

Daggers Drawn

By H. Mortimer Batten

DUSK was settling rapidly as two men scrambled down the sandy slope towards the water-hole. The foremost of the two was an Indian, the other a white man, though it was difficult to distinguish any difference between them in the dim light. Both had toiled all day across the sandy uplands at the heels of six hundred head of cattle; both were covered from head to foot in thin white dust which clung to their hair like hoarfrost and gave a grey, ghostly look to their faces.

The Indian gained the water-hole, and flinging himself flat proceeded to drink in long, savage gulps. Then he filled his two water bottles and sat down with a sigh of contentment on an overhanging boulder.

The drinking place consisted simply of a pool of water which bubbled up and percolated away into the sand. It was scarcely a yard wide, but it was well known to the ranchers who crossed the range as the only drinking place within a day's ride. The difficulty lay in preventing the cattle, which were driven along the plateau a thousand feet above, from scenting or "sensing" it and making a stampede down into the valley. If this happened, there would be no water for the men and insufficient for the cattle themselves—those which succeeded in safely descending the slope. If this happened the men would be there for days, for there was no possibility of driving the herd, half mad with thirst, away from the scent of the water, and of returning them safely to the plateau above.

This was why Sil Wiseman had remained on the plateau, keeping guard over the herd, while his partner, Ben Berry, and Keelatee, the Indian, went down to the drinking hole.

Berry reached the edge of the pool and was about to throw himself flat when something happened. The Indian on the shelf above moved his position, and before the very eyes of the thirsty white man an avalanche of dust and stones teamed down into the pool, turning it a dirty grey.

Berry was a man of quick and evil temper, and his thirst did not improve matters. For fully ten seconds he glared at the Indian. Then he said slowly and deliberately:

"You did that on purpose!"

The Indian made no answer. The look on his face was haughty, almost insolent. After a second or so, he turned away and looked across the prairie. Then Berry was on to him with the snarl of a panther. "You supercilious pagan!" he hissed. "For nine months I've put up with your quiet insolence and little meannesses. I guess we'll settle this little business right now!"

He seized the Indian by the bandanna, and jerked him, head foremost, from the boulder. Keelatee fell in a half dazed condition and Berry dealt him a brutal kick in the ribs, then another and another.

Not till he had been kicked twice in the ribs and once in the face did it seem to occur to the Indian that it was time to fight. He leaped to his feet like a steel spring, his dark eyes blazing savagely.

Instinctively, Berry withdrew, but ere he could step aside, the Indian's bony fist shot forth with stunning force.

Berry went to the ground like a log, but the Indian did not kick him. Instead, he dragged him to the edge of the pool and held him under for a good ten seconds.

"That will do for you to go on with," muttered Keelatee, then proudly he strode away.

II

Berry sat at the water's edge, staring savagely at the retreating figure of the Indian. He had been beaten in fair fight of his own making, and beaten by a "common savage." Anger, humiliation, but above all, hatred possessed his mind. He had hated men before, but now a sense of jealousy was mixed with his hatred. Never had he obtained any particular proof that he himself, a white man, was a being of a higher stamp than the red man, who had beaten him. True that he had money, while the Indian was a penniless savage. But Keelatee did not drink, he did not gamble—above all things, he lived a clean life—while Berry knew the world, the world of the Western saloons, and loved it. Was he, then, a better man than the savage, who had beaten him in fair fight?

Though these things were at the back of Berry's mind, he did not reason them out

now. He was blind with fury and mad with jealousy. Forgetful of his thirst, he rose to his feet, and was about to leave the place when something bright, lying at his feet, caught his eye.

He stooped down and looked at it. It was a necklace of porcupine quills, in the centre of which hung a plain copper cross of ornamented finish.

Berry gave a low laugh and thrust the necklace into his pocket. He had scored on one point at any rate. This was the Indian's Mission Station Medal he had found. Discovering its loss, Keelatee would imagine that some curse was coming upon his life. Taught at the Mission Station that the medal brings a blessing to all those who wear it, the Indian would sooner have parted with his life than with this precious medal.

That was why Berry laughed as he thrust the thing into his pocket. Then he began to toil up the slope towards his partner and the great herd of cattle.

III

Keelatee reached the plateau and handed Sil Wiseman his bottle, then the Indian sat down to await the return of Berry.



The sport of Salmon Fishing in B.C. waters

Sil Wiseman was a young man and a successful rancher. Handicapped by want of capital, he had taken Berry in as partner nine months ago, and Berry's money had since become indispensable. It was with growing anxiety, therefore, that Wiseman had noticed the increasing friction between Berry and Keelatee. Keelatee had shared his home for five years, and they were the best of friends. But since the arrival of Berry, Keelatee had become silent and morose; it was clear that he did not approve of the partnership, that he loathed Berry's way of living. Thus, Wiseman had watched the rift between them widen conscious that sooner or later, something regrettable would happen. Behold now! Two white partners, and between them an Indian—an Indian who was devoted to one, but who had fought and beaten the other!

Soon Berry sauntered into the firelight and took his seat. He was outwardly calm, but his eyes blazed venomously as they rested on the Indian. Had he been true to his color, he would have let things rest, but that was not Berry's way.

"Sil," he said presently, "either me or that Indian has to get out of this ere ding-dong slurs! The range ain't big enough for both of us. I've got money in the ranch, and can't very well clear out at a moment's notice. The Indian's only a paid man, and I have to help pay him."

Wiseman was silent a moment, then said:

"I guess you've had words?"

"Pretty good guess, too," sneered Berry. "Cept that there weren't many words about it."

Wiseman shrugged his shoulders.

"I was afraid it would come to this," he said rather wearily. "I've seen all along that you didn't hit it off together."

"Hit it off!" Berry repeated. "Who could hit it off with a supercilious swine like that? He's all right to you. He regards you as his boss, but he looks upon me as an impostor. It's been the same ever since I came to the ranch. I ain't going to be treated like dirt by any man, far less by a blinking Indian. I tell you right now that Keelatee's got to go."

So far the conversation might not have concerned the Indian at all for all the attention he appeared to give it, but now he rose to his feet.

"It is true," he said quietly. "Berry and I cannot live together. We might have become friends to-night, but he chooses otherwise. Half the cattle on the range are his, but I have nothing to prevent me going. It is I who must go. I have spoken."

Sorrow and pain were on Wiseman's face as he took the Indian's hand. He cared nothing for Berry, but to sacrifice his partnership on this score was almost impossible. No, the Indian must go, but

ular reason why you should consider yourself a better man than Keelatee, except that you're white and he's colored. He does at any rate, live clean. There isn't a child in the place who doesn't run to him, and I kind of imagine that I've seen children shrink away from you."

Berry was silent for fully ten seconds, then he said:

"I thank you for that, Wiseman. Maybe I shall remember it some day. In the meantime, I guess we'd best turn in, before we both of us get too much said. I've no doubt that you'd rather I went than the Indian, but I ain't going—see? It's my money that helped to make you, and maybe some day I'll be big enough to smash you and to freeze you out of the range! Then look out!"

IV

Keelatee did not waste time on the trail. Leaving the two white men he struck off across the foothills, riding all that night and all next day. When dusk fell again, he had reached the ranch house at Villa Mare, where he and Wiseman had lived together so long.

The Indian had evidently some fixed object in view. He went to a hollow tree trunk some yards from the shanty door, and groping about in the dusk, presently returned with the key.

For a moment he paused on the verandah, startled into realization by the old familiar scents and sounds. Over his head, clambered a scented vine, which he himself had planted five years ago, to watch its growth with pride and wonder. In the timbers of the roof, the spruce bugs were busy with the soft, faint rhythm he had listened to in his bunk for hours on end. Was he now to leave all this?

Quietly Keelatee turned the lock and let himself in. Dusty, travel-worn, he threw open his tunic and groped at his neck for his Mission Station Medal. Heavens, it was gone!

Keelatee staggered to the door like one drunken. This, then, was why this other misfortune had befallen him! Careless of its existence for so long, he had lost his Mission Station Medal! He had meant leaving it upon the pillow of Wiseman's bunk as a token of good faith, thinking that it would bring a blessing upon the life of his partner, even as it brought a blessing to the life of every Indian who wore it.

Keelatee knew now that a curse was upon him. During those hot dry days and nights of weariness and thirst, he had forgotten the medal and now it lay out on the foothills somewhere—on the barren lands trail!

For fully a minute Keelatee pondered the disaster, then slowly a new light came into his eyes. He muttered thickly through his teeth, and his hand fell upon the sheath at his loins. It was Berry who had brought all this upon him! It was Berry who had darkened his life and snatched away happiness! Well, Berry should suffer.

Slowly the Indian drew his dagger from its sheath. Now he would carry the naked blade at his loins and the sheath—that symbol of peace and quietude—he would leave on the pillow of his master.

Keelatee stole back into the room and laid the skillfully ornamented sheath on his master's pillow. A few minutes later he rode away, leaving things as he had found them, and intent on searching for his lost medal.

When an Indian carries his dagger unsheathed, it means that he is ready to use it, and woe betide his foe should they meet face to face in some quiet place.

V

Wiseman and Berry were a stir at dawn, and soon the slow-moving, thirst-smitten throng of cattle were under way. It was a case of keeping them moving between water-holes; the weaklings would fall out, but those that were worth a price would keep going till the thirst belt was passed. Toiling in the dust and heat all day, both men were brought to realize what the skill and energy of the Indian had meant to them, and when night fell, black and chill, they heaved a sigh of relief.

It was a ghastly place to make camp, but it was the only place. On either side of the narrow defile the rugged mountain slopes rose abruptly, huge boulders of rock, bedded in soft sand, covering the earth's surface. Up on the heights there the movement of a rattlesnake might set the