

THE TROUBLE-TRAIL

By SAMUEL ALEXANDER WHITE

Drawing by Fergus Kyle

SERGEANT SILGARDE, of the Mounted Police, pushed open the door of Ransome's Rest, the largest saloon in Forty-Mile Post.

"Bryce Casmar been in here this morning?" he asked the proprietor.

"Just gone out," informed Ransome, moving over to the window and looking up-street. "Yonder he is stopped. See him? Talkin' to yon old crowbait in funeral clothes!"

The Sergeant stuck his head round the door jamb and took a surreptitious squint up the main street of Forty-Mile. A few blocks above he could see Casmar with his back against one of the veranda posts of the N.A.T. & T. store, listening to some harangue from a lean, black-garmented fellow who seemed a cross between a quack doctor and an itinerant phrenologist.

"Old crowbait's a broker," enlightened Ransome. "Got some quartz veins he calls mines up the Chandinu. Tryin' hard to get Bryce to invest real gold in them."

Silgarde idly stretched his hands up to the top of the doorway and raised his whole body so that his moccasined toes swung clear of the floor.

"Guess Bryce won't invest in any mine," he observed. "Unless it's one measuring seven by five by three, with a little wooden slab at the end!"

"What?" demanded Ransome, startled out of his habitual self-complacency. "There ain't nuthin' to that dago business?"

"There sure is. A whole lot to it!" the Sergeant assured him, suddenly launching out through the doorway with a skilful swing. "You keep your eyes open, and you'll see how much."

The trail through the camp which served as Main Street was beaten hard by the feet of men and huskies and polished smooth by sledge runners, but Silgarde did not avail himself of the inviting path. Walking cat-footed in the fluffy, new side-snow, he crept down upon Casmar and the broker. Casmar's back remained nailed to the veranda post as tightly as a patent medicine sign, and Casmar heard no creaking foot-gear, for Silgarde was wearing smoke-tanned mooseskin. The broker, punching his arguments home, was likewise unaware of the Mounted man's approach, but just as he came to his plitudinous phrase: "Not a prospect but a proven mine!" there was a sudden twitching at the holster which hung under Casmar's mackinaw coat. Casmar's hand came down too late. The holster was empty, and he felt a rude poking in his ear.

"You've lost something, Bryce," grinned the Sergeant. "But I'll sure give you back its contents if your opinions don't coincide with mine. Are they coinciding?"

Casmar turned a bronzed, straight-featured face and regarded the Mounted man thoughtfully.

"I guess they are, Sergeant. But what in thunder have I done on you?"

"Nothing. It's the Law you're up against. Pretty nearly time, isn't it? You know you've done as you pleased in the Forty-Mile for a long period. You know I've closed my eyes so as not to see you doing it. I like you, Casmar. I've liked you from the first, when you blew up here from the South devil-go-shift and friend-cut-out. You have sense. What dazzles me is why you didn't use it, why you didn't figure out where your trouble-trail would land you."

"It hasn't landed me yet!"

"Guess again. It sure has. You've gone the limit. You plugged a dago last night, and the dago's going to die."

"But he needed plugging, Sergeant. He sat opposite me, a white man, in Pollino's Cafe and told me to my face that Hasselgreaves, another white man, had blanketed claims on Moose Creek and—"

"An impossibility, gentlemen," cut in the broker. "An impossibility owing to the new method of recording. I can take you both to the recording office—"

"Oh, go to thunder!" ordered Casmar, whirling on him fiercely. And the broker went!

Casmar turned again to the Sergeant.

"That dago business was self-defence," he asserted.

"I calculate it was," replied Silgarde. "You're not the kind to draw unless someone else is drawing. But your reputation's against you, Bryce, and the other Italian who was with Crossetti is prepared to swear that his companion had no weapon and used none."

"It was the usual thing, a knife. Lovesca took it out of Crossetti's hands when he went down. I

thought he was coming for me, too, and I covered him, but he went hunting for you."

"I believe you, Casmar. No man up here can say you ever lied. But it would be Lovesca's word against your own in the court they're establishing. And you know they'd take Lovesca's. As I said before, you'd lose out on your reputation."

The Sergeant had pocketed Casmar's gun. He, too, leaned against one of the veranda posts of the store, his arms folded, and the two men studied each others' faces, creased as those faces were by the blizzard-winds and seared by the Arctic frost.

"Well, what's to it?" Casmar asked at last.

"The American boundary right now," Silgarde told him, "or a chance in the court when they get it working. Take your choice, Bryce. But I wish I were choosing for you."

"Don't worry, Sergeant," laughed Casmar. "The boundary will do. I'm not so struck on the Forty-Mile Post that I can't leave it."

Silgarde unfolded his arms, and a sigh of relief heaved up his powerful chest.

"GOOD!" he ejaculated. "I was afraid you'd be so stubborn you wouldn't go. Your pride's so thundering stiff. I believe it was that that sent you to the North in the first place. Though you'd never say!"

"No, I'd never say," returned Casmar, his lips setting in a grim line.

"Ready to mush now, then?" asked the Sergeant in the awkward pause.

"All I got to do is throw the harness on my dogs."

"Throw ahead. I'm escorting you to the boundary."

Inside a quarter of an hour a sled drawn by five malemutes flashed past Ransome's Rest. Ransome, springing to the window, saw that Bryce Casmar was driving and Sergeant Silgarde steering.

"Never a-fore seen a man goin' by dog-team to that plantin'-ground as Silgarde mentioned," he observed philosophically.

Forty-Mile Post lies at the junction of the Forty-Mile River with the Lower Yukon. Casmar and the Sergeant swung out on the frozen tributary and headed up it. Fifteen miles or so westward ran the line separating the American and Canadian Forty-Miles. There was two feet of snow on the ice, but the trail was well broken, so there was no need for Casmar to travel in advance of the dogs.

He ran beside, the crack of his long whip splitting the frosty calm. Sergeant Silgarde had the gee pole, twisting the front of the flying sled round the river bends. They whirled through the twilight Arctic noon at a great speed, and that speed, coupled with an atmosphere of thirty below, practically prohibited speech. Not till they had covered over a third of their journey and had passed the mouth of Bear Creek was the silence broken. Then it was Silgarde who spoke.

"Didn't think you'd be so fast about championing Forrest Hasselgreaves," he panted, the smoke of his breathing fogging the air.

"Forrest Hasselgreaves is a white man," replied Casmar. "And no dago puts over anything on a white man while I'm round."

"Still, you and Forrest aren't on a very solid friendship basis!"

"No."

"What's the reason?"

"None of your business, Silgarde."

The Sergeant chuckled. "Yes, it is, Bryce," he corrected, letting slip the gee pole and placing a hand on Casmar's shoulder so that they lurched together in the long snowshoe stride. "Yes, it is. Remember, I like you. I like you well, or I wouldn't try to shove a foot into your affairs. But Hasselgreaves is a pretty close friend of mine, and he's told me something of the break-up between you and his girl Lunetta. Now I want you to take the chance of straightening that out. Forrest tells me that Lunetta and young Marvin are on their way in from St. Michaels to visit him. He's over on Moose Creek a lot, and naturally they will be, too. So—"

"That's plenty, Silgarde," interrupted Casmar, shaking off the Sergeant's hand. "I can sure attend to my own affairs. And just remember I'm not taking olive branches from you, Hasselgreaves, Lunetta, or anyone else."

Viciously Casmar flicked his whip into the malemutes, lashing them to full speed. Then, beating them at their own game and leaving Silgarde back at the gee pole, he dashed ahead and commenced to break trail where it was already broken. He stayed thus in the lead past Brown Creek and on to the bend of the Forty-Mile River below the mouth of Moose Creek.

There the Sergeant threw his weight back upon the gee pole.

"Whoa!" he yelled.

The malemutes halted.

Casmar looked about, wheeled, and came slowly back.

"This the boundary?" he asked.

Silgarde nodded. "We're square on the line. Over yonder's the American Forty-Mile and your opportunity to become a law-observer. You sure must change your ways, Casmar. The Mounted Police are the big noise up here now. The Yukon isn't wild and woolly any more. And we've got that disturbing element known as the bad man on the run."

"Got any more advice for me?"

"Yes. Remember you're outlawed. Never turn your malemutes' noses into the Canadian Forty-Mile again. Alaska's your abode. Can you keep that in your head, Bryce?"

"I sure can, Sergeant."

"Then here's your gun!"

II.

THE twilight Arctic afternoon was merging into the gloomy Arctic night as Casmar came up from the bend of the Forty-Mile River to the mouth of Moose Creek. There on the boundary squatted the American customs house. Through it all the gold of the American Forty-Mile was checked on its way to Dawson City, and around it clustered the heterogeneous log and canvas buildings of the Moose Creek Camp. The camp was seething with life. Cabins, stores and restaurants were full, and the Lucky Strike saloon, where Casmar housed his dogs and ate supper, was jammed with Moose Creek men, men from more distant creeks, Wade, Chicken, Franklin, Last Chance, Napoleon, and with Dawson and Eagle freighters.

On the dancing floor of the Lucky Strike glided the usual two-score couples. Storming the bar leaned the usual crowd of besiegers. And around the tables hung the usual host of stakers. Of this latter throng Casmar was a unit, a fortunate unit for once. But he was not bucking the roulette wheel or

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"You're not drawing, Juneau!"