

Red Bluff, not by the main street, as anyone riding up from the south would naturally have done, but by a series of circumlocutions around to the east.

There was a house on that southern trail that he did not have the courage to pass!

Having left the lower edge of Blueberry Ridge just at sunset, he had timed his arrival so that it was eleven o'clock when he entered the familiar little town and made his way to the house of a friend—a halfbreed, on a side street near the depot.

He tied his horse to the trunk of a poplar down the street a little way, and then walked, with a peculiar rolling gait, forward to the half-breed's house. The inhabitants of Red Bluff kept early hours. The town at this hour seemed deserted, and of this he was very glad.

He knocked at the door of the small pine one-storey building. Receiving no answer he knocked again, and quite loudly. After a moment or two the bolt of the door was drawn back and the door opened revealing a man's head only.

"What you want?" demanded a sleepy voice.

"Is that you, John Crow?" whispered the other, advancing until his face was within a foot of the half-breed's.

The latter drew in his breath sharply.

"Sacre!" he muttered, opening wider the door and stepping out upon the small step.

"I came to see what's happened, John. You ain't been out to see me fer two months, an' I ain't had a smoke o' baccy all that time. I jist had t' come in. Have y' got a smoke with you?"

"Charley, you're a dampfool! Sh! Don't talk so loud. De police have a line on me an' dat's why I not been out wit' de grub an' tobaccy—"

"A line? God! How—how d'ye find it out John?"

John Crow shut the door and stepped down, to the ground.

"De missis she got one sharp ear. All de tam she listen, so I not call my life my own!" he muttered.

"But tell me, John, quick! Have the mounties been a-follerin' you?"

"Sure!"

"An'—an'—do they know where I'm cached, John?"

Crow shrugged his shoulders. The other, his breath coming short, seized the halfbreed's arm.

"I gotta get out o' the country, me. Y' ain't got a bit a 'baccy, John? Gimme all y' have an' I'll beat it south an' be over the border before to-morrow night."

Crow thrust his hand into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out a small, dirty sack, less than half full of tobacco.

"De mounties got a guy watchin' me," he said, tendering the sack to his friend, "an' so it no good me any more help you, Charley. But you sure must keep de eye peeled. Dey're closing in on you, by gar! Six mont is long tam but not too long for dem forget!"

Crow laughed as he finished speaking. "I didn't kill Jack—you hear me, John Crow!" Charley whispered hoarsely. "You heard me say that before. I can say it again a hundred times, I never killed Jack!"

Crow adopted a roughly sympathetic air.

"Nefer mind. You full o' firewater dat night, Charley. You not know for sure. But all de same, who you tink goin' to belief you w'en you got no witnesses, eh? You better clear out! One, two, t'ree tam I start out for your cache wit' stuff an' I find someone trailin' me lak de hunter trail de poor li'l rabbit. Even now mebbe someone is watch us."

Charley started and looked up and down the little street. All was quiet.

"No, I'm safe yet," he said; "I got my old horse tied down there a ways. I got some grub, an' now I got some 'baccy. Jist gimme a couple o' matches, John. Thanky, bo. Now, I'm off."

"Wait. You got some dollars; yes?"

"Yep. I got enough to land me in Salt Lake or Seattle. Then I figger I'll work my way to Panama on a freighter. Who's on my quarter-section, John?"

"Nobody. De gov'ment took it over. Took Jack's place, too."

"There ain't no one in my shack, then?"

"No."

"I'll camp there fer to-night, I reckon."

"You watch out!" warned Crow, shaking his head.

Charley laughed lightly.

"Oh, sure!" he returned. "So long, Crow."

Sergeant Dodge, of the Mounted Police, had been in the saddle all day, on the lookout for chicken shooters and other game lawbreakers. It was only August, and the open season being still a month away, these weeks were very busy ones for the officer and his men, on account of the illicit shooting in the various game districts.

Riding slowly up the little rise which looks down over Rattlesnake Jack's acres, Dodge struck a match and consulted his timepiece. It was half-past eleven o'clock, and quite dark, for the afterglow, so well known on the prairie, which lingers from sunset till ten o'clock, had faded.

"I've a good notion not to make for Red Bluff to-night," the sergeant said to himself, as he rode slowly on. "And yet I don't quite relish the idea of sleeping in poor Jack's shack either. It cer-

tainly wouldn't be conducive to a peaceful night's slumber. The murdered fellow's ghost might rise." He laughed aloud. Then a sudden thought struck him. A bit further on and nearer town was Charley Pederson's shack! Ha! Good idea that. He would put up there! "By the way, wonder what became of that Swede guy? He certainly has led us a dance these past six months. I'd recognize that old hat-rack of a horse he has, anywhere, but I suppose he's either killed it or turned it loose on the ranges. Queer thing, that murder! Half of the countryside doesn't believe Charley did it. Yet, why should he have run away if he weren't guilty?"

Busied with these reflections—for the hundredth time in the past half-year—Dodge came at length to the lonely little building which had been Pederson's abode. It looked lonelier than ever.

He dismounted and led his horse around to some outbuildings at the rear, where he found a rack half full of old hay. From the rusty old pump he drew water for himself and his beast, and then having tied the horse under a shelter he set out for the shack, meaning to make himself as comfortable as he could, on Charley's old blankets. He had had supper at the house of a farmer friend in the hills some five hours ago, but he decided that if he could find any canned food around he would make another meal at once.

Scarcely had he entered the almost-empty little shack when the sound of hoof beats fell on the still night air. Hesitating, in the very act of striking a match, Dodge waited. In the gloom, without he could discern nothing but the winding grey ribbon of road. Presently, however, a solitary horseman hove in



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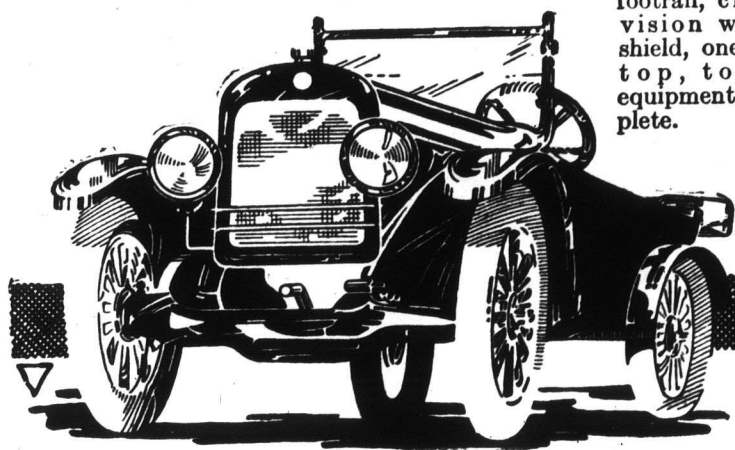
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