

His Majesty's Mail

A Thrilling Story Illustrating the Every-Day Drama of the Great North

THE Mackenzie River mail packet, bound from Edmonton to Fort Macpherson, was many days overdue at Chippewyan. For a week a demoniacal northern blizzard had swept the Athabasca Valley, and Sandy MacFells, the factor of Chippewyan, was worried about the mail. He walked back and forth with his daughter Margaret throughout the straggling rooms of the post in a great impatience, shaking his grey head remonstratingly at those of the crowd of inhabitants who voiced the possibility of calamity having overtaken the packeteers in charge of the dog train. The trading-room was full of post people waiting like himself, and among them sat Sergeant Ford and Constable Mikel Rochaine. These men of the Mounted Police had little hope of seeing the mail that day. It was the worst day of seven bad days, and they knew the Athabasca River trail in snow and wind.

"I guess it's no use," yawned Ford, arising and stretching himself as he stared at the swishing window coated inch-deep with frost. "The packet isn't going to get in. It must be storm bound somewhere down the Athabasca."

"Jacques Grasson, he bring the packet to-day," declared the French-Canadian constable, with conviction. "Dis is de limit of hees taim, an' he be come alright. An' I tell you no storm evaire bound him, eider. But dere be so mooch loose snow. It mak' de runnin' ver' bad an' de taim ver' slow."

"Tha's richt, Mikel," observed MacFells, pacing by with Margaret hanging onto his arm. "Tha's richt, mon. Nae bleezard ever stoppit Jacques Grasson wi' in ma ken. It's the trail bein' sae heavy. It's losin' him hours a' the time, an' hours soon make days, especially when they're lost ones."

"Do you really think it will get in to-day, Mikel?" asked Margaret, eagerly. She was more impatient for the packet's coming than even her father.

"I be sure Jacques not ver' far away," replied Rochaine. "Dis storm she blow so close an' low dat not'ing can be seen on de lake. If de cloud lift an' we see ovaire de ice, I t'ink de packet mebbe be in sight. Tak' de glass an' you be spot her!"

The lens, however, failed to reveal anything in the whizzing storm wrack. But as Margaret closed the wind-buffed door, it was hastily burst open again from without, and in rushed Klavin Machot, the trapper. Without stopping to kick the surplus snow from his shoepacks, Machot slid across the planks, leaving a double streak of white which immediately turned to twin rivulets upon the floor.

"Le pacquet!" he cried, flinging down his cap and jumping on it.

"Go away, Klavin! Tell that story to a Dog Rib! Too cold for jokes!" came the medley of comments from the men in the trading-room.

"I ain't jokin'!" declared Machot. "Le pacquet for sure!" He picked up his cap, which looked like a bannock that failed to rise.

"Where'd ye see it, mon?" demanded the factor.

"On de lake. I have de deadfall set at de lowaire mouth of de Peace. I go see w'at I catch, an' dere creeps le pacquet ovaire Athabasca. She some ways out from de rivaire's mouth. I see her wan minute w'en de cloud lift oop."

"Only one glimpse?" asked Sergeant Ford.

"Dat's all de taim I b'e have before de tam theek blow in. T'ree men an' de dog train!"

"Three?" asked MacFells.

"Sure t'ing!"

"YOU'RE wrong," put in Sergeant Ford. "You've had a dream, or you've seen another party on the trail. There are only two men with the mail packet, Coleene, the Cree trail-breaker, and Jacques Grasson, the packeteer."

"Yes," growled Cory Calvick, a rough character who with his brother Dease worked for the Hudson's Bay Company, "people don't pike out for their health

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in a blizzard. You've been seein' things, Machot."

"Not a tam bit," asserted the trapper, confidently. "I see t'ree men an' de dog train on de lake ice."

"Klavin ain't de man to mak' meestak'," Private Rochaine supported. "He have de grand eye. I bet dat train is Jacques Grasson's."

"Then who's the third man?" asked Cory Calvick.

"The Lord knows!" exclaimed his brother Dease. "Mebbe some crazy tenderfoot lookin' for local colour!"

"Well, he'll get it," chuckled Cory, "if he follows the Mackenzie River mail."

Still, in spite of their doubts, the rest had caught something of Klavin Machot's enthusiasm. They crowded to the door, listening in the cold, and soon, borne on the sixty-mile-an-hour wind, sounded the faint tinkle of bells.

turned to the scene before the post. In front of the factor's place all was pandemonium. Dogs fought. Women chattered. Children squealed. The trading-room was jammed with men of strange and diverse types, Hudson's Bay employees, fort runners, trappers, traders, Indians. In and out of the columns of human legs darted the slaving huskies, fighting as they went, knocking the limbs from under the unaware. The post canines were out to challenge the dogs of Jacques to deadly combat, but these were too tired to answer the challenge. They lay down by the fire and refused to move. Grasson himself, Coleene, and the constable, who gave his name as Farrell, from Edmonton, huddled over the stove, sucking warmth into their marrow. Farrell talked only with the factor, Ford, and Rochaine. He seemed to evade the questions of the curious inhabitants as to the necessity of his travelling in such weather, and soon the inhabitants began to form opinions of their own. Word went about that the Mackenzie mail was valuable, and

many were the whispered conjectures that took place between men and women. The Calvick brothers caught the drift of things and, watching their chance amid the general confusion, slipped unnoticed from the trading-room.

THE factor was busy in his office, sorting out the mail and writing despatches for the other posts upon Company matters. On the through way-bill which accompanied the packet he had to enter the time of the tripper's arrival and set the hour for departure for the fresh relay of men and dogs to carry the mail northward through Fort Smith to Resolution. While MacFells attended to the necessary writing, a new team of huskies was being harnessed to the toboggan outside. Silver Stream, a full-blooded Chippewyan Indian and a trusted courier, stood ready to travel in advance of the packet to break the trail, and Polleaux Pangué, a half-breed, was detailed to drive the next section of the route. During the interval of awaiting the coming of the packet, Pangué commenced to load the supplies for the trip. On the forepart of the toboggan he lashed the bundle of provisions, consisting mainly of pork, beans, flour and tea, together with frozen fish for the dogs. Above the provisions the blankets were tied in rolls, leaving room at the back for the packet. As Polleaux finished his preparations, Sandy MacFells closed up his despatches and thrust them into the box with the mail. Then he beckoned Sergeant Ford into his office.

"Ye'll understan' why Constable Farrell cam' wi' the packet," he began, in a low voice. "There's money goin' forrard, an' I ha'e an order for ye to send a man on wi' the mail tae Resolution." He showed Ford the order from Winnipeg headquarters.

"Rochaine can go," announced the sergeant. "He's the only man here, and I trust him like myself."

"Verra weel," nodded MacFells. "An' ye can just impress on Mikel hoo important a duty he has. Dinna mention the fact abroad, ye ken, but there's thousands in yon packet."

FORD'S face became serious. "That's a big inducement for robbery!" he exclaimed. "How many people know it?"

"None but oorsel's. I ha'e it by sealed word, an' I'm sendin' the same sealed word on."

"Didn't Farrell know what he was guarding?"

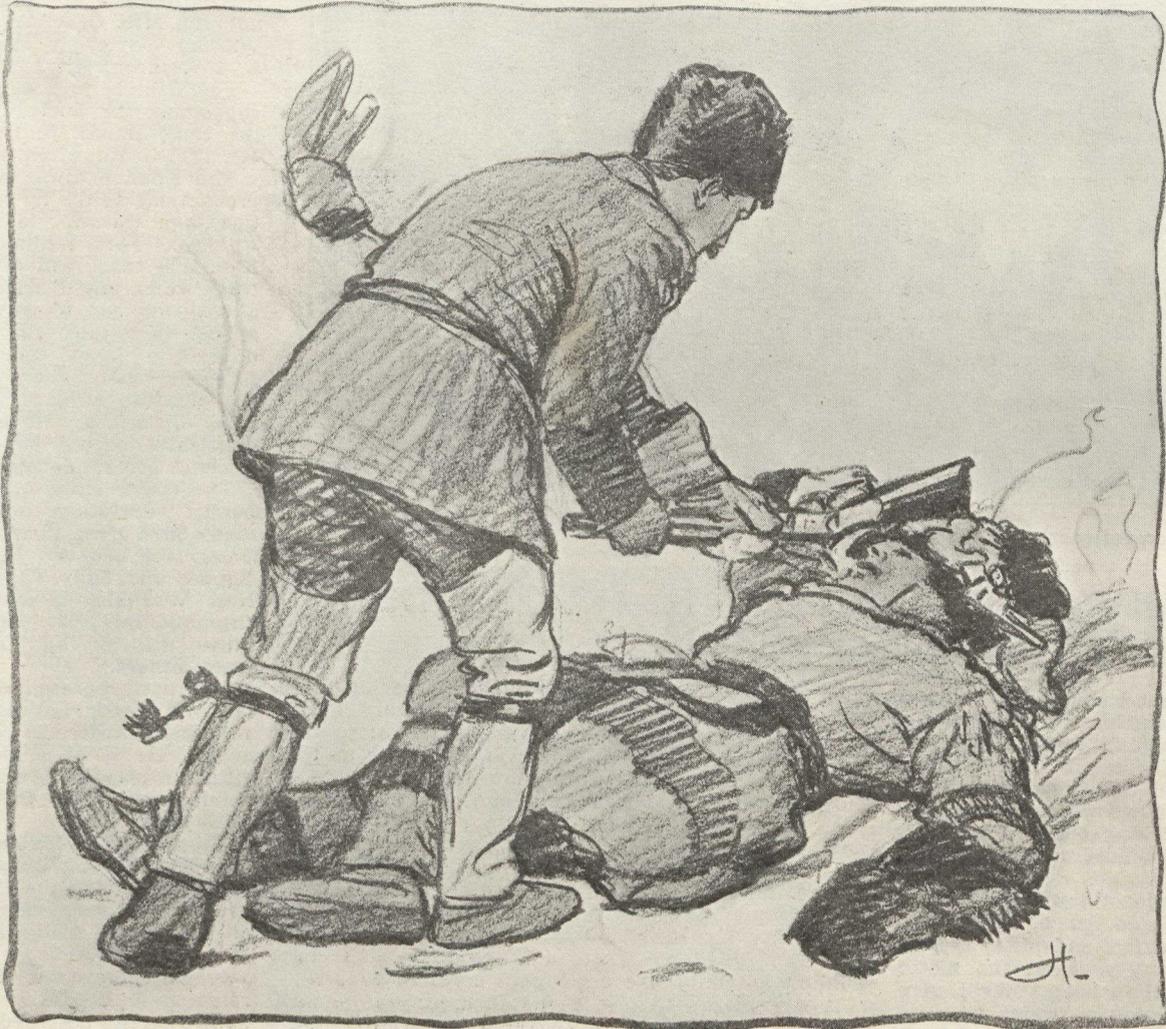
"Not in dollars and cents, though I dinna say he hadna his suspicions. His orders were to deelever the packet at the cost o' his life. An' that was pittin' strang value on it."

"And Rochaine gets the same order?"

"Aye."

"Alright, I'll give it to him at once. He'll want a few minutes to gather his kit."

Ford went off to give Mikel his commission, while the factor crossed the yard to the waiting toboggan. With ostentatious dignity MacFells placed the



Its butt met Dease's menacing weapon with a crash of metal and bones.

"Dere!" cried Machot, triumphantly. "Hear de bells? Le pacquet is here."

Instantly there was a tumultuous rush through the trading-room door. The crowd floundered out over ten-foot drifts toward the three snow-plastered figures nursing tired dogs along with the laden toboggan. The factor stood in the doorway and watched the train come in. Ahead ran Coleene, the Cree trail-breaker, lithe and powerful, his deerskin parka rimed with hoar frost. Behind him followed the toboggan bearing the mail packet with Jacques Grasson's mackinaw-clad form lurching beside. And in the rear came a stranger about whom swarmed the eager inhabitants.

"Who's the tenderfoot?" asked Dease Calvick, staring with the others from in front of the trading-room.

"No tenderfoot about him!" growled Cory. "Don't you see his uniform?"

"By Jove, you're right, Cory!" exclaimed Dease. "It's a constable of the Mounted Police."

For although the stranger's clothes were sheathed in ice and snow, they could make out the cloth and stripes of the Force.

"Cory has a good eye for the uniform now," remarked Sergeant Ford.

Whereat the crowd of men roared with laughter, for the fact that the Calvick brothers had got into a horse-stealing scrape with the Police in the fall was known by all at Chippewyan.

"Look out I don't get too good an eye for it," answered Cory, scowling at both Ford and Rochaine, who had been the law's representatives in the affair.

But the sergeant and the private only laughed and