

A Tenderfoot's Wooing

By CLIVE PHILLIPPS WOLLEY

(Author of "Gold, Gold in Cariboo," Etc.)

CHAPTER XXXVI—(Cont'd).

As he looked he heard the horses stamping in the kitchen.

"Going, is he? I blanked if he shall!" he muttered, and without stopping to think, he ran down into the kitchen.

But the sight which met him there staggered Jim Combe, so that he stood gaping with his hoots still in his hand.

Anstruther in full hunting costume—pink coat, immaculate leathers, top hat, and gloves—turned and faced him. His horse, looking enormous alongside the weedy country breeds, was standing as still as a sheep in the middle of the room, facing the window, from which Anstruther had contrived to take the sashes.

"What in—"

"Going to bed, Jim?" asked Anstruther easily, interrupting him and looking with a grin at Combe's boots. "Sorry to bother you, but before you turn in you might put those up again for me," and he pointed to the sashes.

"But—"

"Say I'll be back soon. So long!" and, before Combe had realized what was happening, Anstruther swung cleverly into his saddle and put his horse at the window.

Combe saw Anstruther touch the great horse with his heel, heard his "Up, boy," as they came to the low window sill, and then the great quarters were gathered beneath it and like a cat, or, to be more exact, a well-broken Heythrop hunter, Roddy-gore reared and popped over into space.

The little cramped jump would have done more to unseat Combe than the worst buck, but the man from Piccadilly sat as if he was in a rocking-chair.

So quietly had Anstruther made his preparations, and the Indians' feint had served him so well, that, with the single exception of Jim Combe, no one had any idea until they saw him from the windows, trotting quietly towards the Indians, who had just returned to their lines, their horses a trifle pumped by the wild gallop they had indulged in.

For a hundred yards he trotted quietly, and then stopping unconcernedly, as if he had been at a meet in his own country, he turned and uncovered to the ladies, smiling and calling a message to them, the words of which they could not catch.

Considering the probability of a volley, it was very gallant fooling, and worthy of the good sportsman he looked, and at any rate it was better and more merciful to Kitty than a tearful leave-taking.

Perhaps he meant it so, but Anstruther was never one of those who parade their good intentions.

Replacing his hat and waving his hand to them, he turned in his saddle, and at a quiet trot rode steadily towards the Indian lines, the great horse reaching at his bit and showing plainly how good the turf felt under his feet after so many days on a boarded floor.

"Great heavens! The boy has gone mad!" cried Rolt. "Can no one stop him?"

"Best let him play his own hand now, Boss," growled Al, whose eyes were beginning to glitter with excitement and understanding. "He knows his long suit. None of us do. Maybe he's going to play peace-maker."

This may have been the idea which kept the Indians quiet, though that could hardly have been Al's reading of the riddle, or the old man's thin nostrils would not have been working so nervously, and though such an attire as Anstruther's would have been in keeping with the traditions of old time Hudson Bay factories when going to a solemn meeting, he carried no white flag or other wilfully misleading emblem.

But he rode unarmed. Except for his horn-handled hunting crop, he carried nothing, and in this fashion, restraining his horse to the steadiest trot, he advanced with the utmost unconcern to within fifty yards of the wondering Chilcotens without a shot fired or a word spoken, whilst his friends watched him with their hearts in their mouths.

At fifty yards from the Indian lines, a dozen voices challenged him, but he rode on as if he had been deaf, without haste as without pause.

Then there was a clank of Winchester pumps, and a rifle went up to a redskin's shoulder. Before the butt touched flesh, in the last second of grace, Anstruther spoke to his horse and touched him with his spurs, so that the gallant beast, unused to such treatment, sprang madly forward on the instant, whilst its rider bent over its shoulder and rode it headlong into the volley which belched out to meet him.

"Give 'em hell! Oh, give 'em hell!" screamed old Al at the window, losing all control of himself, his ace working with excitement. "Didn't I say the colt was clar grit? He's through 'em, I tell you. Miss Kitty, look. Don't shut your eyes, lassie,

Your man's clear through 'em.

And he was.

A beast coming at you is the hardest mark to hit. A man in deadly earnest is even harder, especially when you don't expect him and calculating upon this and timing his dash to a moment, the man from Piccadilly had ridden right over the nearest group of Chilcotens, going on to the east group of Chilcotens, knocking one down with his horse, and breaking old Khelowna's head with his riding-crop as he passed, and now he was going "lickety bridle," as old Al would put it, on the far side of the enemies' lines, whilst they scrambled to their horses instead of stopping to shoot.

So far he had done well, but in a glance his friends realized that his gallant effort had been wasted. Instead of turning to his left and making for the road, in which case he would have had a clear course and two hundred yards' start, he was heading for Soda Creek as the crow flies.

"He has forgotten the canyon," groaned Jim Combe.

"He hain't done no such thing," contradicted Al. "That's what he's a-playin' for."

Jim looked at the old man and understood.

"He can't do it. No horse could," "He can. A buck couldn't. A horse couldn't, but he's a goin' to, Great Scott! See that!"

Perhaps half a dozen Indians followed directly in Anstruther's footsteps like a pack of hounds running in view, but the main body of them realizing their quarry's mistake, making for the dip where the road went through, to which they imagined he must eventually come, if he would cross the canyon.

For half a mile the going was good, firm, grass-covered cattle land, and over this the red coat sailed, going two lengths for every one covered by his pursuers. But beyond this for several hundred yards the land was boggy, and when Al spoke, Anstruther slipped out of the saddle and ran by his horse's side, whilst the Indians seeing this, made desperate efforts to overtake him, and played their horses clean out.

Once through the little bog, he was in the saddle again, cantering easily until, to those watching him, he seemed on the very brink of the canyon, with the broken pine close on his right.

Then he shook his horse together, crammed his hat on his head, and went at his death hands down.

To five people still alive, there is one second in their past lives which was more than a day long.

When it was over, a fair-haired girl sank quietly to the ground, and for the first time in her life Mrs. Rolt did not move to help a sister in trouble. She could not. Her great eyes were wide with the hunger of seeing; her little hands clenched and her parted lips white; and when Al, speaking as if he were in church, whispered: "I take it all back about them duds. There ain't no flies on fox-hunting," the others burst into hysterical laughter which was perilously near tears, for the red coat had cleared the canyon. "Jomped it, by gum; jomped it clar!" as the old song says, and was sailing away, a dim pink spot, straight as the crow flies for Soda Creek.

Does the story want finishing? Before Anstruther had ridden for a couple of hours, a large posse of men came over a rise and were startled by the vision of a white-faced madman riding across the Chilcote country in the uniform of the Vale Hunt; moreover, the madman was so mad that he could barely speak intelligibly, and he appeared to be swooning from pain, though on him was no trace of a wound.

They brought him back with them to the ranch, from which, at their approach the Chilcotens vanished like the mists of morning, and it was Horseley, the leader of the posse, who, a month later, talking to Jim Combe over a pipe, said:—

"Like will to like, Jim. She'd never have made a wife for you, old chap. You'll have to plug along same as we all do until you find another Mrs. Rolt—if the world holds one."

The End.

Australia's Aliens.

Only one per cent. of the male population of Australia were born in Germany or Austria, and as regards women scarcely more than one-half of one per cent. are of German or Austrian birth. These facts are revealed in a return prepared by Mr. Knibbs, the Commonwealth Statistician, from the latest available figures, says the Westminster Gazette. There are, of course, many residents born in Australia of German or Austrian parents, but for the most part they have proved themselves loyal citizens, and a considerable number of them have taken up arms and are fighting on the side of the allies.

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