

PRAIRIE RALPH

A SHORT STORY

BY LAWRENCE MOTT, IN THE PALL MALL MAGAZINE.

Inspector Gibbs and Sergeant McPherson walked slowly across the barracks square of the R.N.W.M. Police headquarters at Regina.

A November wind whistled mournfully through the leafless trees; the skies were sodden and grey, and the long low buildings seemed desolately forlorn—cheerless in their severe white and drab.

The inspector drew his cape closer about him. "Another winter to face, sergeant," said he, as though seeking sympathy from the heavily-built Scotchman.

"Ay, sir, an' while it beginneth sae brauly 'tis boun' to be a wheester!" The inspector looked at his companion impatiently. "Does a Scotchman ever see anything from a cheerful point of view?"

"The flicker of a smile crossed the other's face. "Ay, sir, while there's a guid tee be seet!"

From the drill-ground came the ridin-master's hoarse tones as he labored with his rookies (newly-enlisted men).

"Thurs for'ard—fours right—Trot!" Then the sound of many shod feet.

"Not—that—way, you backwoods axe-slinger! Stick on your horse in some sort of shape, not like a trick monkey on a performin' dog! Strike me silly if I ever saw such work! Say, men, the stenorian tones changed to pleading ones—the commissioner 'll be back from Ottawa soon an' he'll ax me fast 'bout 'how's my rookies?'

"You boys don't want me to get the 'call down' for not workin' over you?" "No! Three cheers for Sergeant Donaldson!" The rattle of staccato sound was like musketry in the cold air.

"That's enough, men; thet'll do for nois!" Now, rookie Tom Dane, for a flashin' touch let's see you pick up your hat at speed!"

The young man, Prairie Ralph's son, put the heavy Ontario horse at full gallop, dropping his sombrero as he started. Turning with a yell at the upper end of the drill-ground, he swept back again, bearing gracefully from the saddle, his fingers trailing on the grass. A deft reach and he had the sombrero.

"You must have been born in the saddle—if it was possible!" Donaldson muttered with a grin of pride. Then—Now, mind the next order. By two—guide—left—gallop!"

The thunder of horses speeding over turf rumbled.

"Halt!" A moment's silence. Gibbs and McPherson listened on the steps of the inspector's office.

"That's well done, men!" from Donaldson. Stables all, shrilled the bugle.

"The men like him, sergeant," Gibbs asked. "Twad be a quare mon who didn't."

The two went in the austere office; Gibbs sat down before a roll desk, littered with papers. The other stood.

"Sit down, sergeant. I have a matter of importance to consult you about."

The use of the word "consult" is rare in the police from a superior to an inferior.

When he heard it, McPherson methodically placed his sombrero between his knees, pecked down, and waited. The inspector's eyes unconsciously saw the outside.

Plain drab roofs, well-kept gravel beds, remnants of summer flower-pots, their stalks withered and shrunken by frost; the painfully countable trees, faint wisps of smoke dragging from stubby chimneys, and beyond the chill, bare prairie, that stretched away, flat, devoid of life.

"Word has reached me," said abruptly, "that Bill Ellis has run amok." Gibbs searched through the papers on the desk. "Here it is, and comes from a reliable source. What do you think?"

The sergeant took the long slip and read carefully, whispering the words to himself. Then he gave it back.

"Tis nae for me, tae gie my opinion, for 'tis vera—"

"He's the man that killed his brother in Hope Valley, isn't he? Constable Dickson's evidence cleared him of that. It was something about his wife, was it not?" Gibbs interrupted.

The sharp eyes from under shaggy Scotch brows twinkled, then were expressionless.

"Tis at that way, sir. Weemin be unco' useful, but fer sae o' that they be generally mixed in sair a lot o' men's deevilments."

Silence between the two.

With draughty puffs and muffled bellows the wind's noises came down the chimney. Now and then a clatter of feet spread itself on the fender or vanished as sparks in the fire—that shed some heat.

"Yes; but if Ellis gets away, then I axit your pardon, sir, but I ken pretty well the kind o' he be, an' 'twill be centerest—vera centerest—"

"Have it your own way, sergeant, but I have no doubts, now."

"Thankie, sir." The sergeant saluted and left. "Vera centerest," he said to himself as he went. A telegram box stood across the main drive and threw himself from the saddle at the inspector's office.

The sergeant waited.

"One hundred thousand dollars gold on east-bound; man suspected on board. Have one man at Gleichen, others to help if necessary at Medicine Hat." The inspector saw McPherson—"Send Dane here; no answer (to the messenger)."

When Tom came, Gibbs showed him the telegram. "You will have to take the west-bound today. Can you make it?"

"One hour? Yes, sir." The Scotchman heard it all. "Vera centerest," he whispered again.

II. The heavy Maritime Express thundered on its way from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean, raising great clouds of dust that eddied and billowed in its wake. The country became more and more level, lying away on either side into a blurred mass of grey. Now and then a distant squatter's homestead rose up ahead, flashed past, and disappeared as a speck behind the next.

"Well, well, it does seem as though we'd never get to Regina!" Two men chatted together in the smoking-car with that freedom which is bred of a long railway journey. One was tall and powerful, with masses of hair heavily tinged with grey; the other a dapper little chap of the fairer, sleeker type—diamond ring on his all.

"I looked curiously at the big man

"The report says that Ellis has threatened to 'hold up' the east-bound Trans-Continental. What about that?" The big Scotchman sniffed the crossing of his legs.

"Well, well, sergeant, what do you advise? Commissioner Berry is away, most of our good constables are on post, and this report says that the hold-up will be between Moosejaw and Regina as soon as Ellis knows that the express car is worth it." The inspector rose up, went over to a big map that hung on the wall. "There is only one place," he said, studying the ticked lines, "that he can hope to have success, and that is from Pasqua on to here; the running time is—" Gibbs got out a timetable. "Ridiculous!" he said quickly. "He would not have time to kill the messenger."

"Well, say by supposition, sir, that he got on at Calgary or Gleichen? Tis vera possible that he might—on t'other hand—be a passenger from Medicine Hat. Does seem tae me, sir, that the deestance and time in this case should be a greet centence."

"By George, you are a—" A knock.

Donaldson pushed the green baize door open.

"Just the man I want." Gibbs hurriedly put the report into the other's hands. "Have you got a rookie who can ride and who is daring?"

"The drill-master looked up. "That I have, sir, and a fine one. His name is—"

"Never mind his name; bring him in to me. You can vouch for him, Donaldson?"

"With my life, if there's any danger about or hard riding to do!" McPherson sat. Gibbs paced restlessly to and fro while the clouds tore with rifts of sickly white between, across the skies in dull, rending masses.

"Rookie Dane, sir!" The big drill-master pushed the other forward.

His eyes, erect easy carriage, powerful figure—all were instantly "sized up" by the inspector. He wasted no words.

"Dane, I am going to intrust you with a dangerous duty, not only dangerous but one that will require a good bit of headwork." He paused.

"Yes, sir?"

Do you know a man called Bill Ellis when you see him?"

At the name Tom's brows contracted. It sounded familiar, but as Prairie Ralph and his wife had agreed never to mention the ex-foreman, and as Tom had not seen him since that day in the police quarters at Battleford many years ago, time had snuffed out the young constable's memory of Ellis.

The inspector was watching him keenly.

"No, sir, I do not, though the name sounded familiar at first."

McPherson looked discreetly at Gibbs. "He used to know—" The inspector stopped, seeing the warning in the Scotchman's look. "Ahem—yes, well, I have had news that this man Ellis means to hold up the east-bound Trans-Continental."

Over the details, from time to time consulting the long slip of paper.

"I shall want you to take the west-bound some morrow, to Gleichen, and spend the night there, see if you can pick up any information at Lennon's saloon."

"Uniform, of course, sir?"

"Naturally; but carry two revolvers. Then, as I was saying, come back on the east-bound; report to me by wire should you get definite news. Here is the photograph of your man."

The inspector stared thoughtfully out of the window. "This is your first chance, Dane; let's see what you can make of it. That's all."

The young man's eyes were aglit with excitement, and Donaldson was highly pleased.

Now, by Jimmy-Christus, don't go badly-high in the air. Keep your two feet on th' ground, an' remember what I tellye, an' that is t' get the drop on him fust!"

"Don't you worry about that," Dane laughed. "Dane's dad and the mother be glad if I make a good job of it."

He went off to his quarters.

When the two had retired in the grim office of the inspector.

"Dinna ye ken, sir, that Ellis saved that young man's life when he was a wee bit o' a bairn? An' ye mecht say saved Prairie Ralph's life, too, when Van Ellis pickt him from bein' smothered by his hee' quickly."

"T'd better not send him, then, Supposing he gets Ellis, and Ellis proves all this to him as a reason to let him go?"

The Scotchman's eye half closed. Human nature, sir, is an unco' strange thing. Bide a wee, sir, and let the lad work it out for his ain self."

"Yes; but if Ellis gets away, then I axit your pardon, sir, but I ken pretty well the kind o' he be, an' 'twill be centerest—vera centerest—"

"Have it your own way, sergeant, but I have no doubts, now."

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"Say, I'm a Yankee from way back, an' as such I'm darned curious to know your name, an' why you're so all-fired anxious to reach—to reach—what's the name of the place?" The big man laughed. "They call me Prairie Ralph at home, and I'm going to surprise my boy, who is in the R.N.W.M. Police stationed at Regina. Haven't seen him for five years as I've had my work to do, and he's had his. I'm giving him a surprise party today."

Ralph was on the lips of his companion's tongue, but the deep affection that shone in Prairie Ralph's eyes enforced respect.

"Don't mean to be inquisitive, old man," he said, after a short silence, while the ponderous wheels under their feet roared and rhythmed over the joints. "I'm married, too, an' I have a youngster, but—but—well, scarlet fever! You know?" he asked apologetically.

Prairie Ralph nodded. "Too bad." As the ranchman was about to light his pipe a burly form in slouch sombrero and long coat hurried past them up the aisle.

Prairie Ralph started. "Bill Ellis, that you?"

The stranger half turned his head, then hurried on into the next car. The ranchman's eyebrows contracted.

"Damn strange, could have sworn that was Bill's back and walk!" With hisses of air-brakes and clatter of trucks the long train drew into Gleichen.

Half-breeds, squatters, colonists, tourists filled the platform. In the white-jacketed porters of the Pullman cars ran hither and thither sending telegrams, buying sandwiches for their passengers. A group of men of the R.N.W.M. Police stood apart. One of them, a tall young fellow, was talking hurriedly, showing a photograph.

On a siding stood the west-bound express, puffing stertorously.

"Ah! board for Banff, Laggan, Golden, Macer, Kamloops and Vancouver! Board—board! Let her go, Jack," the conductor shouted, and the west-bound pulled slowly away.

Prairie Ralph got out for a whiff of fresh air. Some one hurriedly cannoned into him; he looked up. "Tom!"

"Dad!"

"Why, I was just coming to look in on you at—"

"All board for Medicine Hat, Swift Current, Moosejaw, Regina and the east. All aboard!"

Tom jumped on the car steps after his father.

"This is great!" the latter exclaimed. "But my surprise party won't amount to much now."

"No, I had it on you that time." Suddenly Prairie Ralph noticed that the young constable had on his full kit of side-arms. This he never wore unless trouble is expected.

"Why?" the ranchman asked.

"Dad, it's the greatest luck to meet you; there's a big fracas ahead, and if I get my man it will mean a lot to me. I may need help."

Prairie Ralph's eyes shone with a strong glitter. "Hold on a minute, lad. I'll be back in a second. While he was gone, the dapper little man moved into the seat in front of the constable, gazed admiringly at him, his uniform and his weapons.

"Say, an' you the old codger's son? I mean," he added hastily, seeing the look of non-comprehension in the other's eyes. "Tis the old chap your father?"

"Yes," Tom answered abruptly. His mind was so full of what lay ahead of him that he looked on every one and everything with suspicion.

Prairie Ralph came back. Both hip pockets bulged slightly. He stared significantly at his son, who understood.

"Now, what is it?"

In whispers Tom told him of the attack to be made on the \$100,000 in the express car.

"Who's doing it?" The ranchman's eyes were aglow with excitement and his big hands plucked nervously at his trousers.

"His name is—"

"Medicine Hat—Me-dic-ine Hat!" called the brakeman.

"Damn his name!" the ranchman said; "but is he on board?"

"Yes, I saw him at Gleichen. Look here, guv'nor, there are police ready to board the train at this station. Can we handle our man alone?"

"Can we?" Prairie Ralph snorted. "Those who knew the detail of the plan wondered why the crowd at Medicine Hat station was so thickly dotted with the uniforms of the police. But nothing happened, and the east-bound went on its way."

Evening haze was settling down on the prairies; great banks of cloud rolled across the heavens, tinged with golden, crimson, and amber in the sunset rays, and tiny specks in the hazy gloom showed that the squatters were lighting up.

"Who do you suppose I thought that I recognized a while back?"

"Who?" Tom asked.

"R-r-r-r-r-r-r!"

The brakes set to their places with a crash. Passengers were flung forward violently. The traveling salesman yelled, "Hold up!" at the top of his lungs.

"Come on, guv'nor!"

Tom, Prairie Ralph at his heels, jammed their way through the crowd of frightened passengers to the express car. The engine was some distance down the track. A man with a revolver could hardly be discerned standing over the engineer.

"Thank God, here's a policeman!" a young woman said.

Tom and Prairie Ralph had a revolver in each hand. The crowd scattered. Tom rapped sharply on the slide-door. "Open up, in the name of the king!"

A moment's silence, then—

"Curse you, open that safe!" The deep voice within was plainly discernible. Silence.

Then—"Till blow the whole car in to nothing!"

"Blow away! We'll both go with it!" another voice—the messenger's—answered.

A faint cheer came from the quaking group outside.

"Hold your position, messenger!" the ranchman thundered. "We'll be in, get 'ax—two of 'em—you loafers, hurry up!"

The frightened conductor and a porter smashed the emergency tool cases and brought the axes.

"Leg up, Tom, to the roof. You break in the slide. I'll cut my way through from above!"

Slud—slud—crack! Splinters flew right and left.

"My God, he's lighted the fuse! Stand clear outside!" the messenger screamed.

"Jump in at it. We're nearly through!" Tom yelled, jamming his axe haft deep at every blow.

The noise of shuffling feet, the heavy breathing of struggling men. Then a shot and a curse.

"All right—boys, I've smashed the fuse. Give him hell, he can't get out, but I'm—done for!"

A shrill whistle came from inside the car. As the man emerged the engineer leaped to the ground and started to run.

From somewhere beneath the engine

a little dapper figure appeared, revolver in hand.

"Oh no; not if I know it! Hands up, an' lively too!"

The man crouched slowly, pulling off a false moustache as he did so.

"I'm a Yankee from way back, an' you don't suppose you can get ahead of Jim Simpkins, do you?"

Prairie Ralph's hole in the roof was big enough to let him through. "Ready down there, Tom?"

"Now!"

The big ranchman dropped to the floor of the car. At the same time the constable rushed over the remains of the door.

Dead, his head half under the huge safe, blood oozing slowly from his left side, lay the messenger. Near him the trampled-out remains of a fuse that led to a square black tin. In the far corner sat a man, his face between his hands—motionless.

Tom covered him instantly with his weapon.

"Surrender in the name of the king!" The man readily looked up, pulling off a false moustache as he did so.

Prairie Ralph's face went white. "Bill Ellis?" he said hoarsely.

"Yes, Ralph, that's me."

"But—but I don't understand, Bill! Keep back there!" (to the excited crowd of passengers outside). They fled.

All gone to the bad, Ralph, since the old days. Everything's gone wrong and I tried this. I heard you when you called to me in the car. Wish to God I'd turned round!"

The man readily looked up, pulling off a false moustache as he did so.

"This murderer should know his father so intimately puzzled him."

Prairie Ralph turned to his son.

"Tom, this man saved your life once—years ago, and saved me later after having killed his brother for your mother's sake. I ask you, is there any way that you can manage to be occupied elsewhere while he slips away?"

A whirlwind of thoughts chased in the policeman's mind. He looked from Prairie Ralph to the other. Then he pressed his hand to his forehead. He had always told me the truth, and I believe that this man—my prisoner—has done all that you say, but I—the ranchman's eyes glistened—"I must do my duty, having taken the oath."

"But—" Prairie Ralph began.

"Prisoner, stand up!"

Defiant Tom handcuffed him.

"Ralph, I'm proud of your boy, and glad that I had his chance once, but saving him. My life is finished; his is just beginning. Don't thwart his instincts or his honor. I'm ready (to the constable)."

The engine was again attached to the train, and Simpkins kept excellent guard over Ellis's confederate.

Exclamations and curses for Ellis, loud praises for the young constable, ran the length of the train as it moved eastward again in the darkness. A vote of thanks was drawn up by the passengers, addressed to the R.N.W.M. P. commissioner at Regina.

Stars glittering, Northern Lights shining nebulously, the east-bound express sped on.

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Twenty-one cases of ptomaine poisoning among girls have occurred at Milton House, Chelsea, one of the branches of the London Female Preventive and Reformatory Institution. One case occurred last night, the victim being Fanny Mary

press stopped at Regina, three hours late.

Inspector Gibbs was there, as were McPherson and Donaldson.

"And did ye get him into the train?" The latter rushed into the train. The manacle prisoner he checked. "By Jimmy Christus, ye'll get promotion for this—good luck to you!"

Leading his prisoner through the crowd Tom's eyes were full of tears. Ellis saw them. "Brace up, boy. You'll come out right."

Prairie Ralph hurried to them. "I'm going on to Brandon, lad. Your mother will be anxious, and I—"

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Too many used a laundry mald. At the lowest it was stated that the girls had on Tuesday eaten some meat cooked on the previous Sunday, and that monomania poisoning had been set up by the presence of the Garter's bacillus, which had probably been brought in from outside and affected the food. The Medical Officer of Health for Chelsea expressed the opinion that the germs probably got into the meat through it from the outside so long after it was cooked, but it was also stated by Dr. Freiberger that ordinary cooking did not produce a temperature sufficiently high to destroy the microbes.

Eleven girls were taken ill the same night, and ten on the following day. The girl Tommer died, but the others are progressing favorably