

Barrett, Courier Hudson Bay Co.

By the Author of
"Lords of the North," "Martyrs of Empire," etc.



HEN BARRETT, courier to the Hudson Bay Fur Company, reached the Rockies, his Indian guides flatly refused to go another step. The voyageurs from the prairie declared that the mountains were inhabited by demons, who hurled rocks on all intruders. On a still night you could hear their artillery rumbling like thunder, said they. That, Barrett explained, was only an avalanche, but the canoe men gravely shook their heads and told stories across the camp-fire in whispers. Lurking and chattering and plotting under the mountain cataracts were water spirits, who lured men to death in the roaring canyons. Besides, one could only enter the mountains by a pass guarded by the devil; and the Devil's Gap led directly into Ghost Valley. Here all the noisy torrents were swallowed up in an awful silence, disappearing no one knew where. And beyond Ghost Valley was the Valley of the Gnomes, where a race of giants had been turned to stone and stood forever moaning and mourning in the wind.

Frightened guides were worse than no guides. Trusting to engage fresh hands from the tribes on the other side of the divide, Barrett dismissed every man and prepared to go on alone. Caching provisions for the return trip, he put enough pemmican and hardtack in the pack on his back to suffice if he found no game. Then, buttoning his buckskin coat securely across the company's dispatch, he shouldered his rifle and set out. The entrance to the mountains he found exactly as the Indians had foretold—a windy gap between two rock walls, leading to a silent, sandy valley. Foamy torrents shimmered against the mountain sides; but there was no sound of falling water, and Barrett presently discovered the reason of the ghostly stillness. The porous soil sucked the streams down to some subterranean river.

"So much for Indian ghosts, or ghosts of any kind," thought Barrett.

He worked his way laboriously up a forested acclivity to the crest of the next mountain ridge, and looked down to a narrow, walled canyon full of great earth pillars taller than most steeples he had seen in London. "The Valley of the Gnomes has evidently arrived," said Barrett, sweeping the canyon with his field glass.

Against the opposite wall was the dark mouth of a mountain cave. At the upper end of the canyon he could see the gleaming, icy forefoot of a receding glacier; and high above were the fields of the mountain snows. To Barrett the explanation of the monster monoliths was plain enough. Ages before, floods from the glacier had carved their way through this canyon. Being hard enough to resist the water, these rocky pedestals, with their stone slabs tilted on top like rakish hats, now stood high above the dry river bed, resembling Druid monuments and giving rise to the Indian tradition of petrified giants.

To Barrett it was all very clear and all very simple, and not in the least terrifying. It did not cause him one qualm of uneasiness when he found that darkness had overtaken him and he must spend the night alone in the Valley of the Gnomes. "Those fool Indians," he said, taking refuge behind one broad, towering pillar—"those fool Indians, with all their old tommy-rot of ghosts and gnomes, make one weary." Unstrapping his pack, he boiled some tea on a little fire of sprigs. Sitting back against the stone figure, he smoked his evening pipe. The night breeze blew from the glacier biting cold. It whistled down the long procession of stone pillars with dismal, baffled sounds. It came sighing round the great pillars like an unseen mourner, and went moaning through the canyon with a weary cry.

Barrett knocked the ashes from his pipe and told himself it was "heavily lonely." Whatever had induced him to join the Fur Company and also left England to avoid for a man! Fifteen years of desolation! He would soon be an old man, unfit to go back to civilization. Civilization! Barrett laughed bitterly. Why had he left England? Ah, yes—why had he left? Usually he did not think of it. The past lay behind a shut door. But to-night, perhaps, that mournful wind had blown the door open. He saw it all—his classmates of the finals at Trinity, the cards, the quarrel, the white face opposite him, the blow struck by himself. Then something flashed in Denham's hand. After that everything went into a black blur. Barrett awakened in his own room, at his father's place, with two surgeons probing for a bullet.

"Where's Denham?" he had asked, in an impotent fury of revenge. "Broke the bars of his prison window and escaped from England."

On his recovery Barrett had joined the services of the Fur Company, and also left England to avoid the odium of an investigation.

Then came fifteen years of exile, with his heart full of hatred for Denham; and here he was, alone, watching the moon rise over the Valley of the Gnomes! The trees feathering the mountain outlines became tipped with silver. Shadowy pillars lengthened across the valley floor, and the wind kept up that incessant moaning in the far, dark reaches of the canyon. Some night bird uttered a lonely scream overhead, and Barrett gave an involuntary start.

"No use regretting what is done," thought Barrett, with a deep sigh. And the sigh was answered by an exact counterpart of his own. Barrett's pipe tumbled from his hands. He discovered that he was trembling slightly from the chill of the night wind, and he pulled himself together with a prompt resolution to quit thinking. "No more ghosts from the past for me," he mumbled to himself.

He was reaching for his rubber sleeping sheet when he distinctly heard another sigh, deeper, nearer, more life-like than the last. Barrett assured himself that it was only the wind; but he was aware, all the time, that his assurance would not have been so emphatic if he had not had a suspicion it was not the wind.

"It may be a wild animal," thought Barrett, glancing uneasily among the gnomes. The valley was now criss-crossed by countless shadows; pillar shadows, still and stately like shafts of a tomb; tree shadows, waving in the night wind; brushwood shadows, quivering to each breath of air.

"I dare say one shot will scare it. We'll see what it is!" Barrett stood up, rifle in hand. He would have moved from the pillar, but the breeze brought him a new sound, a deep, sobbing groan. Barrett felt invisible terror clutch at his throat.

One shadow had assumed a huge, grotesque shape and was gliding down the canyon, past the gnomes, tossing its arms in

the air, wringing its hands, bowing and swaying as if in agony. It was the shadow of a man—a man with long, wild, unkempt hair and shaggy beard; a man naked but for a girdle of skins hanging from his waist.

Barrett stepped quickly behind the pillar, saw the shadow move slowly down the valley floor, and, as its feet passed the gnomes, a living man came into view, wild and unclad save for the rough clout of caribou skin. The man was beating his arms about, groaning and muttering aloud.

"Some lonely trader gone mad," thought Barrett, "or some escaped madman hiding here." And he hung back, undecided what to do. No other white man was within two hundred miles of them. What could the courier do? He could not take the man with him, nor could he afford to be detained on his trip.

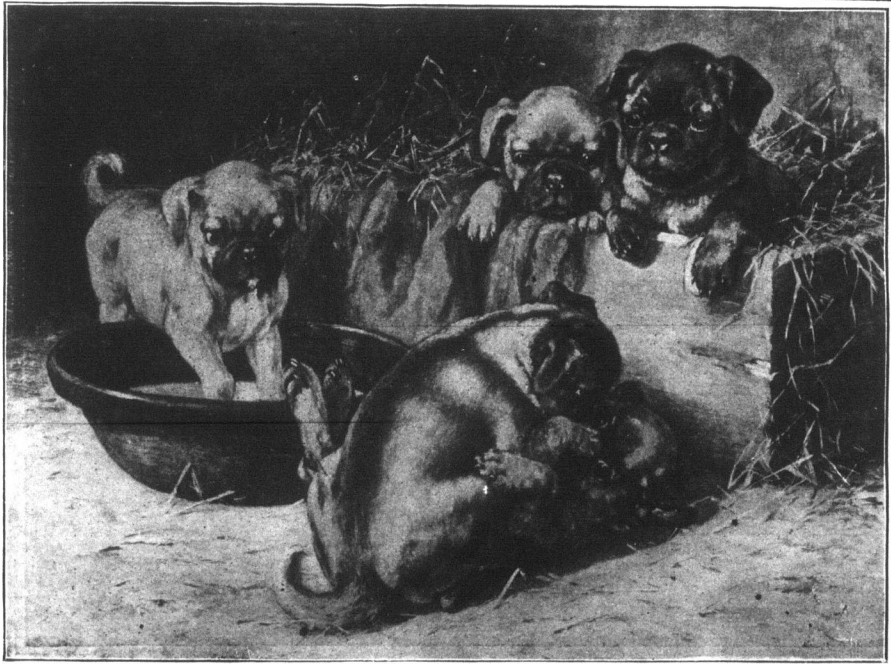
"Dead—dead—dead!" cried the man, with chattering terror, pausing a few paces from Barrett. "Dead—and—twas I—twas I—twas I!" he screamed, with maniacal gesture, "twas I who killed him!" And he passed on down the canyon among the tall,



A CANADIAN MEADOW

silent stone figures, wringing his hands and groaning. Barrett waited till the man had gone beyond view. Then he gathered up his kit as fast as he could.

"Here is a pretty pass," Barrett told himself, "boxed up in this canyon with a murderer and madman." And he was strapping the pack up when he saw the figure coming slowly back up the canyon. The moonlight shone full on the man's face. Hiding, Barrett watched. The wild man came on, muttering up at the stars and clutching the air. Though his bared arms were muscular and weather-worn, his face was ghastly white. In a flash the courier understood. This was the denizen of the cave on the opposite mountain wall, and he only came from his haunt at night. He was tall and strode with the swinging motion of a stag. Something in the cast of the white features, in the action of the rugged arms, in the poise of the head, in the resolute step, vaguely reminded Barrett of some one whom he could not recall. He puzzled his memory for the resemblance; but it only sent up blurred faces, like the broken reflection of a turbid pool. This time the man did not pass so near the gnomes. He stood a pace off, mumbling; with an angry gesture of striking an invisible enemy.



THE PRIZE FIGHTERS.

"Barrett—Barrett—Barrett!" he ground between clenched teeth—"O Barrett, if you could come back to life and know my punishment—I, the heir to Denham Hall, wandering with the brand of Cain, an outcast among the rocks!"

Barrett fell to his knees with the cold sweat standing on his forehead in beads. Again the injured man saw that chiselled, white face across the card table. Again he detected the cheat in the cards. Again he felt a blinding flash in his own eyes, and for him all life went black. Here was the enemy for whom his revenge had been hungering these many years; and the courier's hand closed like a vise on his rifle.

Out of terror at what he might do, he flung the weapon down. It rattled noisily among the stones, and the wild man fled like a hunted stag, leaping from boulder to boulder, with his long hair streaming to the wind. When Barrett looked up, a white figure against the opposite mountain wall was clambering into the black opening of the cave.

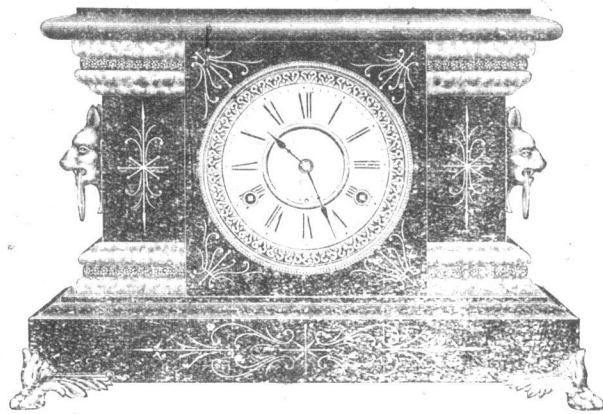
Barrett gathered up his pack and stole away from the dread spot into the darkness of the mountain forest. On returning over the mountains he did not come by way of the Valley of the Gnomes.

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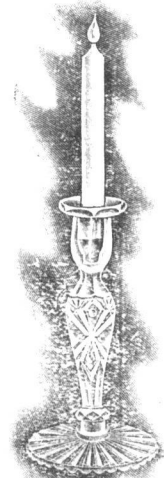
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