

The Picturesque Derelict

A Colloquial Story of the North-West Mounted Police

By MADGE MACBETH

Time: Last Spring.

Place: Cherry Creek, Saskatchewan.

Characters? You Will Meet Them.

DISCOVERED Donald Macpherson, young Inspector of the R. N. W. M. Police, sitting on the verandah of the Barracks, smoking. (Not the Barracks, you understand, but Mac, was smoking. Let this be perfectly clear at the start, because it has nothing to do with the rest of the story.) Night is falling, without any thumping of stars or other disturbance; just noiselessly closing in, hiding the few sprigs of greens which appear in the Barrack grounds. Hat-pins painted green, or wisps taken from a broom will give a fair idea of the dense and verdant shrubbery about the town of Cherry Creek.

Enter bird (in distance).

Coo-ee-ee-ee!

Answer, another bird (in distance), Coo-ee-ee-ee!

Mac: Heigho!

Hoof beats heard, and across stage as far as drop will allow rides Bryant, a four-flusher who has butt into the town as riding master to recruits, and Clare Brownhill. Exit equestrians. Darkness slips another cog nearer the footlights, and when it is crowding the orchestra out of their places, Mac rises, delivers himself of a healthy oath, shakes his fist at the atmosphere Bryant has breathed and walks up stage, right. Exit through door marked MAIN STREET.

THERE you have a whole lot of information in a paragraph. What's the use of my elaborating on the fact that Macpherson had been in Cherry Creek three years, and slithering the pages over with love passages between him and the doctor's daughter, Clare Brownhill? For it's been proven scientifically, that you can get away with an awful amount of love passages in three years—that is, if you are not a religious mutt, with grass growing in your head in place of a brain.

You wouldn't read a long tirade against Bryant, if I wrote it; you have to see and feel a man's meanness to take it in. But ask the recruits; they would tell you the sort of brute he was. In fact, the commanding officer (not that there is much excuse for bringing him into the thing) came back from Calgary with a tale that Bryant had been posing at the Ranchers' Club as an Englishman in hard luck, and he had tried to get on the Force, without succeeding, thank heaven! You can tell from all this that Mac loves Clare and hates Bryant; that Bryant loves Clare—in his way—when writing of a villain never forget that subtle touch—"in his way"—and Clare just naturally hangs on to two men, rather than concentrate upon one. Clare's a girl, you know! So Mac, seeing them out riding together, delivers himself of an oath of no mean strength and joins in with Main Street, only parting from it at the entrance of the City Hotel; the bar of the City Hotel, to be explicit.

At this point, we might as well call the story open. He looked about the room uninterestedly until his eyes lighted upon a fellow thirster at the extreme end of the rail. This individual had a nose it must have cost a pretty penny to maintain; he had a watery, wandering eye and a drooping figure which always drooped toward the glass rather than away from it; his closely-cropped bullet head looked like that of a convict; a long, blue scar extended from his eye to his mouth, in which no teeth acted as barrier between his palate and a curious, outside world. A portion of one ear was missing, but as though oblivious to these trifling defects, the stranger leered happily and mumbled snatches of song, stopping now and again to invite some one to drink.

"Apollo blown in from Olympus?" asked Mac of the bar-tender, with a nod toward the end of the wall.

"Dunno whar he hails from, Cap'n. Looks to me like the Missin' Link, but you never can tell. Got jarred off'n a freight here this mornin' an' he's been lickin' it up pretty strong, all day." Then, he added, commercially, "but I reckon he's purty near the end of his pinch of change, by now."

The derelict's eye resting upon the Inspector, he swayed away from the rail long enough to accomplish a limp salute.

"Name it, Cap," he invited, sociably; "name it, an' it's yours."

Macpherson signified his appreciation as well as his refusal. "He has a weak heart," explained one of the by-standers, to the stranger. "More'n one

glass of sarsparilly jes' natchelly does fer him."

"Am soundsh Gib'rarlter," boasted the derelict, proudly. "An' if anybody doubtsh m', fists 'll prove 't."

He waved a loose fist in the air and smiled.

"Shay, Cap, wanta goo' man?"

Mac laughed frankly, and the sound carried no sting.

"If I did, you would hardly qualify, would you?" he asked.

"Oh, Amsh ound; an' Ash Come-backer, Cap," the other said, with as much earnestness as he could muster. "Down to Spokane, dey-sh aid Ah was-sh Hash-been, but 'm not! Nix-ee—Ahsh Come-backer!"

The Inspector smilingly shook his head.

"All right," he said. "Come over to the Barracks in the morning, and I'll see. Good night, boys."

Enter Bryant, wearing riding clothes and look of galling, smug satisfaction. Business of greeting Macpherson with patronizing, overdone cordiality, and business of being received about as gladly as a raw wound would cherish a coat of sand-paper.

"Warm night," volunteered the Inspector, conversationally.

"Very! Very! Especially when one is—riding!"

The shot told and he knew it, but had little time in which to enjoy his hated rival's discomfiture, for the tattered remnant of better days flung himself upon Bryant with a tearful cry of welcome.

"By Godsh!" he said. "M' ole frien', Dook! What'll y' have, Dookie, dey're on me?"

Bryant flung the inebriate brutally aside, and brushed his coat clear of the offensive touch.

"Get out of my way, you skunk," he ordered, "or I'll—"

"R'fush t' drink wish ole pal," sobbed the stranger, making another endeavour to lay his heavy head on the riding master's shoulder. "Why, Dookie, don't y' r'member—"

The reminiscence was cut short by Bryant's large and well-aimed fist. The derelict crumpled into a shapeless heap of filthy clothes and lay still.

Gathering rage as he talked, Bryant heaped abuse on the prostrate figure at his feet, and suddenly, in a gust of ungovernable fury, he savagely kicked him.

"You coward!" cried Macpherson, catching him from behind. "Kicking a perfectly helpless man who's down and out!"

"Mind your own business," answered the other, struggling futilely, "or I'll beat you up worse than that—officer or no officer!"

"Possibly, but until that is accomplished, I am going to protect that man from you. Here, Bill!" he called to a willing assistant, "take the stranger away and put him to bed somewhere," and when that was done he released Bryant.

"In your uniform you have the advantage," sneered the latter, "but you'll hear more of this. I can well appreciate your private reasons for playing the cheap hero and wanting to get the drop on me. Every little thing helps, I suppose."

He laughed insultingly and was gone.

Inspector Macpherson's quarters—lapse of one day. Enter the victim of the previous night's fracas. Rather dilapidated but clean and ambitious.

ABOUT eleven o'clock on the next morning a servant entered the mess and saluted.

"Strange looking party to see you, sir," he announced. "Says you told him to call."

Mac's acquaintance of the previous night came sheepishly forward. He was apparently sober, but nervous and ill at ease, twitching his cap as he looked everywhere but at the officer. He had been shaved, which somewhat improved his appearance, but even this attempt at respectability was counterbalanced by a fresh scar and much obvious damage to his clothes.

"Sit down," said Macpherson. "You look as though a drink wouldn't hurt you."

The man stared at the glass held out to him a moment, then with a cry, he clutched it and drained it off in a gulp.

"Cap, you're a life saver," he mumbled, wiping his lips on his sleeve.

Macpherson laughed.

"Have you had anything to eat?" he asked.

"Nix a thing, Cap. Hadn't the price in me clothes, this morning."

The Inspector rang for his man and soon the hobo was eating a meal so square the edges cut him. He ate ravenously, undisturbed, and when he had finished, Mac asked his name.

"Wyatt—Jack Wyatt," he answered. "I come from Nova Scotia 'riginally, but Lord love you, after I run away to sea, I felt jes' as much at home in South Americy or Noofoundland, I did. I've seen a bit of this ole globe, Cap, not all the good there's in it, nuther. I bin a sailor, cowboy, brake-man, scene shifter, cook in the shanty, bar-tender an' circus hand. Them's some of my accomplishments, as you might say. Course, I kin do other jobs, sech as soldiering. Say, Cap, ain't you got a berth for me?" he enquired, absently—his whole attention being centred upon some object in the room beyond.

"What interests you so much in my room?" counter-questioned the Inspector, before answering the man with a refusal.

"Punchin' bag, sir. Is it yours?"

"Yes. I use it sometimes to limber up my joints. Would you like to try it?"

"Golly!" breathed Wyatt. "I'd love to have a leetle crack at it." He stood up, took off his ragged coat and disclosed a pair of brown arms, bare to the shoulder. He was thin from illness and dissipation, but still muscular. Entering the bed-room he eyed the bag for a second, then started in with such a fusilade as it had never known. For full ten minutes Macpherson could hardly see the whirling, bobbing leather sphere which kept sputtering blatta-blatta-blatta, unceasingly. Slower and slower it went, until, with a gasp, Wyatt stopped.

"Gee, but I'm plum out of condition, Cap," he apologized. "I uster keep her talkin' for a half hour any day, without stoppin'. But I kin come back," he added, hastily, as on the night before.

"WELL, you certainly are some bag puncher," admired the officer, smiling. "I never saw it done like that before. How did you get so run down?"

"With de typhoid, when I was brakin' on the Northern Pacific. Was laid up in hospital at Grand Forks for two mont's and nearly croaked. When I got out, I tipped de scales at exactly one hund'ed pound. Oughta be one seventy-five."

"Were you ever in the ring?" asked Macpherson, looking his guest keenly over.

"Was I ever in de ring?" repeated Wyatt, excitedly. "Why, Cap, I've fought a hund'ed an' six battle, an' only lost ten! I made a draw in sixteen of em', an' five was with de best ones! I went a draw with Philadelphia Jack O'Brien and Mike Twin Sullivan, I did! I allus fought outen my class, which was middlin' heavy. You ask Dook Banks—"

"Who is Duke Banks?"

Wyatt opened his eyes as far as swollen muscles would permit.

"Why, de guy you saved my bones from last night. Didn't you ever see him with de mitts on?"

Macpherson nodded ruefully.

"I have! I saw him put my favourite, Tommy Arundel, to sleep last month and the sight cost me all my savings. But I didn't know he was a professional; here, we call him Bryant and he has the position of riding master."

Wyatt jeered. He explained in no delicate terms that Duke Banks was a ringer and a dirty one at that; the idea of his holding any position outside the ring was a howling scream. "Why, Cap," said he, "Dook, he can't no more help fightin' than I kin help drinkin'. He didn't have no call to punch me last night; he jes' natchelly couldn't help it. Oh, I owe him one or two, believe me!"

"Would you like to go up against him again, Wyatt?" asked the Inspector. "You must take time to think it over. Frankly, you are too old to be taken on as a 'regular,' and I do not need any 'specials' just now. But if you think you could go up against Bryant, I may be able to cook up a little match, on the side."

The derelict wrung Mac's hand in a grip that hurt.

"Jes' gimme a chanct, Cap," he cried. "I'll show you! I ain't no has-been, b'lieve me! Ain't I told you that I never lost but ten fights an' all of 'em to guys bigger and heavier than me? Gimme a leetle trainin', let me have one more swat at de