

FOLLOWING THE BIG GUN.

A REMINISCENCE OF '85.

I. THE FIRST MOVE.

For many months the Big Gun had been left to hibernate in the square enclosed by the buildings of Fort Macleod.

Even when spring came, when the last snow-wreath had vanished before the breath of the Chinook wind, and the stir of the year's new life was felt in the land, his sleepy calm was uninterrupted.

But one day as the men were drawn up for stable-parade, the Captain came out and read them a despatch which made their hearts beat fast, it was a fragmentary account of the Duck Lake fight, and thereafter there was little day-musing for the Gun. He was forever being thumped about after six eager, sinewy horses; or being unlimbered,—not that he was very limber in the common meaning of the word; then his throat would be swabbed out by raw gunners, who gave him nothing to cough up; or they would explode caps with a mere irritating snap when he felt he ought to be allowed to roar.

There was continual going to and fro in the square in those days. The shout of the gun-sergeant made echoes like hammer-strokes rattle among the buildings; and out beyond the line enclosed by these there was actual hammering, and the bite of the adze was heard, and the creaking and coughing of saws; for at each corner bastions were a-building, with loop-holes pierced through their heavy timbers, whence one could watch the wide prairie. A blanketed Indian scrutinized one of them for an hour. "What is it?" said the carpenter. The Indian half-closed his eyes, and in grievous tones declared that it was "Bad Medicine."

If this brave had not been spying about the Fort, he would have been glad to stay at the Reservation, where excitement made buzzing such as one hears in a hive on a summer evening. The old war-spirit was rampant. The gray-haired sub-chiefs had stories to tell of their ancient prowess, stories reserved for a complete edition of Munchausen's book. The young bucks burned to do something on which they could base bigger stories. Meanwhile the councillors of the tribe withdrew nightly to secret meetings. Occasional messengers rode in on tired ponies, bringing tobacco from Riel, or boasting that the days of the white man were numbered.

For two years there had been bravado talk among the Indians of a great confederacy; by uniting together the tribes were to regain their hunting-grounds, and when the settlers were driven away, the buffalo, they thought, would return. So South Peigan and North, Blackfoot and Blood, Kootenai and Sioux, Nez Percé, and Flat Head, Gros Vent and Stoney, Fox and Snake and Crow, were to gather from mountain and prairie, and drive from the land the white invaders. This was the yearly talk in the Spring; it began whenever the ponies which had been "skin-poor" all the winter, began to eat of the young grass, and it reached its loudest when they "waxed fat, and kicked," like Jeshurun.

It is needless to tell with what envious eyes the young warriors looked upon the roaming herds that had taken the pasture lands once covered by their buffalo. Reports came to the Fort that they had been reviving memories of the hunt by killing cattle,—not in hidden coulees either, but on the open prairie. For the Indians the prospect was fascinating; the fifty thousand head of cattle in the district seemed to them innumerable, and from among the ten thousand horses each one thought how well he could replenish his own pony-herd. For the ranchers the outlook was not joyful, for their wealth was represented by these herds of cattle; for them the Chinook winds seemed to blow just as kindly as for the buffalo, coming with warm breath from the Pacific to clear away the snow from the foot-hills and the plains. But what if the increase was in the end to be ministrant only to Indian feasting? Moreover, the ranches were far apart, too far to allow the men to give help in emergency to one another. So the cowboys, and the settlers on their little scattered farms were expectant, not to say afraid, as the boasts and threats of the Indians were reported to them.

On the Reserves, however, there were old men who counselled patience, and restrained the warlike ardor of the would-be warriors by telling them that Riel was not yet in power, and by reminding them of the Government ration still coming to them, beef and flour, week by week, without any pre-

requisite of toil on their part. They observed also that in the Fort the preparation of "bad medicine" was going on.

The Fort was a busy place. In the square men hurried back and forth. The Sergeant would look at the Gun when he passed, and say, "I hope there is to be work for you, my pet." In the stables a score of horses stood with saddles girthed. Provisions were ready, so that with pack-horses a four-days' trip could be begun at any moment by a squad of two score, more than half the men in the troop. To anticipate their absence men in the neighbourhood were to be organized as mounted rangers; and an infantry garrison was to be enrolled for the Fort, that the Police might be the more free to patrol the district.

There are few finer forces in the world than that from which the men were drawn who eventually travelled with the Big Gun. They were in proportion as one man to a hundred of the Indian population. They had to watch the wily braves, and prevent them from killing cattle, or stealing horses. They had to see that no one evaded customs dues, and, most unpleasant duty of all, to capture whiskey smugglers and dealers; this in a town into which was flowing a perpetual tide of cowboys, freighters, bull-punchers, ranchers, mule-skinners, and sometimes miners and prospectors, all of whom were willing to pay high prices for spirituous exhilaration. They were brave fellows, these men of the Mounted Police; they used to laugh and make arrests while the lustreless eyes of loaded Winchesters were turned upon them by irascible friends of the horse-thieves.

The daily troubles of the Big Gun began on the day when a despatch told of the Duck Lake fight. That was the opening of the Half-Breed Rebellion of 1885. The Indians camped on the Mokoanis River, just fourteen miles from Fort Macleod, had the news by their runners two days before it came to the Police by telegraph and courier. Soon every Indian tribe, even to the South Peigans and the Crows, knew that war had begun, and had received Riel's final invitation to have part in it. They were deliberate about smoking the tobacco he sent; they all wanted to be on the winning side.

The question, What was all this commotion about? is quite likely to interrupt the story here. First of all, then, let it be known that the Half-Breeds in the North had many grievances: the methods of surveying their district perplexed them; they believed that there was favoritism in the placing of Government contracts; they could not get titles to their lands. Then let it be understood that they had made appeals by letter and petition to the Government; and when these failed had sent a deputation which brought back promises, for "light are words, and lightly spoken." In the end when they found themselves unnoticed, and the promises unfulfilled, they thought of Louis Riel and called him to their aid. Their desire was to have such an agitation that the swell of its waves might beat upon the threshold of the big houses for talking at Ottawa. The agitation was to be constitutional; but they were like children in their quick indignation against what they considered the injustice of their treatment by the Government.

The Half-Breeds tell of the war's beginning thus: One day an official of the Hudson's Bay Company passed through a settlement, coming from the east, and the men queried eagerly, "Are we to hear from the Government?" It may be said parenthetically, that this was not a politic question, for one of their grievances was that the Hudson's Bay Company took Government contracts, for a price, then gave the people who filled them half a price, paying the same not with money but with double-priced goods. Moreover it was a current joke that this man had drowned several inquiries in Hudson Bay rum; there are those who say that it is very potent liquor in which to drown care and weariness, and the inquiring spirit. Was it likely if these things were so, that this official should greatly rejoice in the agitation which was likely to bring investigators thirsty only for facts? Maybe his wish fathered the thought, for he said, "Yes, you will hear from the Government; you will get an answer in bullets." That sentence was like the striking of the match; it set the flame of rebellion leaping.

The men were silent and dismayed. It was found in Riel's state papers that an order at once went forth to seize the stores at Duck Lake belonging to those who were loyal to the Government. About the same time teams sent thither from Fort Carlton to bring in supplies, were confronted by armed men. At this news Major Crozier advanced from Carlton with fifty-five men of the Police force, and forty-