

## His Majesty's Mail

(Continued from page 9.)

the mail packet rocked in his wake. Inside five minutes the pack of grey dog-like things burst from the bluffs onto the lake ice three hundred yards behind. Rochaine sighted over the snows into them and saw four feet flip upward as he pressed the trigger. Again he turned the trick, and yet again. The pack stopped an instant and jumped on the fallen, while the constable ran after the toboggan.

The heavy breathing of the three men and five huskies cast a white smoke in the air. They were going at top speed. Kasba's village was still two miles away and dark was gathering. Twice more Mikel repeated his manoeuvre of facing the pack, and each time the outfit gained a few hundred yards before the wolves got close again. The pack did not like this medicine. In the brains of its members was the acme of cunning, and when a dozen were slain, the old dog-wolf leaders grew wiser. The men in charge of the mail packet saw them scatter to the flanking spruce and edge up in a skulking line which closed in to a half-circle, broke, and reformed again to the rattle of Rochaine's rifle. The outfit was practically breaking its way through the animals.

"W'at you t'ink?" panted Mikel, as he spurted alongside Polleaux Pangué. "Mak' de barricade of de toboggan an' fight it out?"

"Too many grey devils," counselled Polleaux. "Keep running to Kasba's."

About them the weird-voiced semi-circle shifted and changed, always keeping pace with the team. The spruce grew darker, till the wolves were nearly hidden. Now they crept in very close, and Rochaine shot with vicious haste, sometimes half-emptying his magazine. The light was bad for sighting, but often a snarl of pain told Mikel that he had got another. The distance to the mouth of the Slave lessened to a mile and a half, and then to a mile and a quarter, but quarter-miles in the North are long, especially when death is dogging the running. Ahead of the huskies Silver Stream stuck valiantly to the trail from which the wolves seemed trying to force him out on the open lake. So dark it was that he could see only the loom of the track, yet without apparent effort his feet found the imprints of those who had passed before. All at once he missed them. His snowshoes struck the unmarred crust, and he halted in uncertainty.

"Do these men fly?" he called back to the others. "Their trail ends here."

"De wolves end dem, mebbe," hazarded Rochaine.

A laugh sounded in the spruce trees above.

"Oh, I don't know about that!" exclaimed a familiar voice.

THE three with the mail packet looked up at the commotion in the branches, and in a moment the Calvick brothers swung down beside them. Rochaine regarded them suspiciously. They were armed like himself with repeaters, and the pockets of their red and blue mackinaw coats bulged with cartridges.

"W'at you doin' oop dere?" demanded Mikel.

"Well," drawled Dease, "we thought it might be a better place to meet these howlin' brutes than on the ground. You see we didn't expect help. Though we're mighty glad you happened along!"

Rochaine knew Dease Calvick lied, but he checked the temptation to tell him so.

"You bet," seconded Cory. "It's no 'special fun sittin' straddle of a spruce limb in this frost all night and takin' pot shots at them timber beasts."

With the halt of the packet, the wolves drew in. Shadowy spectres, they broke from the spruce in a charge, but they met the fire of three rifles instead of one, and the deadliness of the volley took them by surprise. They turned again and slunk for shelter. Each man had killed two, and, whatever their other shortcomings, Rochaine blessed the Calvick brothers for their good marksmanship in the poor light.

"Reckon they know their distance

now," chuckled Dease, refilling his magazine.

"They sure do," exulted Cory. "Three repeaters can get them as fast as they show themselves. God be kind to the fellow who invented repeaters!"

"W'ere you be goin'?" asked Mikel, uncertain as to the brothers' intentions.

"Who? Us? Oh, out to our traps! We have a line across from the Slave's mouth to Lake Clair. We'll camp with Kasba for the night. Where you makin' camp?"

"Kasba's!" answered Rochaine, with the feeling of a baited man.

"Better be gettin' on then," suggested Cory. "We've over a mile to go, and it's thunderin' dark."

"Go on, Silver Stream," ordered Rochaine.

The mail packet swung away from the spruce bluffs along a level marsh and pointed for the Chippewyan village. The wolves stuck half-heartedly to the chase till the outfit neared the village. Twice they were close behind, but the three rifles played havoc with them, and with disappointed wailings the pack dispersed southward over Athabasca.

Yet though rid of one danger, Rochaine felt that he faced another. He had his misgivings as he entered Kasba's village in company with the Calvicks. He could not get rid of the idea that the brothers had designs on the mail packet. They had not been out to their line of traps for a month, and this sudden journey just before nightfall and through the heart of a blizzard looked suspicious. Kasba and his Chippewyan tribesmen welcomed the travellers with some ceremony.

PRIVATE ROCHaine slept uneasily. He lay with the mail packet beside him and with his rifle within reach. Three times he wakened and gazed at the recumbent forms of the Calvick brothers who lay on the other side of the tepee across its central fire-pit. He had his doubts as to the soundness of their pretended sleep, but those doubts seemed foolish, for morning came and nothing untoward had happened. At three o'clock he was awake and making ready for a start.

His movements awoke Cory Calvick, and the latter rolled over in his blankets and raised himself on his elbow.

"You're an early bird, Rochaine," he yawned. "Think we'd better start too, Dease?"

"Blazes, no!" exclaimed Dease, awakening and stretching. "It's only the middle of the night yet. It's all right for you, Rochaine. You've a long trail ahead of you."

"Oui," nodded Mikel. "I can't be waste any time."

The attitude of the brothers puzzled him. He could not understand their sudden friendship and meekness, for he knew their inherent lawlessness. He had looked for a fight in the night. It hadn't come. That should have been an agreeable disappointment, but it wasn't. The Calvicks had failed to show their hand. Mikel would much rather have seen their cards. Still his face was imperturbable as he swallowed a hasty breakfast, gave Kasba and his chief men a present of tobacco, and passed out on the trail. Silver Stream was already off in front. Polleaux Pangué swung his whip, and the packet headed north to Fort Smith.

With smiling unconcern the Calvick brothers watched it go. Rochaine remembered their smirks, and instinctively he knew that there was some hidden thing beneath those smirks. Every rod of the journey he fretted over the reason for the Calvicks' ease and confidence, and ten miles northward on the Slave River's breast he stumbled, literally stumbled, upon the reason. For there he caught his snowshoe in a snow-covered fragment of driftwood frozen in the ice and pitched forward on his face against the rear of the toboggan. The weight of his body and the momentum of his fall broke the packet from its lashings on the tail of the load.

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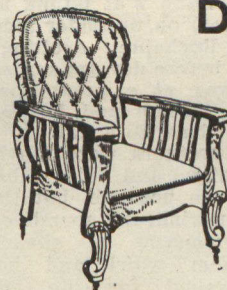
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