura made a disapproving sound with her tongue.

“Don’t you know any better than to ask his name, Steve? It frightened him. You know how Inspector Barker hates the news to get to the papers. You should be more careful, dear. You’ll scare them from visiting us.”

Claver winked. “I couldn’t do that—not as long as you’re here. They’re bound to get an eyeful of you whenever they come to town. That’s his first visit. Now he’s caught the disease. Your reputation for beauty and wit and — — Oh, damn it, another interruption! Why do people persist in butting in when we’re so busy?”

The door was thrust noisily open, admitting a short, stocky man with a swarthy complexion and stiff black hair. He carried a small satchel, and with his other hand he removed a rather new sombrero and bowed low toward Laura. There was an air of banter in his manner that annoyed her.

“Good morning, Mr. Thoreau,” she greeted, without smiling.

“Morning, Mrs. Claver. Busy as usual, I see. Everyone wonders when you find time to write those editorials the *Times* is famous for. Of course we know Steve isn’t capable of them.”

Laura adjusted the work on her knee and, still without smiling, replied:

“Oh, I rattle them off in my sleep. Steve awakens when I commence to talk, and he writes them down. In fact the editorials are the easiest thing I do. I also run the monoline and the press, set the type, keep the engine going—and often I marvel that the West turns out such poor correspondents for the papers.”

“Touché!” Thoreau chuckled, not at all disturbed, though his correspondence from the neighbouring village of Irvine always occupied more space in the *Times* than that of any other correspondent.

Laura looked him over coolly. “Why did you think Steve married me?”

“What we wonder, Mrs. Claver,” retorted Thoreau, “is why you married Steve.”

“Why should they? It’s our business, isn’t it?” She smiled to rob it of its sting. “Well, I hope you’ve brought your notes, though it’s rather late. Steve was worrying. The space is waiting for you.”

“And that,” declared Thoreau, “is reward enough. It’s all the reward I’ve ever had for all the time I spend on my notes.”

“You’ve had a free ad. all the time for your butcher-shop, haven’t you?” Steve interposed.

“And what good has it ever done me? Do I ever sell an extra pound of meat from it?”

“Well, it makes you something of a respectable citizen, with faith in your local press. But this I know, Eugene Thoreau, that a certain correspondent from Irvine is amply rewarded merely to see the emanations of his puerile brain in print. It’s the French in you, Gene. Goodness knows how many other bloods combine to make you what you are. But come inside and let’s have some notes. I hope that bag isn’t full of them.” He pointed to the satchel.

Thoreau followed him laughingly into the inner office, winking back at Laura as he went.

Claver’s private office was bare, untidy, and ugly. No more than eight feet square, and cut off from the outer office and from the small-press room behind by a seven-foot board partition, one wall was almost filled by a battered-looking safe, the door now wide open, revealing an interior as untidy as the room in which it stood. The solitary window occupied most of the outer wall, the door the opposite side. Against the partition stood

Claver's desk, over which, fastened to the partition, hung a nest of pigeon-holes from which protruded an unsightly mess of clippings and folded papers.

Claver dropped into the chair before the desk and pointed to the other. Thoreau, still smiling, placed his satchel on the floor and seated himself. As he did so he slid the chair into the shadow of the overhanging pigeon-holes.

Claver noticed it and laughed. "What's the matter? Been up to something that won't stand the light, Gene?"

"Been up to living in this glaring sun for five years, and it's too much for my eyes. They aren't what they used to be." He made a wry face.

"That'll be good news for the other lads in the shooting contests. It may give them a chance. I believe the *Times*' records show you've won them all this year."

Thoreau smiled stiffly. "No credit to me. That's because Blue Pete dropped out of them. I don't mind admitting that when he beat me last year I had to think twice to prevent myself letting him have my last bullet in that grinning dark face of his. It's awfully humiliating to a proud man like Eugene Thoreau to be so consistently beaten. He's the only man in these parts who can outshoot me. . . . And, blast him, if I'd turned my gun on him he'd probably have beaten me to the draw. It makes me fighting mad to think he no longer considers it worth while even to enter the contests. The prize means nothing to him, and the result is a foregone conclusion. It only bores him. Some day I'm going to lose my temper and shoot him from ambush."

Claver laughed. "It's to be hoped you never become enemies. . . . Or if you do, I'd like to be within sight—out of range, of course—to witness the duel. There'd be a couple of well-attended funerals afterwards, and the end of two of our most interesting citizens. You know, I haven't met the half-breed yet; I don't know why. I think everyone else within a hundred miles has been in here at one time or another. Meeting him is a pleasure to look forward to."

"Not such a pleasure as you think, perhaps," giped Thoreau. "He's the ugliest man in the West, with those crooked eyes and—"

"But right in a newspaperman's line," interrupted Claver. "It isn't the beauties who get front-page space in the *Times*."

Thoreau shook his head, half in fun, half in earnest. "Better look out what you say about him in the paper when you do meet. He gets out of hand rather easily, and when he does the fur flies."

“Has he made yours fly?” asked Claver slyly.

“Not yet.” Thoreau smiled slowly, and his eyes took on a distant look. “I like the fellow, you know, yet somehow I’ve a feeling that the day will come when the shooting we do won’t be at a target. I don’t look forward to it, I’ll confess. I’m willing to take my chances with any other living man, but I’d have to have a split second’s start on the half-breed to stand a chance against him. And no man has managed to get that start yet. Many have tried. They don’t carry guns where they are now, I suppose. But,” more briskly, “that isn’t why I came. I brought the notes your wife derides—so pleasantly.”

He reached down and lifted the satchel to his knees and opened it. A faded blue cotton bathing-suit appeared on top, and he took it out and dropped it carelessly on the floor. Then he paused to wipe his face.

“Phew! Some weather we’re having. I’ll be honest about things,” he said, pointing to the bathing-suit. “I did come to town partly to bring these notes, but what I look forward to most is a swim.”

“A swim? Where?”

Thoreau chuckled. “In water. Where did you think?”

“But—but there’s only the river.”

“Well, there’s water enough there for me, isn’t there?”

Claver gripped the edges of the desk. “You don’t mean to tell me you’d risk bathing in that current?”

“Of course I do. I go in swimming every time I come to town when the weather is warm enough.”

“But, man alive— —”

Thoreau waved it aside. “I like it. Nothing like bucking something that never gives way—nothing like that for keeping a man’s fighting spirit keen.”

“Where in Heaven’s name do you go in?”

“Down beyond the woollen mill,” said Thoreau lightly, tossing on the desk a handful of paper.

Claver picked the sheets up absent-mindedly. “But that’s where the current is swiftest.”

“That’s what makes it the best place—or partly so. The real reason is, of course, that it’s away from houses, and I can undress there in the bushes. It

gives me a goal, too: I see what time I can make to the cutbank on the other side and back, and how near the starting-point I can land on my return.”

“And some day,” sighed Claver, “I’ll lose my wordiest correspondent. By the way, how’s the butcher business getting along in Irvine?”

“Giving me a living, at least. . . . But it does surprise me how people manage to get along with so little meat. Or perhaps it doesn’t,” he added, with a wink.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Never hear of strays?”

“Certainly. I run a half-page of brands to handle them.”

“Never hear of the rustling, then, that’s been going on all summer?”

“Indeed, yes. The town is full of it. It’s a pesky nuisance to a newspaperman, because it’s too trifling in detail to merit the space it really deserves in bulk. I’ve tried using my imagination on it— —”

“Won’t the Mounties give you something more substantial to go on?” inquired Thoreau.

“Not Inspector Barker. Did anyone ever get much information from him? Every time I talk to him I leave with a curse on my lips. He hates newspapermen. He says we talk too much— —”

“Use your imagination too much, he means,” laughed Thoreau.

“Perhaps. But he has found my imagination not unserviceable at times.”

Thoreau bent to repack the satchel. “But surely the Mounties have their suspicions about the identity of the rustlers?”

“If they have, they haven’t taken me into their confidence. And, by the way,” he chuckled, “if the public, as you hint, live on those rustled cattle, they should bring them to you to kill for them.”

“That would be fine for the butcher. But—and there’s a big ‘but’ there—the poor, down-trodden butcher has to display to the Mounties the hide of every animal he kills. Doesn’t give a dishonest butcher a chance to make a living.” He rose, satchel in hand. “Well, you’re busy; and I’m in a hurry for that swim. If you have time you might come down with me and paddle in the pools along the shore; they’re quite safe.”

“Not such a bad idea, either,” agreed Claver, following his visitor to the outer office. “I could point then to the spot where the body went down, when

the Mounties come to drag for you.”

Thoreau threw back his head and laughed. “Don’t frighten me, Steve. . . . But I imagine dragging for a body in that current in a mere boat wouldn’t be very profitable; the body might be anywhere within a hundred miles. No, better not set the Mounties on me till I drown, Steve.”

With another laugh, and waving at Laura, he left the office.

Laura’s eyes remained for several seconds on the door he had closed behind him. Presently she asked:

“What’s on his mind, Steve?”

He turned inquiring eyes on her. “What do you mean? He seems to be thinking of nothing but a swim to get himself cooled off. He looks forward to fighting that current, the crazy fool.”

His voice trailed off toward the end, and a frown appeared on his forehead.

“You know, Laura, I, too, noticed something. He was livelier, more bantering, than usual. He seemed to be excited. . . . They have no water at Irvine.” He turned back toward his own office. “God, I wish I could find a place to swim today. I feel sort of—sort of—depressed—no, oppressed. It’s that storm everyone says is coming, I suppose.”

“That man,” murmured Laura, her eyes fixed on the window, “always interests me.”

“But you evidently don’t like him. I saw that. I think Gene knows it too, and so he likes to tease you.”

“What in the world is he doing here in the West? He’s far too well educated to be a butcher, and in such a small village as Irvine. Consider those notes of his. . . . Somehow I feel that we’ve never got below his skin: we don’t understand him.”

Her husband laughed lazily. “Speaking of education wasted in a butcher-shop in the West, what about a Bachelor of Arts running a puny weekly in a cowtown like Medicine Hat—and with the prettiest wife in the world as assistant?”

“What I’m thinking about most,” retorted Laura dryly, “is the next payment due in a month on that puny weekly, and you standing there thumping your chest while the monoline waits for material.”

“So mercenary!” sighed Steve.

The telephone jangled. He reached for it.

CHAPTER V

THE SCOOP

Afterwards Laura often wondered why her attention was riveted so tensely on the lounging figure of her husband as he leaned against the high day-book desk and held the receiver to his ear.

“Hullo—and this is my busy day,” he shouted, less ungraciously than the words. Suddenly he straightened. “Oh, hullo, Mahon!”

That, Laura knew, was Sergeant Mahon, second in command of the local detachment of the Mounted Police. The Sergeant had always been a good friend, sometimes a “front-page” friend in an indirect way; for the Mounted Police gave little news to the local papers except for a purpose.

Claver’s eyes glistened with excitement as he listened.

“Sure, sure! I’ll be right down. Mighty decent of you, Sergeant. . . . Oh, well,” with a chuckle, “however contemptible your purpose, it’s comparatively decent for a Mountie. Ta-ta!”

He snapped the receiver into its hook and hurried to the inner office, calling back:

“They want me down at the barracks. Got to glance over this proof first. Campbell’s waiting for it.”

Laura sighed. “Oh, all right, hand it over.”

He trotted out with it to her, grinning sheepishly. “That’s the devil of the telepathy between us: I can’t be subtle about it.” He dropped the galley-proof on the table beside her.

“What’s up at the barracks?” she asked.

“Don’t want even to guess. I hope it’s not just that horse-stealing the cowboy mentioned. Hope it’s real front-page stuff. Better tell Campbell to run that,” pointing to the proof, “on an inside page and not to start making up the front page until he hears from me. Leave out the Council meeting till I get back; I may have to cut it down. We’re pretty crowded this week. Take a glance at Thoreau’s stuff, and give it to Gilmour to set up.”

Laura laughed up at him. “Always room for a crime, isn’t there, Steve? What would you do without the Mounted Police?”

“And what would the Mounted Police do without me?” he retorted. “Without them we’d at least miss the glamour of the scarlet tunics in town. And the story-writers couldn’t be guilty of the mistake they always make when they picture the Mounties in those same scarlet tunics when on duty. Some day I plan to correct that—at so much a word.”

He made for the door. Laura stopped him.

“Hadn’t you better rub that smudge off your face and put on a coat and a hat? If you went that way they’d know I chased you from the office—besides writing the editorials. They accuse me of everything worth while now.”

Claver scrambled impatiently back to his office and picked up hat and coat.

“You’re too thin-skinned, my dear. Imagine what they’d think if they knew all you’re really guilty of. It might even be a wise thing to convince them that I can at least beat you running.”

When he appeared on the street he was still only half into his coat, and he ran along Fourth Avenue toward Main Street dragging at a sleeve. But the sound of the engine of the rival *Tribune* brought his pace down to a fast walk. Glancing through the window as he passed the *Tribune* building, he saw that the editor’s chair was empty, and he quickened his pace. Had Jarrold, too, been called to the barracks, and was he already on the way?

As he rounded the corner of Main Street a jeering voice broke over him from the *Tribune* doorway:

“What’s the hurry, Claver? That tin-can engine of yours disgusted with the *Times* again? It shows some decency at heart, if it is, and that’s something in the *Times* office.”

Claver halted for a moment and raised his hand. The distant chugging of the engine could be heard.

“Listen, Jarrold. Ever hear a sweeter sound? The *Times* engine knows when it’s well off: it doesn’t have to make up for the empty brains of its editor. When the *Tribune* really wants an idea, or a sane thought, come over and talk it out with me. I’ll explain in one-syllable words. I’ve always a moment for a brother in trouble. It isn’t your fault if God turned you out with a wooden head.”

He continued on down Main Street at a sober pace. At South Railway Street he turned to the right, instead of keeping straight on across the railway tracks to the barracks. But once out of sight of the *Tribune* door he stopped, extracted his notebook, and scribbled in it. Then he wandered back, apparently absent-mindedly, to the corner and peeped up Main Street. Jarrold was not in sight, so he hurried on to the barracks, laughing to himself.

Constable Murchison, seated at a patched-up desk in the gloomy hall into which Claver admitted himself, motioned him toward a door on his right.

“You’re to go right in.”

“I should say I would.” Claver paused with his hand on the knob. “If I’m arrested, Murch, call up the wife and tell her to borrow on the plant for bail. The paper’ll be worth a lot more when I get out and expose you people. If this is just a friendly call, if the Inspector has presumed to call me down here on such a busy day for something less important than murder, there’ll be one right here in the office for front-page space. You’ll see.”

He pushed the door open and entered.

Inspector Barker’s office seemed never to change. It was always dusty and unkempt, and badly in need of paint. The Inspector himself, always clean and tidy in his person, served only to make the room look rustier. Indeed, the whole building was badly down at heels. For the Inspector had the futile hope that sooner or later some visiting superior with an eye to neatness might decide that something should be done about it in the way of paint and renovation.

The Mounted Police barracks at Medicine Hat had been there since before the railway cut down through the cutbank to the east, crossed the valley where the town lay, and the river beyond, and pantingly climbed the cutbank to the west. It had entertained—and imprisoned—every sort of human life, from the dirtiest Indian to the bluest blood of England, both entertained and imprisoned. For England had occasionally come across the ocean and out to the prairie with the idea of enjoying the “natives” as a spectacle, and sometimes had overenjoyed itself and been caught in the grip of the law. Indeed, nothing raised the hair on the back of the Inspector’s neck so stiffly as to be called, and treated as, a “Colonial,” particularly since he had visited England himself three times and had seen so many things in which it was half a century behind his own country; and he had ways of officially expressing his resentment. For Medicine Hat liquor was pungent,

and there were laws few were aware of until they found themselves behind the bars.

It is a fact that even today the “Colonial” idea prevails in England, and Canadians resent it with all the fury of a country that has advanced far beyond the motherland in the visible equipment of existence. There is, too, the unfortunate type of Englishman who visits Canada with the demand that he be accorded the privileges and reverence of an elder brother with unquestioned claims to the estate.

The drabness of antiquity had settled over the barracks. In a subtle way it had, in time, reacted on the Inspector, so that, formal as he was on the street, within his office he frequently sat with tunic unbuttoned; and always his blotter was littered with the siftings from the tobacco pouch that rested on it. The rickety chair in which he sat was intended to lend itself to the general need of repair.

As Claver entered, the Inspector did not turn, did not move. And the editor, in a burst of irritation, slammed the door behind him.

Not a flicker of a muscle showed that the Inspector was disturbed. But he said:

“Is that the way they bring up children in the cent-belt, Steve?”

(The “cent-belt” was a term of contempt applied to the East by the West, since at that time nothing so petty as the cent was recognised in Western coinage.)

“They bring them up to recognise rudeness to visitors,” retorted Claver, dropping into the extra chair.

“So many are extra sensitive to rudeness because they practise it themselves. But it’s not worth even an editorial note.” The Inspector whirled about in his chair. “It didn’t take you long to get here.”

“When the Mounted Police need help,” said Claver, “they can count on Steve Claver of the *Times*.”

A symptom of a smile twisted the corners of the Inspector’s mouth, but he only shouted, “Mahon!”

The pound of hurrying feet sounded along the hall from the back of the building, and a tall, straight-backed officer entered.

“I suppose you smelled a scoop?” suggested the Inspector, as he leaned back and scowled at Claver.

“So many smells come from the Mounted Police,” retorted the editor, “that one may be pardoned for getting confused about them. No wonder you’ve such a bad reputation, Inspector.”

The eyes beneath the iron-grey brows twinkled, but otherwise his face was grim. “It’s the company we keep that gives us that reputation, Steve—all the smelly people of the prairies—including editors. It’s bound to leave a taint. The difference between the Mounted Police and the editor, Steve, is that the Police chase the smell to eradicate it; an editor overtakes it and bathes in it, draws it into his system, and makes it fouler before exposing it to the public. An editor doesn’t wish a smell to be eradicated, because then it ceases to be news.”

Claver grinned. “Any smell about now that you can’t eradicate, Inspector? Is that why you brought me down?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” The Inspector glowered at him.

“So-o-o! Bad as that, is it? Hit the nail on the head at the first blow, did I? But there’s nothing clever about that. I’m only going by past experience. You’ve needed me before, you know.”

The Inspector made a wry face. “Nobody but an editor would stoop to rubbing it in. But even an editor might be expected to do something for his country. I’ve repaid you a thousandfold for anything you ever did for me. But this insolence of yours is all the reward I get for thinking to do you another favour. I might have expected it.”

“The Greeks bringing gifts, you know, Inspector.”

“But it’s not like that. I thought to give you a scoop. The *Tribune* doesn’t come out for two days.”

“I’m eating humble pie.” Claver tried to look contrite. “What has happened?”

“Nothing much—that is, from an editor’s point of view. Only a near-murder.”

“Murder!” Claver leaned forward excitedly.

The Inspector thrust him back. “Too bad, Steve, much too bad. I’d like to leave you free to lick your lips like that, but there’s a difference between murder and near-murder—in spite of your bloodthirsty cravings. . . . But I will say this, that the fact that it wasn’t murder is merest accident. Tiny Cooper, out at the Triangle H, was shot night before last by rustlers. No, he’s

not dead, nor likely to be. Most of the cowboys I know are destined to kick out at the end of a rope.”

“Do you mean it’s the rustlers who’ve been stealing the cattle all summer?”

“How do I know? This time it was a larger bunch than ever before that they cut out. Still, until we know differently we’re considering the rustlers the same lot.”

“You say Tiny’s not likely to die. Is he badly hurt?”

The Inspector sat for several moments jabbing thoughtfully with a copper paper-knife at the blotter before him.

“No. . . . And that’s the curious part of it. He nearly bled to death—shot through the thigh. He’d have kicked out if—if something hadn’t happened.”

Claver stifled the gush of questions that came to his lips. Before them the Inspector would only have been maddeningly cryptic.

“I suppose,” he remarked casually, “that Tiny did a bit of praying, and an angel came down and stopped the flow. Cowboys are noted for their eloquence in prayer. Mind if I smoke?” He drew out a cigarette and lit it.

The Inspector, robbed of the moment’s gloating he had promised himself, grunted irritably.

“Damn it, it’s always the same. Something is always butting in to muddle a nice, easy trail. Why the devil can’t we have a clean, simple murder for a change, with no complications—the sort of crime where you strike a lead like they have in the stories, so you can follow it through to the murderer. It’s these off-shoots, these twists and bewildering side-issues, these unintelligible slants, that make life miserable for the Mounted Police. I’m going back East where a murder is a murder without disturbing frills.”

Claver heard him through with no sign of the excitement that boiled within him.

“Of course,” he murmured, “if you need help— —”

“Help? Hell! Listen to this, you amateur detective—and plague take you all. Tell me what you make of this. Mahon and I have stood on our heads and lain on our stomachs and turned cartwheels to obtain a comprehensible view of what happened, and still it’s Sanskrit to us.”

He paused to waggle a long finger almost under his visitor’s nose. The bristling ends of his waxed moustache worked furiously.

“Listen—and if you’re smart enough to guess the answer I’ll say this town isn’t going to the dogs because of its editors.”

Claver eyed the wagging finger, then leaned forward and wagged his own under the Inspector’s nose.

“And you listen to this, you great big bluff and four-flusher: you know this town wouldn’t be on the map if it weren’t for the *Times*—with the *Tribune* adding its mite now and then. You know that you and your more competent but browbeaten assistants would be hanging their heads in shame if I hadn’t been around two or three times to give them leads. Put that in your foul pipe and smoke it.”

A twinkle of amusement creased the Inspector’s eyes, though his mouth dropped ominously at the corners.

“You impertinent young upstart! All you’ve ever done for the Mounted Police is mix trails, muddy the waters, and— —”

“All right, all right!” Claver leaned back comfortably in his chair. “Call it even. I’m a busy man. Now let’s clear up about Tiny Cooper and the blood that ceased to flow by some mysterious means. There’s a space always open on the front page for blood. What use do you wish to make of it?”

“Huh! That’s better.” The Inspector leaned back in his chair and tipped his fingers together. “Here’s the story: Night before last the rustlers—or that rustler, though we think now there’s more than one in it—cut out a bunch of cattle from the Triangle H herd. The boys happened to be short-handed, so the job wasn’t difficult. This kid Tiny was one of the night-herders, and he rashly set off in pursuit. Alone, mind you.” He paused, jabbing angrily at the blotter. “They shot him!”

He swung to face Claver.

“By the way, are you paying me space rates for this?”

“On the contrary, unless you tell me more I’ll bill you for my time.”

“All right. Then get out.” He waved Claver away. Then, smiling, he added: “Ask Mahon for the rest. He knows more than I do. But get out, get out.”

Claver was not reluctant to go. He knew he would get more detail from Sergeant Mahon than the Inspector would permit himself to give out. And so without another word he followed the Sergeant to the hall and into a small office at the rear. Mahon was laughing.

“I wish some more of the boys had heard you. Well, Steve, there isn’t much to tell. It’s those side-issues the Inspector spoke of, and we don’t know much about them. Tiny won’t be frank with us. There are inexplicable gaps in his story, but he refuses to fill them in. These lads are stubborn— —”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, Mahon,” Claver broke in, “cut the verbiage. This is my busy day.”

“All right. You heard the Inspector say that Tiny almost bled to death. What saved him was—the rustler himself.”

“That’s not so remarkable when you consider that he’s probably a friend in the light of day. These rustlers are part of us—they’re just ordinary men like Tiny; they couldn’t stand by and see a man bleed to death. They could shoot to kill nine times out of ten if they wished to. They don’t because they’re not murderers at heart. Look at this half-breed everyone talks about. You know more stories about Blue Pete, I suppose, than I ever heard. But even I know that he shoots only in self-defence. Or, some say, to lend you chaps a hand— —”

Mahon broke in sharply: “Never mind about Blue Pete.”

“You bit, Mahon.” Claver grinned.

“Blue Pete has nothing to do with this. Let me get on with the story: Tiny gave chase to the rustlers and was shot.”

“The Inspector told me that.”

“But he didn’t tell you that he was shot more than half a mile from where he was found later.”

“He crawled there, of course.”

“He couldn’t. He had bled too much. We found the spot where he had lain and almost bled to death. Besides, he never uttered a sound his companions heard until he reached the spot where they found him. His neckerchief was tied about his leg as a tourniquet, and he would never have had the strength to do it. Besides, someone had cut away his chaps and his pants to get at the wound.”

Claver considered it. “What do you figure happened?”

“The rustler, of course, had come to his assistance, had bound on the tourniquet, and had carried him back to the herd.”

The Inspector had come to the door unheard.

“Of course, of course! The whole affair is unreasonable and inexplicable. I told you it was, Steve. And now the first thing we have to do is to explain the inexplicable. That’s the way things happen out here. Oh, this country!” He threw out his hands. “Must be something in the air—everyone acts so crazily. The East is where I should be. I’m too sane to follow the meanderings of lunatics.”

Claver smiled. “Sure it’s the air that makes people crazy. . . . And you’ve been here longer than anyone else.”

The Inspector stalked up to him and waved a finger in his face.

“Remember this, young man: you’ve heard all we know about this affair, and there must be no wild guessing and unsettling imaginings, or nasty hints, in that sheet of yours. Publish only what we’ve told you. We’ve troubles enough as it is without being led in crazy circles by your mental aberrations.”

CHAPTER VI

PLANNING

When Claver had left the barracks Sergeant Mahon followed the Inspector to the front office.

“There,” growled the latter, “goes brains tainted with impertinence and instability . . . encouraged by a lot of aggravating luck.”

He leaned his chin in his hand and watched the retreating back of the editor as he hurried along South Railway Street.

“And,” he added viciously, “the worst of it is that he can and does help us now and then . . . usually when he isn’t aware of it.”

“Do you think, sir,” inquired Mahon hesitantly, “that he can help us in this?”

“I wonder.” The Inspector drummed on the desk. “These two jobs of rustling coming so close together are going to make things uncomfortable for us till we have them solved. Those horses from the Double X—why couldn’t they have waited till we made some headway in this other affair? . . . I wonder if Claver knows about the broncos. He seemed to be chuckling inside. I wish we could get one of them cleared up before he gets the news in that paper of his. Nothing I’d like better than to get the laugh on him as a lousy news-gatherer.”

“But you offered the story about Tiny Cooper, sir— —”

“Yes. I’ve a thought that a bit of publicity about that affair may not do us any harm. Tiny will find himself assailed from all sides for the part of the story he refuses to tell us. Some time he’s almost certain to break loose and spill the parts he conceals now. . . . But about this horse-rustling—it’s the first we’ve had this year. . . . I don’t know which to tackle first; we can’t take them both on with any hope of success. Damn it, the Commissioner should give me half a dozen more men. He’s always kept me short-handed.”

He clambered to his feet, staggering a little as the chair tilted awkwardly, and commenced to pace about the room, his hands working together at his back, his stiff moustaches cutting strange capers as he talked.

“If it was just a simple case of rustling, but it isn’t. What is it that cowboy insists on keeping to himself, and why? He never walked—or crawled—from where he was shot; we know that. And both Mike and Flat swear he never called out until he lay where they found him; and there wasn’t a drop of blood there or on the way from where he was shot.

“The hell of it is that people will think it’s we who have sealed his lips, that we won’t let him talk. They’ll think we want to make a mystery of it so we won’t be expected to get too swift results from our investigation. But we’ve got to get busy, Mahon. All summer we’ve been working quietly to run down the rustlers, and we’ve got nowhere. The public knows something of it, and they’re apt to think us helpless and incapable. Now the whole affair is forced into the open, and everyone will clamour for results.”

He seated himself and glowered at the untidy blotter. “I’m still not satisfied with things around Irvine. I’ve a hunch that something’s wrong out there.”

“We’ve been through the place, sir, with a fine-toothed comb,” protested the Sergeant.

“All right, then use something finer. We must work fast, too, because that horse-stealing can’t wait.”

“Do you suspect anyone at Irvine, sir?”

“I can’t get that butcher out of my mind,” growled the Inspector.

Mahon smiled thinly. “I thought you suspected him. That’s why I’ve given his place particular attention. There’s nothing there. I’ve looked for secret hiding-places, and every hide is examined for overbrands and cancellations. We’ve found nothing to make us suspicious.”

“But the hides you’ve been shown,” puzzled the Inspector, “don’t seem to add up to the sort of life that fellow Thoreau is able to lead. He never seems to be short of funds or comforts. . . . There’s something mystifying about him, too. What is he doing in Irvine—and butchering? He’s too well-educated to be satisfied with being a butcher, and his wants are too exacting to make Irvine fill the bill for him. That cow-village is not for the likes of him, Mahon. Besides, you say he’s often away from home. . . . And there’s that banking he does in Winnipeg. I’m looking into that now. I can’t help thinking we’ve missed something in not arresting him, if only on suspicion. . . . And yet we’d be in a mess if nothing came of it; we can’t take liberties with a man like that.”

Mahon restrained himself. He was angry. The Inspector's comments were, he felt, a criticism of himself.

The Inspector sighed. "It looks as if I'm going to be forced to call on Blue Pete again."

"Do you mean for the cattle or for the horses?"

"The cattle, of course. It's the more important."

"Would he take it up, sir?"

"Why wouldn't he?" The Inspector's tone was half angry, half inquiring—wholly anxious.

Mahon laughed dryly. "Can anyone answer that, sir—even Blue Pete himself? Why does he turn down so much we ask him to do?"

"And why," broke in the Inspector, "does he insist on doing things his own way, to our chagrin and sometimes our shame? . . . The worst of it is that if he weren't like that he wouldn't have such generally good results, I suppose. That's what gets me all worked up. We have in the Force certain definite methods, established through the years; and along comes an ignorant half-breed and shoots holes in our system—with success where we fail. No wonder my hair is getting greyer since he came across from Montana."

He heaved a heavy sigh. "Oh, well, talking and raving won't get us anywhere. There may be something we can do without him. I won't call on him till I have to. Get out on the street and keep your eyes open. The whole town is bound to be talking about this shooting affair. Show 'em the scarlet; they like to see it. Someone may talk to you. That's how we get the best of our information. And, by the way, you might bring me a package of tobacco on your way back. I'm almost out of it."

Sergeant Mahon left the room. He examined himself carefully in the mirror in his own office in the rear of the building and, spurs clanking musically, passed out to the street.

The Inspector watched the straight figure cross the railway tracks and turn along South Railway Street.

"And after all his work with the breed," he reflected dismally, "he doesn't know him any better than I do. All the cases they've worked on together—and dangerous ones, too—they should know each other like open books. . . . And I hope they work together many a time yet. . . . Believe I'll let him get to work on Thoreau. He'll get the facts if anyone can."

He reached to the telephone with a jerk, as if fearing that his mind might change, and called up the Police Post at Turner's Crossing. It was a third of the way out toward the 3-Bar-Y ranch where Blue Pete was to be found when at home.

In the meantime Sergeant Mahon was out on the street effecting something more than entertaining the natives with his scarlet town tunic. He kept eyes and ears open. From South Railway Street he turned up Toronto Street. He strolled slowly along, purposely giving the impression of nothing to do, no destination in mind. Now and then he paused to stare into the show-windows. One of the three town policemen passed and bowed.

A display of a fresh shipment of books in a window caught his eye. As he stood examining the titles he was aware that someone had pulled up near the outer edge of the sidewalk behind him. Focussing on the dim mirror of the window, he saw that it was an Indian. No one else was near. His ears pricked up, but he did not turn.

The Indian was muttering:

“Come out railway. Grey Coyote tell something. Nobody see you. Grey Coyote there right away.”

The Indian lounged on. The Sergeant continued for some time to inspect the books with unseeing eyes.

He knew Grey Coyote, and nothing he knew of him induced any approach to admiration or friendliness. The Indian had never had a good reputation with the Police. There had, indeed, been occasions when he might have been sent to jail. But his infractions of the law had been of a minor nature, except for the few times when the Inspector had considered it wise not to press the matter; and Grey Coyote, though not a chief, was a leader among the Indians in the encampment to the east of the city. What the Inspector withheld his hand for was in hopes of some major crime whereby he might send the leaders to jail for long terms.

And yet not infrequently the Indians had been of value to the Mounted Police, volunteering information that would otherwise not have reached them. One never knew when they might be of further service.

Up Toronto Street the Sergeant wandered. He turned along Fourth Avenue, followed it at a leisurely pace to Main Street, purchased the Inspector's tobacco, and strolled off back to the barracks, where he told the Inspector of his meeting with Grey Coyote.

“We’ll both go,” decided the Inspector instantly.

Mahon was doubtful of the wisdom of showing so much official attention. “Might it not frighten him, sir?”

“Not if we play our hand properly. In fact, it might be wise to give him a good fright. But we’ll start as the genial friend. There may be questions I want to ask, and I can’t bring him here to the barracks. I’ve an idea Grey Coyote is a mine of information, if only we can find the way to dig for it. Get out my horse, Mahon.”

CHAPTER VII

AN INFORMER

The two Mounted Policemen emerged from the corral gate at the rear of the barracks and turned north, away from the town. They rode idly, out merely for exercise, the few who noticed them decided. Away before them lay a wide stretch of low, level ground, bounded on the north and west by the river, and away to the east by the broken cutbanks that rose to the prairie near Dunmore Junction. It was almost uninhabited, for much of it was under water during the spring freshets.

Past the hospital they rode, and on beside the abandoned woollen mill, to where what little trace of roadway remained turned to the right in the elbow of the river. Still at a jog-trot they followed the road along the edge of the river, rounded the high board fence about the baseball grounds, and at last reached the jagged promontories into which the eastern cutbank is broken. Into one of the narrow slashings they rode.

Grey Coyote was waiting for them. He sat alone on his heels on a little mound, nervously smoking a long-stemmed pipe. When he saw the Inspector his nervousness visibly increased, his lips tightened and a frightened look came into his eyes.

The Inspector appeared not to notice.

“Hello, Grey Coyote!” he greeted affably as he dismounted. “Thought I’d come along. Hope you don’t mind. I needed some exercise, and so did Sambo,” nodding toward the black horse whose reins he had given to Sergeant Mahon.

The distant barking of dogs broke the silence. The Inspector cocked his ear toward it and laughed.

“I’ve often wanted to ask you what you do with all those dogs about the camp.”

Grey Coyote shrugged. “Nothin’,” he grunted.

“I see. They just grow up and stick with you. But how do they live in winter? Do they freeze or hibernate, and return to life in the warm weather, or do you find room for them in the tepees?”

“Dogs used to winter—always used to it. No freeze dogs, no more than Indians. Curl up in snow out of wind. Thick hair. Getting thick now for winter.”

“Makes me wish I was a dog,” laughed the Inspector. “Forty years in these winters hasn’t thickened my hair—or my skin. Here,” taking out his tobacco pouch, “try some of mine.”

It was the proper touch to win the Indian. Grey Coyote’s eyes brightened, and he hastily tapped the bowl of his pipe empty and seized the pouch. The Inspector watched with a friendly smile, and when the pipe was filled held a match to it.

“Well, what’s the news? I haven’t seen you around of late. Been working somewhere?”

“Irvine,” grunted the Indian.

“He’s been working for Thoreau, I believe,” Sergeant Mahon put in. “I’ve seen him out there. Isn’t that so, Grey Coyote?”

“Work no more for him,” said the Indian.

“What’s the matter? Did he fire you?”

“Indian fire himself.”

“Is that so? In these days it requires fortitude to do that. What happened?”

“Huh! Indian no thief. Grey Coyote no thief.”

“I could well believe that at the moment or you wouldn’t be telling me,” said the Inspector dryly. “But what’s the story. Who wanted you to be a thief?”

“Frenchy.”

“You mean Frenchy Thoreau wanted you to steal? To steal what?”

“Cattle.”

The Inspector’s eyes sought Mahon’s for a fleeting moment. They said “I told you so” as plainly as words.

“Do you mean that Thoreau is the one who’s been rustling those cattle all summer?”

“Frenchy rustler—small rustler—steer now—two steers—maybe three steers. Big pay for butcher.”

“It would be. He stole them for the meat—to sell it? . . . But we’ve examined every hide of his and found his trade on the level, so far as we could see.”

“Mounties no see everything.”

“You’re only too right there—though we do see more than we get credit for. But how did we come to miss Thoreau’s rustling?”

“Frenchy hide meat. Next store. Frenchy cut door through from cellar near furnace. Beef there in cellar. Frenchy cuts much ice.”

“By jove, Mahon, we should have been suspicious about that ice.” The Inspector made a grimace. “So that’s how he beat us, eh? Have you known this long, Grey Coyote?”

He realised his mistake in asking the question, and to cover it he appeared to pay little attention to the Indian’s reply:

“Not know—not sure.”

“How did he work it?”

“Frenchy bring in beef at night.”

The Inspector thought for several moments. “But how could he dispose of so much meat without arousing suspicion? How did he get rid of the meat?”

“Frenchy run some across to Montana. No Mounties there.”

“One for us, Mahon,” laughed the Inspector.

There were a score of questions still to ask; but Grey Coyote was getting more and more restless and wordless and squirmingly uneasy. And the Inspector knew that if he hoped ever to get more information from those dark lips he must be content for the time being. He had enough, at any rate, to work on for the moment.

“It’s good of you to tell us this, Grey Coyote, and we won’t forget. We have to depend on honest people like you to keep us informed. When I need you I’ll call on you.”

Grey Coyote jerked the pipe from his lips and stared into the Inspector’s face.

“Grey Coyote tell everything now. Nothing more. No see, no do, nothing more. Mounties no need Indian more. Get Grey Coyote in trouble.”

“In other words,” the Inspector grumbled to his subordinate, “we must keep him out of this. I suppose he can’t be blamed for that.” He turned to the Indian. “All right. We probably won’t need you any more. We’ll find that door in the cellar. By the way, Thoreau’s in town today. I saw him— —”

The Indian started and stood up. “Frenchy here? No see him. Frenchy much bad man. Cut Indian’s heart out if he know.”

“Not likely—the cutting part, I mean. He’s not the sort to use a knife; a gun’s more in his line. God, I wish I could shoot like him. All right, boy, we’ll do our best to keep you out of this. And, as I said, we won’t forget.”

“Which,” he growled, as he and Mahon rode back to the barracks, “may be interpreted in a way Grey Coyote little suspects. . . . It’s double-crossing like that that we have to depend on so often, and I hate it. That damned Indian has been in the thick of the rustling himself. . . . But then, why did he blab?” He turned it over and over in his mind during a long silence.

“I think I see,” he offered at last. “He thinks to get out from under; that’s why he talked. He’s afraid we’re getting on to Thoreau, and he himself would be in a mess. . . . And yet—and yet it strikes me there’s more to it than that. You could see hatred in every word. He has it in for Thoreau for some fancied or real grievance. He thinks to get even and save his own skin at the same time. . . . And if Thoreau ever heard of it before we get our hands on him I wouldn’t like to be in Grey Coyote’s shoes. No wonder he doesn’t want to be brought into it publicly. Fear and a grudge—there’ll be fur flying when Thoreau and Grey Coyote meet, I fancy.”

He rode for a time in silence, sending his horse along at a brisk pace.

“And now our work’s cut out for us, and we mustn’t lose a minute. You and Priest, Mahon, you’re to ride right away out to Irvine and find the hidden beef. If Thoreau’s still in town, all the better. I’d rather not arrest him until we have the proof; but if he shows up while you’re searching, arrest him immediately. But look out for that gun of his. . . . I wish to God Blue Pete was here to go along with you.”

Mahon remembered that he had seen Thoreau pass the barracks on his way toward the river, and he told the Inspector. “Possibly going for a swim. He does that every time he comes to town.”

“What, in that current?”

“He says he likes the tussle.”

They had already passed the elbow of the river and were riding up Main Street. The Inspector drew in and looked back. The roar of the current filled the air, louder there because of its angry surge at the bend against the blocking cutbank to the north.

“What a place to tempt Providence!” he muttered. He chirped to his horse and rode on. “By the way, he does the Irvine notes for the *Times*, doesn’t he? Claver may know something of his movements.”

In his office once more, the Inspector sat moodily staring at the blotter on his desk. Mahon stood silently waiting for the orders he knew would come.

“I wonder,” mused the Inspector, “if Claver can be trusted. I want to know where Thoreau is, but I don’t wish him to know we’re interested in him. I must take a chance.”

He drew the desk telephone to him and asked for the *Times* office. “That you, Claver? . . . Now this is on the quiet. Have you seen Thoreau today? . . . What the hell does it matter why I want to know? I want to speak to him, that’s all. . . . No, nothing wrong, of course. Don’t I sometimes talk to you without arresting you? . . . Gone for a swim? Have you seen him since? . . . Oh, all right, let it go. There’s no hurry. I’ll get in touch with him some other way. On the quiet, I said. Thoreau might think, as you did, that I wished to arrest him for something.”

He hung up and sat for a time buried in thought. Becoming aware of the waiting Sergeant, he glowered suddenly up at him.

“What the blazes! I told you to go— —. But, no. First send Murchison down to the river. Thoreau may have been there all the time behind those bushes. Murchison mustn’t arrest him or show undue interest in him, but I want to keep an eye on him. When he reports back, you and Priest must be ready to ride to Irvine.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE DROWNING

Steve Claver opened his eyes reluctantly. A sense of discomfort, of foreboding, amounting to misery hung over him. He was irritable, a little breathless, distinctly depressed. But it was always the same on publication day.

There was so much that might happen on that day of days. No matter how forehanded they might have been at the office, no matter how well prepared to meet emergency, something might have to be hurriedly rewritten at the last moment, in the light of later information; or fresh news might come in, necessitating the rearrangement of formes, cutting out, substituting, condensing. Besides, one of the small staff might be ill, or a forme might crash and pie, the special nightmare of the publisher. Or the press might develop a tantrum, or the rollers might have contracted with the cold. Most nerve-racking and threatening of all, the engine might have one of its not unusual attacks of temperament.

But even as he vaguely realised the day's horrors, he knew that something else nagged for his attention.

The telephone below stairs was ringing; and he knew it had been ringing for some time.

He jerked himself to his elbow, still not quite awake, and listened. He and Laura had rooms in a private house, and it was not their duty to answer the telephone. Why the blazes didn't someone answer and stop that jangling?

Suddenly he was wide awake. He looked at his watch. Six-thirty. No one would be up.

Laura, beside him, had wakened. "You know it will be for you," she said. "Slip on your gown and answer, Steve."

He rose grumblingly. "Why should it be for me? It can't be anything at the office, because no one is there at this hour."

He threw on gown and slippers and passed out into the hall. Laura could hear him shouting angrily into the telephone:

“Hello, hello! Don’t ring the town awake. What the— Oh, you, Inspector.” The voice dropped so that Laura heard no more.

“Better get something on, Claver, and come down,” the Inspector was saying.

“What’s up?”

“Your publication day. Isn’t that enough?”

“Sorry. I’m only half awake. I’ll be right down. In the meantime, hold the murderer till I bring the evidence. I’ve got it in my pocket. He writes with his left hand, and he has a pimple on—” But the Inspector had hung up.

Claver leaped up the stairs, throwing aside his gown as he ran, and burst into the bedroom. Laura was already out of bed, collecting his clothes. Neither spoke for a few moments. Claver knew she had heard enough. Presently she asked:

“Did he say why?”

“Of course not. You know how dumb he is on the telephone. And even in his office he’s about as loquacious as an oyster. Besides,” he added slyly, “he was afraid I might tell you. Let’s see, was it the Inspector who said that to a woman a secret was either too good to keep or not worth keeping?”

She tossed his shirt in his face. “Well, don’t forget this is publication day, and you’re depending on me.”

“That’s what makes this so exciting—the first part of what you said, I mean. There’s hot news down there at the barracks. Keep a space for it on the front page.”

He was already half-way down the stairs as he drew on his coat. At the door he stopped and looked back. Laura leaned over the balustrade, watching him.

“I’ll telephone how much space to reserve,” he called back. “Sorry I’ll have to leave so much to you, dear.”

“And perhaps he means the ‘dear,’” she thought, with a smile, as she returned to the bedroom to dress. She must be at the office the moment it opened.

In the meantime Claver was making haste toward the Mounted Police barracks. The town was only waking up, so that there was little reason for concealing his excitement. A milk wagon lumbered along a side street, the

driver watching the flying figure without much curiosity. Claver had always been “a funny fellow.” From the Royal Hotel stables three much subdued, morning-after cowboys cantered into view, on their way to a belated return to the waiting herds. A town policeman standing on the town-hall steps shouted a query as Claver passed, but the editor only waved and continued his way. The policeman followed at a brisk walk.

The barracks’ door stood wide open airing the hall, and Claver dashed in. Inspector Barker stood in the hall, waiting for him. Without a word he beckoned him toward the back door and, turning, led into the corral.

“You’re going for a ride, Steve,” he said. “It’s not far, so you won’t need that famous habit of yours—or liniment afterwards.”

“Where are we going?”

“Only down to the river—beyond the woollen mill.”

“What’s happened— —”

“You remember you told me Thoreau had gone there for a swim yesterday. Well, Thoreau has had his last swim; in the world where he’s gone the story is that they don’t have much water.”

Claver stood with wide, shocked eyes. “You mean he—he’s drowned?”

“Do I have to spell it for you?” snapped the Inspector. “Come along.”

“But—but I warned him it wasn’t safe,” murmured Claver, following through to the corral.

“How wise of you! How incredible that anyone wouldn’t recognise your warning!”

Claver shook his head incredulously. “He looked forward to it so. Told me he always swims there when he comes to town. . . . And that’s the end of my best correspondent.”

“What a touching elegy!” muttered the Inspector.

They rode out through the gate. Not a person was in sight as they turned north toward the elbow of the river.

“You know,” Claver murmured, “something about that man always puzzled me.”

“You’ve nothing on the Mounted Police in that, Steve. He was something more than a puzzle to us.”

Claver regarded his companion with frank surprise. “Why, what was there about him to interest you?”

“The same as interests us about every newcomer. We look you all up when you show signs of settling among us. I could tell you things about you that you never imagined anyone but yourself would ever know. We’ve kept an eye on you. . . . But Thoreau—he was different. I never found out much about him . . . not till yesterday when we learned what he really is—or was, I mean.”

“You—learned something?”

The Inspector smiled grimly. “He was something more than your best correspondent, Steve. But that can wait. I suppose even an editor wondered sometimes what a man with Thoreau’s education and experience could find to interest him in the West, and especially in a small cowtown like Irvine. We wondered. . . . Now we know.”

“But you won’t tell?”

The Inspector hesitated. “Oh, well, you’re bound to find out sooner or later. But if I tell you I must have your promise not to mention it to anyone till you get my permission.”

Claver groaned. “A newspaperman with a front page, with a scoop to fill it, and then he must promise to pass it up! You’re always taking the bread out of my mouth, Inspector—to say nothing of my family. All right, I can do nothing but promise.”

“Eugene Thoreau was a rustler.”

“But—but, Inspector, there hasn’t been any rustling to speak of— —”

“Except what’s been going on all summer,” said the Inspector gruffly. “It’s been enough to turn my hair grey—though, of course, short of a murder or two, or a whole herd rustled, there was nothing for an editor to get excited about. Well, Thoreau is the rustler.”

“But how could he be? That butcher business of his kept him busy—and the Mounted Police examine every hide— —”

“Every hide he shows us, every hide we can find. Thoreau sold meat that did not come from any hide like that.”

Claver rode on, finding it difficult to believe what he heard. “You found this out only yesterday? Where and how did you pick it up?”

“A little birdie told us,” laughed the Inspector. “Look here, we don’t talk about any information you give us; we treat everyone the same.”

They had passed the woollen mill. The bare flats lay before them, desolate, ugly. Even the town’s real estate boosters had been able to do little with that bare stretch. Toward the river the ground was pitted with water-filled holes, and here and there bushes dotted the space between. The roar of the river was unceasing.

The Inspector looked about him. “Dismal spot, isn’t it? A man might shout his head off for help, and not a chance to be heard. We’ll tie our horses here.”

They tied their horses to a dead cottonwood tree and set off on foot toward the river, picking their way through the bushes and avoiding the pools. Straight before them the river turned to the east, piling its water against the cutbank on the other side and roaring in protest. They were forced to raise their voices to make themselves heard.

“The Sergeant is dragging for the body,” said the Inspector.

Claver followed the direction of the pointing finger. Out in the rushing torrent a rowboat was laboriously pulled by two Mounted Policemen, while the third, recognisable as Sergeant Mahon, leaned over the side. They watched for several moments in silence.

“There’s little chance,” declared the Inspector, “of finding the body. That current might carry it for miles. It may be down near Saskatoon by this time.”

Claver’s mind was in a whirl. “But how do you know he’s drowned? A little birdie couldn’t tell you that.”

“No,” laughed the Inspector. “That was real detective-work. You see, when you know a man has gone in swimming, and you find his clothes on the shore, even the trained Mounted Police deduce that something has happened to him. Naturally they think of a drowning. Clever, wasn’t it? Here, I’ll show you Thoreau’s clothing. Incidentally we telephoned to Irvine to make certain it was his. But, come to think of it, you could have identified it. There.”

He led out from the bushes along the sandy shore. The ground there was bare sand, and their footprints registered at every step. On one of the higher, dryer mounds lay a heap of clothing, kept from the dampness by a satchel. Claver recognised every detail at a glance.

“They’re his, all right. . . . But I can’t believe it. To be sitting talking to him in my office only a few hours ago, to have warned him of the danger — —”

“There was that other danger you were in no position to warn Thoreau of,” declared the Inspector grimly. “You didn’t know what he was. We were going to arrest him. In a way his death defeats us and saves him from a long term in jail. He did himself a service by drowning.”

Claver looked down on the pile of clothing that had become so pathetic in its hint of the living.

“You’re—you’re quite sure he was a rustler, Inspector?”

“Mahon has been out to Irvine and found the stolen meat.”

“But the hides—what about them?”

“He was far too clever to leave them where they might be found. The killing was done in the Hills, and of course the hides — —”

“If you found no hides, how do you know the meat was stolen?”

The Inspector tilted the corners of his lips. “The amateur at work, eh? Well, when you find a secret doorway cut through a stone wall to the cellar of an adjoining building that’s supposed to be unoccupied, once more even the Mounted Police can add two and two.”

“All right, all right.” Claver eyed him searchingly. “You discovered an eyeful in a single day, didn’t you? Who’s been talking?”

“We learn a lot from talk,” was the Inspector’s reply. “Sometimes more than the talker thinks.”

“The talker in this case was doing some double-crossing. He knew—and he knew because he was in it himself.”

The Inspector’s face creased to a slow smile, as he looked down on Claver, but he said nothing.

Claver winked. “You’re one of those talkers who tell more than they think, Inspector. But, to relieve your mind, it doesn’t go into the *Times* . . . not yet.”

“If it does, before I give you permission— — Oh, hello!”

He raised his chin and sent an angry glance over a bush that grew close to where they stood. “Come here, you,” he roared.

Claver had turned to look. A shambling figure lounged out from behind the bush and came toward them, slouching from hip to hip. He was a huge fellow, his Indian blood betrayed by his coppery complexion and high cheek-bones. His left shoulder sagged a little, and his nose had evidently been badly smashed. His eyes, as he came nearer, were so crooked that Claver could not be certain on what they were fixed. He was attired in a dirty grey sombrero, a red and black checkered shirt and red neckerchief sloppily knotted, and a pair of thick leather chaps that were stiff with the accumulations of age. On his feet he wore a pair of brightly polished high-heeled riding boots, from the heels of which protruded a huge pair of two-inch spurs that rattled musically as he walked.

“What the hell!” The Inspector clacked his lips. “One never knows when that breed will pop up. He gets on my nerves.”

Claver had no doubt of the identity of the newcomer. He had heard so much about Blue Pete, the half-breed, that he had longed to meet him ever since the first story had been told him with the usual imaginative trimmings. That the breed had never turned up at the *Times* office, had never, indeed, crossed the editor’s trail, had made him all the more mysterious and tantalising. Blue Pete’s prowess with his famous .45 had made of him just the sort of man to interest a serious editor, and his little pinto Whiskers shared her owner’s fame. A background of lawlessness added to the general interest and threw over him a glamour that even drew crowds of youngsters on his heels whenever he appeared on the streets. He had been known to have worked with the Mounted Police, but that time, so far as the public suspected, had passed with the open contempt of a judge who refused to accept his evidence in court. Now all Medicine Hat awaited with tingling nerves the time when the breed and the Mounted Police would be at open loggerheads. That would be a contest of wits as well as of guns.

There had been an occasion, not so long ago, when the half-breed had proven that he could, when he would, be of value to the ranchers. That smashed nose of his was record of that stirring event.^[1] Yet not a rancher in the district chose to make of him a friend. Only the Mounted Police and Blue Pete himself knew the true reason for that. It was that every rancher had something in his record that would not bear the inspection of the law; the “wide open spaces” made of the law a restriction to evade.

Of course there was, too, the fact that no self-respecting white man in the West could bring himself to hobnob with a breed, the generally accepted opinion of a half-breed being that he possessed all the vices, and few of the virtues, of both races.

There were other reasons, too, for Blue Pete's ostracism. He had married a white woman, the owner of one of the most profitable ranches in the district, the 3-Bar-Y. To be sure they had married when both were engaged in rustling, and the woman's brothers had died rustling, shot by their own hands to escape capture by the Mounted Police,^[2] but still she was white, a traitor to her blood.

The big, awkward fellow rounded the bush, leaped with surprising agility an intervening pool, and lounged up to the Inspector. He had taken from his belt a disreputable corn-cob pipe, and his eyes were bent to the task of filling it.

[1] *The Vengeance of Blue Pete.*

[2] *Blue Pete: Half-breed.*

CHAPTER IX

BLUE PETE OPINES

The Inspector greeted him with some show of irritation. It was not unusual in their meetings. The official mind resented the fact that on not a few occasions he had been forced to depend on Blue Pete's cunning and recklessness; on others the half-breed had stubbornly refused to co-operate. And it did nothing to allay that feeling that when the breed had agreed to do what he was told he always did it in a way that threatened dire official consequences far beyond the success of the job he undertook. Had it been possible the Inspector would have welcomed a chance to get along without him. Failing that, he would have preferred to have him on his regular payroll where he might order him about.

There were, however, two insuperable obstacles in the way of including him on the staff. One was the refusal of the judge to accept his evidence, the other was that Blue Pete himself refused to accept pay for what he did.

That refusal in itself was a source of irritation, for the Inspector was convinced that the half-breed's co-operation arose solely from his passion for danger and excitement, and not at all from a desire to enforce the law and punish lawlessness.

Now the Inspector clacked his lips irritably. "The nose of a bloodhound, Pete. Did you smell death?"

The half-breed solemnly raised his face and sniffed. "Not wot yuh'd notice, I don't. . . . Not here. But out there!" He pointed to the boat struggling in the current. Then he turned and scowled at Claver.

The Inspector understood. "It's all right, Pete. You needn't be afraid of Claver. I have him hogtied. He's promised not to mention anything till he has my permission. Even an editor daren't break a promise like that. Besides, he owes too much to us for filling his front page. What have you got on your mind?"

Blue Pete waved his pipe in the general direction of the boat.

"Got so many men yuh wanta drown a few o' them, Inspector?"

The Inspector regarded the boat with some anxiety. The men were evidently having trouble. "They won't drown," he declared. "And," frowning at the half-breed, "you wouldn't care a damn if they did, if Sergeant Mahon wasn't there."

"Bes' man yuh got." Blue Pete's face was expressionless. "They ain' fishin', I reckon?"

"But they are—for a body."

Blue Pete faced the Inspector with a swift, surprised movement. "One o' yer boys?"

"No, thank God. Far from it. It's Frenchy Thoreau. He came down here yesterday for a swim, and we found his clothing and everything. What a fool to try to swim in that current!"

A smile flickered over the half-breed's face as he turned back to the boat. "Think so?" he muttered.

"Would you wish any better proof?"

"Dunno." The half-breed was smiling again.

"Damn it, man, there are his clothes. Don't they tell the story?" He pointed to the heap.

Blue Pete turned toward the clothing, but his eyes appeared not to focus. "Mighty ch'icy time to drownd hisself."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the Inspector.

"Nothin' much mebbe. . . . On'y I wudn' drownd that bunch o' Mounties on a gamble like that."

"Look here, Pete,"—the Inspector came nearer, his brows drawn angrily together—"what the devil are you hinting at?"

Blue Pete made no reply. Instead, he stooped to the pile of clothing and carelessly turned it over. Claver watched with rising excitement.

"Perhaps he's right, Inspector," he declared. "It isn't all so complete a story as we thought. For instance, where's the tie?"

The Inspector thrust the half-breed aside and rummaged through the pile. Then he straightened, his moustache working, glaring down at the rumpled clothing.

"No," he admitted grudgingly, "it isn't there." He shrugged his shoulders, as if throwing aside an unpleasant thought. "But that proves

nothing. He wore a tie when you saw him, I suppose? It may have blown away—or been stolen, or— —”

He stopped. Blue Pete had left them. His eyes were fixed on the wet sand. The prints of bare feet were visible leading to the water’s edge. He followed them.

The Inspector’s lip curled. “At least he didn’t fly away . . . and you’ll perhaps notice there are no tracks returning.” He made an impatient gesture toward Claver. “You’d make a mystery of what you saw with your own eyes. It’s in your blood. It doesn’t suit your nasty, grovelling, distorting, dirt-seeking mind to have a decent drowning, does it?”

Claver only laughed and pointed to the half-breed. “When he’s finished helping you out of this mess, Inspector, I’m going to offer him a job as a reporter. He has the right touch to make a success of a job like that. We’d work together dandy. I’d smell the dirt and he’d find it. He suspects after my own heart.”

The Inspector appeared not to hear. He was close on Blue Pete’s heels as the half-breed approached the water and stood for a few moments peering into the shallow edge of the river. For several yards the sandy bottom was plainly visible, and as far as they could see the footprints continued straight toward deep water.

The Inspector laughed jeeringly. “Must have got his feet wet, at least, eh?”

Still Blue Pete said nothing. But he stepped into the water, following the footprints on the downstream side. A thin cloud of sand rose with each step and disappeared with the current. The Inspector and Claver remained on the shore, watching every move.

Where the prints passed out of their sight the half-breed paused for a moment and bent his eyes close to the water. It had long since reached his knees, but he appeared not to notice. Suddenly he shifted downstream, still bent forward so that his face almost touched the water.

Presently he straightened and pointed to the struggling boat.

“Bes’ git ’em in, ef yuh don’ want no real drowndin’s.”

The Inspector flushed, opened his lips to speak, snapped his teeth shut. But they opened again a moment later.

“All right. But now you’ve got to show me.”

The boat was in evident difficulties. It had worked its way into the swifter current and was whirling about, with Sergeant Mahon bailing furiously. The Inspector drew a whistle attached to a white cord from the breast pocket of his tunic and blew it sharply. Sergeant Mahon raised his head. The Inspector beckoned.

“And I’m a bigger fool than ever,” he grumbled to Claver, “for letting him work me so easily.”

Blue Pete had waded on downstream, his attention bent on the water outside. The pair on the shore followed.

Suddenly the Inspector started forward. His face had gone redder than ever. They had come almost two hundred yards from where they had found the pile of clothing. The Inspector grunted with disgust and pointed.

From the water a fresh trail of bare feet led across the sandy shore and on into the bushes that there grew more thickly. Plainly they were the same feet that had walked away toward the water from the pile of clothing.

Blue Pete came brushing past them. He was wet to the thighs, and his boots “squunched” at every step. His dark face was expressionless. They followed him into the bushes. He stopped beside a pool of water in the sandy ground.

There was no need to speak. The owner of the bare feet had seated himself on the side of the pool and had thrust his feet into the water and dug his hand even into the sand at the bottom to scoop up water to wash off the sand.

“Well, I’ll be swiggered!” snorted the Inspector.

Suddenly Blue Pete grinned. “Frenchy reckoned yuh’d be.”

The Inspector eyed him narrowly. “Look here, Pete, what made you suspect he’d try that trick on us?”

“Oh, nothin’.” Blue Pete rubbed the back of one hand across his disfigured nose. He looked out over the bushes toward the river. The boat was drawing in. And suddenly his face darkened. “Might ’a’ drowned ’em—the hull boatload,” he snarled. “Durn ’im, he shud ’a’ thought o’ that.”

The Inspector persisted. “I asked you why you suspected it, Pete.”

“Wal-l . . . I jes’ reckoned it was a mighty good time fer Frenchy to drownd hisself.”

“Go on.”

“The drowndin’ worked too slick, yuh see, jes’ now.” The half-breed was almost pitifully uncomfortable.

“Why too slick—just now?”

But the half-breed would say no more. Instead of answering he removed his boots one by one and emptied them. The Inspector’s hot temper flared.

“You suspect him, Pete, because you knew that he was the rustler who’s been stealing those cattle all summer.”

“Shure,” agreed Blue Pete easily.

“And you’ve known it all the time?”

“Shure.” The boots went on with considerable difficulty.

“And you didn’t tell us? You let it go on all summer— —”

“’Twasn’ none o’ my business. Reckon some knew it better ’n me. That skunk was one.” He nodded carelessly over the bush.

They looked, but they could see no one.

“Grey Coyote,” Blue Pete informed them in a low voice.

Suddenly he hurdled the bush, then another, and came into view gripping the collar of an Indian.

“Want him, Inspector?” he called.

The Inspector threw out his hands. “No, let him go.”

Blue Pete reluctantly released his hold, assisting the frightened Indian to escape with a well-placed kick. Disgusted, he returned.

“I allus git muh bes’ chance w’en I can’t take it,” he grumbled. “I got a real hankerin’ to do nasty things to that Neche.”

The Inspector laughed shortly. “You did fairly well in the time you had. You never forgive an enemy, do you, Pete?”^[3]

“Not’s long’s tha’re enemies I don’t.”

Claver looked at his watch. “If there are no more difficulties to straighten out, Inspector, I’ll be running along. The *Times* is waiting for the best scoop of the year. But don’t get alarmed—I won’t tell the dear public how Thoreau pulled your leg, so you needn’t get purple in the face. I’m afraid if I stay any longer you’ll make me promise not to mention anything at all about it.”

He started away. But the heavy hand of the Inspector dropped on his shoulder and whirled him about.

“You’re going to have front-page news all right, Steve, but it’s going to follow the line I propose. You’re going to say Thoreau is drowned. Certainly he’s drowned. Even an editor should be able to see why I don’t wish him to know we know he’s still alive. We’re going to get that man, and it’ll be easier if he doesn’t suspect we’re after him. I’m not asking you to promise this time, I’m ordering it. You know how unhealthy it would be to defy me.”

He shoved Claver from him and turned to speak to Blue Pete. But the half-breed was already far away. The Inspector shouted, but there was no response.

[3] *Blue Pete: Horse-thief.*

CHAPTER X

INTERVIEWING BLUE PETE

The Inspector's office was full of policemen. Constable Priest, and Murchison, and Langley stood against the wall beside the door. Sergeant Mahon had taken his stand beside the desk, his eyes on his superior.

Inspector Barker, his tunic more open than ever, as if it choked him in his wrath, ploughed up and down the office. His face was red, his brows met in a straight line that boded ill for someone, and his moustaches worked as he talked.

"It means a long, tiresome, and disheartening stern chase, boys. And you've got yourselves to blame for it. If you'd had your eyes about you you'd have found that secret door, and this thing would never have happened. You should have known what Thoreau was at. Now he's slipped through our fingers . . . and we've got to deceive the public to save our reputations. Oh, I know letting Thoreau think we're fooled makes our work more promising, but you know as well as I do that I was thinking almost as much about protecting ourselves from the justified scorn of the public. . . . We might even escape that scorn permanently if we let the affair drop as a real drowning, but you know we can't do that, even if there weren't two or three outsiders who know it as a fake. Grey Coyote must have heard and seen, and nobody could trust that Indian."

He stood still for a moment, thinking deeply. "Of course . . . of course, I might have him arrested and sent down, just to keep his lips shut, but some day that, too, would be sure to come out. But this Thoreau—I should have had him arrested on suspicion long ago. Any sane man would know he wasn't what he wished to be thought to be."

He sighed and flopped into the mutilated office chair.

"But what's the use of crying over spilt milk. He's gone—cleared out. . . . And I mean really cleared out. That's what's going to make it such a task. He'd skip right out of the Medicine Hat district where he was so well known. He daren't show his face within a hundred miles. . . . So what are we going to do about it?"

“May I have the job, sir?” Sergeant Mahon held himself stiff, and his voice was cold. He felt that the criticism was directed particularly against him; he was also angry at Thoreau.

“No—you—may—not!”

The Inspector let his eyes range along the line of waiting constables, and a frown gathered on his forehead.

“I can’t afford to let any of you go. I’m short-handed as it is, and this chase may take you anywhere and last a year. . . . If I asked the Commissioner for more help he’d have to know how Thoreau nearly duped us. God, when I think how near a thing it was! If it hadn’t been for Blue Pete — —”

He stopped, lips and eyes wide open, and thumped his fist on the desk.

“What about the half-breed?” Then slowly he slumped back in the chair. “What’s the use? He knew all the time Thoreau was rustling, yet he wouldn’t tell us. I couldn’t ask him— —”

Sergeant Mahon spoke up: “I think he’d rather like the job, sir.”

“Why do you think so?” demanded the Inspector, whirling about in his chair. “You know he seldom does the things we want him to do.”

“There’s danger, sir, to the one who tries to run Eugene Thoreau down.”

The Inspector thought for a moment. Suddenly he raised his head and glowered at his men.

“All right, get out on the street, all of you, and bring him in, if you have to rope him. I want him, understand? . . . No, wait a moment. Tell him I want to see him, but not to come until it’s too dark for anyone to see him entering the barracks. I don’t want the town to know. You, Mahon, you’re the one to induce him to come, if anyone can. He won’t run away from you. Priest, you and Murchison station yourselves on your horses at the top of Toronto and Main Streets and see he doesn’t get away to his ranch.”

Mahon shifted uneasily. “There’s always the possibility, sir, that he might refuse.”

“There’s the possibility of anything where that damned breed is concerned. I’ve never yet been prepared for anything he did. His mind doesn’t work like a white man’s. But we’ll have a try. Once I get him here I’ll at least have a chance to tell him what I think of him for not keeping us informed about Thoreau. Now get along.”

The constables hurried from the room. Mahon lingered.

“Would it be any use, sir, getting in touch with Grey Coyote again? He might be willing to tell us more.”

“He could if he would. Blue Pete said that Indian was in it with Thoreau, and he knows. Damn him, he knows everything. But we can’t make an Indian talk, and Grey Coyote is scared stiff right now. Besides, we know all we need to know until we get our hands on Thoreau. . . . What I’d like to know is how Thoreau learned we were after him. Because that’s why he planned to disappear.”

The Sergeant suggested that Thoreau may have seen them riding out to meet Grey Coyote.

“Even if he saw us riding that way it would tell him nothing, and he certainly didn’t see us talking to the Indian. No, I think he’d cleared out before that. From the tracks he left he merely undressed, walked into the water and out again to where he had left his second outfit. He daren’t take a chance on hanging around after that. . . . By the way, I wonder how he left the district.”

“He may have had a horse concealed somewhere, sir.”

The Inspector whistled. “He may be the one who rustled those broncos from the Double X. There was nothing small in the long run about Thoreau. Oh, well, there’s not much use speculating until we learn a little more. Perhaps Blue Pete may know something about that, too. He seems to know everything that goes on.”

He sat drumming on the desk in a long thoughtful silence.

“Every time I get that breed to help us I’m on tenterhooks for fear he’ll get us involved in something worse than the original crime. Yet he has helped us at times and I’ve a hunch he won’t refuse this time. I don’t think he likes Thoreau; I noticed that at the river.” He straightened. “Well, what are you waiting for, Mahon? Get out and find him.”

Mahon did find him, and in an unexpected place. In his wanderings he chanced to drop in at the *Times* office, and there was the half-breed seated uncomfortably on the edge of a chair against the wall of the outer office, while opposite him, busy day as it was, Claver was perched on the corner of the long table. The large press downstairs rumbled and rattled, the engine strove valiantly to keep things running. Laura bent her sweetest smile on the half-breed.

Blue Pete's presence there was simply explained. Claver had hurried to the office from the river, had rattled off the story of the tragedy, and had left the rest to his wife while he hurried to the street to find the half-breed. In him, he felt certain, was a mine of good "copy," a promising naïveté that might be played on to unburden itself of hitherto untold tales of a thrilling existence.

He had managed to get Blue Pete to the office, but the naïveté he thought he had noticed was too obstinate for him; it offered a wall against which he threw himself in vain. Whether assumed or not, the half-breed's simplicity fought aside every prying question, until Claver, torn between a sense of helplessness and of the meanness of prying, was uncertain whether to yield to his irritation or to apologise.

All the way through the one-sided interview Laura had listened with silent amusement. But when the half-breed commenced to fidget she broke in with such natural, friendly interest that he prolonged his stay.

It was at this moment that Sergeant Mahon walked in. Blue Pete greeted him with an abashed grin.

Mahon was at first annoyed and alarmed. He understood only too well the purpose of Claver's interest in the half-breed, and there was so much those thick, dark lips might tell that should not be told. But he managed to smile and nod with disarming composure.

"Just dropped in to try your temper, Steve, on your busy day. And what I find is that all this talk about being so rushed on publication day is only another editor's yarn."

Claver had the grace to flush a little. It was Laura who replied:

"But this is the assistant editor's day, Sergeant. Steve handed over the reins to me at half-past six this morning when the Inspector called him down to the barracks. I don't permit intrusion on my prerogative. Steve is only my assistant today. One thing it did—it enabled me to meet one we've long wished to meet." She smiled so sweetly on the half-breed that he dropped his sombrero. "Blue Pete must be the only one within a hundred miles who hasn't been in the office before. It isn't fair."

"Perhaps he has no illusions about an editor's interests," said the Sergeant.

"If he had none," declared Claver, "he'd know that the most important, the most vital, thing in town is the newspaper and its editor — —"

“And the most inquisitive,” interrupted the Sergeant, with a laugh.

Claver slipped from the table, making a wry face. “Did you ever try to wheedle anything from Blue Pete? I think you have. The Inspector tried to do it this morning. I’ll bet he’s mad yet at his failure. Well, I’m too busy to spend time after you’ve butted in, Mahon. There’s still work for the assistant editor.” He had reached the door of his office. There he turned. “And I hate all Mounties. All I like about them is their scarlet tunics and their horses.”

Blue Pete stumbled to his feet, nonplussed and embarrassed. Sergeant Mahon laid a friendly hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t let that disturb you, Pete. He doesn’t know any better; he comes from the cent-belt. Come on, we’ll get out of this. Mrs. Claver, I fail to see how you manage to live with a man like that.”

Laura gurgled with amusement. “Don’t you think he’s improving, Sergeant? Yes? Well, that’s why I married him.”

The Sergeant had the door open. Blue Pete scurried through. The door closed.

“What was he wanting to know, Pete?” asked the Sergeant, as they reached the street.

The half-breed grinned. “By the time you come nobody knowed, not even him, I reckon. Never knew a felluh so curyus. Sort o’ got me flummuxed, so I didn’ know wot to answer.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t.” The Sergeant tried not to laugh. “But it’s good I ran into you, for another reason.”

The half-breed looked anxiously in his face. “Wot’s the matter now?”

“The Inspector wants to see you.”

“He seen me this mornin’.”

“But Claver was there—and you ran away.”

“It’s somethin’ then”—he nodded gloomily—“he don’ want nobody to know about.”

“He’ll have to tell you about that, Pete. All I have to do is to ask you to go to see him. Not now—not till after dark. Perhaps you’d better go in by the corral gate: I’ll see it’s unlocked.”

The half-breed snuffled unhappily. “I gotta git home.”

“The 3-Bar-Y never did need you. And Mira doesn’t worry about you; she’s got used to it.”

“Reckon she otta by this time.” They walked on for a time in silence. “Reckon I know wot th’ Inspector wants. . . . I’ll be thar.”

CHAPTER XI

BLUE PETE'S DETAIL

With the first darkness he crossed the railway tracks and slipped through the unfastened corral gate. In the hall Murchison was waiting for him and he was shown directly in to the Inspector's office.

A dim light burned there, and for a wonder the blind was down. Inspector Barker, in his usual place, smoked fitfully, his feet raised to the desk before him. "I was afraid you might have got off to the ranch," he grumbled.

"Otta be goin' thar now," said the half-breed, in the same grumbling tone. "Shud otta sneaked out earlier, then yer men 'ud 'a' missed me."

"What men?"

"The two yuh planted up Toronto an' Main Streets to stop me."

The Inspector scowled at him. "How the hell did you know that?"

"'Twan't wuth tryin' no dodge on yuh—like Frenchy done."

"Damn Frenchy!"

"Yeah. Reckon yuh got me down here to help damn him, eh?"

"I'll take anyone's help to accomplish that. Any man who tried that on the Mounted Police! . . . But if you'd got away I'd have had you brought in."

Blue Pete's eyes opened anxiously. "Wot fer?"

The Inspector chuckled deep in his throat. "I'd hate to have as much on my conscience as you have, Pete. And, speaking of that, I hope you can't sleep for thinking of how you never told us about Thoreau and his rustling."

"I wasn't ast."

"Do you have to be asked by your Mounted Police friends for every little thing like that?"

"Rustlin' ain't no little thing in these parts."

"You're right. That's why we have to round Thoreau up if it takes us all around the world and lasts ten years. Besides, we've another job on hand: a

bunch of horses was stolen from the Double X. At least they're missing. We must find them. All this means so much work for the Mounted Police that I don't know how I'm going to set about it. If only you'd told us about Thoreau when you knew it!"

"I wasn't workin' fer the Mounties."

"Do you have to be actually engaged by me before you'll help us?" demanded the Inspector angrily.

"Mostly. W'en I'm workin' fer yuh that's one thing, w'en I ain't that's another." He saw that the Inspector was really indignant, and he hurried on. "Anyways, I done jes' as good."

"How?"

"Twice, jes' fer fun, I rustled back from Frenchy the cattle he stole." He grinned at the memory.

"Well, I'm going to give you some more fun: I'm sending you out after Frenchy."

The half-breed's eyes twinkled. "I'm takin' it on."

"You're—what?" The Inspector could scarcely believe his ears. "My God, man, what's happened? I never knew you to jump at any job I gave you. Don't you like Thoreau?"

"I got reasons," muttered the half-breed. He drew his corn-cob pipe from his belt and reached to the tobacco spilled on the blotter before the Inspector. "An' you—yuh jes' can't let nobody git away with a trick on the Mounties, can yuh, Inspector?"

"That isn't why I'm after him," declared the Inspector, reddening a little.

"No, jes' sort o' makes it more sartin you'll git him." He puffed his pipe alight. "Tell yuh, w'y don't yuh git Grey Coyote to run him down?"

"Why should I get Grey Coyote? What has he to do with it?"

"Yuh know durn well wot he's gotta do with it. He was in it with Frenchy. . . . Ever stop to wonder why he squealed?"

"Who told you he squealed?" But Blue Pete puffed contentedly away; the question was too trifling to answer.

The Inspector's quick temper rose in a storm of words:

"Pete, you're the damndest, most aggravating cuss I ever had to deal with. I'm warning you, if ever I get a chance to send you down I'll do it, just

to teach you to be less impertinent.”

The half-breed removed the pipe to pack it more tightly with one huge thumb. “Gor-swizzle, Inspector, ef yuh want a chance I kin give yuh a handful right now.”

The Inspector cleared his throat lustily. “I wish I had you on the pay-roll, Pete, if only for a week. I’d take some of your impertinence out of you. If that judge hadn’t— —”

“The jedge don’ make no diffurnce now,” said Blue Pete. “I took yer pay then ’cause it’s the game I like. Now I git the game ’thout the pay—an’ yuh can’t do nothin’ but cuss yer head off. I ain’ takin’ yer money. ’cause w’y? ’cause it lets me do wot I like the way I like. An’ wot ’ud I do with money?” He closed his eyes and puffed twice. “Besides, I know too much to be a real Mountie. I’d hev to tell it all, an’ thar’d be a lot o’ empty ranch houses hereabouts. An’ it wudn’ be fair w’en I larned it w’en I wasn’ no Mountie.”

The Inspector sighed. “I had hoped you liked to help us because you want to see the law enforced.”

“Me—Blue Pete?” The half-breed tapped his own chest and laughed. He laughed so long that the pipe went out. “Tell that un in these parts, Inspector. Good ’nuff fer the *Times*.” He sobered. “But I dunno. Mebbe yer right a bit. Some things I jes’ nachully can’t stand fer . . . but ’tain’t ’cause tha’re agin the law. I jes’ nachully hate ’em.”

“And I hope you always will, Pete. I hope you hate this man Thoreau. It was a mean type of rustling. By the way, did he ever take anything from the 3-Bar-Y?”

Blue Pete’s face split into a wide grin. “Shure. Cut out three steers one night on the boys. . . . Next night I sort o’ raided the Hills an’ cut out the hull bunch he had ready to run across to Montany. He ain’ touched the 3-Bar-Y sence. ’Tain’t healthy.”

The Inspector leaned forward. “So you even knew where he kept the cattle in the Hills?”

“Shure. Thar ain’t nothing I don’ know ’bout them Hills. I got to know ’em durn well w’en I was rustlin’ muhself—an’ a lot sence.”

The Inspector gave up. What was the use? Always in his dealings with Blue Pete he encountered something, some unconventional and more or less lawless but obdurate outlook on things in general, that appalled him and left

him helpless. And helplessness always made him peevisish. “All right, we’ll let that pass. You’re taking on this job—right away?”

“Findin’ Thoreau, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll find him.” He rose, rubbing his hands together. “Frenchy ’n’ me’s goin’ to hev some fun; we’ll shure find out who’s the bes’ shot w’en ’tain’t a target.”

“No monkey-tricks, Pete.” The Inspector looked anxious. “He must be put where he won’t be able to do any more rustling. . . . But remember that you face a ruthless scoundrel who— —”

“Oh, I dunno,” the half-breed broke in.

“Well, I’m telling you. He’s unscrupulous, and you’re going to have to be careful. You’re bound to have trouble when you run him down.”

“Shure. I know Frenchy.”

“He must be punished all the more because he’s an educated man who should have other goals before him instead of rustling. When an educated man takes to crime he’s beyond reform.”

The half-breed shook his head in mild disagreement. “I dunno. Frenchy ain’t no scoundrel—not all the way he ain’t.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Who d’yuh think done them things fer Tiny Cooper?”

“You don’t mean he— —” The Inspector whistled.

“But that doesn’t sound reasonable. He wouldn’t shoot a man down in cold blood and then risk his own life to look after him. The man who fired that shot wasn’t thinking of saving anyone.”

“Ast Tiny.”

“I will. But that doesn’t matter here. You have your job.”

Blue Pete tapped his pipe against the heel of his boot, filled it again in preparation for the next smoke, and replaced it in his belt. “Shure. I’m gittin’ Thoreau fer yuh. He’s shure gotta pay fer— things.”

CHAPTER XII

PREPARATIONS

It was close to darkness of the next day when Blue Pete drifted down the trail that led to the ranch buildings of the 3-Bar-Y. As usual Mira heard the patter of Whiskers' hoofs and came to the door.

"H'lo, Pete!"

"Howdy, Mira!"

Whiskers, the wiry little pinto, gave a whinny of welcome and loped on toward the stable.

By the time Blue Pete returned to the house a hot meal was well under way. He dropped his sombrero on a wooden peg in the wall and beneath it hung the mackinaw he carried against the cold of the September nights. He was tired, unusually tired, and he let himself go into his own special chair with a bang that shook the building. Slowly and thoughtfully he commenced to prepare his pipe.

Mira had not uttered a word, had not so much as glanced in his direction, since his entrance.

"Supper'll be ready in a minute," she warned. "Better not start to smoke."

He thrust the pipe absent-mindedly back in his belt and sat silently staring at the floor. His chair was tilted back against the wall, his feet caught about the legs.

"What's happened now, Pete?"

Mira read him like an open page, and sometimes she took no pains to conceal it.

He started. "Nothin', nothin' 't all."

"Nothing you mean to tell me, you mean." She heaved a heavy sigh. "All right. Keep on getting yourself into trouble, like you always do, and then expect me to get you out of it. It's always the same."

"Thar ain't no trouble to git intuh," he muttered sullenly.

“Not as long as I keep you here there ain’t. . . . But I can’t never do that long. I see you’re starting off soon.”

He shifted irritably, and the chair almost upset with him. “Wot makes yuh think that?”

She made no reply; it was unnecessary. Each knew that the other knew, that there was little they could conceal from each other. Blue Pete dropped the front legs of his chair and, rising, carried it to the table. Then he wandered off to the window and stood looking out into the growing darkness.

“Inspector’s got a job fer me,” he muttered.

“I knew that. What is it this time?”

“Frenchy Thoreau.”

“What about Frenchy?”

“Bin rustlin’ all summer, Frenchy hes.”

She turned and regarded him over her shoulder. “Is he the one’s been rustling a steer now an’ then?”

“Yep. Shure, he’s the one.”

“Huh! An’ you knew it all the time.”

Blue Pete made no reply. Tense silence filled the room. He coughed nervously into it.

“He hasn’t been doing it all alone, neither,” said Mira presently, in a low, tight voice.

Still no answer. She crossed the floor and laid a hand on his arm.

“See here, Pete. Look me in the face. You ain’t been helping him, have you?”

A look of mingled surprise and indignation came into his crooked eyes. “Helpin’ ’im—me? Say, an’ me takin’ on the job o’ runnin’ ’im down!”

She turned back to the stove. “No . . . no, you wouldn’t do that. But you knew it was going on, an’ who it was. If you’d told the Mounties there’d be no job to take on.”

“Shure, I know that.”

“An’ I believe you’re glad now you didn’t tell, just because you look forward to the job.”

“It’s shure goin’ to be some job,” he returned vaguely. He told her of the trick Thoreau had thought to play on the Mounted Police. “An’ th’ Inspector’s mad ’s a wet hen, ’cause nobody don’ git away with nothin’ like that on the Mounties.”

“Frenchy must have known they was after him.”

“Shure. . . . Reckon that skunk Grey Coyote squealed.”

Mira moved thoughtfully from stove to table. “It’s going to be a hard job, Pete, an’ a long one maybe. You’ll be goodness knows where before it’s over. He won’t dare stay around these parts.”

“Reckon not.”

“An’ Frenchy ain’t going to be taken without a fight.”

“Reckon not.”

“An’ he’s quick on the draw an’ shoots mighty straight.”

“I’m countin’ on that.”

There was a ring to it that brought Mira’s eyes to him with an angry flash in them. “That’s why you’re taking it on, I do believe. You like it because it’s dangerous. You take on all the nasty, dangerous jobs.”

“’Tain’t the dangurs jobs that’s nasty,” he insisted.

“An’ the Inspector always gives you those jobs.”

“Shure. They kin do th’ others themselves.”

She sighed. “Will you never be satisfied till they bring you home tied on a horse’s rump, Pete? You’ve come through so often by the skin of your teeth. You can’t expect it’ll keep up always. Look at that shoulder, an’ that nose, an’ all them scars. . . . Some day it’ll be your heart, Pete.”

He dug into the food she set before him. “Wot’s the use bein’ lucky ef yuh don’ give luck a chancet?” He inserted half a tea-cake in his cavernous mouth and spoke through it. “Frenchy ’n’ me’s not bin shootin’ agin each other fer a year now. Reckon mebbe he thinks I’m skeered o’ bein’ beat. Mebbe I’ll git that out o’ his mind. He mebbe got cocky winnin’ all the shoots this year. I gotta find out ef I’m still the bes’ shot.”

“An’ what if you find you ain’t? What if he gets the drop on you? It just takes one bullet for that, Pete . . . and it may be his,” she ended in a forlorn voice.

“I’ll be watchin’ out,” he assured her.

She worked about the room as he ate.

“When you starting?”

“Soon’s I’ve et.”

“Where are you going to look for him?”

“Dunno,” complacently.

She came and stood beside him, her hands on her hips. “You mean to tell me you’re going to look for him without knowing where to start?”

“Gotta start somewheres, ain’t I?”

“He may be a thousand miles away by this time.”

Blue Pete looked worried. “Don’ look so good, that. Don’ like goin’ too fur about. Didn’ like it in the Rockies a tall.”^[4]

“No, an’ I had to go and get you out of them,” she reminded him.

He made a wry face. “Luck’s shure to be with me one way er t’other.”

“Can’t you tell me where you’re making for?” she pleaded.

He screwed up his face and leaned back in his chair, his huge hands locked behind his head.

“I bin thinkin’.”

“You don’t—too often,” she said. “An’ when you do it often gets you into trouble.”

He ignored it. “I bin thinkin’,” he repeated. “That Frenchy’s part Injun. He’s a breed like me.”

“He ain’t like you neither,” she protested indignantly.

“No, that’s right.” Blue Pete grinned. “He ain’ got a nice li’l wifie an’ the bes’ ranch in the West— —”

“Never mind that. I’m askin’ you where you’re going to start.” But her cheeks were flushed, and she turned away to conceal it.

“Wal, he’s bin thick with them Injuns at the Hat. That skunk Grey Coyote was workin’ fer ’im.”

“But you say Grey Coyote squealed.”

“Shure. But Frenchy don’ know that—not yit he don’t. . . . Reckon I’ll poke ’bout that camp a bit an’ keep muh ears open. They’ll know whar he is;

they know most everythin', them Neches."

"Yes, you'll go poking about their camp, an' Grey Coyote an' Sunface an' Black Eagle's got bullets for you any time they see you alone, ever since you fought 'em in the Hills."¹⁵¹

"Wal"—Blue Pete rubbed his chin and smiled—"I got a gun o' muh own, an' I ain' sayin' I love 'em any too much."

"But they'll shoot on sight; you daren't."

"Mebbe. But I got good eyes and ears. Then I kin shoot in self-defence. I done it offen. Ef they miss me fust shot, then I shoot in self-defence. Th' Inspector lets me do that."

It was no use talking any more, and Mira knew it. Never yet had she succeeded in turning this half-breed husband of hers from any task he undertook, though in her love for him she always tried. That was because the only tasks that attracted him were dangerous. During the days and sometimes weeks when he was away from her she always fretted, for he never wrote, having learned to write a little only since he met her.

"It's bin danged quiet, Mira," he murmured, as if in apology. "I gotta git doin' suthin' — —"

"You might go on herd," she suggested.

He shook his head. "I'd go stale—sissy. Herdin' — 'less it's rustled cattle — ain' good 'nuff fer me."

"You'll at least stay an' smoke a pipe," she said sarcastically.

"Shure. . . . But I gotta start tonight."

"With Whiskers? You shouldn't ask it of her after that eighty miles from the Hat."

Blue Pete considered it. "She'd be lonesome ef I went 'thout her. Whiskers kin stand another trip; she's used to it. I won't start till it's real dark. She'll be aw right by that time. . . . Anyways, mebbe I'll need th' ole gal."

He moved his chair back to the wall, unhappy because he saw that Mira was unhappy.

Presently she said: "He won't be there in the Indian camp: he wouldn't risk it. Then what'll you do, where'll you go?"

“Dunno. Mebbe I’ll find out suthin’ thar. . . . Mebbe I kin git Grey Coyote to talk to me like he done to the Mounties.”

“If he knew where Frenchy is he’d have told the Mounties.”

Blue Pete turned that over in his mind for a time, then he shook his head. “No, that ain’t the Injun way.”

“But, Pete, all he wanted was to get Frenchy into trouble. You can see that, can’t you?”

“Yuh don’ unnerstan’, Mira. The skunk didn’t tell jes’ to git Frenchy intuh trouble. He was skeered the Mounties ’ud find out, an’ then he’d ’a’ bin in it to the neck. Now the Mounties kin use him in court, an’ that’ll git ’im off.”

A wind had risen. It whistled around the ranch house. Mira paused in her work to listen, and a slight shudder ran through her small body.

“It’s the September snowstorm coming,” she prophesied.

But he shook his head. “Not yit it ain’t. It’s jes’ blowin’ up fer it. Mightn’t come fer a week.”

“But it *will* come. An’ if you’re caught in it— —”

“’Twon’t hurt me. I bin through ’em before, Whiskers an’ me.”

“It’s always the last one that gets you,” she sighed. . . . “It’s got lots of people on the prairie. . . . Birds say it’s going to be a hard winter.”

He had struck a match, and he held it to his pipe and puffed luxuriously.

“Don’ worry, Mira. Whiskers ’n me’s bound to git hung, not frizz to death.”

“Did the Inspector tell you that?” she inquired caustically. “Well, take your mackinaw and a blanket. Listen to that,” as a blast rattled the door.

The half-breed tilted his head to listen. “That’s from the south yit. ’Tain’t real cold. Got to work round to the west before the storm. . . . Whiskers ’n’ me’s ridin’ north fust.”

She stood in the open doorway, a coat over her head, as he rode past up the trail, Whiskers whinnying a farewell. Only as they swept across the glow of the lamp behind her could she see them, but with her ears she followed the hoof-beats until they died away over the rise.

“An’ all I can hope,” she murmured forlornly, as she closed the door, “is he don’t need me where he’s going.” But as she prepared for bed, she added: “But if he does need me, I hope I get there in time.”

[4] *Blue Pete: Detective.*

[5] *Blue Pete: Horse-thief.*

CHAPTER XIII

IN DANGER

For a short distance Whiskers and her rider, working toward the main trail, took the wind on their sides. The pinto loped along, her head low, her eyes half closed, ears flickering back and forward, and her scraggly tail streaming off to the left before the breeze. Blue Pete, too, bent over the saddle-horn, seeing nothing, aware only of his thoughts and the dull satisfaction of being once more on Whiskers' back in the open. He was thinking of Mira.

At such times she was little more than an incredibly joyous dream; it seemed impossible that she could be real. So far as he could reason it out she was the one joy in his life that had come to him through no effort of his own, and he had never been able to understand his good fortune. Much of the time—indeed most of the time—he was away from her, yet she was never completely out of his mind.

“Gor-swizzle, ole gal,” he muttered, tightening the rein and sending the pinto on at a faster pace, “she likes us! Reckon some 'a' got funny tastes, ain't they?”

Where the ranch trail reached a more beaten trail they turned to the north. The wind was now in their backs, and for hours they continued, Whiskers maintaining a steady lope that covered the ground with surprising speed. No sign of fatigue from the eighty-mile trip that had ended only a few hours before was noticeable.

Near Turner's Crossing, where was a Mounted Police post, Blue Pete swung wide over the prairie, giving the building a wide berth.

Daylight had just commenced to throw a cold pallor over the prairie when he left the trail and struck to the east. For more than six hours he had been riding, with one stop to give the pinto a rest. By the signs she needed another, for her tail twitched a little, a sure warning that her rider seldom ignored. It was not to be wondered at that she should feel the strain, for in something like thirty hours she had covered one hundred and forty miles.

They were still some twenty miles from their destination, and as the light increased, Blue Pete kept his eyes fixed on the north for the first glimpse of

the standtank that topped the cutbank above Medicine Hat. Though he recognised almost every foot of the prairie, and always knew where he was, Whiskers' growing distress communicated itself to him. He fondled her ears as she loped along.

“You 'n' me, ole gal, we mus' be in a durn hurry, eh? An' hurry ain't goin' to git us nowhere, is it? No, sir-ee, it ain't. Bes' slow down a bit, ole gal, an' take it easy. You 'n' me's got lots o' work to do, an' we mebbe gotta be jes' right to do it right, er it won't be healthy fer us nohow. Twenty mile yit, an' me hankerin' fer the town like a puncher wot ain't smelled a drink fer a month!”

Whiskers appeared to understand every word. She knew Blue Pete would never be really tired, so the suggestion was that he was concerned about her; and so, to show that his concern was unnecessary, she buckled down to a faster pace. Seldom did she require direction; she appeared to know every thought that was in her rider's mind. Going in that direction they must be making for Dunmore Junction—or the Indian encampment. Accordingly she made straight for them.

She sensed, too, that Blue Pete had no desire to be seen, and so she clung to the coulees; and where they came into the open she hurried along faster than ever, rushing the heights. Her ears ever turned backwards.

Blue Pete noticed it and laughed. “Shure, ole gal. S'prised, ain't yuh? Yuh know dang well I don't like them Neches.”

It was almost six o'clock when the standtank came into view. The nights had lengthened in the past month almost beyond belief, so that at that hour it was still not broad daylight. The town lay eight or ten miles to their left, the standtank standing up against the pale sky, the only break in the flatness.

A train whistled far before them, and at the sound Blue Pete straightened with a jerk. Then, flapping his legs against Whiskers' sides, carefully protecting them from the enormous spurs he wore, he sent her into a high lope. Presently the whistle was repeated, this time nearer. A few buildings appeared not far ahead.

Blue Pete pulled up. They were in a coulee, invisible from the level of the prairie. Hurriedly he dismounted and dropped the loose reins on the ground. Whiskers whinnied softly, wonderingly, questioningly—indignantly.

“Can't tell yuh nothin', ole gal, 'cause I dunno nothin'. But reckon yuh bes' keep quiet. Yuh know that's Dunmore Junction, donchu? An' yuh know that Neche camp's jes' down below the cutbank thar. So you 'n' me's gotta

be mighty keerful now. Them Neches is jes' plain Injuns yit, spite o' gittin' mixed up with the whites. They got long ears. 'Member that, ole gal. I'll be back."

He started away. An angry, indignant snort from Whiskers brought him about sharply. He grinned apologetically.

"Shure forgot, ole gal." He hurried back and caught the reins about the horn. "Sorry. I wasn' thinkin'. You ain' goin' to stray whar yuh shudn' be. But look-ee. Bes' git a good rest. Never know wot we might hev to do. I'll whistle ef I need yuh."

He trotted away, following the coulee. After a time it sloped upward to a draw. As the ground rose he stooped, until at last he was crawling on his stomach. Not a living thing was in sight when at last he raised his head and looked about. Straight before him rose the scattered buildings of Dunmore Junction, merely a station, a section-house, and several white-fenced loading corrals. A panting freight train stood before the station, smoke rising lazily from it.

Blue Pete straightened slowly. He ran forward. In a couple of minutes the corral fence concealed him, and, keeping close to it, he worked his way forward toward the train. Where the fence ended he stopped and crowded in behind one of the posts.

Two men came from the station to the platform. One of them ran along the cinders and clambered into the engine-cab, the whistle sounded, and the train started off on the downhill run toward Medicine Hat.

The half-breed waited until a dozen cars had passed. The train was gathering speed. Scuttling out from the cover of the fence, he seized the iron rung of the ladder of one of the cars and drew himself up, twisting himself around until he stood on the couplers between the cars.

The train struck the descent through the cutbank. Its speed increased. With quaking heart Blue Pete watched the ground fly back from beneath him. He had not reckoned on such speed. Yet he should have known. The trains, especially the heavy freights, always flew down that long grade. It threatened now to defeat the plan that had come swiftly into his mind. The broken cliffs into which the cutbank was cut on that side of the town crowded close against the rails for the most part, with every small recess filled with trees.

Down there, in just such another slash in the cutbank the Indians had located their encampment, a collection of tepees seldom seen by the whites

and not often by the Mounted Police.

A brakesman came running along the tops of the cars, applying the brakes. As he stepped across the opening over Blue Pete's head he saw the half-breed and shouted angrily down.

Blue Pete did not hear him; he had something more important on his mind. He must jump, and soon, or the speed of the train would be too great to risk it. Clambering to the outside ladder, he watched for an opening that offered some chance of landing without battering himself to a pulp. It came, a stretch of green slope that ended in a thicket of trees. He let himself go, curling into a ball as he fell. Over and over he whirled, halted at last in the resilient embrace of a cluster of cedar trees whose branches brushed the ground.

He was not hurt, but for several seconds he lay, dizzy, marvelling at his good fortune, waiting to recover himself.

It was well he lay still. As his wits returned his eyes opened to a sight that sent the blood momentarily pounding to his head. Seated on their haunches on a ledge of the cliff across the railway track were several Indians. As yet their attention was fixed on the retreating train that, with shrieking brakes, was about to disappear around a curve.

Blue Pete held himself motionless. The thick cedars effectively concealed him so long as he did not move. He studied the situation. Then slowly, so carefully that the movement of the branches would go unobserved, he commenced to uncurl his body, at the same time drawing further back into their embrace.

Safe at last, he contented himself with watching proceedings. A squirrel scolded angrily from a nearby tree, and the half-breed scowled at it. The sound, he knew, would have warned him had he been where the Indians were. Nor was it likely to continue long without carrying to them its message. It was a tense situation, and he grinned. Instinctively his hand went to his belt for the touch of the familiar .45.

With a shock he found the holster empty.

His keen eyes flew back along the course he had followed in his leap from the train. And there, a score of yards away, lay the gun!

Almost at the same instant one of the Indians grunted and pointed, and the group scrambled down the cliff, crossed the railway track, and the one who had seen the gun first picked it up. A single glance, then his eyes darted

swiftly about. He said something to his companions, and a flutter of excitement ran through the group.

The half-breed waited for no more. The Indians had recognised the gun. Almost everyone in the district knew that gun. With it Blue Pete had entertained or threatened many of them, and he had shot it out with not a few. It formed part of the aura of romance that surrounded him. The way he could flip it from its holster ready for action, while others were feeling for their guns, the tiny targets he could pick off without seeming to take aim, the tricks he could play with it, had made of it a weapon of uncanny attainment. There was one trick that never failed to elicit the screams of the nervous and to whiten the cheeks of most spectators: he would insert the muzzle of the loaded gun in his mouth and carelessly revolve the barrel with the trigger, stopping it at the very moment when the slightest further movement would have blown his head off. A jealous cowboy had once tried it. What brains he had had made a mess of the bar-room of the Royal Hotel. No one had ever tried it since.

Blue Pete's wits worked swiftly. His plan of approaching the Indian encampment without being detected had worked out better than he could have expected, right up to the moment of the finding of the gun. But now the Indians knew that he was there. Unarmed as he was, he would be at their mercy if they found him. And he knew how little mercy they would show. For there amid the convolutions and unexplored corners of the torn cutbank on that side of the city anything might happen and the world would be no wiser. The Indians had long hoped for a chance like that.

But Blue Pete had no thought of providing them with such a chance. Creeping from cover to cover he retreated, while yet the Indians discussed what they should do. After a time he heard them searching for him, aware now that he was probably unarmed or he would never have permitted them to capture his beloved gun. When he felt safe he ran.

Out of sight beyond the curve in the railway, he crossed the track and climbed the cutbank beyond. He found it was a mere promontory and, since it was likely to expose him to view, he crossed it flat on his stomach and dropped into the ravine beyond. From there he crossed another height and let himself carefully down in the next valley.

He had to be careful, for near the mouth of the valley stood the Indian camp. Screened by the trees, he eyed it malevolently. A surging anger made his teeth grate together. To be helpless, to be forced to run before the Indians, to know that he was at their mercy if they came on him, hurt his

pride. He had run from them before, but always mockingly, making them feel as he felt now.

The camp was a ragged collection of ragged tepees. Yet he knew the poles in every one of them numbered fourteen, and that each had its definite place. The effect of untidiness was due rather to the varying lengths and sizes and straightness of the ends that protruded from the peaks of the tepees, with the canvas thrown back to allow smoke to escape and air to enter. He had spent the early years of his life in just such surroundings.

For a time he crouched there, watching the lazy life of the camp, the swarm of dogs, the almost naked children, the shapeless squaws. He was downwind from the dogs, so that they would not scent him. All the time part of his attention was turned to any evidence of pursuit.

An Indian hurried into sight from the direction of the railway. Blue Pete cut back through the trees, crossed the valley, and climbed the height beyond. Another ravine—and another height.

As he looked down from the last height, he saw that the valley below him was wider than any of the others he had seen. Across its entrance the jutting cutbanks almost met, and the narrow opening was choked with trees. A tiny thread of water meandered through the valley and out toward the river.

And then, with a start, he noticed something else—a bunch of broncos feeding at the upper end of the valley. And they were not Indian ponies. He let himself down, picked his way through the thin band of trees that edged the valley, and at last found himself near the feeding animals. And as he eyed them he whistled, and a broad grin twisted his face.

As he turned about he saw that a mounted Indian dozed on his pony at the entrance to the valley—a guard.

CHAPTER XIV

BLUE PETE'S NEW JOB

It was typical of Blue Pete that at that moment he was too absorbed in what lay before him to be conscious of more than an instinctive need for caution. The Indians in the camp were outwardly law-abiding. They were too frightened of the Mounted Police to be anything else. But everyone knew that it was only the strong arm of the law that kept them even safe as neighbours.

Blue Pete had no delusions about them. He knew the danger he ran in there. Against him there existed an undying vendetta. They hated him for his white blood. They hated him because they knew how powerless they were against him under anything like equal conditions. They hated him because he had often baulked them, had literally laughed at them.

And Grey Coyote and a couple of his friends had a special reason for hungering for his scalp.^[6]

He was brought back to the realities of his peril by the mad barking of the camp dogs. The Indians searching for him had probably reached the camp. He had a picture of the gloating of Grey Coyote as he displayed the .45. For it was that particular enemy of his who had the gun.

He might have escaped with ease, but he had never even considered flight for such a reason. He had come for a purpose, and now the reason for not taking to his heels was doubled. Not an Indian of them but would shoot him on sight—and perhaps that, too, had something to do with keeping him. But he knew he had to be careful, must match Indian wits with Indian wits.

At moments like that his white blood was forgotten. Against Indians he fought as an Indian, until the moment of crisis. His Indian blood gave him cunning, animal instincts, and a certain amount of ruthlessness. It gave him the outlook on things in general that so puzzled and angered the Inspector. But always at the last moment his relentlessness was tempered by the white blood in him.

With the desperate recklessness that often got him into tight corners but more often won him success he crept back through the trees toward the dozing Indian guard. Horse and rider stood still as statues, the Indian's hands

crossed limply on the horn of the saddle before him. The barking of the dogs had roused him for a few moments, and he had glanced along the valley toward the feeding broncos; then he had closed his eyes again.

He was a large fellow, and the half-breed noticed it with a strange light in his crooked eyes.

Carefully he crept nearer. At last he stood directly behind the unconscious pair. An open space of fifteen yards intervened, and Blue Pete studied it doubtfully. But he had no time to concoct another plan, and silently he stepped into the open.

The pony heard him first, but before it could raise its head the half-breed was over its rump, his arms wound tightly about the Indian. As the pony bucked, Blue Pete threw himself free, dragging the Indian with him. Almost as they landed, the half-breed had the Indian's neckerchief free and was winding it over his mouth as a gag, his powerful legs holding him helpless as he worked. The struggle was fierce while it lasted, for the Indian was as powerful as he was large. But Blue Pete had the advantage from the start, and his superior strength finally forced the Indian to yield.

"Ef yuh don' want a bang on the nut yuh bes' take it easy, ole boy," he panted. "I am' takin' no chances in this comp'ny."

The Indian recognised him and made no further resistance. Methodically Blue Pete set to work to undress him. The shirt was of a nondescript colour, largely from dirt, and the pants were of faded and flimsy cotton.

"Here, lift that leg er I'll crack down on yuh. An' w'y the devil donchu tote a shootin' -iron?" he added with disgust.

Still astride his helpless victim, he removed his own clothing and donned the Indian's. Then he rose.

"Now come 'long. You 'n' me's waltzin' up this way a bit."

He pushed the Indian before him through the trees. After a time they halted. Blue Pete had brought his own clothing and now with his shirt he tied the Indian's arms behind him around a tree. His pants secured his captive's legs in the same way.

"Reckon that'll hold yuh till I need them things ag'in. An' ef yuh tear 'em I'll be real rough with yuh. Jes' the same, yuh smell, an' I don't like my shirt gittin' smelly. I don't like yuh nohow, so I'm apt to hurt yuh considurble." He looked down at the dirty clothes he wore and made a wry face. "An' I'm dang shure I'll hate yuh a lot more 'fore I'm through with

these duds. Some time w'en yuh git near the river, drop in. On'y take yer dog along so yer frien's'll rekernise yuh w'en yuh git out. An' keep below the town er yuh'll p'ison it. They drink that water."

He hurried away. The pony had fled to the other horses. Blue Pete approached it in a leisurely manner. He knew he could not deceive it into thinking he was its owner, but he had a way with horseflesh that made him confident that he would have little trouble. And he needed that pony. If only he had his rope!

But the pony was an Indian's pony, and it must have smelled the white blood, for it persisted in keeping at a distance; and in a few minutes the half-breed gave it up. For a time his failure upset him, as perhaps being prophetic, but he had no time to waste on that. And so he hurried away to the entrance to the valley.

As he went his anger rose. He was thoroughly roused, angry enough to take the foolish risks to which he so often exposed himself. The pony, when he had never failed with a horse before, was the final straw to a rising burden of indignation and fury.

He had almost reached the cover of the trees masking the entrance when the sound of approaching horses sent him diving to the concealment of the nearest bush. At the same moment, from the corner of his eye he saw two Indians appear on the height to his left, having come the route he had followed, whether by accident or not did not matter. One thing was apparent — Grey Coyote was making the search for him thorough.

The Indians saw him at the same time but, deceived by the fleeting glimpse they had of him in clothing familiar to them, they merely called down to him. Without replying, he waved and continued into the trees. They would wonder, of course, that he was not mounted, but they were not apt to do anything about it without orders from Grey Coyote; and Blue Pete had troubles more immediate than any they offered, for the mounted Indians were almost on him.

They came winding in through the trees, Grey Coyote at their head.

They had not seen him, and he held himself perfectly still in the shelter of the tree he had reached just in time. They came confidently on, taking no precautions. There was no need for caution, since they numbered nine, and they were confident their quarry was unarmed. Even armed, without that famous .45 he was shorn of his special powers.

Their insulting casualness, but, more, the sight of his beloved gun thrust in Grey Coyote's belt, brought a glare of fury to the half-breed's eyes. He crouched. The Indians would pass within a few yards of him, and he waited, his teeth gritted together, muscles flexed, fingers curved like talons.

And as Grey Coyote came opposite him he launched himself forward.

It did not occur to him that all the odds were against him, that a moment's slip, or the ordinary course of such a wild risk, would surely mean death to him. At that moment only Grey Coyote counted.

He had gauged the distance well, had instinctively foreseen that the suddenness of the attack would afford him several seconds of comparative safety for what he had in mind, since the Indians were certain to be rendered momentarily incapable of action by surprise and shock. What might happen after he succeeded in his object did not matter. If he reached the trees they would not dare to follow until he had time to make his escape. There would be, too, momentarily, the disguise of the clothes he wore.

What he had not counted on was the muscular, automatic reaction of the Indian pony Grey Coyote rode. Offspring of generations of horseflesh that had had to act quickly for its very life in escaping the attacks of wild animals, the pony bounded aside as Blue Pete came into view. The half-breed's hands landed not on the Indian but on the pony's back. And the unexpected leap made by the pony caught Grey Coyote unprepared and threw him off. Sprawling on the ground, he rolled away before Blue Pete could reach him.

For a fraction of a second the half-breed hesitated, considering continuing the attack. But the other Indians were reaching for their guns, and he realised in time the folly of it. Leaping away, he spun around a tree, reached a thicket and, shielded by it, raced away, while bullets sang about him or thudded into the trees.

As he ran, his teeth grated together. For one of the shots, he recognised by the familiar sound of the discharge, had come from his own .45.

That the Indians would not dare to follow closely he had counted on, and in that he was right. They had reason now more than ever to respect his desperate daring, and they knew well his strength. Those powerful fingers of his had more than once rendered an Indian helpless.

He had no plan as he ran save to escape, but unconsciously he retraced the route he had followed with the Indian whose clothes he wore. He remembered the Indians he had seen on the height, and he looked about for

them. They would be roused by the shooting and perhaps be on the watch for him.

The purloined pants he wore bound him, and he glowered down at them as he ran.

The sound of the shots had reached the camp and roused it. Dogs were barking, and a dim tumult signalled the fact that the whole camp was coming in haste. Blue Pete hurried on.

Suddenly he pulled up. He had come on a scene that held him momentarily at a loss what to do next. The two Indians he had seen on the height had clambered down into the valley, had discovered their bound mate, and had already untied him. They were going through the pockets of Blue Pete's pants. They must have heard the shots, of course, but they could not think that the owner of the pants was near.

With a bellow the half-breed sprang at them, knocking them apart, sending them sprawling. As one fell, Blue Pete snatched the gun from his belt and covered them with it.

"Bes' take it easy, boys," he warned, coolly collecting his own clothing and bundling it under his arm. "I got a right narvus finger, an' I'm easy to skeer."

Keeping an eye on them, he backed into the trees and, safely out of sight and range, turned and ran. The pursuit of the larger band, however, had come nearer. But they would learn that he was now armed and would keep their distance.

Racing to the upper end of the valley, he commenced to climb the steep cutbank. It was stiff work, for the bundle of clothing impeded him as he scrambled from ledge to ledge, pulling himself up by the bushes and trees that clung to the slope.

Near the top the bank was clear. As he came into the open, a bullet struck the earth close to him, sending dirt into one of his eyes. A couple more missed him by inches, for the Indians were using rifles. It served only, however, to increase his speed, and in a few moments he threw himself over the top and was safe.

The Indians, he knew, would come no further, for up there he was within sight of the railway buildings at Dunmore Junction. He made straight for the coulee where he had left Whiskers. She heard him coming before he came in sight over the rise and was waiting for him. But when she caught sight of the

unkempt Indian his stolen clothing made of him, she whirled around, prepared to flee, watching him over her shoulder.

In a moment Blue Pete understood. He laughed.

“Fust yuh heerd me, ole gal, then yuh seen me, an’ now yuh smell me with these duds. Gor-swizzle, I don’ blame yuh. I smell muhself. Here, I won’t insult yuh; I’ll change right here.”

He undressed and donned his own clothes. The pinto approached and watched proceedings with pointed ears. Blue Pete rolled the Indian’s clothes tight and fastened them to the cantle of the saddle.

“Reckon yuh won’t smell ’em now, er me neither: we’ll go too fast fer that.”

He mounted. But he did not urge the pinto on for a long time. He was deep in thought, and now and then his head shook unhappily.

“Reckon it sorta gits things mixed up a bit, Inspector, an’ yuh won’t unnerstand, but that’s the way I see it, the way it’s gotta be. I got a job o’ muh own now, so the one you guv me’s gotta wait. Goin’ to take a lot o’ ’splainin’, but I ain’ got time fer it now. Git goin’, ole gal. You ’n’ me’s got a long ride—an’ a lot o’ ticklish work to do ’fore we’re through this. . . . But th’ Inspector’s shure goin’ to be real peevisish ’bout it.”

[6] *Blue Pete: Horse-thief.*

CHAPTER XV

ARMS AND THE MAN

Early next morning Whiskers loped wearily down the slope to the 3-Bar-Y, with the familiar whinny that always brought Mira to the door to welcome them.

Mira, still asleep, wakened with a start and was at the side window in time to see her husband dismount at the stable door, carefully rub the pinto down with straw, then turn her loose for a roll before entering the stable.

With troubled face she watched, giving no sign that she was there. As Blue Pete disappeared through the stable door, she turned slowly back to the bedroom and commenced to dress.

“Oh, well,” she sighed, “what’s the use?”

It was some time before he entered the living-room. He came with a great show of indifference, snuffing a little nevertheless as he crossed to the wooden peg where he always hung his sombrero. Neither spoke. Save for the uneasiness Mira read so readily in his manner he might have been gone from the house only a few minutes. Busy about the stove on the meal she knew he needed, Mira kept her back to him.

With a care that, in its extravagance, was ridiculous, he chose a second peg for his mackinaw. He carried it now wherever he went, for the nights might be cold at any time, though he had not worn it once since the previous spring. He had protested when Mira insisted that he take it along.

“Gor-swizzle, w’en a felluh gits hitched he’s on the way to git soft inside an’ out.”

The silence now from the stove distressed him, and he felt nervously for his pipe. Mira took pity on him.

“It’s food you need, Pete, not tobacco. . . . Food an’ a lot of rest.”

“I ain’ tired,” he insisted irritably, shoving the pipe back in his belt.

“You never are . . . you think. But how much sleep have you had in the last three nights?”

He grunted contemptuously. “I ain’ tired,” he repeated.

“All right. But you won’t deny you’re hungry.”

The sarcasm in her tone made him squirm.

“Yuh know I don’ need no bed to sleep in w’en I got Whiskers. I sleep jes’ comfor’ble in the saddle on th’ ole gal.” A vague sense of disloyalty assailed him. “Wal, purty near ’s comfor’ble,” he qualified. “I mean, I kin git along.”

She did not press the point. “Where have you been?”

“To the Hat.”

“Two hundred an’ forty miles about in two days an’ a half! You must think you’re a train. . . . You might think of Whiskers, if not of yourself.”

“Th’ ole gal’s aw right,” he protested. “You go tell her I don’ think o’ her an’ see wot she says.”

“What you been doing?”

“Oh . . . nothin’.”

“Is that why you’re ashamed of yourself?”

The question appeared to provide food for serious reflection, for he seated himself slowly beside the table and made no reply for a long time, one hand rubbing absent-mindedly over his face.

“An’ mebbe yuh ain’t so fur wrong thar, neither,” he decided.

“What’s that bundle you had fastened to your saddle?”

“That? . . . Oh, that’s the mack yuh make me tote about like a durn tenderfoot.”

“I’m not speaking of the mack. What is it? I see you didn’t bring it in.”

He started. “Gor-swizzle, I wudn’ do that.” The memory of the odour of the Indian clothing made him wrinkle his nose.

She did not pursue the question. With a frying-pan in her hand she came and stood beside him, emptying it on his plate.

“Got yourself into more trouble, I see.”

He attacked the food with a ravenousness that failed to distract her from the subject.

“I see you got yourself into more trouble,” she repeated.

“Not yit I ain’t.”

“No . . . because you’re at home, an’ I’m here to see you don’t make a fool of yourself around the 3-Bar-Y.”

He glanced up at her accusingly, but his crooked eyes fell away as they caught hers fixed on him.

“I ain’t in no trouble, I told yuh.”

“Not till the Mounties come for you, you mean.”

“Thar won’t be no Mounties come fer me. . . . I hope.” He stuffed his mouth too full to say more for the moment. “Ef yuh wanta know, nobody’s comin’ fer me.” Then he added in a low voice: “I’m goin’ fer them.”

“Yes, you left here day before yesterday to get Frenchy Thoreau. I suppose you have him in that bundle.”

“No-o. . . . No, but I’m goin’ to git Frenchy—some time.”

“Did you expect to find him here . . . or did you come to take me to help you?”

“I come ’cause—’cause I hed to.”

“For why?”

“Fer guns.”

She was back at the stove. She turned swiftly and anxiously about. “Where’s your .45?”

“I dunno—not zackly I don’t.”

“You—you ain’t been drinking, Pete?”

He grinned at her. “Think I took to drink, Mira, sudden-like?”

“I’d never know what you took to. I’d never be surprised at anything. What happened the gun?”

“It—sorta—fell outa muh belt.”

“You don’t mean—someone—took it?”

His face went dark. “Nobody never done that, an’ yuh know I wudn’ be here ef they did. I tell yuh I lost it. I can’t go chasing Frenchy ’thout a gun. Whiskers went sideways comin’ home, all ’cause my gun wasn’ thar to balance me. . . . ’Tain’t safe about these parts ’thout a shootin’-iron.”

“It ain’t safe for you anywhere, with or without one,” she told him. “But you could have got all the guns you want from the Mounties, without

coming all the way back here.”

“I ain’t gittin’ no guns from the Mounties. I gotta hev muh own guns.”

“Of course you’re not getting them from the Mounties. You came out here because you didn’t wish to see them.”

“I ain’t takin’ no new orders,” he growled. “Ever’ time I see th’ Inspector he’s got some new idee. I jes’ can’t ’member ’em all. . . . Look here, Mira, it’s goin’ to be a ticklish job gittin’ that Frenchy even ef I hed muh .45. He’s lightnin’ on the draw an’ a dead shot. D’yuh want me to take more chances than I need to? I got a job to do an’ I gotta do it right. Yuh don’ wanta see me plugged, do yuh now?”

She heaved a heavy sigh. So often she found herself faced by this blank wall behind which she was able to see only after a persistence that afterwards accused her; for he could never resist her long.

“You can outshoot Frenchy with a pea-shooter, Pete, and you know I know it. What happened your gun?”

She was standing over him. He shifted uncomfortably and would not look at her.

“Where did you lose it?” she persisted.

“At the Hat.”

“You were going to visit the Indian camp. Was it there you lost it?”

He nodded.

“To them Indians?” She made no effort to conceal her scorn.

His fists doubled on the table-top. “I’m goin’ back to them Neches,” he declared through his teeth.

“An’ what happened you’re ashamed of? You were there?”

“Shure. Didn’ I say I was goin’. . . . An’ I found that bunch o’ bronses rustled from the Double X.”

“Did you tell the Inspector?”

“I ain’t seen him.”

“You took care you didn’t. Are you going to tell him?”

“’Tain’t nothin’ to do with me. I got suthin’ else to do.”

She did not speak for a long time. He sat smoking and picking his teeth. Now and then his crooked eyes sought her face from beneath his brows.

“You say you’re going back to them Indians,” she said, out of the silence.

“Shure.”

“You ran away from them.”

He scowled. “I hed to. No shootin’-iron — —” He remembered. “’Course I did hev a Neche gun at the last, but ef thar shootin’-irons is like thar ponies, they don’t act fer nobody else. . . . ’Sides, ef I hed used it mebbe th’ Inspector’d bin sore with so many dead Injuns to ’splain to the Commissioner. Reckon he’s got ’nuff to ’splain about ever’ job I do.”

“And the job you got now, Pete,” she declared, stooping to look into his face, “isn’t the one you want to talk about to the Inspector. All right. Now you go right in there and get some sleep.”

CHAPTER XVI

A NIGHT OF STRAIN

By September the long summer days are gone around Medicine Hat. The summer sun still shines brightly and usually warmly, but its hours are limited. Instead of rising shortly after three and continuing to bleach the prairie until almost ten at night, it has shortened its stay to moderate hours, and sometimes it introduces a twilight unknown to midsummer.

It was a blustery night. The storm that had threatened for days had broken in an unexpectedly mild form and almost passed. But Blue Pete, riding through it on the next day, knew that all that blackness of day and night held more in reserve, that at some time in the near future it would blaze forth with more vigour because of its extended delay.

Far above Medicine Hat, where it snuggled in the valley at his feet, the wind howled and whined. Now and then it reached below the cutbanks to whip dust into the air, to tug alarmingly at creaking signs, and to slam doors and drive the citizens to cover.

There on the windy heights where he sat his horse, close to the edge of the cliff that dropped straight to the rushing torrent of the river, he gazed down through the night over the lighted valley. His mount had turned its back to the wind and stood with drooping head, snorting now and then with indignation and protest. The half-breed hunched forward, his shoulders about his ears, his hands crossed on the saddle-horn. The loose ends of his neckerchief whipped about his cheeks, and he caught them irritably and tucked them inside his shirt. His sombrero was crammed low over his eyes.

Slowly he turned his head from side to side, peering through the darkness. Once his ear was attracted by the roar of the river far below.

“Durn dirty night,” he muttered, with a shudder. . . . “An’ a durn dirty job,” he added, but resignedly. “Mira’d say ’twas crazy too. . . . So’d th’ Inspector. Dunno w’y nobody don’t think same’s me. Reckon somebody’s wrong.” Still no bitterness in his tone.

He turned his bronco toward the town and urged it down the steep climb into Main Street. “Wal, Whitey, bes’ be movin’ on. We got work to do, an’ it don’ make no diffurcnce wot the night’s like. . . .

“Don’ seem nothin’ else to do, as I see. I wudn’ be no use to the Mounties ef I didn’ do it.” He touched the one visible gun in his belt. “Shure I ain’ skeered to shoot it out with Frenchy nohow, nowhar. But thar’s things I gotta straighten out er thar’d be no livin’ with them Neches. Shure I gotta,” he repeated, as if none too sure, after all.

He drew his mount in and looked away toward the right. “Mebbe otta git down over that way. Safer, too, mebbe.”

Which probably decided him to go another way, for he swung away straight into Main Street.

As far as the corner of Fourth Avenue he saw no one; the wind had cleared the street of pedestrians. But across from the town hall was the Men’s Club, and Saturday night was a big night there. As the half-breed rode past, a scattered line of men hurried up the steps and disappeared into the brightly lighted hall. The street light fell full on him as he loped past.

The man at the end of the line stepped aside and turned.

“Hello, Pete!”

The half-breed gave no sign that he heard. If anything his face bent lower as he cantered on.

The man watched him flash out for a moment under another light and fade again into the darker portion of the street. Then he entered the Club and sought a telephone-box.

“Hello, Inspector. Steve Claver speaking. What’s on tonight. Who’s been ‘drownded’ this time?”

The Inspector swore. “What the blazes are you talking about, Steve?”

“Only inquiring, as a newspaperman should.”

“Well, nothing’s happened. Why do you ask me? You know as much about what’s going on as I do, and a sight more about things that don’t go on. . . . Anyway, if I had news, the *Times* doesn’t come out for three days. Another thing, I wouldn’t tell you anything anyway.”

Claver laughed. “Must I fill in next week’s issue with the things I didn’t tell this week about the drowning? I’d run it in a black border and dedicate it to the Mounted Police.”

“I’ll thank you, Steve, to be more circumspect about what you say over the telephone.”

“Oh, it’s all right; this is a private booth at the Club. I asked because I’ve just spotted Blue Pete sneaking down Main Street toward the barracks.”

“Blue Pete? I haven’t seen him for days.”

“Well, he doesn’t wish anyone else to see him this time, so I suppose he’s on his way to a tryst with you. Anyone’d be ashamed of that.”

“Aw, go to blazes!” The Inspector slammed the receiver in the hook.

He swung about in his chair. “Mahon!” he called. “Mahon!”

The Sergeant hurried along the hall.

“Has Blue Pete come in? Have you seen him?”

“Have I seen him, sir? Where? When?”

“Claver says he’s on his way down here.”

“He hasn’t stopped here, sir.” Sergeant Mahon was worried by the question, for the half-breed had long since become his special responsibility at the barracks.

The Inspector jabbed irritably at the blotter. “Mahon, I tell you that loony breed’s up to no good. He’s at one of his maddening games that mean sleepless nights for me. Why was he sneaking down Main Street—that’s what Steve said—if he wasn’t coming here? Where else could he be bound for? Let’s see, I’ll call up the Royal Hotel.”

He got someone on the telephone at the Royal Hotel, only to find they knew nothing of Blue Pete. The Inspector groaned.

“Then what in tarnation is he doing? Why is he still around town, when I gave him a job to do? Thoreau won’t be within a hundred miles of this place.”

“Perhaps, sir,” Mahon suggested, “he may be inquiring around to pick up the trail. He can’t just ride out of town without a destination. Perhaps,” he ended stiffly, “he’s doing the job you gave him to do.”

The Inspector glared. “That’s right: stick up for him no matter what he does. You always do. I don’t suppose that breed has ever done anything wrong in your estimation. I suppose even those years of rustling were only his way of preparing to work with us. He was — —”

“It certainly helped, sir, didn’t it?”

“It helped to make him the holy terror he is. I suppose even the men he murdered were only an initiation into—”

“Did he ever ‘murder’ anyone, sir? I don’t think so. So far as we know he never killed a man in cold blood, never except in self-defence or in the prosecution of the tasks you gave him.”

The Inspector ran his hand through his greying hair. “We don’t know all the crimes he’s committed; we don’t know the way he committed the ones we know of. He always manages to be alone when he commits them. And he’s Indian enough to be too sly for us to learn much about them. . . . I’ve a hunch he’s got himself started on something right now that he daren’t tell us about. He wouldn’t come sneaking down Main Street without reporting here, if he wasn’t afraid to report. It means another mess, you mark my words. And I’m going to have to get him out of it by ignoring something for which he should get a term in jail. I always have to do it to save my own skin. Never thought the Mounted Police would fall so low that they had to accept—even seek—the services of a damned breed who has a record as long as your arm. I have to use him to get us out of trouble—and he gets us into a new one every time. He’s taught me to be blind and deaf—and to lie. I’ll go out and do some crazy thing myself if this goes on much longer; he’s got on my nerves.”

A smile stole over his lean face; the explosion had worked off his bad humour. “But I suppose I’d have gone mad long ago without him. Well,” with a sigh, “I suppose all we can do is sit tight and pray. We need it every time we use Blue Pete. And if you go to church tomorrow you might put up an extra one there—only a little one, say, that he doesn’t have to clean out a whole town just to get his hands on that rogue we gave him to catch.”

CHAPTER XVII

EAVESDROPPING

It was not in Blue Pete's plans to murder anyone. It never was. Which does not mean that his plans never went astray. He had killed many a man, and the record of them was carved in the butt on the lost .45. It was the one reminder he had.

The plan he had appeared to be definite enough, however, for he crossed the railway tracks, pressed his bronco to a faster pace past the barracks, and disappeared into the night of the lower flats beyond the hospital.

There he was safe from curious eyes, and he raised his head and breathed more freely. As far as the bend of the river he continued, then turned with the faint trail to the east, following the rushing torrent for a time.

At the turn a chuckle gurgled in his throat. He recalled that in that spot Thoreau had almost deceived the Mounted Police and saved himself from the chase that would now never end until he had been laid by the heels. It was the Inspector's chagrin and subsequent fury that tickled the half-breed.

The bronco stumbled, and Blue Pete pulled it in.

"Steady, Whitey. Yuh don' know this trail like Whiskers does. 'Sides, yuh ain' got the ole gal's eyes, hev yuh? Wisht I had her tonight somehow. Sort o' night I like havin' her between muh legs. You 'n' me's mebbe got some tricky work to do tonight. But I reckon yuh'll do yer best."

The continued darkness appeared to terrify Whitey, for he snorted and edged away from the roar of the water. But presently the trail veered toward the south.

They came to the high board fence about the baseball grounds. In its shelter Blue Pete pulled up and sat for a time thinking. At last he turned from the trail, to follow the fence to its eastern end. Dismounting there, he slid a rein about one of the boards of the fence and tied it.

"Ef yuh'd bin Whiskers," he explained regretfully, "yuh wudn't need no tyin'. No, sir-ee, yuh wudn't. That's wot's saved muh skin manys a time. But you 'n' me's diffurnt. Yuh got guts, Whitey, but yuh're a 3-Bar-Y cayuse, an'

you 'n' me ain't worked together long. Yuh'll larn. S' long. An' ef I don' come back somebody'll find yuh, an' thar's yer brand."

From the cante he released a bundle and, nose screwed up, unwrapped it and commenced to remove his own clothing. In a few minutes he was dressed once more in the dirty shirt and pants he had stripped from the Indian left to guard the stolen broncos. Then he vanished into the darkness.

Moving onward with the uncanny assurance of one to whom darkness was never complete, he reached the nearest of the promontories into which the cutbank on that side of the town was slit. A moment's hesitation, and he knew exactly where he was. Shifting his direction slightly, he dived into one of the wider ravines, and presently the luminous outline of a lighted tepee came into view. For a time he stood regarding it, fixing its location in the camp. Then, with a nod of satisfaction, he advanced.

A dog barked suddenly. The half-breed stopped and muttered a low exclamation of disgust. He had forgotten about the dogs. Three or four of its companions joined in the hubbub half-heartedly. There were, Blue Pete knew, a dozen tepees and half a hundred dogs, but apart from the lighted tepee and the dogs there was no evidence of life anywhere about the encampment.

But the dogs were enough to warn him of the danger into which he was projecting himself. The lighted tepee meant that someone, and most probably a group, was inside, for little was wasted on lights about the camp. And though the other tepees were invisible in the darkness it was not certain that ears and eyes were not wide open within and around them.

"Ef them dogs got noses like I got," he thought, tilting back his head, as if to remove it as far as possible from the clothing he wore, "they'll smell me real Injun now. These duds bin Injun from the day they was bought—er stole. Dirty Injun too. Ef they git to wind'ard it's the clothes they'll smell, not me. Me, I kin smell 'em all directions. W'en I git through with 'em I gotta soak in the river. Wal, here goes."

He crept forward.

Ten paces distant from the lighted tepee he heard voices from within it. Some sort of discussion was proceeding, for there were grunts and sudden ejaculations, and now and then short silences.

So close to him that he started, a dog suddenly burst into an excited barking. Instantly Blue Pete sank to the ground. It was well he did, for the next moment the flap of the tepee was thrown aside and an Indian's face

appeared against the light, mildly curious at the cause of the clamour. So distinct was the face in the light from the tepee that Blue Pete recognised it.

“Black Eagle,” he told himself. “Reckon I owe him somethin’ some time. So he bes’ not git too durn curyus.”

The dog came nearer. It was joined by several of its companions. But the familiar odour of the clothing appeared to satisfy them, for they passed sniffing along after a lazy bark or two.

The Indian withdrew. Blue Pete rose boldly that the dogs might not be alarmed, and moved nearer.

Creeping around to the back of the tepee, he seated himself on the ground, his back to a tree. A fresh pack of dogs came smelling about him, barking mildly. Blue Pete held his breath until they were gone.

“Some day,” he decided irritably, “I’m comin’ back here with a shot-gun an’ clean the lot o’ yuh out. Them smellin’ me Neche, durn ’em! I’ll cut yer gizzards out fer that. . . . But it’s good yuh do. Them Neches in thar’d cut mine out ef they knowed.”

He set himself to listen.

Within the tent half a dozen Indians were gathered. That the conference was of vast importance the half-breed recognised, even before he heard what was said. For a short time he had no difficulty making out every word, but after several fresh arrivals among the dogs had expressed their mild suspicion by barking, the Indians instinctively lowered their voices.

And so he was driven to advance to the very canvas of the tepee, where he lay full length on the ground, his ear close to the narrow crack of light that escaped beneath it.

He could hear every word now. And as he listened, his face broadened to a grin of satisfaction. Two or three of the voices he recognised, and in his curiosity concerning the others he rashly tried to raise the canvas that he might see within.

The blood suddenly pounded to his head as a gruff voice close behind him in the darkness uttered an exclamation.

The group inside heard and was silent. Only for a moment, then they poured through the flap. As if the signal had spread instantly, the whole encampment seemed to spring to life. Blue Pete, still lying on the ground, had turned to face the voice. But the owner had retreated out of sight. The

half-breed felt for his guns, for he could see no way out now but to start to shoot.

He could hear the Indians running around the tepee, and his fertile mind leaped to a possible method of escape. With a jerk he tore the canvas up far enough to roll inside the tepee. Leaping to his feet, he struck out the candle fixed to one of the poles and bolted through the open flap.

For the moment he was safe. But the Indians, locating his ruse from the extinguishing of the light, were swiftly on his heels. But he was well away, and he had no fear that they would overtake him.

It was the dogs that ruined his scheme. They came tearing after him as he dived and dodged among the tepees, making for the trees toward the end of the little valley in which the camp lay. They swarmed about him, and at last one took a nip at a flying leg. Its jaws clamped on a flapping pant leg, and Blue Pete went down, rolling over and over. He was up quickly, but he knew the dogs would have him sooner or later.

He knew those dogs. He had lived among their kind during his earlier years and had visited many an encampment since. Much too cowardly to attack by day, by night they saw their chance, and the Indians coming audibly close behind them gave them courage.

He had a momentary furious thought of turning and shooting among them. They would be frightened at the discharge of a gun, but by that time their owners would have him surrounded. As a second dog grabbed his pants he stooped and caught it by the neck in his powerful hands, choking its scream of terror off completely and hurling it against its companions. Then he ran on.

He reached the trees. His groping hands contacted an overhanging branch and he drew himself up. He had escaped the dogs, but in so doing he had eliminated every chance of escape from the Indians. Almost as he reached for a higher branch they were crowded about the base of the tree, kicking the dogs away. They had him cornered.

Safe for the moment beyond their reach, he paused to study the situation. His one immediate danger was that the Indians might shoot blindly up into the tree, and he wondered if he should climb higher or accept the protection of the thicker lower branches. Second thoughts, however, inclined him to doubt that they would shoot. In the night air a shot would be audible downwind for a great distance, and at that time of the night it would probably bring investigation. A vagrant thought struck him that he himself might fire a few shots and bring succour. But he spurned the idea instantly.

His pride would never permit him to seek aid against mere Indians. Besides, this was no time for bringing the Mounted Police.

Below him the dogs continued to yelp, but gradually they were driven farther off by their owners and almost silenced.

The half-breed climbed higher.

He had, he noticed with satisfaction, happened to pick on one of the larger trees. It enabled him to put some distance between him and the Indians, and its many branches would act as a shield should the Indians, as a last resort, take to shooting. But beyond that there was little hope. The Indians had only to wait till daylight. Any amount of shooting by day would arouse no curiosity.

His groping hand encountered a break in the arrangement of the branches. Feeling about it, he discovered that it was part of another tree that had fallen against the one in which he had taken refuge. An exciting hope shot through him. Carefully he climbed above it and let himself down along it. By the angle of the slope he figured that the base of the tree must be a promising distance from the one he had climbed.

The wind continued to howl. In irregular blasts it swooped down over the cutbank, or whistled and whined through the tree-tops. The dogs had retired. Scarcely a sound came from the Indians, but the half-breed knew they were there, the whole camp of them. Slowly and carefully he let himself down the incline. There were, fortunately, few impeding branches, so that he made little noise, and what there was the wind swallowed or accounted for to the sharp ears of the Indians below.

Not more than a dozen feet from the ground he realised that some of the Indians were directly beneath him. A single false move, even the dislodging of a piece of bark, might betray him. Inch by inch he descended, wondering if the group had spread enough to surround the base of the tree he was following. But he had to take the chance.

His feet touched the ground. It was well then that the dogs had been driven away, for they would surely have heard or scented him. The Indians had no suspicion of the manœuvre.

With a broad grin Blue Pete glided off into the darkness.

Ten minutes later he stood on the upper level, far above the Indians. They had, he learned, decided not to wait for daylight. One had brought an axe. The slash of the sharp blade in the tree trunk sent a thrill of exultation

through the listening half-breed. He heard the axe strike again and again. The great tree creaked; it was ready to fall.

Blue Pete raised his chin and sent down into the valley a taunting, maddening “Yip-ee!”

But as he clambered down into the next ravine and picked his way back to Whitey, he sniffed with disgust.

“Huh! Me a ’tective! Me!”

CHAPTER XVIII

A MAJOR CRIME

Sergeant Mahon walked slowly along the barracks hall and stopped at the door of Inspector Barker's office. A low chuckle from behind him brought him around angrily to frown into the face of Constable Murchison.

"It's nothing to laugh at, Murch, and you know it," he muttered. "I'm in for a raking, of course, and it's got to be gone through. But why in blazes I'm expected to explain everything Blue Pete does and be responsible for it I don't see. I'm not the one who gives him his jobs. I'm not the one who dictates how they should be carried through. I'm not the one who can discipline him when he runs off the rails."

"But," teased Murchison, "you don't mind taking some of the reflected glory at his successes."

"Well, I've worked with him every time he's let any of us help, haven't I?" He made a wry face. "I'm supposed then to boss the job; but did ever anyone boss Blue Pete? He goes about things his own way, no matter what we say. If he didn't, if he did things our way, he wouldn't be much use to us."

Constable Murchison shook his head. "How do you know the Inspector wants to talk about the breed?"

"Because he never shouts in that tone unless Blue Pete has got under his skin again. I know the symptoms. Well, here goes."

He straightened his shoulders, pulled down his tunic, wiped every expression from his face, and knocked at the door. A gruff "Come in" replied, and the Sergeant entered.

Inspector Barker sat crouched over the desk, his arms flung out before him over the blotter. His tunic was open at the throat, his iron-grey hair was awry, his moustache too. His eyes were fixed blankly on the dirty window before him. The Sergeant's heart sank, but he walked stiffly to the desk and stood waiting to be addressed.

The Inspector started. He picked up a sheet of paper that lay before him and glared upward at his subordinate.

“What the hell kept you so long? I’ve been shouting for you for hours.”

“I was busy with a horse, sir, that we found tied to the rail before the barracks this morning.”

“A horse? What horse? Why should there be a horse there?”

“It was tied there, sir—left there.”

“Whose is it?”

“It bears the 3-Bar-Y brand, sir.”

The Inspector spun around, and his hands grasped the edge of the desk.

“The 3-Bar-Y? Why—why, that’s Blue Pete’s ranch.”

“Yes, sir. The bronco— —”

“Where is he? Bring him in. You know I want to see him.”

“Blue Pete is not here, sir. There was just the bronco.”

“What the— —. Say, Mahon, what does it mean now? Why should— — It must be Blue Pete who left it, of course.”

“I expect so, sir.”

“Is it that ugly little scrunt of a pinto of his?”

“He isn’t likely to leave it tied to our rail, sir. Whiskers would— —”

“Yes, yes, I know all about Whiskers; she’s laughed at me many a time.”

“It’s Whitey, sir. I know it. It’s Blue Pete’s second choice.”

“I’m not interested in the bronco; it’s its owner I want. He was in town last night, Claver said.”

He swung back to the desk and picked up the telephone. Mahon heard him ask for a number.

“The *Times* office won’t be open today, sir. This is Sunday.”

Inspector Barker swore softly. “All right, all right. I know it isn’t open.” He shouted irritably at Central: “Give me Claver’s house.”

As he waited he spoke over his shoulder to the Sergeant. “That Claver has an eye on everything. Sometimes he helps. When he reported that Blue Pete was in town, and when the breed failed to show up here, I knew something rotten was afoot. That breed couldn’t do anything that isn’t shady. I’m going nutty— — Hello, Claver. Inspector Barker speaking.” His voice

had gone abruptly suave. “How are you this fine morning—or is it fine? Going to church? . . . No? Well, you make a mistake, Steve. It’s men like you they invented church for. . . . Now don’t get funny. As a matter of fact I didn’t call you up for that sort of advice; you’d never take advice, anyway. What I want to know is about Blue Pete. You saw him last night, you said. Was he on that pinto of his? . . . You didn’t notice? What kind of a newspaperman are you? . . . Oh, cut that out. You don’t sound a bit amusing. . . . No, that’s all. I only wished to prove to your own satisfaction what a rotten newspaperman you are. I hope I’ve succeeded. Ta-ta!”

He rattled the receiver in the hook and sat glowering at the blotter.

“Well,” he snapped finally, with an oath, “there it is. He’s done another of his disappearing acts. And you know what that is certain to mean to us: trouble, always trouble. You know the symptoms as well as I do: he’s started something he’s ashamed to talk about to us—or he’s afraid to. Leaving that bronco, of course, means that he has no further use for it for the time being. Then he must have gone somewhere by some other means of transportation. The railway, of course.”

“Perhaps, sir,” suggested the Sergeant, “he had Whiskers somewhere to transfer to.”

The Inspector threw out his hands. “For Heaven’s sake don’t introduce more confusion. If you’ve got something worth while to say, get at it; if not, keep still.”

He leaned back in the chair, his hands linked behind his head.

“There’s only one explanation: he’s found out something about Thoreau. . . . But if that’s it, why did he avoid us? Don’t you see how it tangles things up? Where is he gone? We haven’t even a hint.”

He puzzled over it for several impatient minutes.

“There’s only one thing to do now: you’re going out to the 3-Bar-Y and have a talk with Mira. You’ll find out, too, if that pinto is still there. And be sure Blue Pete himself isn’t hiding when you appear. . . . But first, let’s find out where and how he went. He must have gone by train, of course. Run over to the station and see if he bought a ticket. Let’s see, what trains could he have taken last night? There’s the nine-thirty east, and the west one at midnight. Then there’s the Crow’s Nest. It leaves at eleven-thirty and connects with the one from the east at the Junction. In the meantime I’ll telephone the Junction and see if by any chance he took the train from there. . . . But he didn’t even get any expense money.

“Lord, isn’t it just like him to do something that keeps us in a dither? We don’t know where he is or why; and there are three trains to mix things up. A lot of people around here think that breed has a simple streak in him. I wish they had to deal with him. The rest of us are the simple ones, when it comes to having anything to do with him. Now, hurry off to the station and find out.”

In ten minutes Mahon was back. Blue Pete had certainly not purchased a ticket at the station, nor had he, the stationmaster was certain, boarded any train there.

The Inspector threw up his hands. “It’s the same at the Junction. It’s always the way. That big breed can vanish into thin air—and emerge from it when he wishes to. It’s uncanny. And what’s the use of us trying to figure out what he’s after; he doesn’t work that way. Perhaps,” grudgingly, “that’s why he gets things done. No white man—and the Indians appear no cleverer—can hope to follow the divagations of his mind. It may work out well enough usually, but I’d be grateful for a single occasion when he wouldn’t get me all heated up. You’ve had that bronco of his attended to?”

“Yes, sir. By the way, are we to keep it here until Blue Pete comes for it himself, or shall we return it to the ranch?”

“Don’t bother me now with a simple problem like that,” barked the Inspector. Then he added: “We’d better keep it; he wouldn’t have left it here if he didn’t expect that. And now get out on the streets again; you may pick up something there. But be sure not to make open inquiries. We don’t want the public to know we’re at all interested in his movements. Then you’re riding out to the 3-Bar-Y.”

But, for a white man, the Inspector had appraised with amazing correctness the course Blue Pete had taken. He was on a train.

But he had not purchased a ticket. At the moment the two officers were discussing his whereabouts he was seated uncomfortably and precariously on the coupler between the baggage car and a passenger coach on the Crow’s Nest train.

The Crow’s Nest line branches off from the main line of the Canadian Pacific at Dunmore Junction, bearing toward the south-west, slicing through a great ranching plain at first, then through mixed farming and ranching, and on through the foothills to Nelson. It is a fairly well-peopled area, containing

such towns as Lethbridge, Macleod, Fernie, Cranbrook, and Nelson, with a variety of production and scenery in its length.

There was no reasonable excuse for the half-breed's manner of travelling. He might have purchased a ticket and ridden comfortably through the night, but that would have been the conventional way. He could not face the varied passengers he would have met, and, in a way, secrecy and discomfort fitted into his mood and his purpose. Under any circumstances he preferred privacy to physical comfort. And now the information he had picked up from the discussion he overheard in the lighted tepee warned him against the risk of meeting an Indian in the train.

Eight hours in such a cramped and chilly position had exacted its toll: he was sore and stiff and short tempered. It accounted for the incidents of the morning that added a new wrinkle to Inspector Barker's forehead. It was bad enough through the long hours of darkness, but with daylight was added the necessity of avoiding discovery at the various stations at which the train stopped. His method of handling that situation was to alight before the train stopped and wander along the track, picking it up again as it passed after leaving the station.

But it was a strain, and it wore his temper dangerously thin.

So that when an observant official at one of the stations caught sight of him and made for him, he had no compunctions about expressing himself with fluency and vehemence, and with sufficient defiance and threat to stop the official's advance. He managed to catch the train as it started, and he added insult to injury by leaning out and thumbing his nose at the angry stationmaster.

It cost him dearly—almost his liberty. For the stationmaster wired on to the next station, and when the train drew in a Mounted Policeman was waiting for him. Fortunately or unfortunately Blue Pete was to him only another tramp stealing a ride, and he set about fulfilling his duty with customary firmness and expedition.

For a few minutes Blue Pete was confused. Open defiance of a Mounted Policeman had never been necessary since his rustling days. To be sure he had avoided them as much as possible, but that was because they so often had distressing orders to give, and when he was actually concerned on their work he resented further instructions and interference.

As the constable made for him he retreated. The officer hastened his steps. Blue Pete faded before him at a more rapid pace.

That was all well enough, and the half-breed saw no danger of capture. But in the midst of it the train pulled out and left him. It reacted on him: he became angry, with the usual attendant recklessness. His anger increased when he saw that, the train having gone, the constable saw little further reason for pursuing him.

It was a small village. Blue Pete had followed back along the railway. He reached a bridge and dropped down into the ravine it spanned. There, ducking out of sight, he climbed back to the upper level and ran toward the station.

The constable, missing him, even pleased at the chance to ignore what had happened, turned back at a leisurely pace in the same direction, whistling under his breath.

The whistle died away abruptly at the sound of galloping hoofs. He looked ahead and saw his own horse, that he had left tied behind the station, tearing along the road.

CHAPTER XIX

WORRIES

“Sergeant! Sergeant! Come here! Quick!” The urgent note in the Inspector’s voice brought Mahon on the run. As he entered the front office the Inspector was seated well forward over the desk, his head in his hands, the picture of distress and concern. He straightened, and waved a letter in an angry hand. Then, like a timid sun peeping through the clouds, a glint of suppressed amusement deepened the lines beside his eyes.

“I told you, Mahon, I told you! It’s broken over my defenceless head, just as I expected.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Don’t ‘yes’ me about it. I know it, don’t I. Here’s a report from Macleod, and it makes strange reading. That is, it’ll be strange to the Commissioner—to everyone but you and me. Sit down. Don’t stand there with your mouth open. You can hear without that—and it’s something you’ll want to hear. You’ll need a chair to stand it, too.”

He slammed the paper on the desk and tapped it with one long forefinger.

“I could read it to you, but when you know the outline you and I can fill in the details without all this wordiness I’ve had to plough through.” He leaned forward and wagged a finger at the Sergeant. “It’s about that nerve-racking, terrifying, distressing, maddening breed of yours, that pest we’ve got ourselves mixed up with.”

“You mean Blue Pete, sir?”

“Of course. Who else?”

The Sergeant looked a little alarmed. “Has he—has—anything happened, sir?”

“Oh no, nothing at all, nothing at all. . . . Would there be anything to tell about Blue Pete at any time if something hadn’t happened to upset us? Was his name ever mentioned without headline stuff for Steve Claver? Did he ever make a move that didn’t break all the laws, written and unwritten?”

“What has he done now, sir?” The Sergeant was distressed.

“Nothing, I said. . . . Only stolen a horse—another horse.”

“‘Another,’ sir?”

“Well, if he didn’t steal that one from the Inverted T^[7] it was enough like it to earn him a year or two in jail if we hadn’t got him out of it. And it makes me blazing mad every time I remember that we had to get him out of it to save our own skins.”

“Has he—been caught, sir—at Macleod?”

“No chance. You know better than to ask a question like that. He’s never caught in his worst crimes. . . . In fact, he’s not even mentioned in connection with this one. But I know, oh, I know.”

The Sergeant’s distress was slightly relieved. “You know it was he, sir? Are you sure?”

“Sure? Of course I’m sure. There isn’t another man in the world would have the nerve, the audacity, the crazy thoughtlessness. No one else would be so damned foolish.”

“Might I know something about it, sir?”

“Certainly. That’s what I got you here for. Now I know why he boarded that bronc on us. He wanted to flit away to Macleod—to steal a horse. He must have gone by train. In fact he was stealing a ride on one. You see, he daren’t buy a ticket with a crime like that planned.”

The Sergeant cleared his throat. “Perhaps he went down there, sir, on the job you gave him. Perhaps he had to have a horse, and the only way— —”

“He didn’t need to steal a Mounted Police horse, did he?”

The Sergeant gasped. “A—Mounted Police—horse!” He saw the twinkle reappear in the Inspector’s eye, and for a moment he was hard pressed to conceal his own amusement. “If he needed a horse— —”

“He took the easiest way to get one. He got the constable chasing him on foot from the train, and then he rounded back and—left the constable on foot. A true Blue Petish touch. But if he needed a horse so badly, aren’t there thousands of them without stepping on our toes?”

He reddened a little at the implication and cleared his throat lustily. “I mean there are many ways of getting a horse without stealing one. If he’d

asked the police down there they could have got in touch with me by telephone, and he'd have had anything he wanted."

"But he knows we don't wish it to be known he works for us," defended the Sergeant. "Besides, it would be difficult to get ourselves out of trouble by defending him, if other Mounted Police were involved."

"So you take it for granted we'll need to protect ourselves. You're right there. But you needn't always hold him on that pedestal where you keep him," growled the Inspector. "I can see how his mind worked: he was stealing a ride, the report says—they call him a tramp for that—and when the constable chased him from the train he said to himself: 'You rob me of my train: I'll rob you of your horse.' It's the way that breed's mind would work."

Suddenly he could hold in no longer. He burst into a storm of laughter, his fists pounding the desk. But the spasm passed quickly.

"Why do I laugh? Lord knows. Imagine one of my own men, temporary as he is, raiding the constable of another detachment and helping himself to his horse without leave or thanks—committing a major crime—doubly major because of the ownership of the horse. I'm trying not to imagine it. Most of my time is filled inventing excuses for that breed, getting him—and ourselves—out of the trouble he takes the shortest cuts to, as a duck takes to the nearest pond. . . . Huh! If I was as clever inventing excuses for myself I'd be happier at home; but Blue Pete exhausts the available supply. I swear I'll never— —" He stopped and sighed. "But I've sworn that so often."

Sergeant Mahon shifted restlessly in his chair, waiting for a chance to break in.

"But you are certain it's Blue Pete, sir?"

"Listen, Mahon." The Inspector repeated the story, but near the end it was interrupted by another gale of laughter. "And all that authority could do was to stand still and watch that horse gallop away—and cuss. And I'll bet a plugged dime that breed called back that triumphant 'Yipee!' of his that must have broken a lot of gritting teeth among his enemies."

"It might not be Blue Pete, sir," persisted the Sergeant.

"And the moon might be made of green cheese. Can you imagine anyone but that breed working such an embarrassing trick on me? If this letter had described him as a Chinaman it wouldn't have fooled me. Here's what happened: Blue Pete heard somehow that Thoreau was down there, so he set off after him. . . . Or we'll hope it's as innocent as that, though I can't

connect Blue Pete with anything innocent. Can you? He rides down on the bumpers, finds he needs a horse, and takes it the first way that offers.”

“Are you going to tell them down there, sir?” inquired Mahon anxiously.

“I’ll be damned if I will!” exploded the Inspector. “Let them do their own dirty work. . . . I know I should tell. But what’s the use? That breed’s going to get himself into some terrible scrape soon enough without me pushing him into it. Besides, I’d pay the piper in the end for engaging him to do our work. I should never use a man like that, and the Commissioner has a way of expressing his convictions so emphatically that only my resignation would suffice. . . . Something else, too: that breed would die in jail. He’s worry enough without his death on my mind.”

He sank his chin on his chest and closed his eyes.

“But we must do something, Mahon,” he burst out presently, straightening and commencing to button his tunic. “We can’t sit here and permit this affair to run its course—the course Blue Pete will carry it along. We must act—get busy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So comforting you agree with me. Perhaps you won’t be so agreeable when you hear what I have in mind. Now that Blue Pete appears to have broken loose, the only thing left for us is to act as if we never knew him. You’re going down there yourself, Mahon. Thoreau must be down there, so get him.”

“And what am I to do, sir, if I run across Blue Pete? Arrest him?”

“I didn’t mention arrest, did I?” thundered the Inspector. “What would you arrest him for? . . . We can’t be sure of anything, can we? A man’s innocent in our law till he’s proven guilty. If he deserves arrest we’ll leave it to the Macleod boys. You’re going down for Thoreau and for nothing else.”

“Then I’m to ignore the fact that we know Blue Pete stole—”

“I told you we didn’t know,” interrupted the Inspector. “Here’s all it says about him.” He picked up the paper. “‘A big fellow, dirty grey Stetson with steel studs in the band, stiff leather chaps, red and black checkered shirt, large red neckerchief, bowed legs, one shoulder lower than the other.’” He leaned closer to the paper. “It doesn’t say a word about crooked eyes or that he answered to the name of Blue Pete, so how can we be sure? But first you’re going to the 3-Bar-Y. I don’t know why I delayed it—unless I had a forewarning that something like this would happen. It was bound to. Mira

may be able to tell you something . . . And when you get down around Macleod, if you run across a breed with crooked eyes and riding a Mounted Police horse you might mention that the police are after him. A man should have a chance. Now, out to the 3-Bar-Y.”

There had been some delay in visiting the ranch, because the Inspector had hoped against hope that Blue Pete would present himself. Visits to the 3-Bar-Y were discouraged by the Inspector because he had no wish to expose the relationship existing between the Mounted Police and the half-breed.

But with the order this time definite Sergeant Mahon set out on the eighty-mile ride. Stopping for the night at the police hut at Turner’s Crossing, he reached the ranch the following day at noon, having obtained a fresh horse and an early start.

Mira heard the patter of strange hoofs the moment he reached the edge of the hollow in which the ranch buildings lay, and as she watched the oncoming officer from behind a window, her heart sank.

Mahon dismounted before the door. It stood wide open, and just inside Mira awaited him, her hands caught tightly together before her breast.

“Good day, Mira!”

It was cheery enough, but it failed to allay her fears. She understood the subtle ways of the Mounted Police.

“What’s happened him now, Sergeant?” she inquired despairingly.

Mahon effected surprise. “Why—why, nothing. Is Blue Pete at home?”

“You know he isn’t.”

The blunt scorn of it confused him for a moment.

“No . . . no, we didn’t quite know that, Mira. You know, of course, that we gave him something to do, but we haven’t seen him since or had a report. The Inspector wondered— —”

She beckoned him in with an impatient movement of her hand and seated herself beside the table.

“The Inspector wondered if I could tell you where he is. Well, I can’t. I never do know when he sets out on these dangerous jobs you give him.”

“We thought he might have told you— —”

“I know nothing, I tell you.” She leaned her arms on the table and looked him straight in the eye. “If he didn’t tell you anything, then you don’t think I’m going to tell, even if I know, surely. An’ now I wouldn’t tell you anything, anyway. Why? Because something has happened. I don’t care what it is, I’m standing behind him. I always will. Now you know, you can tell me what’s happened.”

Mahon had had time while she talked to think things out, and he decided to tell her some of the truth:

“On Saturday night he left Whitey tied to the rail before the barracks. None of us saw him. We don’t know why he did it or where he has gone. Naturally we’re anxious to know.”

“There are a lot of people in these parts anxious to know that. But if you or they expect me to tell you, it’s a waste of time. . . . However, I’ll tell you this, that I don’t know; I’m just as much in the dark as you are. He was back here on Friday. He took Whitey because Whiskers had had too much to do. He left for the Hat, it seems.”

“Then Whiskers is still here?”

“You may go to the stable and see,” she offered, her lip curling.

“So that’s all you know, Mira?”

She was thinking, her eyes downcast. “I’ll tell you something more: he said he paid a visit to the Indian camp at the Hat after he saw the Inspector. You see, Frenchy is part Indian, an’ he thought the Indians might know where he is. Perhaps he went back there again. But if he left Whitey with you, then he must have left by train for somewhere. Make what you can out of that, for it’s all I’ll tell you.”

She raised appealing eyes to him. “If he’s in trouble only you or the Inspector can get him out of it—or maybe me. Please, won’t you tell me what has happened?”

He could not resist it. “We don’t know for sure, but we’ve an idea he’s somewhere beyond Macleod, perhaps in the foothills.”

“There are a lot of Indian camps there, aren’t there?” she asked.

“Yes.” The Sergeant rose, his spurs tinkling as he walked to the door. “Thank you for what you’ve told me.”

She had followed him. “Will you tell me if—if you know—of any trouble?”

“I’m afraid only the Inspector could promise that, Mira.”

She watched him ride up the slope and disappear. And as she turned back to her work her head shook forlornly, and tears glistened in her eyes.

“Pete! Pete!” she moaned. But after a time a slow smile gathered on her tanned face. “You’re such a sweet, exciting worry, Pete.”

[7] *Blue Pete: Horse-thief.*

CHAPTER XX

AN INDIAN CAMP

The theft of the Mounted Police horse was something more than an act of bravado or retaliation. It had come to Blue Pete, as he retreated before the pursuing constable, that he might require a mount where he was going. Away from the railway the distances would be great. And the sleek, powerful animal tied to a hitching-post behind the station was like a gift from the gods.

“Yip-ee!” he shrilled back at the disgusted and indignant policeman, as he galloped away.

In a few minutes he was out of the village and concealed by rolling country. He turned westward.

This was new country to him. All about, and particularly before him, the familiar more or less flat prairie to which he was accustomed had given place to great rolling stretches, some of it covered with bluffs, the western term for thickets of trees. A few moderate-sized hills poked toward the sky. And away along the horizon rose the icy peaks of the Rocky Mountains.

Blue Pete shuddered. Memory swept back to a summer that he had spent in these mountains.^[8] It had been an unpleasant experience, even though it had packed every hour with the danger and excitement his nature craved. The mountains smothered him, defied him, forced on him new conditions and a new manner of living. Accustomed to a horse beneath him, the mountains brutally discouraged such luxurious travel. After that summer he had hoped never to see them again.

And here he was riding directly into their teeth as fast as a swift horse could carry him!

It frightened him, but he did not falter. The task he had set himself lay before him, and he would go to the ends of the earth to carry it through. The thought turned his mind to the two weapons he carried, one inside the band of his pants, the other beneath his right arm. He drew the one from his pants and glanced contemptuously at it.

“Buck up, boy. Yuh ain’t muh ole .45, but yuh gotta do.”

After a time he pulled up and looked about him. "Reckon I'd git lost down here, but them mountains is allus west, so I can't go much wrong. Them Neches is somewhars this way."

He sent the horse on. "Not sech a bad cayuse, neither," he muttered, patting its neck, "but yuh ain't Whiskers, no, sir-ee, yuh ain't. Yuh got speed ef I need it. Them Mounties know thar hossflesh."

He drew the horse down to a fast canter, and for a couple of hours he rode straight at the mountains. Then he stopped, dismounted, unsaddled, hobbled the horse's front feet with the beautifully whitened rope attached to the saddle, and turned it loose to graze and rest.

He lay down to think things over. Thus far he had come more or less blindly, thinking only that the Crow's Nest Railway would carry him toward the foothills where he knew the Indian encampments were. There were reserves not far away, but many of the Indians preferred the unrestricted life of comparative nomads, choosing the wooded valleys of the foothills because they offered game, with shelter and pasture and good water. They would be Blackfeet and Piegans, with perhaps a few Bloods, all branches of the Algonquins, having split away at a distant time of famine, their distinctive names arising from certain conditions encountered in their travels in search of food. Now they were almost as distinct as if of different major tribes, though they spoke much the same language still.

In a vague way Blue Pete was aware of these facts, and what he did not know did not matter. He could speak their language, could almost foresee their every decision, could even in emergency think their thoughts: he had no fear that the strangeness of the situation in which they might place him would take him unprepared. What he had heard as he lay beside the lighted tepee had sent him straightway to the foothills, and whatever happened he would take in his stride.

He rose, resaddled, and rode on.

By evening he had been forced to circle to avoid several clusters of ranch houses, irritated by the fences that sometimes blocked his way but served to warn him of the buildings within.

The country became more broken, with more and larger bluffs of tree, ranch buildings were fewer. The hills grew higher. He was approaching, he knew, the foothills, with fingers of elevations reaching out toward the prairie, each edged by a secluded valley on either side.

In those valleys would be the Indian encampments.

But where was the one he sought?

Blindly he entered the nearest. The hills rose on both sides, thickly wooded, still and lonely; and the distant mountains had come appreciably nearer. The floor of the valley was smooth and well grassed, turning and twisting with the convolutions of the hills.

He was wondering how far he should go, how he might save himself several days of blind wandering, when the distant barking of dogs sent a tingle of excitement through him. He drew rein and sat listening. The dogs, he knew, located an Indian camp; he recognised that barking, mean, prowling, half-starved, complaining, cowardly. The Indian dog that knows no affection, can offer no excuse for living.

Swinging aside among the trees, he dismounted and went forward on foot.

In a few minutes he came within sight of the encampment. Save for its more imposing, more beautiful surroundings, it might have been the camp at Medicine Hat. There were more than a dozen tepees, evidently permanent, and the same mangy clutter of dogs prowling about.

From an overhanging height he studied the scene for some time. It was a beautiful valley, treed along its borders, with a stream gurgling through near one side. In the open space between the trees the tepees were set up. Several Indians were seated on their haunches in loose groups, their squaws trotting about the work of the camp while their masters looked lazily on. Smoke rose from a dozen outdoor fires, with other spirals curling from the openings in a few of the tepees.

Until darkness almost blotted out the scene he remained where he was, never taking his eyes from the Indians within sight. It surprised and annoyed him to realise that, though he had arrived at his goal he had no definite plan of operation. Still, none of the Indians he saw interested him, and so, with darkness, he returned to his horse and rode southward. Finding another valley, he turned into it.

By that time it was dark, but he rode carefully forward. And again barking dogs warned him of a camp. Dismounting, he crept nearer. He crept too near, for the dogs caught the scent and commenced to howl lugubriously. The Indians, he knew, would read the meaning of that tone, and so he moved away downwind. After a time he was able to descend within a few yards of one of the tepees.

And still he had no definite plan. He knew what he sought, of course, but the accomplishment of the task he had set himself depended on something more than prowling about camps. Something more practical and promising must be done, and done without loss of time. There in the foothills were a score of such valleys, and each might hold its encampment. And in any one of them might be what he sought. The weather, too, might break at any time; he knew it would not be long delayed. There under the mountains the threat of it was more solemn and fearful. What had warned the prairie was doubly impressive near the mountains from which the storm would come.

As he stood over the camp it appeared to go to sleep. Even the dogs were silent. Something about it sent a wave of nostalgia through the half-breed. He could remember just such a camp far, far back as a small lad. It was across the Border in Montana. Superficially the location had been much the same as this, with the difference that the valleys were depths below the prairie level. It was there in the Badlands that he was born. He had been happy enough until his mother died, then he had fed anew the wild desire of the lad to emulate the heroes he knew, the big rustlers, with a gun and a bronco of his own, with the whine of bullets about his ears and the excitement of the chase.

To be sure the strain of white blood in him had made him something of an outcast in his tribe. Perhaps it was that that had made him so ambitious, as well as filled him with such unrelenting hatred of Indians.

Now, looking down on the sleeping camp, weary from days of limited rest and sleep, surrounded by unfamiliar scenes, he longed to be there under the ragged, patched canvas, with the stars peeping down on him through the open peak of the tepees, with the audible sniffing of foraging dogs through the night.

Far to the west some wild animal gave raucous voice. He had never heard the sound before, and his hand went instinctively to his gun. The dogs wakened with the call and commenced to bark. The creature away there in the fastnesses of the hills, hurling defiance at the human life he knew to be near, was no wolf. There were wolves in the Cypress Hills. Perhaps a cougar, he decided, some wild-cat breed. And suddenly he craved companionship.

Hurriedly he returned to where he had left the horse and lay down beside it. In a few moments he was fast asleep.

[8] *Blue Pete: Detective.*

CHAPTER XXI

BLUE PETE HELPS HIMSELF

He did not sleep long or peacefully. A cloud hung over him. His futile visits to the Indian encampments had brought home to him his lack of any definite plan. He felt certain he had come to the right place, but what next? How best set about what he had in mind? How carry it through without recourse to bloodshed?

There in that part of the country he was a stranger, suspect in his every move, and unwelcome. The Indians would resent his presence, even before they knew his purpose. Against him as a half-breed they would combine even to unbridled violence.

As he lay worrying, waiting impatiently for dawn, the restlessness of his horse close by sent his mind back to the Inspector. Inspector Barker would be angry, harshly critical of what he had done. To have set out without reporting was bad enough, but to have helped himself to a horse that did not belong to him was distinctly criminal. And a Mounted Police horse! The Mounties were so touchy about things like that. Though he was one of them in a way, he had never been able to work with them for long. They were always critical of his methods, the only methods he knew; and he had no patience with theirs.

With a sigh he rolled to his side and lay looking out through the trees to the valley beyond. The wind was rising again, but where he lay it touched only the tops of the trees, wailing through the evergreen boughs in a way that increased his uneasiness. Moments of something like despair assailed him. Considering the difficulties he must face, the certain trouble, whatever success he had, was it worth while going on with it? Two camps already had yielded nothing of value. Of course there were many more camps through the foothills, but it would require weeks to examine them all, and winter would be on him before he could hope to complete the investigation. Even if nothing happened in the meantime. Hundreds of square miles would have to be covered, and even then the search he could hope to make would be nothing more than perfunctory. He struggled against the wave of depression, gritted his teeth together, and closed his eyes in another effort to sleep.

Light began to show in the eastern sky.

He was wakened by the familiar thud of a horse's hoofs somewhere near. With his ear to the ground, and ever on guard, he heard it while it was still inaudible from any other position, and he jerked himself upright to listen and watch. His crossed eyes had a new light in them.

There was little danger of being discovered, unless his horse exposed him by whinnying. With Whiskers he would have had no fear. He rose and stood close to the horse's head, prepared to choke it off should it show signs of audible greeting. But the horse was apparently well-trained: its ears pricked up, its head turned inquiringly but that was all. The rider came nearer. With a cunning leer Blue Pete glided away through the trees.

An Indian, half-asleep, muffled in a gay blanket and bent drowsily over the horn, rode slowly into view. His body swayed limply to every move, as he left the pony to pick its own course. The day had not yet quite dawned, but against the sky Blue Pete's keen eyes took in every detail. Close beside the faint trail he took cover behind a tree.

The Indian came suddenly to his senses as a shadow shot into the open, landing squarely on the pony's rump behind him. His arms were caught to his side in a steely clasp, and, as the pony dashed madly on, the lasso was unwound from beside the horn and bound swiftly about his body and arms.

As yet nothing more than that terrifying shadow had come within range of his eyes. It had come too suddenly, and the light was too dim, and it was careful to remain behind him. In his terror the Indian was speechless, and by the time the attack had assumed something more real than a nightmare he realised that to cry out would gain him nothing but harsher treatment.

There appeared to be no hurry. The pony continued to run. But one of the reins dropped from the bound hands, to trail on the ground, and the pony instantly stopped rather than throw itself. Then the helpless Indian was dragged from the saddle and dropped on the ground, face down. There was nothing brutal about it, nothing really painful, and he submitted for fear of worse. The end of the lasso was bound about his ankles and he was lifted from the ground and carried into the gloom of the trees.

There his arms were untied and, piece by piece, he was undressed—the blanket, a ragged sweater, a checkered shirt, and a pair of leather chaps he always wore tied below the knees. It was an expert operation, with not a moment when both hands and feet were free at the same time for effective resistance, even had he not long since been convinced that resistance was hopeless.

Naked, he shivered in the early morning air, but the blanket was laid on the ground and he was rolled in it, the ends carefully tucked in for better protection. A gag of his own neckerchief was fixed over his lips, and the end of the rope was fastened to the nearest tree. Then his assailant vanished. Minutes passed. The Indian commenced to tug and twist at his bonds. But the knots were secure and complicated. . . . Presently came the patter of swift hoofs, and to his surprise his assailant loomed once more over him. The rope about his wrists was untied, and the stranger vanished.

In a couple of minutes he had freed himself. Shivering, he clutched the blanket more tightly about him and hurried to the open valley. His pony grazed peacefully nearby. Mounting, he galloped madly away.

From the trees Blue Pete watched him go, chuckling to himself. Already he wore the Indian's clothes. He had foreseen that he must look more like an Indian if he hoped to attain his purpose, and the Indian had been a God-send. But the attack had unquestionably complicated things.

Returning to where he had left his horse, he lay down once more to think. The clothing had been one step accomplished, but there must be more. His complexion, for one thing, would betray him. He must be darker, and that lower left shoulder, relic of the fight with Dutch Henry^[9] would be recognised by anyone who had seen him before. Of course, by concentrating on it he might keep the shoulder up. But he could not hope to alter those crooked eyes or that smashed nose and the other scars of his fight to the death with Butch Dorman. The colour of his complexion he could easily alter when the time came. The ease with which he had acquired his disguising clothing raised his spirits, and he rose and prepared to start on another day's search.

[9] *Blue Pete: Half-breed.*

CHAPTER XXII

AT THE CIRCLE R

His own clothing he bundled together and strapped to the cantle of his saddle. He must dispose of it somehow, but that problem would surely solve itself in due course. Humming tunelessly, he rode out into the clear and struck back toward the prairie.

Clear of the valley, he turned southward. Two or three depressions that followed failed to interest him, and the time they wasted in making a search of them irritated him. But while the sun was still low he came on the third Indian encampment.

It was a beautiful spot where the early morning sun of that time of the year, when its rays were most welcome, fell full on the tepees. The morning meal was under way as he came within sight of the camp, and the odour of frying meat made him realise how little he had eaten for a whole day and more. Oddly enough—and it made him more wary at first—only two gaunt dogs were in sight, and they were at the other end of the camp. Then, as he wondered, the loud baying of an excited pack far to the west, deep within the forest, offered an explanation. The dogs had probably treed some wild animal.

The residents of the camp thought the same, for, at the sound, from most of the tepees Indian braves came running, rifle in hand, and hurried off toward the clamour.

A squaw emerged from a tepee not far from where Blue Pete stood concealed behind a tree. Under her arm she carried a naked papoose, and at her heels came two other small children. She set the papoose on the ground, and the other two squatted beside it. Then she hurried back into the tepee and returned with a large tin plate piled with meat and some kind of bread. Her maternal duty performed, she strolled away to a group of her sisters who had gathered in some excitement to listen to the barking dogs.

Blue Pete's mouth watered at the sight of the food piled on the single plate before the three children. Swiftly he crept into the open. The children saw him coming but showed no fear and made no outcry. With childishly curious eyes they watched him approach, all the time stuffing their mouths with what the plate contained.

But when he seized the plate and ran with it, their howls brought the squaws swiftly about, to send after the hurrying half-breed a chorus of protests. As Blue Pete ran he crammed the food in his mouth.

He had no fear of the squaws. They would not venture to follow him. And the men of the camp seemed to have rushed away for the chase.

But in that he was wrong. At the outcry the flap of a tepee was flung back, and an Indian pushed through. He caught a glimpse of the fleeing half-breed and, reaching back into the tepee for his rifle, sent a shot more or less wildly in pursuit. But, hurried though it was, it clipped the bark from a tree close to Blue Pete's side.

Angered at the whistle of the bullet so near him and emboldened by the food, he ducked out of sight and rounded back, to approach the camp from another direction. He was in time to see the Indian racing for the trees. There was no further danger, but the temptation to send a bullet close to the running Indian's feet was too great to resist. The Indian, surprised, jerked to a stop and dodged behind a rock. There, well protected, and aware now of the position of the stranger, he took careful aim and pulled the trigger.

But Blue Pete had fallen to the ground, and the bullet passed harmlessly over him. Still, a revolver against a rifle, he could not hope to fight it out, and by that time he was disgusted with himself. Rolling out of sight, he rose and ran.

"Gor-swizzle!" he growled. "Jes' makin' a tarnation fool o' muhself, like I allus do, th' Inspector says. But," defensively, and evading the point that accused him, "I hed to hev food, didn' I? Them kids kin git more, can't they?"

He noticed then that he still carried the empty plate, and he went back toward the camp and sent it sailing down the slope toward the tepees.

His hunger more or less satisfied, he tried to think that he felt better, but he did not succeed. He was uneasy. Once more he had let his ebullient spirits, his senseless anger, bring him to the attentions of the Indians in an unfavourable way.

"An' now lookit," he upbraided himself, "I got 'em all lookin' fer me. An' if them squaws seen me I gotta keep away from 'em. . . . An' how d'I know wot I want ain't thar in that very camp? Shure thing I dassent let them squaws see me ag'in. Huh! Me a 'tective! Me!"

He found his horse and rode on southward, peering hopefully into every valley he passed. Toward noon, just as he decided to explore a wider valley,

the sound of approaching horses sent him swiftly in among the trees. Tying his horse well out of sight, he returned to the edge of the forest and waited.

Half a dozen mounted Indians came into view from the valley. They rode single file, loping toward the open prairie at a fast pace. Each bore a rifle. They were the usual nondescript lot, all hatless and blanketed. All except one. He rode in the middle. Not only did he wear a hat, but his rotundity made him conspicuous among his companions. For several moments the half-breed's eyes wandered inquiringly over the unusual figure. But he was more interested in their destination. For they rode with evident purpose, and the ponies were above the average, all swift and fiery. That they had not come far was evident enough from the way they fought to be given their heads.

Blue Pete let them go, but his eyes followed them until a curve in the valley hid them from his view. Then he rode out and back along the way they had come; for in there somewhere must be their camp.

He had not far to go. As usual its location was announced by the barking of dogs, and he dismounted and approached with care. He was struck by the number of tepees. There were a score in sight, and evidence of others among the thinner trees at the other end of the valley. The band he had seen, he saw at a glance, consisted only of a chosen few, for a dozen Indians were in sight, most of them smoking, lolling about on the ground in a loose group. They had come together on the other side of the camp, and they appeared to be discussing something of importance, for their faces were turned inward and several talked at the same time, gesticulating with their pipes.

The squaws went about their unending tasks, drawing water from the stream that ran close by, cutting wood, attending to the children, throwing bits of discarded food to the ravenous dogs, mending torn canvas. Two of them squatted on the ground just below Blue Pete, working beads on moccasins. They, too, conversed in low, eager tones, but they were too distant for the half-breed to hear what they said.

For a long time he studied the Indian braves, examining each face in turn. Apparently disappointed, he lay back, his hands linked beneath his head. The fruitlessness of his search thus far irritated him. Always impatient, always driving straight to his goal, he felt beaten and discouraged. This sort of thing might continue for weeks with no better result. But what else could he hope for? To lie concealed and merely to watch from a distance for what he sought offered little promise. How could he be certain the camp was not the one he sought unless he had more and better opportunity to examine it at

close range? Riding from camp to camp, forced to keep out of sight, he would see only what happened to come before his eyes.

There was, he decided, one course only that offered success: he must live with the Indians, be one of them, talk to them and hear them talking. Then, even if the camp he chose did not end his quest, he might learn through it the one that would. For, while the camps were entirely separate in their organisation, they must be in touch with one another; the news of one must eventually reach the others and be discussed.

The decision to alter his tactics was established enough, but how was he to develop his new plan? To be accepted in an Indian encampment required much more than desire. Naturally suspicious of strangers, the Indians wished only to be left alone. And that prejudice against strangers must somehow be overcome. But how? Even if he found the answer, was he subtle enough, patient enough, to play the rôle required of him? For patience and subtlety were not for him.

Unhappy about it all, he rose and made his way thoughtfully back to his horse.

As he reached it a thought struck him, and he stopped and stared at the horse, a sheepish smile twisting his dark face. The smile broke into a scornful laugh.

“Gor-swizzle! Ef a c’yute seen me he’d know I rustled that cayuse. Keepin’ out o’ sight ain’t hard fer me, but this hoss ain’t Whiskers. Lookit that saddle! Lookit that bridle! An’ nobody rides a hoss like that but a Mountie, not in this country.”

With a self-deprecating shake of the head he loosened the cinch and removed the saddle. The bridle was a problem. He could get along well enough with no saddle, but he must have a bridle on a strange horse. He thought of the Indian’s pony that he might have stripped with its rider.

His thoughts returned to the camp he had just left. The camp ponies, he had noticed, were hobbled and loose at the upper end of the clearing. Somewhere within the tepees their saddles and bridles must be stored. Leaving the horse, he returned the way he had come and presently was once more on the hillside, looking down on the camp. The men were still grouped together, the squaws still fussing about. The dogs still prowled, chased away when they approached the tepees. For a long time he lay looking down on the peaceful scene.

One tepee, directly below where he lay, was in better repair than the others and was set a little apart. The trees grew close to it. The squaw who occupied it came and went, scarcely mingling with the others of her sex. After a time one of the Indians clambered lazily to his feet, strolled across to the tepee, and entered, the squaw making way for him. In a few moments he reappeared, packing his pipe, and rejoined his companions.

The half-breed's face lit up. Keeping well out of sight on the slope, he picked his way past the camp and crossed to the opposite slope. There, after satisfying himself as to his position, he drew his gun and fired twice in quick succession. The sound echoed through the valley. Even as its echoes still rang he was off at full speed to the other side of the camp.

As he expected, the shooting had brought an abrupt change in the life of the camp. The Indians were already on the move toward the spot, some carrying rifles. The dogs were out of sight, barking and baying as they roamed about, too cowardly to take up the chase without their masters. The squaws, clustered together, looked on in their phlegmatic way.

Blue Pete ran his eye anxiously over them. The young squaw from the tepee beneath him was not among them. But he dare not delay. In fact, the risk he ran sent a thrill through him. Gliding from tree to tree, he dropped down the hillside toward the tepee. A stream rippled at the base of the slope. He might have leaped it, but he did not permit it even to break his stride; he was unconscious of its existence, since it offered no obstacle. In the final fringe of trees he lingered for a moment. The Indians had disappeared with the dogs, and the group of squaws was hidden by the tepees. Before him, not twenty paces away, was the tepee on which his attention was fixed.

The sound of movement within brought a low grunt of disappointment. There were other tepees, but they were too distant and too exposed. Besides, he had set his mind on the one before him. There was nothing to do but to go on and take the risk.

His eye lit on an old stove standing in the open beside the tepee. Quietly he moved across to it. As he passed into the open and around the tepee he saw with satisfaction that the attention of the squaws remained fixed on the other slope. Reaching the stove, he tipped over one of the tins and darted back.

As he expected, the squaw rushed out, thinking a dog had got into mischief. Blue Pete had thrown himself down close to the tepee. The canvas did not quite reach the ground, and he lay on his side so that he might see within. And his heart leaped as, just beyond reach, he saw a saddle and a

bridle lying on the bough-strewn floor. A quick slash of his knife opened the way. He reached in and grabbed, then, keeping the tepee between him and the squaw, he raced back into the trees.

He was just in time. For the squaw, returned to the tepee, saw the slit canvas, and immediately set up a howl. It brought the entire squaw population on the run.

Even far away beside his horse the din from the camp reached the half-breed. Hastily he adjusted the Indian saddle and bridle to the police horse and, looking about, selected the fork of a large tree and in it deposited the police equipment and his own bundle of clothing. The rifle he retained. That done, elated by his success, he mounted and rode away.

His satisfaction, however, was short-lived. Presently a new problem brought the wrinkles back to his forehead. To what purpose all this provision for concealing the source of the horse he rode, if in so doing he blocked every chance of joining the Indians? Besides, there was so much about him now that might be recognised by the rightful owners.

He rubbed his nose thoughtfully and grunted with dismay. "Jes' like Mira 'n' th' Inspector says—I work too durn fast. I dassent let them Neches see this cayuse like it was, an' now I dassent let them see it or me as we are. . . . Reckon I bes' skin back to Montany whar I ain' got nothin' to hide —'cause 'twudn' be no use to try. Me a 'tective! Me!"

The new problem so occupied his mind that he rode for a long time with no thought of direction or destination. He was brought back abruptly to the world about him by the sound of a distant rifle shot. He saw that he had come out from the foothills and was well away on the prairie. Gently rolling hills surrounded him, cutting off the view. Here and there bluffs of trees dotted the landscape, many of them sheltering herds of cattle that appeared to be untended. It was, he recognised, perfect cattle country, with good grass, ample shelter, and constant water.

Advancing toward the shot, merely curious as yet, he climbed a long slope. As he reached the top he halted, his eyes gleaming with excitement. Far away a group of riders loped easily about in a narrow circle. And far beyond them, following a much larger circle, raced three antelopes, their graceful leaps carrying them along at a speed no horse could rival. He had hunted antelope many a time, and he knew their ways. Pursued, they seldom fled straight from their pursuers but ran in a wide circle, their eyes always on the hunters. It was their undoing.

The Indians, Blue Pete quickly recognised, were the half-dozen he had seen that morning riding out from the camp.

Retreating out of sight, he considered what to do next. But the hunt kept intruding on his plans; he found himself more interested, for some reason, in the half-dozen Indian hunters. And so he started to circle them, in order to reach a height that would bring him nearer without being seen.

As he emerged into the more open country a group of ranch buildings came into view a couple of miles to the south. The sight gave him an idea, and he spurred toward them. A two-strand wire fence barred his way, and he followed it until he reached a gate. As he let himself through and came nearer the buildings their outward luxury and completeness almost made him turn back. But he closed his teeth and went on.

“Nobs!” he ejaculated scornfully. “But,” with a burst of loyalty, “they ain’ got nothin’ on the 3-Bar-Y, not by a long shot they ain’t. Mira ’n’ me we got wot it takes fer good cattle-raisin’, an’ that’s all that matters. . . . An’ I hope,” he added with a wry grin, “they ain’ got nothin’ on *me*.”

A gentle slope fell away before him. As he neared the ranch house the door opened and a heavily-built man appeared in the doorway, watching him curiously. A sudden panic almost sent the half-breed hurriedly about. Suppose the man recognised the police horse! What if a Mountie was about! And what would he have to say for himself in any case? He looked down at his clothes and screwed up one eye doubtfully. But he continued toward the house.

The man greeted him genially: “Hello, stranger! Glad to see you. Are you lost?”

There was evidence of culture in his voice, as well as of honest welcome.

“No, sir, not lost,” replied the half-breed uneasily. “Not zackly wot yuh’d call lost. Cudn’ git lost with them mountains thar. But I never bin in these parts before.”

The man came eagerly down the steps. “Tickled to death to meet you, anyway. We don’t see many strangers down here at the Circle R. Put your horse up and come in. Good beast you have there.”

But Blue Pete had no thought of more intimacy than he could avoid; all he wished was to finish what he had come to do, and to escape with few questions to be answered.

“Reckon not, thanks, mister. Jes’ wanna fin’ a place to store muh cayuse fer a few days.”

A slight look of suspicion came into the man’s eyes, and he looked horse and rider over more critically.

“Want to sell the animal?”

“Not wot yuh’d notice. I jes’ don’ want him fer a few days.”

“Riding make you sore or what?” The man’s eyes twinkled. “I used to feel it when I came out first. I suppose I’m calloused now where it catches you.”

Blue Pete dismounted. The man watched with widening eyes. He laughed deprecatingly.

“When I look at those legs I know you don’t need to answer about being sore from riding. You’ve spent your life on horseback; you’ve got yourself shaped to it. But what’s up? You can leave your horse here for the rest of its life; but if I had a horse like that I’d keep my eye on it.”

“Reckon you’ll do that fer me,” said the half-breed, with a smile. “I’m goin’ huntin’ in the foothills, an’ a hoss is apt to be in the way. Got critters in them hills to shoot?”

“Oh, sure we have. There are cougars, and wild cats, and now and then wolves. And the more you shoot, the better for our herds. There’s bear, too, but they’ll be holing in very soon now.” He looked about at the dark sky. “By the look of things they should hurry. Storm coming, don’t you think?”

“Shure is.”

“Hadn’t you better stay around till it’s over? I’d be glad to have you.”

“Oh, I kin take care o’ muhself. Got to git in some huntin’. Don’t hev much whar I come from. Jes’ antelopes, an’ a wolf er two.”

“Where do you come from, may I ask?”

“Cowpunchin’ Gleichen way. Takin’ a bit of a holiday.”

The man gravely examined the sky. “If you get yourself caught in that storm you won’t think it a holiday. It’s going to be pretty bad; the first September storm always is. This one looks as if it’ll be a snorter. West of here you won’t find anyone but Indians.” He stopped and laughed in an embarrassed way. “But perhaps you’ve friends among them. If you have you’ll be all right. There are a dozen little camps there in the foothills, and

they manage to live through the coldest winters. . . . If you don't know them, perhaps I'd better warn you: they don't like strangers about the camps. The Piegans are the worst; they don't mix. I don't have anything to do with any of them."

He had talked most of the time with his eye on the horse. Now he stepped around it.

"Fine beast, I tell you. Not a bronco, of course."

"Naw. Friend brought him from Winnipeg way. I'll pay for his keep."

"Not at the Circle R you won't. How long do you expect to be around?"

"Week er two. Mebbe longer."

They moved toward the stable, a low, freshly-painted building further in the hollow.

"I hope you don't mind my asking if you're an Indian."

"Mother was Injun."

The man opened the stable door and stood aside for half-breed and horse to enter. "The stall at the end." He followed over a clean cement floor that made Blue Pete's eyes open wide with admiration.

"Better be careful among the Indians," the rancher advised.

"Yuh mean they don' like a breed. Reckon I'm useta it. Wot's the cost?"

"For the horse? Nothing, of course."

"But I gotta pay, mister. Can't le'e the hoss ef yuh won't let me pay."

The man laughed in an embarrassed way. But Blue Pete was determined and after a time they came to terms.

"Now come in and have a bite. And if you insist on paying for that, you can take your horse and go."

Blue Pete shook his head. "Ain't hungry. Jes' et a good meal."

"Where did you get it?"

"The Neches. The Indians, I mean."

The rancher's eyes narrowed with renewed suspicion, but he said nothing. Blue Pete stood admiring the stable.

"Mind ef I send the cayuse to do the huntin' 'stead o' me? I'll stay here."

“My wife now and then makes a remark like that,” laughed the man. “Well, if you won’t honour us by dining with us, here’s hoping you get a bagful of cougars. And the horse’ll be waiting for you if you’re gone a year. Give my compliments—with bullets—to the mountain lions. They’re too fond of calves. You look as if you can use that rifle you have.”

CHAPTER XXIII

A LIFE-SAVER

Blue Pete was glad to get away. The owner of the ranch had been sincere in his welcome, as all ranchers are, but he was plainly puzzled. The horse was an unusual animal for a cowpuncher to ride, and the half-breed wondered if there was not some private mark carried by the Mounted Police horses of the district, and if the rancher had noticed it. Perhaps it was a foolish risk to leave the horse where the police might visit at any time.

His worry was not unfounded. The rancher continued to watch him out of sight, and he did not fail to notice that his late visitor took the shortest route to the nearest cover. Then he returned to the stable and examined the horse more carefully.

But there was no mark to betray its ownership, and after a time he made his way to the house to explain to his wife why they would have no company to meals.

In the meantime Blue Pete was making time over the prairie. He had quickly got himself out of sight, and in a bluff he stopped to make sure there was no one about. He was increasingly uneasy and worried. If the Mounted Police found the horse they would know now where to look for him. In addition, unmounted, everything looked different. So long had he viewed the world from the back of a horse that it bewildered him to be forced to get about in any other way.

And still he had no plan for getting closer to the Indians.

The thought reminded him of the necessity of further disguise, and he made for the nearest water, searching through the grass at the edge of the stream as he went. . . . Presently he followed the stream to where it vanished among the trees, and in a few minutes he reappeared. The eyes were still crooked, the nose smashed, the face scarred, but the tell-tale coppery-bluish shade was gone from his cheeks. His face was darker now and duller, and when he walked, that drooping left shoulder was raised. He had, too, acquired a slight limp. The metal studs were lacking from the band of his sombrero.

Still thoughtful and unsatisfied, he wandered back into the open, scarcely aware of the direction he took. But back in his mind must have lingered some tinge of the curiosity he had felt about the Indian hunters.

The sound of a rifle shot brought his mind back with a snap to the antelope hunt, and he hurried forward. The chase had worked toward the south, and from the crest of a rise he watched it.

The three antelopes were still running. The circle they followed kept them almost half a mile from their pursuers, however the Indians altered their position. The hunters wasted few shots; they knew their time would come. Blue Pete watched to see what plan they had in mind.

The stout Indian he had noticed in the centre of the line that morning detached himself from his companions. He rode about them, following the course of the antelopes. Two of the Indians, apparently impatient, raised their rifles; but he signalled to them not to shoot, and they obeyed. For several minutes he continued to circle, working the deer southward. Suddenly he raised his rifle and, without seeming to take aim, pulled the trigger. The leading antelope leaped into the air and crashed on its head, turning a complete somersault. It was dead.

It was a difficult shot and swiftly taken, and Blue Pete whistled his admiration, for the hunter's pony had been restless. Almost before the deer reached the ground the hunter wheeled about and, digging his spurs into his mount, dashed across the circle away from the antelopes. In that direction the ground fell sharply away. Into the depths beyond he disappeared. Unsuspecting the danger that lay in wait for them on the other side of the circle, the deer continued their flight. As they reached the drop the hunter suddenly spurred into view. The deer, in a panic, separated and darted away. But they were not swift enough. Scorning his rifle, the Indian fired with his revolver at a distance of thirty yards. The antelope stumbled but kept on. But a second shot rang out, and the animal dropped sideways, a leg broken.

It was a circus scene. Deer and pony were in full flight, yet both shots had gone exactly where the Indian planned. In his excitement and admiration Blue Pete stood upright and waved.

“Gor-swizzle, I mighta missed it muhself.”

Then, remembering, he tumbled back out of sight. The third antelope, thoroughly alarmed now, had set off straight toward the south. A single Indian spurred after it. They were coming almost straight for Blue Pete, and he looked about for a place to hide. But there was no cover he could hope to reach in time, and so he lay still and waited.

Not fifty yards away the antelope bounded into view, and a few moments later came the Indian. He was half a mile behind, but the deer was tiring, and the pony was comparatively fresh. The pair disappeared in the rolling country.

For a time Blue Pete was content to watch the other Indians cutting up the two antelopes that had been brought down. But all the time, almost unconsciously, his ear was turned in the direction where deer and Indian had disappeared. He listened for a shot.

When none came, curious, he started in that direction.

Presently he found himself running, and he wondered at it. A strange excitement surged through him, but even in his surprise he did not slacken his pace. In a long, rangey stride he covered the ground with astonishing speed. He topped a rise. Far to the south the antelope was visible. It ran wearily and slowly, and had turned more toward the open prairie. The Indian was nowhere in sight. Blue Pete kept on.

It was the pony he saw first. Riderless, it moved about in a circle, its head turned to escape a trailing rein. The Indian he found lying beside a rock, groaning with pain and only half conscious. As the half-breed called out to him he turned his head painfully, but he gave no sign of relief or welcome. Once a Piegan, always a Piegan, unsocial, solitary, inhospitable.

Thinking swiftly, Blue Pete addressed him in the Cree language: "You're hurt. Where do you live?"

The Indian did not understand, but he pointed to his twisted ankle and felt gingerly at his side. Blue Pete nodded. He saw that fortune had played into his hands in surprising fashion. He smiled and nodded again.

The Indian pointed to his pony, and Blue Pete set out to capture it. He did not try hard, for he feared that, once in the saddle, the Indian would be through with him. The pony evaded him. The Indian gesticulated in the direction of his companions, but Blue Pete feigned not to understand.

At last he made signs that he intended to carry the injured man to his camp, and the latter indicated the direction. Tenderly Blue Pete raised him from the ground and turned him over his shoulder.

He had no delusions about the size of the task he had set himself. The Indian encampment, he figured, must be at least five or six miles away. There was also the chance that the other Indians might overtake him and relieve him of his burden. His rifle he carried in his hand.

Thus he set off. The afternoon was passing; it would be dark before he could reach the camp. But there was nothing else to do toward carrying through his plan, and the very strain of the task would stand him in good stead with the other Indians. Resting at frequent intervals, he plodded along. After a time the Indian was silent, and Blue Pete knew that he had fainted.

He lingered a little then, waiting for darkness.

As usual the dogs announced his approach and came swarming about him. A dozen Indians hurried after them, some bearing torches. Several were mounted, evidently about to start away on a search for their missing comrade.

Into their midst Blue Pete bore his burden in silence and gently laid the unconscious man at their feet. He tried to explain in Cree, but they understood nothing except that a strange Indian had found the injured man and had brought him in.

Someone approached from the darkness. It was the stout one whose shooting had won the half-breed's admiration. Dropping to his knees beside the unconscious Indian, he felt his pulse. The light of the torches fell on his face. Blue Pete slunk back into the shadows.

CHAPTER XXIV

COMPLICATIONS

The circle behind him did not open to let him through. The stout Indian raised his face.

“Where did you find him?” he inquired in Blackfoot.

Caught unprepared, Blue Pete almost forgot the rôle he had assumed. But he caught himself in time and shook his head ununderstandingly. The Indian did not repeat the question, but for a moment or two his glance lingered over the darkened face of the half-breed. Then he returned to the man lying before him. The other Indians gabbled excitedly about them, but they appeared to be willing to leave everything to their stout companion.

Issuing swift and confident directions, the latter set to work on a splint for the broken ankle. With dexterous fingers and, except for his orders, in complete silence, he finished the job and rose.

“Carry him to his tepee,” he ordered in Blackfoot.

Suddenly he faced Blue Pete.

“Where did you come from?”

It was spoken in Sioux, and for the moment Blue Pete was bewildered. He hesitated; he could not remember what dialect he had used.

The other repeated the question, adding in a casual tone as he turned away: “Do you speak Sioux?”

Blue Pete remembered—but not enough. “No,” he replied in Cree. “I speak Cree.”

The Indian’s eyes crinkled. “But I see you understand Sioux.”

“A little.”

“And perhaps English as well,” he added in English.

Blue Pete scowled and shook his head. “You speak many languages,” he remarked admiringly.

“I’ve lived in many places,” was the reply. “My name is Round Owl. What do they call you where you come from?” He spoke now in Cree.

“Thunder Face.”

“I can see why. Where do you come from?”

“From across the Border.”

“But you have no horse.”

Blue Pete glanced about with affected nervousness. “I was chased by the Mounted Police. They shot my bronco. I escaped. I’ve walked almost from Calgary.”

Two of the Indians had borne their injured comrade away. The others were grouped about, listening but understanding nothing. Only one appeared to make out something of the dialogue. He stepped forward now. He appeared to be a chief.

“Who is the stranger?” he inquired of Round Owl. And when he was told: “Thunder Face is welcome.”

Round Owl interpreted.

“Perhaps,” suggested the chief, “Thunder Face will live with you in your tepee.”

But Round Owl shook his head. “No, I prefer to live alone. His real friend is Leaping Rabbit. There is room in his tepee.”

Blue Pete stood mute, feigning not to understand, but a turmoil of thoughts tumbled about in his mind. For almost the first time in his life he was frightened. It was not physical in origin, though he fully appreciated the danger to which he had unwittingly exposed himself. What really alarmed him was that the unexpected situation into which he had walked threatened to upset all his plans, to introduce a struggle between duty and desire; he knew which should win but was not so sure which would. He looked wildly about.

But as Round Owl spoke composure of a sort returned. This was, after all, what he had sought, and now that he had won it he was not likely to turn his back on it.

Round Owl turned to him. “You’ll be more comfortable with Leaping Rabbit. He’s the one you brought in. His tepee is fresher and warmer, and he has a woman to cook for him. You’ll be glad of warmth and comfort, for there’s a bad storm on the way. Is it not so—the storm?” he inquired of the chief.

The latter raised both hands and let them flutter to his side. "Great blizzard will come soon. Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the next day, perhaps not for three days. But it will come."

It was no news to the half-breed. Save for what difference the foothills might make in the storm, he knew it would be unusually severe when it did come. Every sign pointed to that, not only the persistent darkness of the sky but the delay. In there in the foothills it might be modified by intruding heights and forest, but it would probably be marked by deeper snow because of its nearness to the mountains from which it came. And for the first time his mind turned to a consideration of what it might mean to him. At the best it would handicap his movements, not only as a physical obstacle to getting about but as a discouragement of any reasonable excuse for wandering.

It seemed to him then that he must find some way, and quickly, of leaving the camp.

Leaping Rabbit's tepee, he found, was as comfortable as Round Owl had described it. It was many years since Blue Pete had lived as an Indian, and he looked forward to it with misgiving. The lack of comfort did not appal him, since he had spent more nights in the open than under cover, and in all sorts of weather. Ever since he had married Mira Stanton the comparative luxury of the ranch house at the 3-Bar-Y had failed to alter his manner of life. To sleep in wet clothing, to ride in the teeth of a gale, to find shelter in a snowbank in a howling blizzard—all these presented no terrors. But with Indian dirt he had nothing in common, and his hatred of them and contempt for them made him fear that he might be unable to conceal his feelings.

Leaping Rabbit was something of a sybarite, indeed. He was young and, Blue Pete gathered, had not long been married to the buxom, good-looking squaw who attended humbly to his wants. That in itself offered some embarrassment, for the tepee was but one room, of course. Still, the best arrangement possible had been made. Except in the centre, where a cleared space was left for the fire in cold weather, the floor was covered with poles on which was laid a thick layer of evergreen boughs. The canvas of the tepee, too, was unusually whole, so that when the flaps were drawn before the entrance and at the peak, the interior was dry and draughtless.

The squaw must have heard the arrangement, for by the time Blue Pete reached the tepee a thick bed of spruce boughs was arranged for him just inside the opening. On another such bed at the back lay Leaping Rabbit. Two cheap home-made candles flickered and spluttered in wooden holders held well away from the canvas. The squaw, silent, inconspicuous in the

darkest corner, her eyes reflecting the candle-light, rose from beside her mate's couch as the half-breed entered, and stood looking at him.

Something about her disturbed him, and he turned his back and dropped to his bed, to stare fixedly through the opening into the night. But so long as the candles burned he knew that, even in the midst of ministrations to her husband, the squaw's eyes seldom left him.

An Indian pushed his head through the opening from without and dropped a pair of comparatively clean blankets beside him. It was a final invitation to make himself at home. It did not surprise him for, unstable and untrustworthy as most Indians are with strangers, they seldom forget a debt.

Throughout the night he kept waking, and, in his uncanny way, he knew that within the tepee another was seldom asleep. The squaw had thrown herself down beside her husband, after putting out the candles, and though there was scarcely a rustle of the boughs, Blue Pete felt that she was listening.

Next day he was restless and undecided. In a few hours he satisfied himself that the task he had set himself was little likely to be completed there. He must move on. But he had sufficient control of himself to appear contented and grateful. The danger was that he might forget and speak to the Indians in their own language; but his inability, as they thought, to understand made them feel free to talk before him. He learned that they had the whole story as he had told it to Round Owl, and that they had as yet no suspicion of the truth. Indeed, Round Owl had elaborated somewhat on the story, leaving the impression that the newcomer was wanted by the Mounted Police. That in itself made him welcome, for the Indians of the West can never get it out of their minds that the theft of their country may be laid to the forces of the law, the one visible agency they see.

In his rounds the half-breed carefully avoided Round Owl. And then he became aware that there was no further need for care, since Round Owl had disappeared.

That was on the second day. In the meantime the Indians were preparing, in their usual last-minute way, for the approaching storm. Their tepees were permanent, but certain studied adjustments were called for and rents in the canvas must be repaired. But the main task was provision for the protection of their ponies. Running loose, the little animals would weather any storm, but hobbled and kept at hand something had to be done for them. The squaws, therefore, were set at the cutting of stout boughs, while the braves

interlaced them with poles to form a roof. The thick forest to the west would protect the ponies from the wind.

For one day more Blue Pete remained at the camp. By that time the Indians paid little attention to him, even when he joined them in their work. On the third day they scattered through the forest, and all through the day the sound of firearms bore to the camp the story of the hunt to provide food in case the storm outlasted the supply they had on hand. In the evening they returned laden with rabbits, most of which had been trapped, and with two brown bears they had been lucky enough to disturb as they were turning in for their winter sleep. The whole camp was festive at the fresh supply of meat. It meant, too, more candles and furs.

The weather had grown noticeably more threatening, and a restlessness settled over the camp. On Friday no Indian wandered far from the tepees. The storm was imminent, and the actions of the Indians convinced Blue Pete that its severity threatened to be greater even than he foresaw.

That day several of the younger Indians organised a shooting contest with their revolvers, using a bared circle on a tree trunk for a target. Their marksmanship was indifferent, since they had little practice with small arms. Blue Pete watched them with growing impatience, itching to give them a lesson. He had discovered the wisdom of using the tepee as little as necessary, for in the squaw's attentions he scented trouble from Leaping Rabbit. He had even taken to absenting himself for meals, since every tepee in the camp was open to him.

The best marksman among the young braves, looking about for approval, spotted the half-breed. He beckoned, holding out his gun. The target had been changed. It was now a small piece of paper impinged on a twig that swayed in the wind. Not an Indian had so much as touched the moving mark. They gathered about the half-breed, pressing him with gesticulations to try his hand.

When he could refuse no longer he shoved aside the proffered gun and drew his own. An eager, supercilious smile twisted his lips. And then, just in time, he remembered. Above all he must attract no more attention; the Indians must not be impressed enough to ask further questions. If he shot as he could they might well recall stories they had heard of him; some of them were certain to have filtered through the tribes. And so he took what looked like unduly careful aim and fired. The paper swayed on. He fired again, irritably. The paper was undisturbed.

With a deprecating, modest shrug he pocketed his gun and turned away. The movement brought him face to face with Round Owl. And on the Indian's face was a curious, sly smile.

On the following day, disturbed by that smile, Blue Pete looked about for him and failed to find him. Once more he had left the encampment. And, since he dare not inquire in Blackfoot, he had no means of finding where the Indian had gone. Wandering from tepee to tepee, he listened to their conversation, but it told him nothing. Apparently the camp was accustomed to these unannounced departures and arrivals.

That, together with the fact that the attentions of Leaping Rabbit's squaw became more flagrant and persistent, decided him that it was time to leave at any cost. To be sure the storm was now an hourly menace, but he dare not let even that detain him. The wind had risen, the sky was blacker with the familiar blackness that foretells snow. When it came it might well force him to remain for days, and that he knew he could not face.

He debated with himself whether to vanish without an explanation. He had no way, so far as they knew, of telling them anything unless Round Owl returned to interpret. To disappear would be simple enough, since he was free to wander where he willed. But he must take at least one blanket, for the temperature was falling rapidly. The snow in itself was not so dangerous as the cold. Even last night the two blankets they had given him were scarcely enough.

But how was he to get a blanket from the tepee without arousing suspicion? Leaping Rabbit already eyed him in none too friendly a manner, and the squaw had made herself a nuisance. Looking about, he noticed that almost every Indian in the camp went about now with a blanket over his shoulders. And so, entering the tepee, shivering a little, he picked up one of the blankets and draped it about him.

The squaw, however, complicated it. Hurrying to him, she snatched up the second blanket and threw it across his back.

A tingle of danger warned the half-breed and he turned. Leaping Rabbit's hand was reaching toward his rifle. With a scowl at the squaw Blue Pete shrugged the second blanket from his shoulders and went out, picking up his own rifle from where it leaned close to the opening.

There was nothing to arouse suspicion in wandering off with a rifle into the forest, except that it was rather late in the afternoon. At such an hour it was scarcely reasonable to expect to find any game worth shooting at. But

he kept on into the trees toward the west. When well out of sight of the camp he turned back toward the east. He increased his pace.

CHAPTER XXV

TRAILED

He did not go far. In among the trees it was almost dark, and as he hurried along in the growing chill of a threatening night a few snow-flakes drifted through the branches and fell warningly on his cheeks. It almost convinced him that he had chosen the wrong time to leave the protection of the camp. But even more compelling was another warning—that sixth sense of his.

Someone was following him!

Gradually he slackened his pace. The blanket on his shoulders he slipped further back; the rifle he brought forward. He had been working east, straight from the camp toward the prairie. Now he shifted his direction, circling back. After a time it brought him to the open valley. There, feeling safer, he turned toward the camp.

Under any other condition it would have delighted him to turn the tables on his pursuer. He had done it many a time, and it always gave him a thrill. But now that might well be his undoing. He must on no account give the Indians reason for thinking he had cause for fear. The one who followed him must be an Indian, of course. Round Owl? Perhaps. But that would mean that he must have been hovering about the camp just to keep an eye on him, Blue Pete. It really mattered little who it was. The one thing necessary was to get well away from the camp and beyond pursuit before they missed him or had reason to suspect that he was in flight.

As he went along, careful to avoid any appearance of suspicion or alarm, he was oppressed by the thought that there was more in the mind of the one who trailed him than mere curiosity. The warning he had received was of real and imminent danger.

It was, therefore, with a feeling of relief that he came within sight of the camp. It was now quite dark, so that he was little more than a shadow when he turned in among the tepees. The dogs had grown accustomed to him and did not bark, so that he advanced in complete silence. A squaw appeared in a suddenly raised flap to empty a can of water and stared at him with frightened eyes before recognising him. Every tepee had its light, some equipped with lamps, more with candles, and two with flaming pine knots

thrust into the earth in the centre of the tepee. In the flickering light every patch was visible, as well as the outlines of the fourteen poles that furnished the foundation for the canvas. It made an untidy picture.

Lazily he wandered through them, at first directing his steps automatically toward Leaping Rabbit's tepee. But as he went along a thought entered his head and he faded away into a small group of tepees set up at the very margin of the forest. There, safe from observation, he ran silently into the trees and turned back toward the spot where he had last been conscious of being followed. Deep in the shadows he waited, listening for the slightest sound. He was intensely curious. There was something about the affair that he felt it would pay him to understand. Gun in hand, he waited with the patience of the Indian.

For twenty minutes he heard nothing suspicious. Yet he knew he was not alone there in the dark. Presently from not far to the right came a slight sound. It might be a prowling night animal, yet he did not think so. Instinct warned him that a human being stood near, someone patient as himself, yet unaware that he was there.

He dare not move. That pair of ears was probably little less keen than his own.

Then across the lighted canvas of a tepee directly below him a shadow flitted. Blue Pete crept down toward it. That the dogs did not set up their warning howl informed him that the stranger was an Indian, yet not necessarily one of the camp braves. Silently he worked along, avoiding the more brightly lighted tepees.

He was near Leaping Rabbit's tepee when the darkness behind it, toward the trees, appeared to his sharp eyes to alter its consistency. Instantly he stopped. But what had been there was gone almost immediately. Who or what was it, and what was it doing there? What had disturbed it? Had he himself been seen or heard? He waited. But when, after several minutes, nothing further happened, he moved along.

As he neared the tepee Leaping Rabbit's squaw came through the flap and stood looking about her.

Swiftly he came to a decision. Stepping forward, he brushed past her and entered the tepee. Throwing himself on the boughs that were his bed, he turned his back and appeared to settle himself for the night. Leaping Rabbit's feverish eyes had watched every move, but the half-breed's hurried entrance almost at the moment the squaw left the tepee had allayed his suspicions.

Presently the squaw returned, glanced angrily toward the half-breed, blew out the candles, and by the rustle of the boughs he knew that she had thrown herself down beside her husband.

He could not sleep, and for a long time he lay staring through the small hole left at the peak of the tepee. Lying thus, both ears were free, and he found himself listening. He could not get from his mind that shadow he had seen behind the tepee, or the unknown who had followed him through the forest; and the sense of impending danger increased.

Time passed. Sleep still evaded him. Suddenly a tingle shot through him, and he held his breath. Something was out there beyond the frail canvas of the tepee, close beside him! There was no sound that he could identify, but he knew it as well as if he saw it.

With a sleepy grunt he rolled swiftly toward the centre of the tepee, turning so that he faced the wall. As he looked, the darkness seemed to become less opaque. The canvas was being forced slowly upward!

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BLIZZARD

The canvas was distinctly moving, yet there was no sound, and only his sharp eye detected the slightly lighter world outside through the growing opening. Had he not been so wide awake and intent on the spot he would have suspected nothing. Then the opening was partly filled—and something slashed through the boughs and thudded into the underlying poles.

Still he did not move. He was safe, and that was all that mattered at the moment. He dare not rouse the camp; he could not afford to bring himself under more curious investigation. He could not hope to allay the suspicions that would be aroused. Besides, he dare not expose his knowledge of their language.

At any rate, the hand that had struck at him was by now well beyond pursuit.

Carefully Blue Pete reached out in the dark. His groping hand encountered a knife thrust deeply into one of the poles that formed the foundation for the boughs of his bed. He eased it loose, thrust it in his belt, and fell asleep where he lay.

Next morning he gave no sign of what had happened. The day was very cold for September and was growing even colder, with light snow blowing gustily about. The sky was almost black.

The threat of the coming storm only served to hasten his departure. He could not face being stormbound in the camp. Rather he would risk the wildest storm. Yet he dare not leave immediately. And so he spent a couple of hours wandering about, listening to every word, hoping to get some clue to his assailant. Once he ventured to pronounce Round Owl's name in an inquiring way. The group to whom he addressed himself must have understood, but no one spoke. It warned him to be careful.

When ten o'clock came he set out once more, carrying the blanket over his shoulders. First to the west, then turning to the east when out of sight of the camp; and this time he determined that nothing, no one, would force him to turn back. When darkness came the Indians would wonder, of course, but

not until they found him absent in the morning would their suspicions be aroused.

He went along with every nerve, every sense, alert. He had proof enough now that the danger of which he had been conscious the previous afternoon had been real enough. But this time, if it threatened again, he would have something to say to it.

He was not, however, surprised when, hours later, he had felt no recurrence of the warning. Probably the unknown had departed with the idea that the knife now resting in Blue Pete's belt had been his death.

He increased his pace. He must reach another encampment before the storm broke.

In that hope he was destined to fail. Snow commenced to drift down in large, lazy flakes. It gathered on the branches over his head, and the ground in the clearings was quickly white with it. And early in the afternoon the storm burst in full fury. The wind rose deafeningly, and the snowfall thickened, blotting out the view. In among the trees he was not aware of its full force. But he had reason to know how much colder it had become.

He was familiar with the sort of blizzard it was. Almost every September the month is marked by some such storm. The wind blows with nerve-racking, blinding, stinging force, and the snow, falling like a blanket, sometimes for two or three days, is whipped up and about until no living thing can face it. It is a time of tragedy to herders and cattle, and of perilous rescue for the Mounted Police. Cattle drift before it over cliffs, into sloughs, banking up against fences and freezing to death where they stand. Oldtimers, overtaken by it, burrow into a drift and await the end of the storm. For nothing but a white wall is visible, and all sense of direction is lost. Sometimes, too, the cold is intense. Each storm exacts its toll of human and animal life.

And a few days later the ground is bare and dry, with the sun shining warmly, flowers blooming, and real winter a month or two away.

When he reached the last trees of the forest Blue Pete hesitated. In there he was comparatively safe. Once out in the open he would face the full fury of the blizzard, and only as he stood with half-closed eyes trying to peer into it did he realise how severe it was.

As usual, opposition and a sense of threatened defeat made him defiant, and he bent his head and stalked out into the open.

His plan was to work south, to find another valley and approach some new Indian encampment. Where he would take shelter then did not occur to him to consider.

The moment he was clear of the trees he realised that he had underestimated the force of the blizzard. He could see for only a few yards, and even within that distance everything was hazy and out of proportion. The world was a dull, whirling, white cloud. But, folding the blanket more tightly about him, he dropped his face and went on, maintaining direction by keeping the wind on his right side.

Familiar as he was with blizzards, he had not allowed for its actual thrusting force. Even with the wind on his side he was driven before it, and presently he realised that he had turned his back to it.

At the discovery he pulled up. How long he had worked in that direction he had no way of knowing. Like the cattle he had simply taken the way of least resistance, his attention absorbed in his own comfort. Then for a time he plodded stubbornly southward, leaning against the wind. But human will and human strength were incapable of persisting, and once more he found himself running before the blizzard.

Only then did it occur to him that all that mattered now was to reach some refuge. The few moments he had stood debating with himself, fixing direction, had told on him: his legs were almost numb, and his brain momentarily refused to work. To stand, he knew, meant certain death. He must keep moving—moving—moving. The wind tore through the blanket and the extra mackinaw.

A little later he noticed with a shudder of alarm that the direction of the wind could no longer be relied on; it seemed to blow from all directions.

Panting, he pulled up. But he could not stand still. He could feel himself growing stiff, and a desire to lie down, to rest, swept over him. It was not that he was tired but that every movement was painful, a struggle against nature. It was so foolish to keep on walking. . . . The thought in itself warned him and, settling the blanket more tightly about his shoulders, he struggled on.

Above everything he must keep his mind from lingering over the desire to lie down. He thought of the Circle R where he had left the horse. It must be somewhere not so far away now. He might find it—or he might fight his way back to the comparative shelter of the forest. But he had no idea where either lay, and he was as apt to come on either by walking blindly on.

He wakened with a start to the fact that his mind had been wandering over warm rooms—tepees—familiar retreats in the Cypress Hills—the 3-Bar-Y—Mira. The blanket, though as he wore it now it protected face and neck, blew out with the wind, admitting the snow. The rifle slung over his back dragged painfully at his shoulders, so that he stumbled. Only by the grimmest determination did he keep from dropping it.

It came home to him with no unsettling terror that he could not continue much longer.

Suddenly the blast of the gale brought a sound that made his head jerk up, and tore the blanket from about his ears. A revolver-shot! He stood still, the blood tingling in his veins, every atom of inertia and defeat gone. He knew what the shot meant: someone was calling for help. The sound had come from somewhere to his left, against the wind, so that it could not be far away. Shielding his lips, he shouted. No answer. He remembered his rifle and, unslinging it, fired a shot. Still no reply. He commenced to work down the wind, zig-zagging from side to side, shouting as he went. But the wind seemed to catch his cries and whisk them away.

Again and again he ploughed forward and halted to shout. Not a sound anywhere but the howling gale. He knew that he must have gone far enough; against the wind the shot could not have been heard further. Whimpering a little, he moved in a circle, feeling about in the deepening snow with his feet.

He plunged into a hollow and fell forward. As he pulled himself from it he heard a groan behind him. It had come down the wind this time, and he turned swiftly back and felt with his hand.

But it was his foot that encountered something at last that was not the snow or the ground—something soft and slightly yielding. He stooped to it. He laughed into the storm defiantly.

It was a man! He could see nothing, but his hand told him all he need know.

“Aw right, muh boy!” he shouted. “You ’n’ me’s goin’ to make it. We gotta, that’s all. Here, git up.” But the body remained limp and motionless. “Git up, durn yuh!”

His roaming hands encountered something that brought a thrill of fear and anxiety that made him gasp.

“Gor-swizzle! One o’ them Mounties!”

He stooped again, placed his hands beneath the policeman's shoulders, and raised him. The man was scarcely conscious, though a groan broke now and then from him and his legs made faint efforts to support him. Blue Pete let him back gently in the snow.

"Gotta git yuh movin', I reckon," he muttered.

He raised the inert form—dropped it—raised it—dropped it—rolled it about. He slapped the man's face, tossed him every way, shook him, swung his arms. The effort warmed himself but was telling on his strength.

"Gor-swizzle!" he panted. "Yuh gotta help yerself some. Ef yuh don't we're both done fer, durn yuh. I can't take yuh nowhar till yer het up a bit; yuh'd friz on muh back. We can't stick it out much longer."

He worked as he talked. For a second or two the wind died down, the snow ceased. And in that clear moment he saw the white face in the snow.

"My God! The Sarjunt! Sarjunt, Sarjunt! C'mon, Sarjunt, fer God's sake help me."

He set to work more violently, talking as he worked, begging, whimpering, scolding, swearing. And at last a touch of life beat through the limp form of the Sergeant. He grunted, sighed, tried to push his rescuer away. The half-breed shouted with joy.

"C'mon, Sarjunt. Go to it. Punch the daylights out o' me. Git real mad an' clout me a few. That's the boy. We'll make it yit, you 'n' me. Whar's yer hoss?"

But the Sergeant was too far gone to answer. All he knew was that he was uncomfortable, that he wanted to be left alone. But the blood was flowing again, and the half-breed dare not wait longer. Jerking the Sergeant to his feet, he let him fall over his shoulder. He had removed the blanket. He found it and threw it over his burden. Then he set off with the wind on his right side.

Somehow he knew now exactly where the Circle R lay. The instinct of the wounded animal had come to him. A mile perhaps, but he could do it. He had to. It was not that he thought of himself. Probably the Sergeant's fingers and toes were already frozen. His own blood raced warmly enough with the strain of reviving the faint spark remaining in the chilled man on his back. But unless he found shelter for him soon it would have been better to have left him to die where he was found, for he was past suffering then.

Across the wind he plunged. The strain was terrific, for the wind had increased, and the snow deepened with every passing minute. Never before had his strength served him so well. The Indian he had carried was nothing compared with the dead weight he bore now on his shoulders, with a gale fighting him at every step. He could rest then when he wished, too, but now he dare not stop. . . .

His chest came up against something that gave a little. The same resistance caught him across the thighs. It was a wire fence, the two-strand fence about the Circle R ranch buildings. The half-breed laughed aloud.

But which way to the gate? He turned to the right and ploughed into the wind, one hand sliding along the upper wire. The gate evaded him. In a panic he drew his revolver and pulled the trigger three times. It was the prairie distress signal. Anyone who heard it would understand, even without the blizzard. He stood still, supporting himself on the wire. He listened.

Faintly against the wind came two answering shots. He waited a few moments, then fired again.

Distant shouts reached him, and he shouted back. Three figures loomed through the white cloud. The half-breed laughed and turned his back to the fence.

“Here, take him. He’s mos’ done in. Git him whar it’s warm, an’ durn quick.”

The rancher’s cheery voice boomed at him: “Great work!”

The weight was lifted from his shoulders.

“Come on through. Hurry. We’ll have you both beside a roaring fire in no time. Here, Jim, take hold. . . . By Jove, a Mountie! All right, brother, keep close to us.”

But that was the last thing Blue Pete proposed to do. “S’long!” he shouted, and plunged away directly into the teeth of the gale.

CHAPTER XXVII

SERGEANT MAHON ASKS

In the heat of the room Sergeant Mahon revived quickly. He found himself stretched on a thick bearskin that covered a wide, comfortable couch. His eyes opened on a glowing fireplace, the air about him was almost stiflingly hot. A stoutish man and two women bent over him, chafing his hands and his ears. His shoes were off, and the soles of his feet tingled with the heat from the fire. He raised his head and stared blankly about.

“Where am I?”

“At the Circle R,” replied the man, stopping to wipe his face. “My name’s Suffron. You’ve had a damned close call.”

The Sergeant lay back and closed his eyes. “I’ll be all right,” he murmured weakly. “Thanks a lot. If you don’t mind I’ll have a nap.”

“Just the thing. Sleep the night through, if you can. But you’ll waken when you smell something to eat. There’s a bit of antelope steak frying for you. You’ll like it, and it’ll do you good.”

The trio moved away. The Sergeant turned his face to the wall and dropped instantly to sleep.

He slept for two hours and wakened, as Suffron had prophesied, to the odour of cooking meat. He was ravenous, and he raised himself on his elbow and turned, sliding his bare feet to the floor.

Suffron was seated on the other side of the fireplace, rocking easily in a large rocking-chair.

“Want your socks and boots? There they are beside you. Feeling a bit gaunt, eh? Well, that steak’ll fix that up.”

The Sergeant smiled without a word and stooped to pull on his socks.

“Still feeling a bit bewildered, are you?”

Sergeant Mahon held a hand to his head. “I think I remember now. I was lost in the blizzard. I remember that I got so cold I had to dismount and walk. I must have dropped the horse’s rein, for I found I hadn’t it, and my horse was gone.”

“If you’d stuck to it you’d have landed here all right; it found its way through the gate somehow. It’s comfortably in the stable now. We were on the watch for its rider. What happened then?”

“I don’t remember much. I think I fired my revolver.” He sank his head in his hands. “How did I get here?”

The rancher shook his head and frowned. “That’s almost as much a puzzle to me as to you. Someone brought you on his back, someone we hadn’t a chance to see. You can’t see out in that storm.” He held up his hand. The wind howled dismally, tugging at every angle of the building. “Some big fellow, that’s all I made out. He’d have to be big to carry you far in a storm like that. He brought you to the wire fence and fired his gun. We were listening for someone after your horse came in. You sure had luck that he ever stumbled on the fence and knew what to do. He might have wandered till kingdom-come, or rather till you both lay down to die, in the blizzard we’re getting right now. Listen. . . . It’s ten o’clock. You must be starving. I am, I know.”

The Sergeant heard the story as in a dream. Memory tugged dully at him.

“A big fellow, you say? He carried me? Where is he now?”

“That’s what worries me. He wouldn’t come in with us. Just ‘so-longed’ us and struck off into that storm. Anything might happen him out there. A bear, or a wild-cat, couldn’t live in that, and it’s miles to the nearest house. Even the trees are away to the west. Even if he reached them he’d freeze to death; it must be around zero right now, a bitter night. I’ve seen nothing worse in sixteen years. Usually it lets up in a few hours at this time of the year when it blows like that, but there’s no sign of a let-up yet. Indeed, it seems to be getting more violent.”

Sergeant Mahon shook his head in a muddled way.

“Did he—did he have crooked eyes, and a badly marked face—a broken nose, for one thing, and several scars. And one shoulder— —”

“By Jove, man,” Suffron broke in excitedly, “that’s the very fellow. I recognise the voice now. He came here first a few days ago and left a horse with me to board while he went hunting in the foothills. He wouldn’t come in either time.”

“Was he sort of a bluish colour?” Mahon inquired.

“He might have been. Let’s see—yes, I remember that now. He was here only a few minutes. He told me his mother was an Indian. Usually I hate

breeds, but he seemed rather decent. Insisted on paying for his horse's board! Imagine! Funny chap."

Sergeant Mahon smiled. "You might well say so."

"You know him?"

"I may." His lips clamped together. Blue Pete was in trouble. It would be unwise to identify him too definitely.

"Travelling with you perhaps?"

"No. But I think I may have met him."

The meal was brought in and set on the table by a woman Suffron introduced as his wife. She smiled with frank relief at seeing the Sergeant prepared to take his place at the table.

"We were afraid you'd been badly nipped," she said, "but you look fine."

"I feel fine," the Sergeant told her.

The second woman he had seen bending over him when he regained consciousness entered. She was young and pretty, with flaming red hair and freckled cheeks, a reproduction in some respects of her mother.

"You must be a new man in the Macleod detachment," said Suffron, as they commenced to eat. "I know them all."

"I'm not in that detachment. I'm from Medicine Hat."

The rancher looked surprised. "I didn't know you wandered about that way—not in Canada, I mean."

"I'm on special work," Mahon replied.

"Couldn't the Macleod boys handle it?"

"It saves time and the possibility of mistakes sometimes to move us about."

Mahon's tone was short, and Suffron took the hint and changed the subject.

"You don't see our part of the country at its best."

"How long does a storm like this last out here?" inquired the Sergeant.

Suffron laughed. "I don't suppose we're much different here from what you are up in Medicine Hat. We can't tell about things like the weather. The storm should be over now, as hard as it is. Anyway, one thing is certain:

there'll be a chinook right after it, and floods. By that time you'll be fit to ride."

"I'm fit now." The Sergeant smiled. "I can't wait if the storm lasts much longer."

"God, man, you wouldn't go out in that? You're crazy. You're fit—fit to freeze. Oh, I know you chaps and your sense of duty, but duty doesn't demand that you throw your lives away to no purpose. There's no honour in that either. Surely nothing that could happen calls for the intervention of the Mounted Police in such a storm."

"It's in such a storm that we often find the most need for us."

"You were a lot of use when the breed saved you. But," he added hastily, "no one can blame you for that. It happens, however, that while you're here I'm responsible for you, and I'm telling you you won't go out that door till the storm lets up. So settle down and make yourself comfortable."

The Sergeant ate in silence. He had a number of questions to ask, but he wished to ask them in a way that, and at some time when, they would not arouse suspicion.

"You said," he commenced at last, "that the breed who brought me in left a horse. Is it here now?"

"Certainly. He paid for it a week in advance. Made me take the money. I'm trying to earn it by stuffing the brute, I suppose. I have to justify that money."

"May I see it?"

Suffron looked up sharply. "Where is all this leading, Sergeant?"

"It might help me to recognise the fellow. I know his horse well—if he's the one I mean. He rode a rather remarkable pinto."

"But this one is no pinto—not even a bronco or an Indian pony. It's a real man-size horse, big enough for the Mounted Police. Much too good a horse for such a fellow to be riding, I've been thinking."

After the meal, waiting for a break in the blizzard, they found their way to the stable, clinging to the guiding rope that was strung from post to post between the two buildings. For one could easily get lost in a few yards in such a storm.

At a glance Mahon knew that the animal was probably a Mounted Police horse, and his heart sank. But he did not lose his head.

“It’s certainly not a pinto,” he remarked. “I never saw the animal before that I know of, so I suppose it can’t be the same man. So many of these breeds look alike.”

The horse whinnied at sight of his uniform. Suffron’s brow puckered.

“Seems to recognise you.”

“Oh, I suppose he senses that we’re good to our mounts.” He moved quickly out of the horse’s sight and stopped to fondle the ears of the one he had borrowed from the Macleod detachment. “This one didn’t mean to let me down, I suppose. Jupiter—that’s my own horse—would never have deserted me.”

“And you’d probably be lying out there now stiff and lifeless. It was this one finding its way here that kept us on the lookout. But I can’t help thinking of the breed. If he’s out there— —”

The two horses whinnied to each other. Suffron was thoughtful.

“You know, one would think they were friends.”

“I suppose a real horse in the West so seldom sees another that they feel like old friends when they meet. The broncos turn up their noses at horses like these.”

He had succeeded in part in turning the conversation, and they started back to the house. The storm seemed to be fiercer than ever, and they were forced to drag themselves along by the rope, their eyes closed against the whirling snow. In the shelter of the house Suffron said:

“I’m worried about that breed. He left his blanket with you, and, God knows, he needed it. By the way, where did that blanket come from? He didn’t have it when he left the horse. It’s distinctly an Indian blanket.”

Sergeant Mahon made no reply. But once more in the warm, bright room, he took his stand before the fireplace and stared thoughtfully into it.

“It can’t last much longer,” he murmured.

The rancher laughed. “The storm? If I could prophesy even half a dozen hours ahead in this country they’d need me at the Meteorological Department. You needn’t worry. We have so few guests that we never want to lose them.”

“That’s nice of you, but I can’t delay. I’ve work to do; it can’t be held up.”

Suffron threw aside the bearskin coat he had donned for the visit to the stables and looked the Sergeant over with a frown.

“I never can understand you chaps. Here you are, lucky to be alive, yet you want to go right out there and tempt Providence again. It isn’t sensible. Every reasoning soul in the West is under cover right now if they can get to it. I wouldn’t let one of my men go out if it meant the loss of every animal I own. . . . And I’m telling you, Sergeant, if you risk it you can’t expect help from us. I won’t let a man of mine go with you.

“Now be reasonable. There’s a nice warm bedroom upstairs right above this room, and a pretty good bed. And your horse is safe and comfortable. For heaven’s sake stop worrying your head—and mine.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NARROW ESCAPE

Suffron had reason to be worried about Blue Pete. At the moment when the half-breed handed the Sergeant over to the rancher and his men he had but two thoughts in his mind—to save his friend, and to escape without being recognised. It was not Suffron he feared but the Sergeant. Both objects, he decided as he plunged away into the blizzard, he had effected. The Sergeant would be under cover in a few minutes; and the storm was too blinding for anyone to recognise him.

But as he ploughed away toward the west, with the protection of the forest in mind, he quickly discovered that something of more vital importance demanded his attention. His blanket he had left with the Sergeant, and the Indian's clothing he wore was inadequate to protect him against such a storm. Even his neckerchief, he found, had blown away. Besides, he was very tired.

With the feeling of fatigue came a keener sensitiveness to the cold, and gradually panic overcame him. He beat it back as he found himself stumbling about, and he drew a long breath and struck stolidly ahead. But his legs commenced to stiffen, his feet to drag. The snow, too, as he neared the more broken ground, became more irregular in depth, so that at times he floundered in thigh-deep drifts, and again over windswept heights. Against this muscle-trying unevenness he could make no provision, for he could not see, could only at long intervals open his eyes. Only concentration on the direction of the wind kept him moving forward toward his goal. His hands were numb, for he had no covering for them, and he was forced to carry them in his pockets, a tiring position that took toll of his waning strength.

The storm showed no sign of abating, and there were disquieting moments when he was forced to fight the impulse to turn and drift before it. Only the recurring picture of drifting, helpless cattle kept him from yielding.

He had his work to do, and he must let nothing interfere with it.

Dropping his face still further and hunching his shoulders, he plodded on, the wind whistling deafeningly in his ears and tugging at his flimsy clothing. The snow drifted down his neck and melted, coursing freezing streams of water over his body. It beat into his eyes when he ventured to

open them, pained the lids when they were closed; sometimes the force of the wind stole his breath, so that he was forced to stop and turn his back to it for a time.

Slower and slower his weary feet pressed forward. He became obsessed with the idea that his body was a mere machine that threatened to run down, and for a time he observed every movement as if he were no more than a spectator. But there were intervals of decision when he would straighten a little and lengthen his stride.

But all the time he knew that the limit of human endurance was in sight. His mind wandered vaguely over it as a material object somewhere before him that at some time soon he would overtake. Now and then it moved away, often it stood awaiting his approach. His whole body was numb now, his muscles labouring to respond to his will. He felt naked, with the wind striking his bare body. At intervals his hands would rise automatically to rub his ears and nose, returning stiffly to the comparative shelter of his pockets. His eyelids were glued to his eyes.

He commenced to count his steps. Somewhere before him was a number, and when he reached that number he might rest. But the number? A hundred? Perhaps. . . . Ninety-six—ninety-seven—ninety-eight—ninety-nine—

Something did happen then. He became aware that the pressure of the wind had ceased. It still blew, for he could hear it whistling more loudly than ever over his head. But he could stand erect, though his joints ached with the effort.

The trees! His drowsy brain brightened a little as he realised it. He opened his eyes. The world was still a white cloud of whirling snow, but it was no longer blinding. He could not see the trees, but he knew they were there. And in that moment he realised with a stab of panic that he had shifted his direction and was steadily working toward the south, with the wind in his side.

The lull, the absence of the driving force of the wind, only succeeded in bringing more forcibly to his mind the seriousness of his condition. One ear was certainly frozen. He grabbed it and rubbed it vigorously. He became more conscious of the extreme cold. The trees he could hear cracking with it as they swayed in the wind. He hurried his dragging steps.

His opening eyes warned him that evening was almost on him. A dull, gloomy darkness seemed to add to the chill of the air. He had a feeling that he was alone in a cataclysmic world, that every other living thing had been

frozen or swept to death. He stumbled into a tree and leaned against it, panting. He had struck it with his nose, and by the lack of feeling in it he knew that it, too, was frozen.

Once more panic swept over him. Soon, very soon, he must find shelter or perish. With the thought he commenced to leap about, in an effort to restore circulation. He beat his arms against his body, twisting and turning, stooping and rising. But the effort was too much for him, and with a groan he relaxed. But still some dim stubbornness against defeat clung to him, and he commenced to run.

He could keep his eyes open now, and with the thickening of the trees that kept the beat of the snow from him he was able to avoid them. A thicket of evergreens tempted him, but when he sought shelter in them he felt himself freezing as he stood. He stumbled on. He heard himself shouting, and the sound reminded him that he had something that would make a louder noise. He drew one of his revolvers.

Fumblingly, with stiffening fingers, he clasped it, locating the trigger more by instinct than by feeling. He pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot returned to him from the trees and the storm. He pulled again. He shouted. It was his one hope now.

Help came. From somewhere to his left he heard a shout. Stiffly he turned to face it—stumbled—fell forward and lay still. He was comfortable now.

A hand fell on his shoulder and dragged him to his feet, and he felt himself being urged forward. A light appeared before him, and he was pushed down a snowy slope through an open doorway. The door closed behind him. He opened his stiffened eyelids and blinked.

Round Owl stood before him, looking him over with surprise equal to his own. Surprise and something else.

CHAPTER XXIX

ARMISTICE

A picture flashed across Blue Pete's mind. It was of a widening band of lighter darkness beneath a tepee canvas—widening—widening—ever so silently, almost too dim to believe—of a darker shadow intervening. He heard the slash of a knife through the boughs that had been his bed only a few moments before, the thud of the murderous blade in a supporting pole.

His hand moved to his gun.

But his muscles were stiff with the cold, his fingers too numb to feel. Dully, for even his mind worked slowly, he realised that for the first time another had beaten him to the draw, and he blinked into the little round hole of a gun in Round Owl's hand. And the hand was steady as steel.

His own hand still touched the butt of his gun. He knew he was beaten.

Then slowly Round Owl's gun dropped away, and he laughed.

“Rather foolish of us, isn't it, Pete? We're here, and we have to stick it out together till this blizzard is over. Did you never hear the story of the man and the wolf who lay down side by side in a cave where they took refuge from a storm, keeping each other warm? It's a good story, and so appropriate here. You needn't feel peeved because I beat you to the draw. That's what you get for wandering about in a blizzard. God knows why.”

He thrust the gun in his belt and turned his back.

“I don't know what you have against me, Pete, but we'll have to last the night through, and I can't keep holding you up. I suppose you're surprised to see me alive—or you were. But that doesn't account for your plan to shoot me. I'm not a wraith. I'm real. Eugene Thoreau may have fooled the Mounties; he knew the moment you saw him that he hadn't fooled you. Neither did his Indian make-up. You've accomplished something along that line yourself, but neither did you fool me.”

He seated himself on a rude table beneath the one window in the little cabin, his legs swinging, and looked the half-breed over.

“If only you could have altered those eyes, Pete, and that nose, and those bowed legs, and that bulk! But Nature imposes a limit to disguise. That's

what this stomach did for me. . . . You know, come to think of it, it wasn't that you thought I was a ghost and your natural reaction was to use your gun on the understandable. And it wasn't that you were sore because I tried to fool the world. No. You've got something definite against me. And I'm consumed with curiosity to know what it is. It can't matter a tinker's cuss to you whether I was drowned or not. That was for Mounted Police consumption; they were getting too curious."

Blue Pete let his hand drop from his gun. He felt oddly weak and helpless and tongue-tied. His brain functioned so slowly that he could remember nothing against Thoreau but that slashing knife that had so narrowly missed him where he lay in Leaping Rabbit's tepee. Yet he felt there was something else—something else. Bewildered, he turned away and stared into the glowing front of a stove at the back of the cabin.

"Yuh know wot I got agin yuh, Frenchy," he growled.

Thoreau shook his head almost indifferently. "Can't say I do. I did get away once with a couple of 3-Bar-Y steers, but you took more than your own back."

"I didn' keep 'em," Blue Pete declared angrily.

"That was your loss. I never tried it again; it was too unprofitable. There were other herds more accessible and open to the petty sort of rustling I did. Of course you knew all the time what I was at, but I always knew you as a square sort of chap who knew when to keep your mouth shut. We never really rubbed against one another in any way to justify your drawing on me—not that I know of. You always beat me at the shooting contests, and I accepted defeat." He stopped to chuckle. "If anyone should shoot it's I. That would cover my secret now. But I don't believe you're here to expose me. Besides, remember the story of the man and the wolf. . . . If I thought of getting rid of one who might expose me I should do it now while you're still too stiff to be yourself. When you get thawed out you'll have me at your mercy. If I want to get you then I'll have to do it from ambush, and that isn't quite in my line."

Blue Pete's lip curled.

"Yuh talk a lot, Frenchy. Mebbe yuh see a better chance tryin' to stick a knife in me w'en I'm asleep. Some day yuh'll larn I'm never asleep w'en thar's danger about."

Thoreau heard him through with wrinkles deepening on his forehead. "Did I ever try that, Pete, did I ever have a chance to try? I don't know what

you're talking about. Yes, I've heard it said you never sleep. Perhaps I'm the one that's asleep now, because I can't believe my ears."

Blue Pete turned to him. On Thoreau's face was such frank sincerity that it was impossible to disbelieve him.

"Yuh mean—yuh mean to tell me yuh didn' try to stick me las' night back thar in Leapin' Rabbit's tepee?"

"I shouldn't need to tell you that. That's no more in my line than shooting you in the back. I wasn't within miles of that tepee last night. I was on other work . . . a lot more important than attempting to murder you."

The half-breed drew from his waistband the knife.

"Mebbe yuh'll say this ain't yours." He held it out. "Mebbe yuh'll say it ain't no butcher's knife. Yuh was a butcher, Frenchy."

Thoreau took the knife and looked it over with frank surprise and interest.

"It's a butcher's knife all right. But, Pete—"

"I bin lookin' fer the owner. Never thought I'd run up agin him so quick."

Thoreau faced him squarely. "Yes, you've run up against the owner, Pete, the one who once had that knife, but you haven't yet met the one who wielded it. That knife was mine, but I haven't seen it since it lay in my shop in Irvine. The only meat I ever used it on was beef. I haven't yet sunk to carving a man. I carry a gun instead . . . and so far I've taken my chance with it."

They stared into each other's eyes for several tense moments. It was Blue Pete who turned away. He stalked to the door and back, fighting belief yet curiously comforted. He stopped before Thoreau.

"Yuh cudn' talk like that, man, 'less it was the truth."

Thoreau laughed. "My saving histrionic attainments. Well, it does happen to be the truth."

Blue Pete returned to his pacing, his great hands locked behind his back.

"Reckon I see," he grated. "On'y 'nother count agin that skunk. Reckon I'm goin' to be real vi'lent w'en we meet."

"May I ask whom you have in mind, Pete?"

Instead of replying Blue Pete eyed him with a new suspicion.

“Frenchy, Grey Coyote useta work fer yuh, didn’ he?”

“‘Used to’s’ the word. . . . The last time we were together he shot at me. On that note we parted. It was in the dark, of course, and I hadn’t time to bother with him then.”

He saw a strange look come into the half-breed’s eyes, and he flung out his hands indifferently.

“Does that sound strange to you? After all, there wasn’t much in common between the two Indians I employed and myself. There isn’t anything in common between any Indians and me—nothing, that is, but an unfortunate streak of blood. It happens that I don’t favour promiscuous shooting when it is not necessary. You and I, Pete, have some of their blood in us, but we escaped a lot of the cruelty that goes with it in them. Grey Coyote saw no difference between shooting a poor young cowboy to escape, and getting easily away in the dark without harming anyone. He has a right to his ideas, so I don’t know that I hold that shot against him. The way he saw it, I suppose, it was taking a rather crazy risk, and he would suffer much as I would if I failed.”

A cold smile creased Blue Pete’s face. “Yuh ain’t fightin’ mad over ideas, eh, Frenchy? Wotchu think about double-crossin’?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jes’ ’bout Grey Coyote. It was him told the Mounties yuh was rustlin’.”

Thoreau drew a sharp breath. “You mean he informed on me?”

“Shure.”

“Some day,” declared Thoreau, and his voice was low and intense, “Grey Coyote and I are going to meet . . . and only one will leave that meeting. . . . I suppose he didn’t say that he and Black Eagle were my assistants?”

He considered, scowling at the floor, while the half-breed proceeded to rub the circulation into fingers and ears and nose.

“Of course it’s not difficult to understand why he talked: he knew the Mounties were suspicious, that sooner or later they would find things out; and he wanted a soft spot to fall.” A self-deprecatory laugh failed to lighten the anger in his face. “One never learns that an Indian can never be trusted. . . . Sometimes I wish I could muster up more of their ruthlessness; I could use it with satisfaction on Grey Coyote.”

Blue Pete watched him with narrowing eyes.

“Yuh say the skunk shot at yuh in the dark, an’ yuh was too busy to shoot back. . . . Huh! Reckon that was the night Tiny Cooper was shot.”

“It was Grey Coyote who shot him.”

“Shure. He would. An’ yuh was too busy lookin’ after Tiny, seein’ he didn’t bleed to death.”

“I couldn’t do less; it was one of my men who shot him. I felt I was responsible.”

“An’ yuh tied up his leg an’ yuh carried him back to whar his mates cud pick him up.”

Thoreau smiled. “It wouldn’t have been much use leaving him where it happened; he was too weak to help himself, and evidently his mates were too frightened to come and look for him. By the way, did Tiny talk?”

“Not Tiny. Great little puncher, that Tiny.”

“I can’t think he failed to recognise me. . . . But I’d know he didn’t tell the police; he didn’t call for help till I had lots of time to get away. But I couldn’t afford to take a chance. With the possibility that the Mounties might drag something from him, and with the Indians against me, it seemed the wise thing to disappear. Drowning offered the best escape. Do you know if the Mounties suspect it was a fake?”

Blue Pete hesitated. A certain remnant of loyalty to the Inspector held him silent. Thoreau’s eyes wrinkled.

“It really doesn’t matter much. I don’t think they’d penetrate this disguise, and the Indians here have accepted me as an Indian.”

“Yuh’d never fool th’ Inspector,” warned the half-breed. “No, or the Sarjunt neither.”

“Perhaps. But I’m not likely to meet either of them away down here.”

Blue Pete was not so sure of that, and he squirmed uncomfortably with the desire to express the thought. Thoreau’s eyes were fixed on him.

“Anything the matter with that, Pete?” he inquired.

“The Sarjunt’s down here right now!”

Thoreau slid from the table. “The hell he is!”

Blue Pete bent unhappily over the red-hot stove, shivering a little. “Reckon yuh bes’ know.”

“Do you mean he’s down here looking for me?”

“Dunno ’bout that. . . . Reckon mebbe he’s lookin’ fer me.”

Thoreau’s face brightened. “And what have you been doing now, Pete, to bring the Mounties after you? If they are, I wish you’d taken refuge somewhere else.” He thought it over gravely for a time. “You know, Pete, I had a proposition in mind. I was going to suggest that we join forces. There’s a big chance for a grand clean-up in the rustling game around here. We could make a killing and skip out.”

For a moment the half-breed’s eyes flashed. He remembered the untended herds he had seen during the last few days. But he shook his head.

“You ’n’ me’s never goin’ to join up, Frenchy. ’Tain’t possible. I got ’nuther job to do.” The instructions he had received from the Inspector swept over him almost with a shock, and he eyed Thoreau coldly. “Sarjunt’s down here mebbe ’cause wot I ain’t done, not wot I done mebbe.”

“And what’s that?”

“Reckon mebbe yuh’ll know some time.”

“All right. It’s your business. . . . I’m sorry about the Sergeant. I don’t want to shoot him.”

“Yuh shoot the Sarjunt,” threatened the half-breed, “an’ yuh gotta reckon with me, Frenchy.”

Thoreau was a little surprised but in no way alarmed. “That’s your business, of course. I’m not looking for trouble, and I admit you’d complicate things more than they’re complicated now, but I’m not going to be taken. Look at it reasonably, Pete: I’m not going gunning for the Sergeant, but if I have to protect myself—you admit self-defence is justifiable?”

“Yuh shoot the Sarjunt,” Blue Pete repeated solemnly, “an’ yuh gotta reckon with me. . . . An’ I’ll tell yuh now—yuh ain’t fooled the Mounties. They know yuh ain’t drowned.”

“How do you know all this—unless you discovered it and told them?” Thoreau stood with his hand on his gun, his chin thrust forward.

Blue Pete glanced back over his shoulder, saw the threat, but made no move.

“Yuh tol’ me a story ’bout a man an’ a wolf, Frenchy. Yuh fergettin’?”

Thoreau’s hand dropped to his side and he laughed bitterly. “I was almost forgetting, Pete. Can you blame me? But what the hell have you to do with me? Why did you need to tell?”

“Oh—jes’—buttin’ in, I reckon. Seems I can’t help it. Mebbe I was jes’ showin’ off. . . . Yuh see, I seen a hull boatload o’ Mounties out in that current fishin’ fer yuh, an’ it looked like murder to me. Might’a bin drowned. . . . The Sarjunt was thar.”

“And to think,” sighed Thoreau, “that I saved your life!” He shrugged. “Softie! That’s the second life I’ve saved in the last few days, and they’ve both got me into trouble.”

“Yuh ain’t in no trouble with me yit, Frenchy. I told yuh I got ’nuther job fust. But yuh bes’ keep out o’ muh way w’en I’m through that one.”

“I don’t understand anything you’re talking about, Pete, and I’m not going to ask.” Thoreau gave an expressive shrug and reseated himself on the table. “We’ll let it go at that. It seems that for some reason at some time in the future you’re going to get after me. All right, I accept the challenge. It’s decent of you to warn me. And now that we’re handing out warnings, I’ll pass one on to you: you know I can’t be frightened. I’m not going to keep out of anyone’s way except the Mounted Police. I’m not going to run away from you, though I’m not going to run into you deliberately. Now that we have that settled, what in the world brought you down here? Is it Grey Coyote?”

“That’s my business too, Frenchy,” replied the half-breed sullenly. “I reckon you ’n’ me— —”

A long, blood-curdling wail cut through the whine and roar of the storm. Both men swung to face the door. The cry was repeated. Blue Pete started forward, his eyes large with excitement. But Thoreau reached the door first and blocked the way.

“No, not you, Pete.” He pushed the half-breed back. “There’s someone out there. That’s no animal. He needs help. It’s my job. You’d be sure to lose yourself, and you’re not yet in shape to fight the storm again. Stay here and keep shouting to me so I won’t lose direction. I won’t be able to see a foot before me. God, there it is again,” as the wailing shriek reached them.

He threw the door open and ran into the wall of white.

Blue Pete took his stand in the open doorway, his eyes closed against the whirling snow. At frequent intervals he shouted. But the sound seemed to strike that solid mass of snow and return to him. Only once was he certain that Thoreau replied.

There followed a long silence, but for the howling storm.

A great mound of snow had fallen since Thoreau led him into the cabin. It lay in a deep bank out before the door. It entirely covered the window. And it was falling as thickly as ever. Blue Pete opened his eyes and marvelled that a man could live in it, could retain life enough even to shout.

He raised his voice and sent it at the full force of his lungs into the wind, and then he held his breath to listen. There was no reply.

In a panic he clambered up the bank of snow and ploughed into the storm.

Only then did he realise the depth of the drifts. The wind cut down through the trees and seemed to press on him from all sides. Floundering along, he made as best he could toward the spot where he had heard Thoreau's voice. He did not open his eyes; they would have been of no use. He held his arm before his face to protect it. The snow sometimes reached to his hips, and often he was forced to stop to regain his breath, for he was still weary from the afternoon-long fight with the blizzard. He was oddly excited and anxious, and he had to fight back the panic that struggled to drive him back to the safety of the cabin. Above all, he remembered, he must keep the direction of the cabin in mind. To lose it meant certain death, perhaps to three of them.

Again and again he halted and raised his voice, facing in every direction, cupping his hands about his mouth. Then he would plunge forward.

A moan, somewhere straight before him, sent him stumbling on. He tripped and fell full length into a bank. Reaching back as he lay, his hand encountered cloth. He tugged at it. It would not give. He rose and struggled with it. It was oddly heavy, and he ceased his efforts and felt about it.

It was, he discovered, two bodies clasped together.

“Frenchy! Frenchy!” he shouted. “Frenchy, git up. Yuh gotta help, I can't do it alone. Yuh gotta help me git yuh back to the cabin.”

He unwound the clinging arms of the pair and jerked Thoreau to his feet, to beat him cruelly about.

Twice Thoreau fell, only to be jerked back. He was trying to stand, and his breath came in moaning gasps:

“You—Pete? I’m—pretty near—done for. My God—what are we—going—to do? We must—save—this fellow.”

“Shure, shure! An’ yuh’re goin’ to help, gol blast yuh. Here, buck up. Turn yer back to me. I’ll pick him up an’ I’ll steer yuh right fer the cabin. An’ ef yuh cave in I’ll kick the gizzard out o’ yuh—er let you friz. Keep shoutin’, too, so I can’t lose yuh. . . . Go on. I got him.”

Perhaps it was luck, perhaps the Providence that seldom fails to reward grit and bravery and self-sacrifice, that brought them to the cabin door. They fell through into the light and heat. Blue Pete had just strength enough left to kick the door shut, and then the three lay where they were, utterly exhausted. The heat and the sense of safety beat through their collapse.

Blue Pete recovered first. He pulled Thoreau to a sitting position. And the pair of them turned to the man they had rescued. He was an Indian, and he lay with eyes closed, breathing heavily.

Suddenly Thoreau threw back his head and laughed hysterically.

“God, Pete, isn’t it a small world?”

The unconscious Indian on the floor before them was Grey Coyote!

CHAPTER XXX

A STRANGE TRIO

Blue Pete rubbed a hand across his eyes again and again and stared. Then abruptly he clambered to his feet and stalked to the other end of the cabin. There he turned and stared again. His great hands worked together, the fingers opening and closing like the claws of a bird of prey. He licked his lips. The breath came raspingly from his moving lips.

Taking a long breath, he strode forward and bent over the Indian. But even as his hand reached out he hesitated, drew himself erect, and wandered slowly back to the stove.

Thoreau, who had risen and resumed his former seat on the table, watched him wonderingly.

“How you hate him, Pete! But why? You can’t have as much against him as I have, no matter what has happened between you. I’m remembering the story I told you about the man and the wolf or else — —” He touched the gun in his belt.

Blue Pete ran both hands through his stiff, black hair. “An’ durn yuh fer tellin’ me that story, Frenchy.”

“Who’d have thought it would have to work in a three-cornered way?” He laughed bitterly. “Three men who hate one another and some day will shoot it out! Which of us will be left? For there’ll be only one.” He looked down on the still unconscious Indian. “Isn’t it a funny old world, Pete? Was there ever a scene like this—three of us, each bound to kill the others some day, yet resting under the same roof, and our hands tied? I’m not trying to understand where you stand, Pete, and I don’t suppose it matters. You have a job to finish, then you’re out to finish me. All right. I said I accept the challenge. It’ll be shooting on sight, of course, now that we understand. But you’ll let me know when this job of yours is finished. I’ll wait for the word, because I’ve nothing against you.”

He smiled and for several moments was silent.

“You know, I find something rather amusing and exciting in the situation. I’ve faced things something like it before, and I always found it gave life a real thrill that made it worth living. There hasn’t been much in

life for me but that—not much, I mean, that’s really interesting. I suppose I took up the rustling as much because of the danger as for any other purpose . . . though I did make a bit out of it.”

Suddenly a thought seemed to strike him, and he laughed aloud. Taking a small pad of paper from his pocket, he turned and scribbled something on it against the table-top. He held the paper out to the half-breed.

“I’m alone in the world. There really isn’t any reason why I should let what I’ve made get into the hands of those in whom I’m not in the least interested. Just as a sporting chance I’ve made you my heir. I’m not sure it’ll hold in law, but it’s an interesting idea. There’s money in the Bank of Commerce in Winnipeg, and more over in Butte, Montana. It’ll give me a reason for shooting straighter when you and I meet, just to keep you from collecting. It’ll give you an excuse for making it hot for me.”

Blue Pete scowled at the paper, refusing to move. Thoreau shrugged.

“Frightened?” he scoffed.

The half-breed strode up to him and jerked the paper from his hand. “Shure I’ll take it. Yuh know yuh ain’t got half a chance with me, Frenchy. Reckon yuh need suthin’ to make yuh shoot straight.” He jammed the paper unread in his pocket and returned to his place beside the stove.

He pointed to the Indian who showed signs of returning consciousness.

“You ’n’ me know that story ’bout the man an’ the wolf. That skunk thar never heerd no story like that. Reckon yuh bes’ take them guns till we git out o’ this.”

“Why not take them yourself?”

“W’en I tech Grey Coyote it’s like to be with a bullet er a fist. I didn’ larn ’bout the man an’ the wolf long ’nuff ago to hold in.”

Thoreau dropped from the table and, feeling with expert fingers over the Indian’s clothing, extracted two guns. “I suppose it’s a reasonable idea. But, say!” He held one of the guns in his hand, staring from it to the half-breed. “I never thought any living man would ever take your gun from you, Pete. It’s the .45 that beats us all.”

“Shure is.”

“And he beat you to the draw, did he? I never thought— —”

The half-breed’s face went dark with anger.

“No durn Neche er nobody else ever beat me to the draw, Frenchy, an’ yuh know it. Not till yuh ketched me with friz fingers a w’ile ago.”

“Then how did he get this? Everyone about Medicine Hat knows this gun.”

Blue Pete snuffled. “I dropped it.”

“Where?”

“Near the Neche camp at the Hat.”

“What were you doing there?”

“That don’ matter. I fell, an’ the skunk got muh shootin’-iron.”

Thoreau held the gun out to him. “I don’t wish to take advantage of you. You’ll need it when we meet.”

But the half-breed held his hands behind his back.

“No, this ain’t the time er the place whar I gotta git that gun from the skunk thar. He stole the gun. I ain’ goin’ to steal it back, not by a durn sight I ain’t.”

Thoreau raised his eyebrows in an expression of helpless bewilderment. “I guess you and I must have got different doses of some sort of blood, Pete. I don’t understand you at any time. But it’s your business.”

The figure on the floor stirred. The other two watched in silence as Grey Coyote’s eyes opened and moved vacantly about the cabin. A stiff smile was turned on him from above the table. Blue Pete scowled. The Indian’s eyes fixed themselves in a frightened way on Blue Pete first, then slowly they swung aside wonderingly to Thoreau.

The latter’s smile broadened but was no more mirthful. “So you find it difficult to recognise your old employer and partner in crime?”

The familiar jeering tone acted on the Indian like an electric shock. With a lightning movement he jerked himself up, and his hand flew to where one of his guns should be.

Thoreau chuckled. “There’s a story that fits in here, but you wouldn’t understand. You’d think it weakness, cowardice. That’s why we disarmed you.”

He walked to a shelf behind the stove and placed the two guns on it. The Indian’s attention had wavered back to the half-breed.

“Reckon this mus’ be a skeerifyin’ place fer yuh to wake up in, Grey Coyote. Yuh didn’ think yuh’d see me this side o’ hell, did yuh? Purty near hell fer yuh now, ain’t it?”

The Indian shivered and raised an arm over his face.

“No, I’m not goin’ to give yuh the dose o’ lead yuh deserve, yuh skunk. But it’s comin’ to yuh. An’ ef I don’ git yuh, thar’s Frenchy. He don’ like yuh no better ’n I do.”

The Indian edged along the floor toward the door. “Grey Coyote no understand. Grey Coyote lost in storm. Grey Coyote know nothin’.”

“That opinion is unanimous,” said Thoreau. “If you’d had an ounce of brains you’d never have made enemies like Blue Pete and me. I’ve learned a few things about you. I forgot this disguise I wear or I wouldn’t have given myself away as I have, but it doesn’t matter now. It looks to me as if a certain dirty snake of an Indian is in for some unpleasant experiences before we’re through with him. Oh, well, you don’t need to care; it was coming to you in time. I hate traitors. I work on the principle that the world is better without them, and I try to help the world in that respect as much as I can.”

The Indian’s eyes moved back to Blue Pete.

“Grey Coyote find gun,” he grunted. “He didn’t know.”

“No,” said the half-breed, “yuh didn’ know. All yuh done was to git the hull camp out after me jes’ ’cause yuh knew, yuh skunk.”

Thoreau took up the baiting. He pointed to the guns on the shelf. “Pete and I don’t need to be disarmed, because we know that story I mentioned. But if you so much as move toward those guns of yours until we give you permission—well, Blue Pete and I are pretty fair marksmen, and we don’t like you a little bit. No, don’t try to understand anything but what I’m telling you. The story would be wasted on you. Personally, I think Blue Pete overdoes it, but that’s his business, not mine. But you heard what I said about trying to get funny with us. Either of us would like nothing better than an excuse to forget the story ourselves.

“I’ve been thinking things over, and this is my solution of a crazy situation: when the storm is over we’ll go in different directions, the three of us. But however wide apart our paths may be for a time, some day the three paths will verge together and cross. You’ll always be Grey Coyote, what Blue Pete calls a skunk and I call a traitor. And he and I have a bet on—with a human life at stake. It’s your life. Now, let’s get some rest. Your place is away there near the door, Grey Coyote.”

CHAPTER XXXI

ON GUARD

Throughout the night the storm continued. But toward morning there were moments when it seemed to weary, and odd silences dropped over a waiting, shivering world. Within the cabin three watchful, suspicious men slept little; what sleep there was Blue Pete and Thoreau took in turns, tacitly agreeing.

It was a strange group, the cynical, reckless Thoreau, the furious half-breed almost smothered with the restraint he put on himself, and the silent, watchful Indian. Instinctively they kept as far apart as the space within the room permitted. Thoreau made himself as comfortable as he could on the table. Blue Pete sat on the floor beside the stove, his back against the wall beneath the shelf on which lay the guns taken from Grey Coyote. The Indian, cross-legged, leaned against the wall near the door. For long stretches at a time he feigned sleep, and then his eyes would open slightly and fix themselves hungrily on the two guns above Blue Pete's head.

The hours passed. The pine knots that Thoreau had fixed in holders on the wall burned out and were replaced by others. Blue Pete kept the stove going from a pile of wood left drying beside it.

The room was stifflingly hot. Blue Pete opened his shirt. Perspiration glistened on forehead and chest. But he would not move. Thoreau panted with the heat, and now and then he turned to glance at the window behind him. After a long time he consulted his watch, frowned, held it to his ear. Then, with a laugh, he went to the door and threw it open. A bank of snow cascaded into the room, and the broad daylight of early morning, a blazing sun.

"I suppose the snow is a blanket over the window," he said. He drew several long, noisy breaths. "Eight o'clock, and a chinook already on the way. Such a pleasant, restful night we've had. We haven't crowded one another; we haven't fought for the blankets; we haven't kept one another awake by talking. And I don't suppose any one of us has slept enough to dream. All right, that ends the present chapter. It's time to move. But first something to eat. The story of the wolf and the man still holds good. I've a

bit of chuck I'll share. Strictly impersonal," he added, as Blue Pete shook his head.

He opened a small packsack and handed the two men a thick sandwich each of coarse bread.

"Shall we draw for the first to go, or has anyone a better plan? It's understood that each has an hour's grace in which to get well away. In other words, you cur," addressing Grey Coyote, "for an hour no one is to shoot. It doesn't mean a thing to you, I suppose, but if you break that rule the one that remains will cut you to ribbons and leave the rest to the cougars."

He stood in the centre of the floor considering.

"No, there's a better way. Pete, you go first. I can trust you. Grey Coyote will go next, because no one would trust him to wait an hour till I'm gone. I'll go last and take my chance."

Blue Pete slung his rifle over his shoulder and made for the door. There he stopped.

"Yuh ain' fergittin', Frenchy? I'm gittin' after yuh w'en I git through. I'll let yuh know." He stood looking at Thoreau, an unhappy expression on his face. "An' it's too durn bad," he muttered, "too durn bad. But I gotta do it."

He ploughed through the snow at the door and disappeared over the bank.

Thoreau turned back only in time. For Grey Coyote had slipped across the floor to the shelf where the guns lay. He fired as Thoreau moved. The bullet struck the side of the doorway.

Then Thoreau had him covered. Blue Pete came slithering down the bank, gun drawn. But when he saw how it was, without a word he turned and hurried away.

The gun dropped from Grey Coyote's hand and he raised both arms in the air.

"No shoot!" he whined. "No shoot! Grey Coyote no try to kill."

"You didn't like hell," snarled Thoreau. He drew a long, steady breath. "If I hadn't told Blue Pete that story I'd fill you with lead—so full they'd mine you when they found you. But I made the rule about the hour's grace. The half-breed's playing square; I can't do less. Nothing fair holds with an Indian. I should have learned that long ago. But I'm not Indian enough to understand a cur like you. Now get out. If you're in sight in five

minutes I'll know you're trying to break the rule, and I'll shoot to kill. I've only a limited amount of patience with traitors."

Grey Coyote started toward the door without the guns.

"No, take the guns. I'm not afraid. No one in these parts can frighten me with a gun except Blue Pete, and he's decent. Besides, you must have that gun of his with you. If he catches you without it he'll pull you to pieces to see you didn't swallow it. If you have it—well, you've a fighting chance, and he'll give you one. You'll need all the guns you can carry."

He stepped aside, keeping the Indian covered. Grey Coyote hesitated. Then he pocketed the guns and went out.

"And don't forget," Thoreau threw after him, "that hour's going to be a short one for us both."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TRIO DISPERSE

Frenchy Thoreau waited an hour in the cabin. It was not a wasted hour, for he had much to think about. And Grey Coyote was apt to lie in wait for him.

It was largely of Blue Pete that he thought. The half-breed had talked in riddles, and in his pride Thoreau had not tried to solve the riddles by asking questions. He and the half-breed were to shoot it out some time—that was all that mattered, for something in Blue Pete's manner convinced him that no amount of reasoning or explanation would alter his decision.

He was not alarmed. His life had been too crammed with danger for him to know what fear meant. But he did not attempt to minimise the threat of it. He had always trusted to his gun to protect him, and he was willing to take his chances even with Blue Pete. To be sure the half-breed could beat him to the draw and outshoot him, but the extra white blood in his own veins should give him the advantage; and, besides, now he was prepared.

Grey Coyote he dismissed with a shrug. Though the Indian might have some thought of ambushing him as he left the cabin, it was more likely that he would consider himself lucky in having escaped two such ruthless enemies and would spend the hour making a clean get-away.

There were, however, two threatening problems that had arisen from the night's experiences. In the first place Grey Coyote was certain to spread the story of his disguise. That would make it difficult for him, even dangerous, for the Indians would be suspicious, however he explained. His thought on coming to the foothills was to get out of the way of anyone likely to recognise him, particularly of the Mounted Police. Once there he might take his time to decide about the future.

But now—that was the second problem—the Mounted Police knew that he was alive, and Sergeant Mahon was already somewhere near. The Sergeant was dangerous. Even if he were unaware that Thoreau was there, the disguise was not likely to deceive him. . . . And what did Blue Pete mean when he remarked that perhaps the Sergeant was after him, not after Thoreau?

As he left the cabin he kept himself alert to every sound and movement. The one immediate danger was Grey Coyote. For several moments he stood on the bank before the door, examining the marks left in the snow by the two who had gone before. They had, as planned, left in different directions, but that meant nothing. Of Blue Pete he had no fear; the half-breed would play the game. Moving hastily along the side of the cabin, he sought the thicker part of the forest, and in the shelter of a large tree stopped to look about.

The chinook was well under way. The morning sun was warm already. Great clots of snow dropped from the boughs, leaving indentations in the snow that made it almost impossible to discern if Grey Coyote had been about. Dodging from tree to tree, he climbed the slope. It led him southward. In that direction he would soon come on an Indian encampment, and as yet he had nothing further in mind. The snow was getting heavy and wet, the warm chinook sweeping down through the trees. The falling snow made strange sounds as it thudded below, and the released branches rustled alarmingly. Thoreau's nerves tingled, and he kept a gun in his hand as he went along.

Water commenced to drip on him, and soon he was wet through.

The chinook, the warm wind that, abruptly and unannounced, tears over the Rocky Mountains to drop its melting touch over the prairie, has never been authoritatively explained. There is the thought that it may come from the Japanese current off the coast of British Columbia. But it is felt only east of the mountains. Western Canada, however, welcomes it without curiosity, for it changes an ice-bound land to mud in a few hours.

The September storm invariably ends in a chinook. And the more severe the storm, the warmer the subsequent wind and, of course, the more water.

Thoreau had reason to know it before he had gone far.

Grey Coyote, facing the same condition, was less sensitive to it, partly because of the more driving thoughts that teemed through his head. He was frightened. The two men he had reason to fear most in the world were somewhere near and eager to settle accounts with him. He saw no way of evading a reckoning.

With his fear went a blazing anger that, though they had offered him no harm, had, indeed, taken no pains to conceal their contempt for him, he had been unable to harm them. If the merest rumour of it should reach the camp at Medicine Hat where he was something of a hero, he would never be able

to raise his head again. For he had come to the foothills swearing to dispose of Thoreau, the one threat he knew to the impunity he sought by divulging to the Mounted Police the story of the summer's rustling. Frenchy was certain one day to be run down by the Mounted Police, and he would continue the story where Grey Coyote had left off. His fellow-Indians had even given him a real send-off on his departure from the camp. It was the aftermath of that celebration that Blue Pete had broken into the night he lay and listened beside the one lighted tepee.

It had appeared so safe then to brag about what he had in store for Thoreau, since the latter would know nothing of his betrayal or that anyone suspected that he was still alive. Should they meet, of course, there would be that shot in the dark to explain, as Thoreau turned back to the aid of the wounded cowboy. But Grey Coyote's cunning was equal to that: it was, he would assert, merely a warning shot to bring to Thoreau's attention the danger he ran.

Now he could have no delusions about his own danger.

Blue Pete he hated with an undying savagery that made him grind his teeth together. The half-breed had always got the better of him, and there in the cabin he had sneered, had insultingly refused to take advantage of his helplessness even to the extent of recovering his own gun.

Some day, was all he knew, they would meet with guns blazing.

When he had worked his way deeper into the foothills for almost a mile he swung to the south. The camp wherein he had taken his temporary abode was in that direction. In the blizzard he had entered the wrong valley.

As he advanced his spirits rose. He would prepare traps for his enemies. As an Indian, in there among the Indians everything was in his favour, and only a word, the word he would utter the moment he reached the camp, would suffice to make outlaws of his two enemies. The mere fact that they had masqueraded as Indians would make them unwelcome and suspect. The warm wind made him feel better, and the climb sent the blood coursing through him. He loosened his blanket and draped it over one shoulder.

As he did so his hand touched the butt of Blue Pete's .45, and he drew it and looked it over with fresh interest. As yet he had fired only one shot with it, and that wildly after its owner that day at the camp. To him and to his kind the gun was gifted with some special power that made it more deadly than any other weapon. Why shouldn't he have the advantage of that power now? Besides, without it Blue Pete would be ordinary. He counted the notches in the butt and was momentarily shocked and alarmed. Some of the

notches were deep, others shallow, and he wondered wherein lay the difference.

He noticed that space remained for more, and a shudder ran through him. But he fought it back. He would fill that space with his own knife.

He pocketed the gun and went on.

Blue Pete had involuntarily made his way out toward the open prairie. The night had been crammed with such overpowering experiences that he longed to get in touch with more familiar scenes. Besides, in the open he could more accurately locate himself. He had never grown accustomed to hills. Of course there were the Badlands; but the Badlands were depressions rather than hills, the heights being the prairie level. There was, indeed, a local belief that the great gouges that were the Badlands were merely complementary to the Cypress Hills a few score of miles farther north.

Dodging the drifts in the broken ground and keeping to the shallower snow among the trees, he plodded down the valley. It widened as he advanced, and the trees thinned. Great blinding stretches of snow lay all about him, softened only by the shadows of the trees. A small herd of cattle sheltering in a bluff he welcomed with a smile and flashing eyes. They made him feel more at home, and he felt the better for it.

He had had little idea where he had wandered in the storm. He had had nothing in mind when he plunged away from the wire fence about the Circle R but to escape and seek shelter in the nearest forest. Out in the open now he took time to locate himself.

Not a landmark was visible, however. But that was to be expected. The country was all new to him, and in its blanket of white what marks he might have recognised were obliterated. Even the scattered bluffs looked different, and the prairie was nothing more than a wavy, dazzling glare.

He winced. "Gor-swizzle, Pete," he murmured, "yuh're clean lost, an' right out on the prairie! Allus suthin' happenin' yuh didn't expect'."

He recalled the Circle R and looked about for it. But he could see nothing that helped.

Having no choice, he turned to the north. In the heat of the mounting sun the snow was getting heavier. It stuck to his soles, forming balls beneath the heels. He was not very wet, since the sun had not yet got in much of its work

while he was among the trees. But the warm wind now brought perspiration out all over him, making him irritable and uncomfortable.

His mind kept reverting to the incidents of the previous night.

Thoreau! A nagging sense of having been traitor to the Inspector he fought with every argument he could devise. He had other work, more important and more pressing work. Thoreau could wait; his time would come. . . . But would it? Somehow the thought of taking the trail against Frenchy offered no attraction. But he had promised the Inspector. Besides, there was another reason he must not forget.

Grey Coyote! His face darkened when he thought of the Indian. No qualifying admiration there, no relenting. Some day he and Grey Coyote would come together, and one of them would die.

But after last night what would the Indian do? Would the threat of his two enemies frighten him away from the foothills? Would he dare to return to Medicine Hat and report failure, this leader of the camp's devilry, this swaggering hero? Blue Pete did not think so. There in the foothills among his own kind everything would be in his favour.

It was noon when a tangle of poles, supporting narrow platforms, attracted his attention. It was, he recognised, an Indian burying-ground. On the platforms, where they were safe from the coyotes, the Indians left their dead for days before interring them. Its presence meant that a camp must be somewhere near.

He picked his way through the forest of poles. To him they were no more than senseless obstructions. Indeed, the fact that they were Indian inclined him to treat them with contempt. His mother was Indian, to be sure, but she had always had a white man's outlook. And she had loved a white man and borne him a son. When she died that son had observed her last wish—to be buried in a white man's cemetery.

The snow was almost visibly disappearing by that time, and the ground was wet and slippery.

The camp that finally came into view was not unlike the others except that the tepees were arranged in more orderly fashion. By certain signs he thought he recognised that he had come on Bloods who preferred this sort of untamed life to that on their reservation near Lethbridge. The tepees stood in two long rows, each opening on a street that ran between. The squaws were hard at work, some digging shallow trenches about the tepees to carry off the water from the melting snow, others bringing fresh boughs from the

forest to cover the damp ground in the tepees. Two or three of the grander tepees had specially deep and important-looking trenches encircling them.

Blue Pete was desperately hungry, and the sight of smoke rising from the openings in the tepee peaks, as well as the odour of cooking meat, made him reckless. He walked straight into the camp.

CHAPTER XXXIII

RECOGNISED

The moment the Indians caught sight of him he realised that he had taken a foolish risk. Though they were, he thought, Bloods, the camp would be in touch with every other camp in the foothills, and the news of his presence would quickly spread. Temporarily the explanation that he had lost his way in the blizzard would probably suffice to ensure him a welcome of sorts, and would obtain him the much-needed meal.

And then he remembered that he had feigned at the other camps to speak only Sioux and Cree. Should he continue the rôle, or risk assuming another character? He decided to remain the foreign Indian, since there was always the possibility that some resident of one of the camps he had already visited might be there.

The nearest tepee was several yards away when an Indian emerged from it and stood staring at him. He grunted. At the sound a dozen tepees disgorged their inmates. Blue Pete walked quietly on, smiling in a friendly way and uttering a few words in Cree.

They received him in utter silence. It did not surprise him, but he saw that he had read the signs wrongly: these were not Bloods, but Piegans. And, retired as the Piegans always were, living up to their real name "Piecani," meaning "cut off," there was even here hostility in their manner.

But it was too late to withdraw, and so he continued to smile.

Suddenly, from the largest tepee, set up in the centre of one of the rows, a tall Indian in heavily-beaded jacket, leggings, and moccasins, emerged and approached him.

"You come from where, stranger?" he demanded in his own language.

Blue Pete shook his head. He pointed to his mouth and worked his jaws. With his other hand he rubbed his stomach.

The Indian, evidently the chief, turned to the other Indians and scowled.

"Come." He beckoned Blue Pete to follow and led him to his own tepee, throwing an order to a squaw for food.

Presently a steaming dish of bear stew was set before the half-breed, and he ate it greedily. As he ate he tried to devise some method of making capital of the situation. But the rôle of knowing nothing of their language tied his hands, and he could see nothing to do but to remain as long as they would have him, keeping eyes and ears open. He wished now that he had discarded his former rôle and had talked with them.

From where he sat he could see through the open tepee flap. And what he saw rivetted his attention and sent through him the familiar thrill of danger. The Indians were gathered in a tight, excited knot, listening to one of their kind about whom they grouped. He could hear their voices but not their words. Something ominous, however, was taking place.

The chief, too, heard, and he rose and went to stand before the tepee.

Blue Pete saw the other Indians turn and beckon, and the chief stalked out to them.

But what held the half-breed's surprised attention was the one about whom the Indians had been grouped. It was the Indian from whom he had stripped the clothing he now wore!

He glanced down at the leather chaps and dirty shirt and smiled wryly. He knew he was in for real trouble this time, and one hand went to the gun hanging on his left hip, the butt facing forward. For a swift draw he preferred the gun on his right thigh, the base of the holster strapped to his leg, the butt backward. But he fancied the Indians might see something menacing in that, and he desired to appear inoffensive; so that he had moved the holster to the other hip.

The chief was listening to their chatter. Blue Pete's crooked eyes swept the interior of the tepee for some means of escape when the crisis came. He might have run for it right then, but some of the stew remained, and he imagined he might need it before he was through.

His roving eyes settled for a moment on the squaw. She had retired to the darkest part of the tepee, and her beady eyes were fixed on him suspiciously. He smiled, but not a muscle moved in the dark, sullen face. He glanced back through the opening.

The chief had turned. Followed by the other Indians he was making for the tepee.

Blue Pete swung his rifle more solidly behind his shoulder, upended the tin of stew in his capacious mouth, and rose. Gun drawn, he pushed through to the open. He had a gun in either hand now, for he had worn one under his

shirt in his arm-pit. Three or four of the Indians had drawn their guns. But not one of them had time to point.

The half-breed did not speak. There was no need. The pointing brace of guns halted the Indians. One dared to raise his own. The half-breed's right-hand-finger tightened, and the Indian howled and dropped his gun, to jam a finger in his mouth. Slowly then, keeping the group covered, Blue Pete backed away around the tepee. If he could reach the trees on the slope behind he had a reasonable chance of escape, even should they all shoot.

Not an Indian dare move. Flushed with excitement and exultation, he picked his way backwards. Then, at the moment when safety was almost at hand, his foot sank into the trench about the tepee. It was filled with water and mud, and he slipped and fell.

It was that that saved his life. Almost against his head a revolver-shot rang out, and the bullet whistled over him. Resting on one hand, he jerked a gun around, prepared to shoot this time to kill. Then he laughed. The chief's squaw had circled the tepee from the other side and fired at him.

Blue Pete sent a bullet after her. It cut through the blanket on her shoulder, and she fell face downward into the water-filled trench.

But the moment's distraction had given the Indians their opportunity. Before the half-breed could train his guns on them again most of them had dodged out of sight. In a moment or two they would be shooting from all directions. Blue Pete picked himself up and ran.

Bullets whistled about him. One brought a sharp but momentary pain to his left arm, another cut through his pants. Dodging from side to side, he reached the trees and took refuge behind the first one large enough to cover him. Three shots he sent back without taking aim. They would not dare to attack across the open between the tepees and the trees if they knew he was waiting for them.

He was not safe yet, however. The Indians were certain to work around into the forest from the upper end of the village, and he knew what that would mean: they were great fighters from cover. He might have run then and escaped, but the thrill of the moment had roused the devil in him, and with a grin he unslung his rifle and waited. They had come near to getting him, and someone had to pay for that.

A face appeared beyond the camp, appraising the distance to the cover of the trees. Then, judging it safe, an Indian jogged into view. But he had forgotten the half-breed's rifle. It pointed—a shot rang out. The Indian

stopped as if he had run against a stone wall, for the bullet had almost skinned the end of his nose. With a shriek he bolted back behind the nearest tepee.

Blue Pete grinned. He slid to another tree—on and on.

“Yip-ee!” he shrilled. And again “Yip-ee!”

CHAPTER XXXIV

BULLETS FLY

As usual he felt less exultant when he had time to review the scene. He had taken the usual crazy risk, an unnecessary one, and had laid up trouble for himself.

“Wal,” he defended sheepishly, “’tain’ nobody’s business but mine, is it? I ain’t no ’tective now, am I . . . not yit? Th’ Inspector wudn’ like it mebbe, but I guv up that job days ago—fer a w’ile. I got work o’ muh own to do, same’s he has. I’m doin’ it, an’ muh own way, ain’t I?”

As he went along he managed to work himself into some degree of indignation at the conscience that nagged at him.

“Anyways, he give me a job, an’ then he sen’s the Sarjunt to butt in on it. If I ain’ to do it, that’s all right with me, but he’s gotta say fust an’ out plain so I kin hear. I ain’ got so much agin Frenchy—not so very much, anyways, that I gotta drop muh own job. An’ I ain’ turned down wot th’ Inspector guv me to do neither. I’ll git Frenchy yit, Inspector, you see. . . . On’y,” he added, stirring up a sense of injustice, “they gotta le’e me to it muh own way an’ at muh own time. I don’t need no Mountie to help me. No, sir-ee, I don’t.”

He had circled the encampment, keeping to the heights. When he considered it safe he stopped to plan the next move. The experience he had just been through promised serious results. He had got himself in wrong at every camp he visited; surely they would know of him in a few days all through the foothills. There would not be a camp safe for him to visit openly. The Indians would be on the lookout for him, too, and there in the foothills anything might happen.

There was nothing to do, therefore, but to hang around the camps, keeping out of sight, waiting his chance.

He struck away to the south, keeping out of the lower levels. The sun was high in the sky and almost uncomfortably warm. The wind came like a breath of summer. The snow had disappeared from the trees and the ground was bare in spots. Water ran everywhere.

From height to height he passed. Now and then the distant frozen peaks of the mountains sent a shiver of memory through him, and he would turn into the thicker trees where he could not see them. The day slid slowly on.

He had no idea how far he had gone when the sound of distant shooting brought him up sharply. The shots, he recognised, were revolver-shots. No hunters, those, but a close-up fight between two guns. He hurried on, and for a time he heard nothing more. As he neared the spot from which he considered the shots must have come he advanced more cautiously, dodging from shrub to shrub.

Suddenly, so near him that he dropped as if he himself had been the target, two shots rang out almost together. One came from straight before him, the other from further down the slope.

He was strangely excited. It was none of his business, yet he wanted to see what was happening. A gun-fight was always interesting, since, however impersonal it was, it furnished a study of marksmanship and cunning. Come to think of it, too, it was little likely to be a fight between Indians. In there in the foothills they could not afford to fight; their encampments were too small, too open, and too much under the inspection of the Mounted Police in case of inter-camp strife. The Indians were capable of almost any crime, but they were careful not to involve themselves with the Mounted Police.

Blue Pete lay behind a shrub and waited. There followed a long silence. He was wondering if he had come too late when a twig snapped off to his right. He raised his head.

In the shadow of another shrub his keen eyes caught a slight movement, and a figure crept into view. It was Frenchy Thoreau.

His back was to the half-breed. His attention was directed down the slope. In his right hand he carried a revolver, and on his swarthy face was a look of ruthless determination, of almost animal cruelty.

Blue Pete glided nearer. He could see down the slope now. Who was down there? The Sergeant? The Sergeant would be in dire peril, for Frenchy was a dead shot, and with that look on his face he would have no mercy. The Sergeant would have little chance, for his object was not to kill but to capture.

The half-breed crept further. A shot rang out, and a bullet came whistling up, to thud into a tree close to his head.

He drew back. He could still see Thoreau, who was quite unconscious of his presence. Thoreau was edging toward him, still intent on the slope. Blue

Pete was forced to admire the cunning and silence of his movements, as he worked his way from cover to cover.

He had reached the edge of an open space across which he must pass should he wish to go farther. Blue Pete held his breath. Surely the fool didn't think of risking it. In that open space he would be a perfect target. Evidently he was uncertain of the location of the other waiting to pick him off.

Blue Pete thrust his hand forward and pulled the trigger of his gun.

At the sound Thoreau whirled like a flash and fired point-blank in the half-breed's direction. Almost with the same movement he disappeared, flattening against the ground and rolling out of sight. The bullet cut through the shrub close to Blue Pete's head, a remarkable shot for its haste.

At the same instant, from down the slope came the crash of shrubbery. The original duel was over. The unseen there in the cover of the trees was in full flight.

For a moment Blue Pete was nonplussed. There was terror in that flight, cowardice. Well, it didn't matter—but it couldn't have been the Sergeant. With a grin he shoved his gun out of sight and stood up, his arms above his head.

"'Tain' the time fer us to git throwin' lead, Frenchy," he called. "Not yit. I cud 'a' plugged yuh a dozen times. Reckon we gotta wait a bit."

Slowly Thoreau's head appeared. It was some distance from the spot where he had rolled out of sight. Far away could still be heard the panicky flight of his antagonist of a few moments ago. He came scowling toward the half-breed.

"Damn you, Pete! I'd have had him in a few minutes."

"Hed who?"

"Why, Grey Coyote."

Blue Pete whistled. "'Twas the skunk, eh? Wal, in a few seconds he'd 'a' hed you. He hed that spot covered yuh was steppin' intuh." He laughed suddenly. "Tickled to death I butted in, Frenchy. That skunk's my meat. W'en I git through with him yuh kin hev wot's left."

He ran a huge, dark hand through his stiff black hair and frowned at the ground. "Yuh don' happen to know a story that fits in here, do yuh, Frenchy, like the one 'bout the man an' the wolf? Seems like thar shud be one."

CHAPTER XXXV

A LUCKY ESCAPE

Thoreau's face cleared and a reluctant smile twisted the corners of his lips. He threw out his hands in a gesture of resignation.

"I give you up, Pete; I can't follow you. I don't wonder they fail to understand you back at the Hat. You had your second chance at that Indian, and you failed to take advantage of it. The story doesn't hold now. There are no more stories for me to tie my hands from now on."

Blue Pete rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Reckon it looks a bit funny to me too, Frenchy. I don' quite unnerstan' muhself. Must be like this: I gotta git Grey Coyote w'en it ain' too easy. Yuh see, I'd hev to let him off too easy then, an' that ain't wot I got comin' to the skunk w'en I git him whar I want him. An' I'm gittin' him, Frenchy, shure thing. An' I don' want nobody buttin' in thar neither. He's mine."

"He's yours if you beat me to him. I'm not apt to let him off when we meet, Pete, so you might as well know."

"Reckon I do. That's w'y I got him started runnin' jes' now. Thought mebbe it might be him."

"Then why didn't you get him yourself?"

"I cud 'a'. I cud 'a' crep down thar w'en he was busy with you an' give him wot's comin' to him, but I'd hed to finish him quick er you'd 'a' butted in. W'en I git Grey Coyote he's gotta know who's gittin' 'im an' w'y."

Thoreau was undecided whether to laugh or be angry. "You've lost your chance, Pete. I'm after Grey Coyote, and I'm not going to rest till I get him. The Mounties are after me, and they're not likely to wait until I've paid that Indian for telling on me. So," his eyes sparkling, "it's a race between you and me, and no favours given, I suppose. And I'll wager there's an Indian with shaky knees right now."

He snapped the shells from his gun and proceeded to clean it. "You know, Pete, it does seem strange how you and I have suddenly taken each other on. We're both so determined to get the same man that we can't face the thought of the other getting ahead of him. And then, at some time in the

future we're going to take each other on to the death. Well, it adds zest to an existence that was rather unattractive. I've got you to thank for that."

The calm assurance of the man for the first time brought home to Blue Pete that the future looked none too bright for himself, and a sudden thought came to him. Why not, just for a moment, drop his own job and clear the way for it by taking Thoreau in to the Inspector? Involuntarily his hand went to his gun.

But Thoreau was on guard. With a swift movement his free hand found a second gun in his clothing and gripped it. For several seconds they stood, not half a dozen paces apart, staring steadily into each other's eyes, with death certain for both should either make another move.

It was the half-breed yielded first. He shook his head. "No, that wudn' be square, Frenchy. Don' know wot got intuh me. I told yuh I'd warn yuh." He withdrew his hand.

Thoreau did the same. "I'm not trying to understand you any more, Pete, but I'm taking no chances with you."

"Reckon I don' want yuh to. When I git yuh it's goin' to be open-like. Ef we started throwin' lead now, who'd be lef' to git that Neche? Reckon I want him fust—more'n I do you jes' yit."

"When you want me, Pete, I'll be looking for you. One more added to the list isn't going to make the rope weaker, even if the Mounties do get me. I'd sooner hang than be jailed." He turned as if to go, then spoke back over his shoulder: "I'll shoot to kill, when the time comes, Pete. So long."

Blue Pete watched him go with mingled feelings. Some day he would have to bring Frenchy in to the Inspector, to certain imprisonment. And prison, as Thoreau had said, was worse to him than death. Blue Pete could sympathise with him in that. There had been months when capture would have meant a long term in jail, and often he had faced the fact with the only real fear he ever felt. He had stolen herds where Thoreau stole single steers, and he had killed a dozen men in his day. And here he was bringing the weight of the law against one who had done so much less to merit it.

With a wry smile he waited until Thoreau was out of sight, then he set off down the slope to where Grey Coyote had started his flight.

He had no hope of overtaking the Indian. Grey Coyote's departure had been too swift and panicky to leave any chance of that; and he was clever enough to cover his trail when the first surge of his panic was past. But Blue

Pete had an idea that he would make for the camp where he had taken up his abode, and he wanted to find that camp.

He had taken only a few steps when a sound behind him and to his left sent him flat against the ground. As he lay he drew his gun. For a time he heard nothing more. Tingling with excitement, he glided to another cover and waited.

He could not understand the thrill that ran through him. He knew the sound had not been made by a wild animal, but how he knew he could never have explained. Who could it be? Not Thoreau, for he had gone in the opposite direction. Not Grey Coyote, for the Indian could never have returned in time, even had he the courage. It might be another Indian, but in the furtiveness of the sound Blue Pete imagined something more exciting.

Failing to hear or see more, he crept away, circling in the direction from which the sound had come.

He had almost convinced himself that his ears had deceived him, and he was thinking of investigating more openly, when over the crest of a rise only a few yards away came Sergeant Mahon.

He was hurrying, his chin thrust forward, eyes blazing. Yet there was caution in his movements, and it gave some inkling of his purpose. His eyes were fixed straight before him where Thoreau had vanished into the forest.

Blue Pete knew what it meant. From some distant height where he had come perhaps at the sound of the shooting, the Sergeant had seen Thoreau, and now he was on his trail. And then the half-breed remembered the last time he had seen the Sergeant, and his heart sang with joy that there had been no ill effects. In his delight he almost announced himself.

But he restrained himself in time. He remembered, then, Thoreau's disguise, and he wondered how the Sergeant could have pierced it at a distance. Was it only the attraction of what he must have known to be a gun-fight? The Mounties were clever, but Thoreau's disguise was good even close up.

In the meantime the Sergeant passed. Somewhere in the direction he was going was Thoreau. Perhaps they would meet. What would be the end of that meeting? Blue Pete thought he could foresee it, and the picture made him shudder. In there among the trees every advantage would be with Thoreau. Frenchy was on guard against the Mounties, and he would have no mercy.

But suppose—suppose it went the other way and the Sergeant won. That appeared to please the half-breed little. Frenchy Thoreau was his job, not the Sergeant's. The Inspector had said so, and he had promised to get the rustler. Did they expect him to stand aside and see another rob him of what was rightly his? No, sir; Frenchy was his.

He considered taking up the Sergeant's trail. But the chance that the latter would overtake Thoreau was remote. Frenchy would be far away in pursuit of Grey Coyote. The Sergeant was not clever enough to pick up a trail like that.

He pushed the thought from his mind and went on. The sooner he completed his own task, the sooner he would be free to take up the Inspector's. It shouldn't be long now.

But as he went along, the danger in which he saw the Sergeant might be worried him. Thoreau was an expert shot with rifle or revolver. His one fault was that he was apt to be over-anxious; sometimes he shot without taking sufficient aim. It was there Blue Pete had defeated him in the few times they had met in the shooting contests. That was shooting at a target, where the sights might be used. What would Thoreau be like in the face of another gun?

He himself never took time to glance at the sights in a crisis like that. His hand, not his eye, told him when he had the target covered. He could shoot from the hip almost as accurately as from arm's length. It was all a matter of practice. In a gun-fight the Sergeant would be perfectly cool. But he would be dominated by the rules of the Force, and that would extract from his coolness its full advantage. No matter in what condition of nerves Thoreau might be—and Blue Pete could not picture him excited—he would have the better of it.

In that thought, involuntarily he turned aside, working in the direction where he imagined the Sergeant would be. He must be on hand to save them both when the two men met. He commenced to run.

Suddenly from almost straight before him a shot rang out, and a sharp pain, like the slash of a knife along his scalp, sent him tumbling forward. And then, to his bewilderment, he discovered that his muscles refused to respond to his will. Momentarily he was paralysed. The wound was insignificant in itself, but it had evidently touched some nerve or jarred some spot in his brain that carried signals to his muscles.

He tried to will himself back to normality, but the strain produced nothing but a wild anger at his helplessness.

He had sense enough still to realise something of the peril of his position. Whoever had shot him would soon learn that he was helpless and would come and finish the work; and there was no defence. All he could do was to lie and watch his own end.

His mind commenced to wander a little. He thought of Mira. She would be waiting for him back there at the 3-Bar-Y, unaware of his danger, worrying about him as she always did when he was out of her sight. Probably she would never know what had happened to him or where he had died, for the wild animals would quickly have his bones cleaned. He did not pity himself but her. She would be left alone in the world; and in their shy, unspoken way they had meant so much to each other.

Though he could not move, his hearing had become keener. Lying flat on his face, grateful that he had fallen into a slight depression, he knew that someone was creeping toward him—coming nearer—nearer.

In his agony he found his tongue:

“Mira! Mira!” He heard himself shouting it and laughed aloud.

And in reply a voice struck through the silence of the forest. Or was it a dream? No, there it was again, a high-pitched, excited voice:

“Pete! Pete!”

The dream—or the reality—effected what his will had failed to do. His muscles came to life. He could move his head now—his arms—his legs. He saw the trees about him and the curve of the concealing ground.

“Pete! Pete!”

It was nearer now. He raised himself recklessly, holding his head with his hands. But a vagrant instinct dropped him flat once more as a shot rang out. The bullet whistled over him, and the next instant he had taken cover behind a tree, his own gun out.

There was no more fight in his assailant. Instead there came a moment's patter of receding footsteps.

“Pete!”

He caught his head in his hands again. That dream! How strangely it persisted! Was he going mad? Had the bullet— —

A stir at his back brought him about with pointing gun. Mira stood there, staring at him. Then she ran to him and caught him in her arms.

“Pete! Pete! Are you all right?”

He blinked up at her, wiping the dirt from his eyes. “It—jes’—ain’t—real,” he murmured.

Mira laughed hysterically. “But it is, Pete, it is. It’s Mira. I’m here—Mira. But,” pushing him away and frowning at him, “what have you done to yourself? You’re—Indian.”

He shook his head vaguely. “I’m—clean—buncoed,” he said.

She caught him to her again. “What happened?”

“I dunno—much.” He touched the bleeding crease the bullet had made in his scalp. “Somebody plugged me, I reckon.”

She drew the handkerchief from her neck and bound it about the wound. She laughed.

“’Tain’t much, Pete. Just another scar to add to the lot you have. Who shot you?”

Blue Pete frowned at the ground. “Dunno. Mebbe—anybody. They don’t seem to like Blue Pete here in the foothills. Can’t say I like ’em any better. Ain’t made a friend sence I come. Any Neche in this part o’ the world’s apt to shoot me.”

He got to his feet, swaying a little. He took hold of her arm.

“Come ’way out o’ this. ’Tain’t healthy fer us, Mira. Yuh bes’ git movin’ quick. I got work to do. I was keerless. I won’t be no more.”

She clung to him. “You’re coming with me, Pete; I won’t go alone.”

He held her off and scowled at her. “How yuh come to be here, anyways?”

“Lookin’ for my man. Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s too much. Th’ Inspector send yuh?”

“The Mounties don’t know I’m off the ranch. I knew you needed me, Pete.”

The half-breed rubbed a hand slowly across his lips.

“Reckon mebbe I did, Mira. They shure hed me that time. . . . I was thinkin’ o’ suthin’ else. How’d yuh git here?”

“Quickest way I knew how.”

“Then yuh come on Whiskers. She’d know whar I was.”

“Yes. Took us four days. I’ve been searching since.”

“Whar was yuh in the storm?”

She laughed light-heartedly. “Whiskers and me found a ranch.”

“Not the Circle R?” His heart was in his mouth.

“No. Why?”

“Oh, nothin’. Jes’ like the way things git all tangled up about me.” He chuckled. “Whar’s th’ ole gal?”

“Down here at the edge of the trees. I heard the shot and made for it as fast as I could. The brush is too thick for Whiskers to get through fast enough. I knew it must be you; you’d be sure to be where there’s gun-play. I shouted, and I thought I heard you shout back. But it must have been fancy; you were too far away when I called first for you to hear.”

“I did call fer yuh, Mira,” he puzzled. “Anyways, I’m all right now. Yuh gotta git outa this. Yuh’re apt to be in the way fer wot I gotta do.”

She caught him by the arm again. “And you’ll get shot doing it. Do come away, Pete.”

“An’ give up?” he demanded indignantly. “Yuh mean yuh want me to let that skunk git away?”

“Wait till you’re all right, anyway. I don’t know what you have to do, but I know it’s too dangerous. Please, Pete.”

“Thar ain’ much out West wuth doin’ that ain’ dang’urs.”

They had moved off down the slope through the trees. Blue Pete inserted two fingers between his lips and whistled. A few moments later the crash of brush reached them from below, and presently the pinto came dodging through the trees, head down, whinnying loudly. She made straight for the half-breed and came to a sliding stop before him, reaching out to lick his face. Blue Pete slapped her playfully. And Whiskers bent her head for him to fondle her ears in the way she loved.

Blue Pete laughed. “Reckon nobody ain’ goin’ to ketch me keerless no more. Whiskers’ll smell ’em out; she’s allus on guard. Never do feel jes’ right ’thout a bronc between muh legs. An’ w’en it’s th’ ole gal, why, thar jes’ ain’ nothin’ kin happen us.”

As if in contradiction Whiskers suddenly swung about, ears pricked forward. Blue Pete caught hold of Mira and drew her behind a tree. At a word the pinto dropped to her side. The half-breed knelt behind her.

For several moments they remained like that, motionless, alert, scarcely breathing. Then Blue Pete, whispering back to Mira, slowly looked about. He had heard nothing, but he trusted the pinto's ears before his own; she lay now with cocked ears and dilated nostrils.

Somewhere near, danger lay in wait for them, ready to strike.

But Blue Pete could not remain inactive. Impatient, angry, sore at what had happened, he whispered to the pinto. With a surge she leaped to her feet, and with the same movement Blue Pete was in the saddle, urging her recklessly forward.

It was an insane thing to do, but he was beyond reasoning, goaded to any risk.

A shot rang out straight before him. A bullet whistled past his head as he ducked.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ARRESTED FOR MURDER

It failed to stop him. Madly he spurred ahead. The promise of action wherein he might soothe the sense of partial defeat, the chagrin of his helplessness before Mira's arrival, sent a thrill through him, and he shouted defiance as he charged.

“Yip-ee!”

From behind a tree an Indian dashed, racing away in a panic, firing a single final shot as he ran. It went wild.

Whiskers required no urging or direction to take up the chase. Her rôle in the rustling of cattle carried over to any other purpose her owner had in mind. She knew exactly what was expected of her. But there among the trees pursuit was not so simple, and Grey Coyote was not too terrified to take advantage of it. Dodging from thicket to thicket, he chose a course the pinto was unable to follow. Often the little animal was forced to circle around a growth too thick and strong to penetrate; often she was blocked by trees that grew too close to let her through.

His impatience growing, Blue Pete became more and more reckless, yet he could get no nearer. He might have brought him down with his gun, but that would not satisfy him. His idea was to ride the Indian down; he must live to suffer, must die losing face. After that what mattered?

Grey Coyote chose his course with increasing cunning, and Whiskers dashed a zig-zag course in vain.

Suddenly the Indian pulled up, then, with a cry, darted away in another direction at top speed.

With a triumphant “yip-ee!” Blue Pete tore after him. He had the Indian now, for straight before him the trees thinned. He reached for his rope and lifted it from the horn. A smile wreathed his face. The loop of the rope hung from his right hand, swinging free. Only half a dozen strides more. His hand raised, the loop began to spread.

At that moment Grey Coyote realised his peril. He could turn neither to the right nor the left without giving Blue Pete the opening he sought. He

stopped, wheeled about, and brought his gun before his eye. The half-breed had put away his gun to handle the rope. The Indian might be ridden down but he could scarcely miss at such a short distance; either pinto or rider was doomed.

For the fraction of a second Blue Pete stared into certain death. Then the explosion of a shot rang in his ears.

But it did not come from Grey Coyote's gun. Instead, with a grunt he pitched sideways, the weapon falling from his hand, and with scarcely a twitch he lay still, blood oozing from a wound in his neck.

Whiskers came to a stiff-legged stop directly over him. Blue Pete, at the unexpected turn in events, had turned sideways in the saddle, trying to pierce the shadows of a thicket of trees not far away. His face was black with anger.

Throwing himself from the bronco, he took shelter behind a tree. There he waited, gun in hand. Mira shouted, but he did not hear her. With Indian caution and dexterity he commenced to move toward the thicket, using every cover that offered. He reached it and dived in.

No one was in sight.

With a muttered curse he turned back to the dead Indian. A familiar gun lay on the ground beside him, his own .45. Grey Coyote had thought to use it on its owner. He stooped to pick it up.

“Put up your hands, Pete!”

Blue Pete turned slowly, eyes wide, lips parted. Sergeant Mahon stood near, gun pointing. Automatically, his face blank with surprise, the half-breed's hands rose. He gaped; his mind was in a whirl. The confusion of the day's events convinced him that it was all a dream. But the dead Indian at his feet was real enough, and it cleared his mind a little.

But he could see no explanation for what had happened. Grey Coyote was dead, but obviously it was not the Sergeant who had shot him. And what did the pointing gun mean?

The half-breed licked his dry lips and blinked, speechless and confused.

And then something else happened. Mira was speaking:

“If you shoot, Sergeant”—her tone was cold as the water about them from the melted snow—“there's a bullet for you, and you know I don't miss.”

For all the attention the Sergeant paid her he might not have heard. His gun remained steady. Steadily he came nearer the half-breed.

“Turn around,” he ordered.

Blue Pete turned dazedly. But he twisted his face toward where Mira stood covering the Sergeant.

“Yuh ken’ do nothin’ ’bout it, Mira,” he warned. “Bes’ put yer gun up. I dunno—wot’s it mean, but thar’s no need fer nobody to shoot. The Sarjunt’s got the drop; it’s no use pluggin’ him.”

The Sergeant ignored them both. In a workmanlike manner he relieved Blue Pete of both his guns and took his rifle from his back. The half-breed made no move.

“Step over that way,” came the order.

Blue Pete stepped over the body of the Indian and stopped. “Kin I look, Sarjunt?” he asked.

The Sergeant made no reply. He was on his knees before the body, feeling the pulse.

“Dead,” he announced flatly. He rose slowly to his feet. “Pete, you’re under arrest.”

“Wot fer?”

Sergeant Mahon pointed to the dead Indian.

Suddenly Blue Pete laughed. “I didn’ plug ’im, Sarjunt.”

The Sergeant examined one of the guns he had taken from the half-breed. It contained an empty shell, the one he had used hours before to warn Thoreau of his danger.

“But I didn’ plug ’im, I tell yuh,” Blue Pete insisted. “He had muh gun—stole it back in the Hat.”

The Sergeant picked up the .45 and examined it with open surprise.

“How could he steal it? And if he did that doesn’t justify murder.”

Blue Pete sighed and shrugged his broad shoulders. “Wot yuh goin’ to do ’bout it?”

Mira had come to them. With a puzzled frown she looked from her husband to the Sergeant. She had been too far away to see what had

happened to Grey Coyote, and she took it for granted that Blue Pete had fired the fatal shot.

“He deserved it, Sergeant,” she pleaded, “and you know it. Grey Coyote always was a skunk. You know that too. That’s Pete’s gun; surely he has a right to get it back by any means in his power. Besides, Grey Coyote shot him only a short time ago. That’s why he’s wearing that bandage on his head. And now he fired at Pete twice before Pete fired back. It was — —”

“But I didn’ fire back,” protested the half-breed.

Mira smiled wanly. “It was self-defence, Sergeant,” she persisted. “Would you expect him to let himself be shot?”

Blue Pete gave it up. “Reckon thar ain’t nothin’ we kin do no more, Mira. The Sarjunt’s right. I’ll go ’long.”

Mahon considered. “Are you coming willingly, Pete, or must I handcuff you and tie you up?”

“Ef yuh do that, Sarjunt, yuh’re goin’ to hev more on yer hands than yuh kin carry through, I reckon. Ef I’d bin goin’ to fight yuh I’d bin at it long ago. Nobody ever took muh shootin’-irons from me before. I’m goin’ with yuh peaceful-like. Wot’s next?”

“We must get this body in too,” said the Sergeant. “We must get it somewhere and telephone the Mounted Police at Macleod to pick it up. I have my horse not far away. Whiskers will have to carry the body that far. Have I your word then not to try to escape?”

“Shure, shure! Thar ain’t no use gittin’ away now. Somebody done this job fer me, dang ’em. But I’m durn hungry, I know. I bin goin’ short fer years, feels like, an’ Neche grub yuh kin steal ain’t—I mean, them Neches don’ feed well, my way o’ thinkin’.”

“You appear to be content to look like an Indian,” said the Sergeant.

The half-breed scowled. “Ef yuh want me to go peaceful-like, bes’ not talk ’bout that. I kin smell muhself. Mira here rubbed it in a bit, an’ I’m gittin’ techy.”

“Where are your own clothes?” inquired the Sergeant. “And where did you get what you have on? Why did you have to stain your face?”

Blue Pete looked down. He snuffled. “I kin fin’ muh clothes, all right. Thar ain’t no answer to yer other questions.”

“You know you’ll have enough to answer for without that.”

“Sarjunt, yuh know dang well ef I hed to answer fer all wot I done in muh life—wal, things has happened quicker ’n I kin talk ’bout ’em. But one thing I ain’ goin’ to answer fer”—he stood over the dead Indian—“is ef yuh go tryin’ to load this skunk on Whiskers thar. She don’ like Neches no better ’n I do, an’ she ain’t so purticklur ’bout hidin’ it. An’ yuh cudn’ arrest her ef she kicked the head off’n him. Tell yuh wot: Mira ’n’ me’ll wait here till yuh bring yer cayuse. Totin’ this skunk’s more in the line of a police hoss than of the pinto. We’ll be chief mourners till yuh come back.”

The Sergeant looked steadily into eyes that held his own. He nodded.

“All right, I trust you.” He turned and strode away, not once looking back.

Blue Pete called after him: “Reckon yuh bes’ gimme a gun er two. ’Tain’ safe here with on’y Mira’s. Thar’s some felluh shoots mighty straight hereabouts. Anyways, yuh got so much artillery strung round yuh yuh’ll trip yerself. Yuh skeered to trust me with a gun? Say, Sarjunt, ef I’d bin goin’ to flit I cu’d ’a’ plugged yuh a dozen times with Mira’s gun. Besides, I gotta tote a gun on muh hip er I walk lame.”

The Sergeant gravely handed over the .45 and the rifle.

He was scarcely out of sight when Blue Pete whispered excitedly to Mira: “Stay here.”

She regarded him with indignant eyes. “You promised you wouldn’t run away, Pete.”

“Ef yuh was somebody else I’d draw on yuh fer thinkin’ I ain’ goin’ to keep muh promise. Did yuh ever know me do that? But I got a job to do.”

“What is it now, Pete?” she pleaded. “I must know.”

He hesitated. “Wal, fust thing, I’m dang mad. I got muh ole .45 too easy.”

“Then why did you shoot him?”

“I told yuh I didn’t.” He sighed. “It was somebody off thar in the trees.”

“Then why are you lettin’ the Sergeant arrest you and take you in?”

“I told him I didn’t do the shootin’ . . . But now he’s gotta take me to the Hat, ain’t he?”

“But why don’t you — —”

“He’s gotta go back with me, ain’t he. Wal, that’s wot I want. He’s bin buttin’ in—tryin’ to git Frenchy hisself. An’ that’s my job, ain’t it? But I got to hurry. I’ll be back.”

“Please, Pete,” she pleaded, “where are you going?”

“To find out who beat me to the skunk. That’s wot I wanted muh .45 fer.”

“You’ll be sure to come back?”

“Ef I don’t the Sarjunt’ll shure want Frenchy a dang sight wuss ’n ever.”

He hurried away up the slope toward the thicket from which the shot had come.

CHAPTER XXXVII

CAPTOR AND PRISONER

It was a couple of hours before the Sergeant returned. He had come further than he thought from where he had left his horse, and in his absence it had wandered. Now he came spurring up the slope. He looked angrily about.

“Where’s Blue Pete?” he demanded.

Mira flung out her hands despairingly. Tears were in her eyes. The Sergeant’s face went black with anger.

“Are you telling me that he broke his promise?”

Mira could only hang her head, as the Sergeant stood threateningly over her.

“What did he say?”

“He said—he said he was coming back. He wouldn’t lie to me.” She was sobbing.

“If he wouldn’t,” declared the Sergeant bitterly, “it’s the only crime in the calendar he hasn’t committed. . . . And now where does it leave me standing? What will the Inspector say? I trusted Blue Pete; I thought I could. I’ve always stood up for him — —”

Mira looked up tearfully in his face. “I can’t think he’ll let us both down. If he doesn’t return I’ll—I’ll find him for you and bring him in.”

Blue Pete came panting down the hillside through the trees. “Sorry, Sarjunt. Reckon I went fuder ’n I thought.”

“Where have you been?” The Sergeant looked him over, torn between anger and relief.

“It’s a long story, an’ yuh wudn’ believe me. I’m here. Ain’t that all yuh need?”

“I asked where you’ve been,” repeated the Sergeant coldly.

Blue Pete grinned. “Wal, seein’ ’s how yuh got me headed fer the hoosegow, yuh can’t blame me fer kiddin’ muhself into thinkin’ I was free

fer a bit, kin yuh? Er will it put a nextry loop in the rope? Anyways, I didn' git wot I went after.”

The Sergeant was in no mood for banter. He was worried—worried about what was to happen to this half-breed friend of his when he took him in for murder. Of course he would soften as much as he could the story he would tell, and the extreme penalty would not be exacted. But to the half-breed, he knew, the rope was preferable to jail. . . . And he did not see how the Inspector would be able to conceal longer Blue Pete's underground connection with the Mounted Police.

“Lend a hand here,” he ordered brusquely, taking hold of Grey Coyote's shoulders.

They lifted the body to the empty saddle on the police horse and tied it there with ropes. Mira mounted the pinto. And so, with the two men walking, they set off toward the east and the open prairie.

As they emerged from the forest Blue Pete spoke for the first time:

“Reckon mebbe I bes' git muh duds, eh, Sarjunt? I don' like muhself in wot I got on. I smell.”

“Are they near here anywhere?”

Blue Pete looked about. “I cud git 'em in an hour ef I had Whiskers.”

The Sergeant hesitated. “You're sure you know where they are?”

“Say, Sergeant, once I bin a place I ain't likely to fergit it.”

“And while you're at it,” said the Sergeant dryly, “you might bring along the saddle and bridle that belong to the police horse you stole.”

Blue Pete chuckled. “Reckon mebbe I cud run 'em down too.”

Mira, puzzled and alarmed at the charge, but saying nothing, dismounted. The half-breed vaulted into the saddle. The pinto commenced to prance with delight and excitement. Her rider drew her in.

“Steady, ole gal. This is a serious moment fer you 'n' me. Besides, I ain't nachurl till I git outa these duds. Yuh shure ken't be smellin' right today, ole gal.”

Within the hour he was back. He had donned his own clothes, had removed most of the stain from his face, and the Mounted Police saddle and bridle were tied with another bundle on the pinto behind him. Whiskers showed signs of having been ridden hard. Her tail twitched a little, and a

slight lather flecked her sides about the double cinch. As he dismounted Blue Pete patted her fondly.

“Reckoned yuh cud do it, ole gal. Got us one las’ ride ’fore the Sarjunt puts that rope round muh neck. Anyways, they ken’t hang you.”

Sergeant Mahon swore under his breath. “Damn it, Pete, stop it. Do you think I’m enjoying this? You’re not going to hang, but what lies ahead of you is nothing to be funny about. Don’t forget what we’ve been to each other, but I have to do my duty. Now come along and be reasonable.”

They proceeded toward the Circle R. After a time Blue Pete broke the silence:

“It’s your trail, Sarjunt, but ef yuh wanta git to the Circle R this side round the world, yuh bes’ strike off a bit more to the north. That is, ’less they moved it sence I seen it last.”

Mahon altered their direction without a word. Presently Blue Pete sidled up to him.

“Yuh plan to take me in thar, Sarjunt, under arrest?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Thar’s a cayuse in thar might know me ag’in ef it seen me.”

“You’re coming in with me, but not outwardly under arrest. I’ll need you. Leave the police equipment with Mira; we’d better not have her with us.”

Blue Pete’s eyes danced. “Never seed nobody look so fur ahead as the Mounties. I jes’ don’ need to think.”

In a coulee out of sight of the ranch buildings they left Mira and Whiskers.

Suffron was dismounting before the stable when they arrived. At sight of the limp body thrown across Mahon’s horse he whistled.

“Had a fight, Sergeant?”

“I found the body,” Mahon answered shortly. “I must get in touch with the detachment at Macleod. You have a telephone, I see. If you’ll let me leave it here somewhere, someone will come and take it away.”

“Certainly. I suppose the stable is good enough for a dead Indian.” He recognised Blue Pete and, looking him over, saw remains of the stain on the half-breed’s face.

“Been passing for a real Indian, eh? I see. So you’ve been on police duty? So that explains— —”

“P’lice duty nothin’,” snapped Blue Pete. “Nothin’ to do with the Mounties, wot I was doin’ in the foothills.”

Sergeant Mahon explained hastily: “It was really he who found the body. Now I’ll telephone.”

“You’ll stop to supper, anyway. It’ll be dark in an hour or so.”

But the Sergeant shook his head. “No, we haven’t time. I want to get to the nearest police post as quickly as possible.”

“And I suppose you’ll be taking from me the finest horse I’ve had in my stable in a long time,” said Suffron. “The boys have had a great time with him; they all want to exercise him. I’d like to buy him, stranger, if you’ll sell him. You can pretty near name your price.”

Blue Pete appeared to consider the offer. The Sergeant had gone to telephone.

“Reckon he’s wuth more to me than I’d git fer him, mister. Fact is, I jes’ borrowed him.”

“He should make a good Mountie horse.”

“Shure. Some o’ them Mounties thought the same. They bin lookin’ him over.”

He disappeared into the stable and presently led the horse out, with the saddle and the bridle he had taken from the Indian. Mahon was waiting for him, and they set off immediately. At the gate the Sergeant thoughtlessly started to turn directly toward the coulee where they had left Mira. Blue Pete stopped him.

“Yuh tol’ the lad back thar we was goin’ to Macleod. Bes’ start off that way. He ain’t quite sartin ’bout us yit. He’s got some idee ’bout this cayuse. Ef yuh miss out stringin’ me up fer murderin’ that skunk, I don’ want no rustlin’ Mountie hosses laid agin me. Th’ Inspector’d be real peeved.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

OBEYING ORDERS

When they were well out of sight of the ranch buildings they swung back toward where Mira was waiting for them. The Sergeant was gloomily silent. He was troubled. Complications kept piling over him. Never in his official career had duty called on him to perform a task so distressing, so upsetting, as the arrest of his friend the half-breed for murder. They had worked together so often, had fought side by side against odds, had carried through together so many dangerous tasks for the Inspector, that they had come to feel almost like brothers, each considering the other a personal responsibility.

Now, as he rode silently along, he saw that the thing he had always feared had happened: the untamed half-breed had committed a major crime against which he could not be defended without being traitor to his duty, to his oath.

From the first he had made up his mind that the story he would tell the Inspector would be founded on self-defence, though he could not bring himself definitely to deny what he had seen with his own eyes—that Blue Pete had been the attacker, not Grey Coyote. From a distance he had seen that mad ride in pursuit of the fleeing Indian. What further defence might be presented for the half-breed must be prepared by the Inspector.

But even with self-defence to relieve him of the extreme penalty, what about the theft of the Mounted Police horse? The Macleod detachment would have to deal with that, and they were not likely to feel sentimental about a stranger, especially about a half-breed. The loss of the horse was a distinct blow to the prestige and honour and infallibility of the Force and could not be forgiven.

Blue Pete read something of what stirred in his friend's mind, but he said nothing.

Mira watched them drawing near with inquiring eyes. When they pulled up before her she would not look at Blue Pete. She pointed to the horse he rode.

“I suppose,” addressing the Sergeant, “he belongs to the saddle and bridle.” She sighed. “So he’s been running wild again.”

“Wal,” Blue Pete broke in sheepishly, “it was all part o’ the game I was playin’. I had to hev a hoss, so I took the fust one that offered. But I’m takin’ it back whar I got it, ain’t I? I jes’ borrered it, yuh see, Mira.”

“It seems impossible for you to play the game in any but the most dangerous way,” remarked the Sergeant bitterly.

“Shure. Thar ain’t no game wuth playin’ that ain’t dang’urs.”

“You’ll find how dangerous it is when you return the horse. But to a man who kills another for no reason but that he stole his gun a little thing like rustling a police horse must be insignificant.”

“Wal-l, it wasn’t hard, ef that’s wot yuh mean.” Blue Pete appeared to review the incident. “Yuh know, I had a good time doin’ it. I kin still see that Mountie standin’ back thar on the road cussin’ the air blue. I knowed he was cussin’ by that.”

Sergeant Mahon stifled a smile. “There’s something else you stole—those Indian clothes. What do you plan to do with them? And there’s the Indian saddle and bridle. I see you kept the clothes with you. You should put them back where you got them, if we had time.”

Blue Pete regarded the bundle contemptuously. “Reckon we got time. ’Tain’t far. Yuh wanta git things cleared, donchu, Sarjunt, fer th’ other things yuh got agin me? Reckon yuh’re right. Wal, we got time. I’ll git them things back whar I got ’em, like yuh say. I kin do it on Whiskers.”

He did not wait for the Sergeant’s consent but leaped on Whiskers’ back, the bundle held between his body and the horn.

“Ef I ain’ back in an hour er so, bes’ git a doctor er a hearse. Them Neches’ll shure be fightin’ mad.”

He started away.

“No shooting,” Mahon called after him.

It was fully an hour and a half, and the sun was close to the horizon, before Blue Pete returned. And his return was characteristic, bathed in the atmosphere he loved.

Mira had grown uneasy. "I'll go and look for him, Sergeant," she suggested.

He shook his head. "If we have to search for him I'll go." He rode restlessly about, silent and uneasy. At last he looked at his watch.

"If he isn't here in— —"

The sound of a distant shot was blown to them on the breeze. They wheeled toward it. It came from a depression to the south of where Blue Pete had disappeared. Without a word they spurred toward it.

A volley of shots urged them to a madder pace. Mira had forged ahead on the horse Blue Pete had stolen.

Then the little pinto shot into sight. Blue Pete lay low over the horn, now and then looking back over his shoulder. Shot after shot came from pursuers as yet invisible, as the pinto zig-zagged at full speed. The half-breed saw his friends and waved.

"Yip-ee!" he shrilled.

Mira had taken the rifle from the saddle holster and was working further to the south where she might sooner get within sight of her husband's pursuers. Sergeant Mahon rode furiously straight ahead, his own rifle across the saddle ready for use.

Around the ridge came a band of Indians, each armed with a rifle. At sight of the Mounted Police they stopped, wheeled about, and raced back out of sight. Mira's rifle was already raised and pointing. Blue Pete saw it and cut across before it, holding up his hand.

They came together. Blue Pete's eyes were bright with excitement and something akin to ecstasy.

"Never had so much fun sence the fight with Butch Dorman,^[10]" he chuckled.

"You're lucky you weren't shot," snapped the Sergeant.

Mira eyed her husband inquiringly. He noticed it and laughed.

"Shure I cuda picked off a bunch o' them; I was close 'nuff at the fust fer muh .45," he explained. "But the Sarjunt said 'no shootin'.' I didn' hev time to pass it on to the Neches. Jes' the same, Sarjunt, yuh sp'iled a lot o' fun— an' thar's a lot o' smelly Neches thar needn' be. It 'ud bin self-defence too."

The Sergeant remained grim. "If it weren't so late I'd get after those fellows," he muttered. "But what did you do to bring them after you?"

"Nothin', nothin' 'tall but wot yuh ordered, Sarjunt. Yuh said to put them things back whar I got 'em. I had a hard time gittin' that Neche whar I cud put the duds back on him. They got after me, an' I had to git the saddle an' bridle back in the tepee, an' the squaws got after me. 'Twas Whiskers got me out. They was real nasty, them Neches, an' all I was doin' was givin' them back thar things." He shook his head sadly. "Ef on'y, Sarjunt, yuh hadn' said 'no shootin'' I'd 'a' had a lot o' fun shootin' off an ear er two. Put a bullet through a Neche's hair an' all yuh see after that's his back."

The Sergeant turned away to conceal the laughter he might not be able to suppress. "We must move along now fast if we hope to reach a police post tonight."

They gave the Circle R a wide berth. Presently Blue Pete rode up beside the Sergeant and cleared his throat: "Goin' to hand me over to them Mounties at Macleod, Sarjunt?"

"I have to report to the police," said the Sergeant stiffly. "I must return these horses."

The half-breed was silent for a time, then:

"Reckon they'll let yuh take me through to the Hat fer murder, once they git thar hands on me? Course murder's murder, but them lads'll be so tarnation mad they'll think thar's nothin' wuss 'n rustlin' a police hoss—durn sight wuss 'n shootin' a dirty Neche. . . . I ruther face th' Inspector, Sarjunt, ef yuh don' mind. I know how I felt w'en Grey Coyote stole muh shootin'-iron, an' a hoss is a dang sight wuss. Ef anybody stole Whiskers I'd do some real shootin'."

The problem put Mahon in a bad temper. It had got on his nerves. He felt sick about the future.

"I must return that horse," he insisted. "I'll explain why I want to take you on to Medicine Hat. There should be no difficulty —"

"Thar needn' be no difficulty," Blue Pete ventured.

Mira had listened without a word. Now she spoke:

"You think you can make a case against him at the Hat, Sergeant. Well, I'm going with you, and I'll swear against everything you say. There's no need to take Pete before the Mounties here. You can say you found the horse wandering about."

“They’d know that couldn’t be true. I’m in trouble enough now without that. The horse couldn’t have been loose all this time and remain in such fine condition. Besides, why should I be the one to find it?”

They went along in a gloomy silence. Darkness had fallen long since, but they had struck a trail beside the railway, and they made fast time. The moon came out in a clear sky.

“Reckon yuh didn’ hear me, Sarjunt,” murmured the half-breed apologetically. “Yuh don’ need to take this cayuse in. I’ll do it muhself.”

The Sergeant laughed scornfully. “Do you think they won’t recognise you? I’ve seen your description that was sent out. We knew from that who it was.”

“Donchu worry yer head ’bout that, Sarjunt. Yuh’ll git me to the Hat all right. I’ve did things like this manys a time. I like it.”

“And that means it’s something that will get us into more trouble, I suppose,” sighed the Sergeant. “Well, go ahead. But no fighting, remember.”

As they approached the lights of the nearest village the Sergeant unburdened himself further: “Yes, damn you, and you’re going to have a real good time at it, whatever it is you’re going to do.”

Next morning an early-rising Mounted Policeman found the missing horse tied before his hut.

[10] *The Vengeance of Blue Pete.*

CHAPTER XXXIX

ON THE JOB AGAIN

On the train to Medicine Hat a distressed Sergeant of the Mounted Police prepared for the worst. He might escape dismissal, but he could not hope to escape the tongue lashing of which an infuriated Inspector was capable. There would almost certainly be demotion. Once more he had trusted Blue Pete, and this time the half-breed had let him down. He knew now that he should never have let him out of his sight, that the man he had trusted had only been waiting for the most opportune moment to escape.

For Blue Pete was not on the train.

Mira had ridden away on Whiskers across country toward the 3-Bar-Y, a ride of three days. Blue Pete was to board the train without any evidence that he and the Sergeant were travelling together. But Mahon, wandering disconsolately from car to car, had failed to find him.

After each trip through the train he returned gloomily to his seat to try to prepare some story that would soften the Inspector's mood. The latter had always insisted that his subordinate was far too indulgent with Blue Pete, that some day he would pay for it. The half-breed's recklessness was certain sooner or later to get his Sergeant friend into trouble.

Besides that, thinking the situation over, he saw how simple he would appear.

Shortly before noon he dropped from the train at Medicine Hat, depressed and fearful, and made his way slowly along the platform toward the barracks across Main Street from the end of the station. He was more depressed from the knowledge that, with all his brooding, he had nothing to tell the Inspector but the truth, the bald, accusing truth.

Friends spoke as he passed, but he did not see them. The low, faded brown building that was the barracks loomed before him, and his heart sank. But oddly enough he found himself more concerned for Blue Pete than for himself. For the Mounted Police were certain to get their hands on him some time, and his escape would only serve to make the penalty stiffer. It might even be that the Inspector would assign to him the unpleasant task of running the half-breed down.

He crossed the road and wandered desolately along the side of the barracks to the front door. Hesitantly he pushed it open.

As he did so, he glanced back involuntarily toward the station. His eye caught a figure hurrying along the street behind the station. He blinked. He rubbed his eyes.

It was Blue Pete.

The Sergeant leaned weakly against the side of the door and waited, scarcely believing his eyes. A slow smile creased his face.

The half-breed panted up to him.

“Gor-swizzle, I had to drop off back thar at the end o’ the yards. Yuh mighty near bet me in.”

“You—you came on that train?” gasped Mahon.

“Shure. I told yuh I wud. I come back the way I went, ridin’ the rods.” A frown gathered on his swarthy face. “Did yuh think I’d let yuh down, Sarjunt?”

The Inspector received them immediately. He had seen the Sergeant pass the window, and later the running figure of Blue Pete, and he had swung his chair to face them as they entered. He glared at them, his angry eyes wandering over the two silent figures that had come to a nervous halt just inside the door.

“Well? Well?” he shouted.

The Sergeant gulped and cleared his throat. Blue Pete stood fumbling his sombrero and refusing to meet the irate eyes before the desk. Suddenly the Inspector threw out his hands.

“Oh, I suppose it’s the same old thing; I can tell it from your looks, both of you: it’s another mess you’ve got us and yourself into, Pete. Surely there’s nothing worse than the one we know.” He dropped his head in his hands. “Lord, what an ass I am to think I can use you, Pete.”

He swung on the Sergeant and shouted:

“Did you get that horse back?”

“Yes, sir. It’s all right. I— —”

“All right? Damn you, what’s all right about any part of it? And why did you bring him here for me to bother about? He should be back at Macleod to

answer for it. I don't want to have anything more to do with him. For God's sake why didn't you leave him for someone else to work themselves crazy over? This was our chance to get him off our hands. Why, oh, why did you bring him here?" he roared.

The Sergeant stepped solemnly forward. "I brought him to answer a far more serious charge—murder!"

The Inspector jerked forward in his chair. "Murder! My God!" He clutched the sides of his head. "Who did he murder this time?"

"Grey Coyote, sir."

"And good riddance," snapped the Inspector. Then he straightened, drew together the neckband of his tunic, and scowled at Blue Pete.

The half-breed appeared to recover from his embarrassment. He lounged nearer and leaned against the desk. He bent forward and proceeded to fill his dirty corn-cob pipe from the tobacco scattered over the blotter. The Inspector looked on with purple cheeks and glaring eyes.

"What have you got to say for yourself?" he thundered.

Blue Pete struck a match and drew a long, comforting puff. He removed the pipe from his lips. "Reckon mebbe yuh'd bes' keep yer shirt on, Inspector," he drawled, dropping into the spare chair.

"Damn your impertinence, what do you mean by that?"

Blue Pete regarded his pipe reprovingly; it had gone out. "Got a match, Inspector?"

The official's hand went involuntarily to his pocket, but he jerked it back.

"What have you got to say—that's what I must know."

Blue Pete fumbled in his own vest pocket and found a match. He relit the pipe and sighed comfortably.

"I mean—it's the same as sayin' yer barkin' up the wrong tree, Inspector. I'll tell yuh wot I gotta say, an' I'll make it snappy, 'cause I'm durn hungry."

He told the story, omitting only the scene in the cabin, adding nothing that might seem to ease his position. The Inspector listened, his face now and then wrinkling with amusement.

"So yuh see," the half-breed ended, "yuh jes' can't arrest me if yuh wanted to. Yuh kin prove I didn' shoot that skunk. Yuh'll find a .38 in his

neck. Both muh guns are 45's. Frenchy allus uses a .38."

"How do you know it was Thoreau?"

"Didn' I hear the shot?"

"You mean you can recognise a gun by the sound of the explosion?"

"Shure—ef I heerd it soon before—most o' them. An', yuh see, I'd heerd that gun w'en he was shootin' at the Neche down the side o' the hill."

"Why didn't you tell all this to the Sergeant?"

"I told him I didn' shoot Grey Coyote. He wudn' believe me." His eyes wrinkled at the sides. "'Sides, I wanted to git him back here to the Hat, an' it was easy that way."

"Why did you want him back here?"

"'cause he was buttin' in."

"Buttin' in on what?"

"On my li'l game with Frenchy. He's my job an' no one else's."

The Inspector's eyes widened. "You mean you're going out now to get Thoreau?"

"Shure. I told yuh I'd git him, didn' I?" He stopped and twisted uncomfortably. "Jes' the same . . . I dunno. Frenchy's a real sport ef it wasn' fer that bit o' rustlin'."

The Inspector eyed him suspiciously. "There's something you haven't told me, Pete. What is it?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' 'tall. Nothin', that is, but wot's Frenchy's business an' mine. . . . An' now I'm goin' to git him faster 'cause he got me charged with murder." His eyes took on a look of something like terror. "S'pose yuh hadn' believed me, like the Sarjunt! Wal, that's wot I got now to add to wot I had before agin Frenchy. He ain' gittin' 'way with nothin' like that, Frenchy ain't."

The Inspector's expression softened; he fought to conceal a smile. The Sergeant, standing behind the half-breed, grinned openly.

Blue Pete misread it. "Yuh do believe me, Inspector? Yuh kin mebbe find that bullet in Grey Coyote's neck."

"Yes, I believe you, Pete."

Blue Pete breathed more easily. “Jes’ the same, Inspector, w’en yuh think yuh gotta send somebody to take muh job from me I’m quittin’. Yes, sir, even ef it’s the Sarjunt. I’ll work with him, but I don’ need no help with Frenchy. I don’ want it. I gotta work alone. I got muh ways o’ doin’ things, an’ tha’re not your ways. ’Sides, Frenchy ’n’ me’s got somethin’ to settle between us.

“Oh, an’ by the way, yuh ’member them broncs wot was stole from the Double X? Ef yuh want ’em bad tha’re up here in the cutbanks near the Neche camp—that is, ef they ain’t bin run away w’en yuh wasn’ lookin’. Mebbe the Neches is on’y ridin’ herd on ’em.”

He made straight for the 3-Bar-Y. Mira had not yet arrived, and he waited for her impatiently. When she came, it was Whiskers who gave the frankest demonstration of affection, but Blue Pete understood.

“But, Pete,” Mira protested, when they had talked things over, “surely you’re not going to get after Frenchy for the Mounties when he saved your life twice, once in the storm and when Grey Coyote had you covered?”

“Mebbe he did,” replied her husband, “but I don’ need nobody to save muh life. I fight muh own fights; yuh know that. ’Sides, look wot he done: he near drownded the hull police lot, an’ he got me charged with murder. An’ Grey Coyote was my target. Nobody gits ’way with all that. An’ donchu go makin’ me soft, neither, Mira. Frenchy’s rustled his las’ steer, an’ I’m the one to see to it. . . . Reckon I’ll take Whiskers ’long this time. An’,” he added in a low voice, “I don’ want no woman taggin’ round to look after me an’ git in the road.”

He stamped outside. But in a moment he thrust his head through the door.

“Yuh know wot it makes me feel like, Mira”—he would not look at her—“but that don’ say sometimes I don’ need yuh.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the ebook edition.

[The end of *Blue Pete: Rebel* by Luke Allan]