

THE HOUR OF PERIL

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voiced cry of despair rose shrill above the crashing echoes, and three or four of the resplendent air-ships, with shattered cables soared up into the sunshine as though in triumph.

Hoskin stood upright and for a moment looked down at his work, then with a leap was at her side in shelter.

"They're crushed in masses," he panted, then, seizing her hand dragged her over the rough, loose stones in the darkness. As they went they heard rocks falling from overhead to block the tunnel's mouth behind them, though ahead the way was still clear.

Out into the daylight at the further end, came the more perilous descent, but fleeing, with the deadly fear of an air-ship's shadow falling on them, they passed with sure-footed swiftness on the edge of heights where at other times they could only have crawled. Down, down they sped, until they stood on the grass of their own valley, the valley where they had longed to loiter until the winter's snows. But they looked on that valley with other eyes now. From a home, if only for a week made sacred to them alone, it had turned into a trap, perhaps a death scene.

For a few moments they rested, to regain breath, close up against the rocky wall, that already sent out its lengthening shadow. Their aching eyes dared not leave that blue strip overhead where at any moment the air-ships might appear. Their horses were grazing happily near the pool, and the smoke of their camp-fire rose in the still air. Tim Nolan had already begun to prepare their supper, and his cheerful whistle added to the serenity of the scene.

"Jove! We must get the fire out," Hoskin muttered, then, "You stay here behind this rock while I run over and help Tim catch the horses."

"But I could be packing the food," she protested.

"No, stay here."

Then she knew how slim he thought their chances to be.

First a dash of water on the fire, then her horse was saddled and led over to her.

"If they come before we're back, make for our old trail," Hoskin said and was gone.

The entrance to their valley was not far from her hiding-place, and she might have managed to reach it unobserved by skirting the open under the beetling cliff's shadow.

Her sturdy brown pony rubbed his nose against her arm and there seemed comfort and promise of help in the warm touch. Her eyes followed every movement of the two men. They were leaving the stores! Surely that meant certain starvation! No, Tim Nolan had flung across his horse a canvas bag that held their tea, bacon and flour, while her husband was loading himself with the ammunition. Thank God, those waiting moments were over, and they were leading their horses towards her at a run. If it were life or death now, it was together, and she could face it. Scrambling on her pony's back, she was ready for them, and in Indian file, they skirted the grass, until the defile took them into its shadow, without one backward glance at their deserted camp. Then began a nightmare of flight, lasting for days and nights. When it was too dark for mountain travel, and they were too weary to stick on their ponies, they rested, one man keeping watch while the other slept.

No crag or defile, however, pathless or shut in, was safe from the terror that might descend on them at any moment from that bright Sep-

tember sky. It was two days before they dared light a fire, but they kept life in them with some biscuits and meat lozenges which Hoskin had carried in a wallet for their mid-day lunch, and luckily for them, water was never far to seek.

"'Twould be worth going out of our way to get at them tough boys in the mines an' lumber camps," said Tim Nolan who, since breaking up camp had never spoken on unnecessary word until now. He had all his life faced the perils of the wilderness, but the terror of the unknown was on him and chilled his heart.

It was in a mining-camp that they first looked on other faces than their own three haggard ones, and for a moment the nightmare lifted, held at bay by the neighbourhood of their kind. But the responsive blanching of those faces to their tale warned them that the terror was not over-spent. They went on, leaving as they passed, a trail of men, grimly arming themselves, and gathering the few women and children to shelter.

Then at last they had reached their bourne, the nearest station of the Mounted Police, whose increased detachments in these latter days had spread from the great plains into the western passes and so out to the coast.

Night had all but closed in on that little mountainside station when the officer in command, sitting smoking in after-dinner peace, in front of his cabin, noticed a tread of horses and stir of voices down by the men's huts, and strolling thither came on an eager group around two gaunt, way-worn men and one woman.

The major never forgot the droop of that last dark figure against the sunset, the loose brown hair around the wan face, and the shadows of fear in the big blue eyes.

"Are you the officer in command? I have something to report," came quickly from the younger man, who seemed the leader. And then, in brief, tense words was told a tale that set astir the telegraph wires from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and from Hudson's Bay to the Mexican Gulf.

It brought the troopers to their ranks, and sent the great part of them clattering off in pairs into the night.

For a week two great nations stood to their arms in the passive determination only known to those who defend their homes, while north and south, picked bodies of scouts explored the mountain fastnesses.

Then, all at once, the tension snapped, and towns broke out red with flags and resonant with bells, for the great sea-victory achieved by the combined English and American Pacific fleets, a victory that shattered the power of the east for generations to come.

During that week Hoskin lay at the Mounted Police station in a heavy fever. He had broken a rib by a slip on loose stones the first day of their flight, though he had not let his wife know of it. The pain, the strain of fatigue and hunger, and fear for his girl-wife, as well as the terror that he had looked down upon had sapped his strength, and the autumn chill was in the air before he was able to sit at the door and watch the stir of the little camp around him.

It was very good to be alive in the September sunshine, with Nettie sitting on a camp-chair nearby, mending some of their well-worn clothing.

Tim Nolan was within speaking distance putting a patch on his boots.

It seemed as though all that lay between them and their last camp

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