

HUNKER BILL'S DOG

How a Faithful Animal Figured in Its Master's Flight

By ARTHUR STRINGER

IN certain remoter divisions of the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police there are two or more men who are known as "Divisional Marksmen." These men, besides receiving a pittance of extra pay, are permitted to wear neat little badges on their tunics, and, incidentally, to curse to their hearts' content the vileness of Canadian ammunition.

The tenderfoot did not need to ask, accordingly, just why grizzled little Sergeant Skeel was being sent out to Kiola Gap. For a half-breed had ridden into the little white-washed barracks, bringing word that Crackerbox Jones had broken gaol from the guard-room at Fort Anderson, had shot down two corporals and a breed, and was now supposed to be making his way along the White-Cat Trail for the Alaska boundary. He had been supplied with arms by the wife of the breed whom he had murdered, and had fired on a constable, who caught sight of him in the light timber west of the Trail. And he would be known by the yellow dog following him. And no half measures were to be taken, for from Regina to Hershel Point, Crackerbox Jones was known as a desperate character.

So Skeel, that short and scarred and grizzled sergeant of dubious origin, who had been smuggled into the force as far back as the year of the Riel Rebellion, and had stuck to the service for the sheer love of the life, secretly filled his tunic pocket with good American cartridges, and watched with dreamy eyes the hurriedly improvised patrolling party detour far out across the lonely muskeg and light-timbered rock between Blackfoot Crossing and White Cat Ford. He said nothing to the tenderfoot who followed him, until he had picked out his position on a wooded bluff to the east of the Gap, commanding three miles of undulating northern desolation. Then he looked over his Winchester carbine with much care. After that he contentedly slipped his forbidden American cartridges into the magazine, and made careful note of the wind before lighting his pipe.

"I allow I'm uncommon grateful for this here ammunition," said the little sergeant with a sigh—and years of Northwest life had not robbed his tongue of its uncouth native touch—"for I'm thinkin' that any gun practice what may be comin' my way—well, it ain't goin' to be the kind where Chinese fireworks fills the bill. If this carbine-work was a-goin' to be just slam-bangin' away until your man came down, then I wouldn't feel so particular. But P'lice orders are some rigid on certain points, especially in dealin' with whites. And my privit instructions are that this here Crackerbox's got to be winged, and brought in alive!" He gazed down at his resting carbine meditatively. "And I ain't hungerin' to obliterate any cuss, just b'cause he's playin' in hard luck!"

"What a fool he is," broke in the tenderfoot, "to trail through with a dog!"

"They're all fools!" rejoined the man with the carbine placidly. "They're all fools in this country, when they try to buck agin' the slow-movin' grind o' British law and order. It's like a baby scratchin' and tearin' at a glacier. He only hurts himself. And there's no let-up to the glacier. But it's like all the rest o' them—him havin' that dog flaggin' his whereabouts, every move he makes! I've never cut across the trail of a bad-man yet, north or south o' the Line, that he didn't have some fool soft spot, somewhere in his make-up! Mostly, I allow, it's a woman. But I can rope in one occasion where it was a bull-snake, and another where it was a Mexican green parrot. But sometimes it's a dog. It was a dog with Hunker Bill, and Bill was about as black-speerited a bad-man as ever drifted down the Yukon."

The tenderfoot asked for details as to Hunker Bill and his dog, patiently waiting his time while the little sergeant's eye studied the lonely and lifeless panorama of coulee and muskeg stretching out into the space below them.

"That was 'way back in the earliest days o' the Klondike gold fever," began the watchman, keeping a dreamy eye ever on the stretch of country beneath him, "when the scum o' the whole Pacific Coast boiled up and dribbled over into the Yukon valley. Everything went, in them days; and I allow this here Klondike country weren't altogether a neat an' tidy rompin'-ground. Just which way Hunker Bill drifted in from is neither here nor there, but just which way he was directin' himself was uncommon plain, for first crack out o' the box

he got mixed up in a dance hall shootin' party and found himself stabbed in the shoulder by a jealous 'Frisco lady. Then he took to invadin' river 'caches' and carryin' off little tid-bits, and sellin' the same open handed, for enough Dawson fire-water to float him into delirium tremens for a day or two. Bein' loaded for bear some proper, one night, he tried to shoot up the Hope O' The West saloon. For this uncommon laudable ambition he had his guns took away from him, and was kicked out into the snow. He was crawlin' home under the stars, cussin' and blasphemin' that whole camp some noisy and eloquent, when he hears a pup yelpin' and two men fightin' inside one o' the shacks. Then he sees a door slung open, and a foot kick something out into the snow. Then the door shut again, and Hunker Bill gets down and noses and crawls around them snow-banks till he finds that something, cryin' and whinin' there uncommon pitiful. It was nothin' more'n an overgrown grey and liver-coloured pup, but that kick had broke its leg, and it was sure goin' to freeze stiff. So Hunker Bill picks it up and takes it home, and binds up the busted foreleg with a set o' splints made from an old cigar-box, and gives it milk punch and the corner of a Hudson-Bay four-point to sleep under.

AND Bill watches that leg, and hangs round that pup, and swipes grub for it, and blasphemes some wonderin'-like and says, 'By Gawd, it's uncommon queer, this feelin' o' havin' any livin' critter lick your hand!' And he'd sit and blink at that pup's eyes, and the pup'd sit and blink soft and steady at Hunker Bill. And then Bill'd go and steal a supper for him. And b'tween you and me and this here jack-pine, that mongrey-coloured dog kind o' works a miracle in Hunker Bill. It clean turned his head, I reckon, havin' even a cur put three minutes o' honest trust in him. For Bill got to thinkin' things over and apprehendin' he weren't livin' up to no kiyang mark o' decency, so he sobered up and took a freightin' contract between Whitehorse and Pork Trail. And every move Hunker Bill makes he is shadowed some close by this liver-coloured pup, forever lickin' at his moccasins and watchin' him with those broodin' and trustin' dog eyes. Bill called him Hunker, after hisself, which, I allow, was no uncommon flattery, as Bill saw it. He wasn't much to look at, that dog, with a big and hairy head, lookin' uncommon like a cross between a Scotch collie and a she grizzly. But he was sure clever, and sure faithful, and soon got onto Bill's curves. What's more, he done everything told him. But his carcass was about as lean 's a Nootchi herin's, and seein' his legs were long and scrawny, and one fore-leg crooked, and an ear torn off, he weren't ever accused o' bein' a beauty. Bill used to say it was all his eyes. They were so soft and meltin' and human-like that Bill got into the habit o' carryin' on conversation with that dog same as if he roped in everything Bill was turnin' loose on him. And if any gravel-washer was gettin' lonesome for trouble, all he had to do was try abusin' that dog o' Hunker Bill's. That would turn hell loose in Bill, and if he weren't held back there was likely to be a lot o' people walkin' slow behind that gravel-washer next day. It weren't so all-fired foolish o' Bill, after all, for when he was driftin' down to Dawson, in a Rice Lake canoe among a lot o' shore-ice, his fool egg-shell of a boat got nipped between two floes and went down. Bill went with her. He came up so paralyzed with the cold he hadn't sense enough to grab the float-ice all around him. And that's where Bill's dog got in his work. He grabbed his no-account master by the coat collar, by the arm, by the hair, and kept haulin' and draggin' him in, from one cake to another, until he got him ashore. But bein' just a fool dog, that was about all he *could* do. So he sat down on his haunches and howled, thinkin', I allow, that his boss was done for. And not bein' able to get him up on dry land, he kept on howlin', until, as luck would have it, three Chilkat squaws came down to the bank to see what was wrong. They hauled Bill out, and gave him a free parboilin' in front of a camp-fire. But with his goods lost, and his boat gone and winter comin' on again, Bill didn't seem to have ginger enough left to go pirootin' for a new job. And in them days, I allow, there was always enough duffel lyin' round loose to tempt any cuss what hadn't a keen sense o' property rights. It was a pretty thin-settled and wild and woolly country, then, between Whitehorse and

Dawson, with enough scows stranded on bars or nipped in the early freeze-up to bridge the Behring. And seein' there was a heap o' freight, and all-fired expensive freight, on them stranded scows that had come down the river, too late to get through, there was about two hundred miles of uncommon choice pickin' for any one so natchurally light-fingered as Hunker Bill. Most o' this stuff, you see, had to be put up on safe ground, and 'cached,' until open water again. Sometimes there'd be nothin' more'n a row o' five logs around it, with a tarpaulin over the top to keep off the snow. Now and then there'd be a watchman left to keep an eye on the 'cache,' but most often it was the Mounted P'lice that scared off thieves and kept Injins from gettin' too inquisitive. There'd be two or three men scattered along the trail, with nothin' to see but the choppers now and then, cuttin' wood for the steamers for the next summer, and here and there a log shack to crawl into when a blizzard blackened that frozen valley o' lonesomeness, like the wrath o' Gawd let loose!

"So it was uncommon loose-jointed patrol-work, I allow, and when one o' the big Edmonton firms 'd lost about half a scow-load of fresh pork, they concluded it were about time to pan out a little law on their own hook. Which same they proceeded to do some strenuous. They bought over the service of a couple o' the blackest-hearted white men in all Alberta, answerin' to the names o' Hootchi Ryan and Peewee MacPherson, and set 'em north to look after things, armed with enough fireworks to clean out a Cree reserve. So far as any one will ever get onto the lay-out o' this here hard and feverish game, these two soft-handed sons o' Order rounds up Hunker Bill somewheres in the neighbourhood o' one o' the caches. And that meant rough-house, though Bill seemingly got away with nothing more'n a flesh-wound—or, o' course, it may have been only the dog got nipped by a stray bullet. At any rate, they root out Bill's seven-foot shack, that night, hidden away in the hill-timber across the flats, intendin' it, I take it, for a little surprise-party for Bill. But this here dog o' Bill's puts him onto the game, in time, and there's a heap o' gun-powder noise in the scattered timber, and Bill leaks out under cover of the darkness, hot as a hornet. Just what heppens after that it's some hard to assoom. But some three weeks later, Hootchi Ryan and Peewee MacPherson not bein' heard from, the company sends up for a report. So the Mounted P'lice sends out an Inspector and two corporals, and they start fine-combin' that trail for evidence. First, they find a bag o' ammunition, and a 40-82 Winchester, which is later identified as Peewee MacPherson's. So they keep at it, goin' round on their hands and knees, pannin' the fine snow between their fingers, until they strike a bed o' ashes. Among these ashes they find buttons and moccasin-eyelits and a buckle or two, and a big H. B. clasp-knife, which is identified as Peewee MacPherson's. By this time it was uncommon clear that Hunker Bill and his two friends had had their fight out to a finish. So the next move for the P'lice was to find the bodies, and then, natchurally, to find Bill.

ONLY one o' them bodies was ever found.

And that was three months later, miles and miles down the Yukon. It was washed up on a gravel-bar, at the spring break-up. And b'cause o' the coldness o' that water, there was no trouble about identifyin' it. It was Hootchi Ryan, all right, but the some startlin' thing about it was that there wasn't a knife-cut nor a gun-wound on the whole carcass. But it was chewed and torn at the throat, and the calf o' the leg and the fore-arms were full o' sharp teeth-marks. So the Inspector could see, plain as print, just how the whole business had come off. While Hunker Bill was attendin' to Peewee MacPherson, that dog o' Bill's was squarin' up accounts with Hootchi Ryan, who, like as not, tried to close in behind, when the fight b'tween the other two was gettin' purty hot. One body was burned—but Bill must a' found that uncommon slow and tedious work, for the other he chucked over a cut-bank onto the river. Then he mosied northwest, for the Alaska frontier, followed by that long-haired, liver-coloured mongrel every move he made. As I laid out before, it was a some sparse-settled country, in them days—and still is, as you'll always find when you travel light!—but it was sure surprisin' how the news o' that double killin' traveled from Yukon down to Wrangel and from Yukat east to Great Bear! It brought some mighty swift and grim-soundin' instructions from the Commissioner down at Regina, for the apprehendin' o' Hunker Bill. I was holdin' out at Fort Selkirk at the time, but I was drafted some speedy to join in that man-hunt, across a thousand miles o' desolation.

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