

was a bad day's work for you; I haven't forgotten yet," he said. "I'm only sorry you're not a trifle older, but it will teach Sergeant Stimson the folly of sending a lad to deal with me. Well, walk straight into the bush, and remember that the muzzle of the rifle is scarcely three feet behind you!"

Trooper Shannon did so with black rage in his heart and his empty hands at his sides. He was a police trooper and a bushman born, and knew that the rustlers' laden horses would find some difficulty in remounting the steep trail and could not escape to left or right once they were entangled amidst the trees. Then it would be time to give the alarm and go down with a bullet in his body, or by some contrivance evade the deadly rifle and come to grips with his enemy. He also knew Lance Courthorne, and, remembering how the lash had seamed his face, expected no pity. One of them it was tolerably certain would have set out on the long trail before the morning, but they breed grim men in the bush of Ontario, and no other kind ride very long with the wardens of the prairie.

"Stop where you are," said Courthorne presently. "Now then, turn round. Move a finger or open your lips, and I'll have great pleasure in shooting you. In the meanwhile you can endeavour to make favour with whatever saint is honoured by the charge of you."

Shannon smiled in a fashion that resembled a snarl as once more a blink of moonlight shone down upon them, and in place of showing apprehension, his young white face, from which the bronze had faded, was venomous.

"And my folks were Orange, but what does that matter now?" said he. "There'll be one of us in — to-morrow, but for the shame ye put on Larry ye'll carry my mark there with ye."

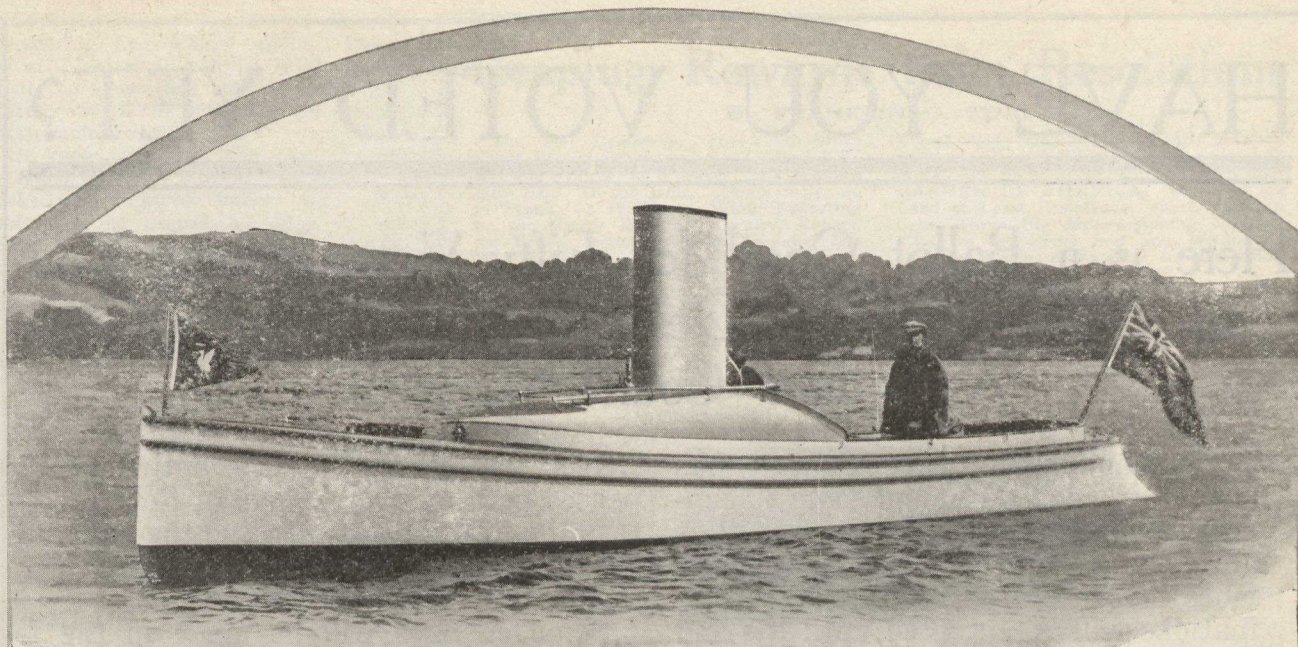
Courthorne looked at him with a little glow in his eyes. "You haven't felt mine yet," he said. "You will probably talk differently when you do."

It may have been youthful bravado, but Trooper Shannon laughed. "In the meanwhile," said he, "I'm wondering why you're wearing an honest man's coat and cap. Faith, if he saw them on ye, Witham would burn them."

Courthorne returned no answer and the moonlight went out, but they stood scarcely three feet apart, and one of them knew that any move he made would be followed by the pressure of the other's finger on the trigger. He, however, did not move at all, and while the birches roared about them they stood silently face to face, the man of birth and pedigree with a past behind him and blood already upon his head, and the raw lad from the bush, his equal before the tribunal that would presently judge their quarrel.

In the meanwhile Trooper Shannon heard a drumming of hoofs that grew steadily louder before Courthorne apparently noticed the sound, and his trained ears told him that the rustlers' horses were coming down the trail. Now they had passed the forking, and when the branches ceased roaring again he knew they had floundered down the first of the declivity, and it would be well to wait a little until they had straggled out where the trail was narrow and deeply rutted. No one could turn them hastily there, and the men who drove them could scarcely escape the troopers who waited them, if they blundered on through the darkness of the bush. So five breathless minutes passed, Trooper Shannon standing tense and straight with every nerve tingling as he braced himself for an effort, Courthorne stooping a little with forefinger on the trigger, and the Marlin rifle at his hip. Then through a lull there rose a clearer thud of hoofs. It was lost in the thrashing of the twigs as a gust roared down again, and Trooper Shannon launched himself like a panther upon his enemy.

He might have succeeded, and the effort was gallantly made, but Courthorne had never moved his eyes from the shadowy object before him, and even as it sprang his finger contracted further on the trigger. There was a red flash, and because he fired from the hip the trigger guard gashed his mitten. He sprang sideways, scarcely feeling the bite of the steel, for the lad's hand brushed his shoulder. Then there was a crash as something went down heavily amidst the crackling twigs. Courthorne stooped



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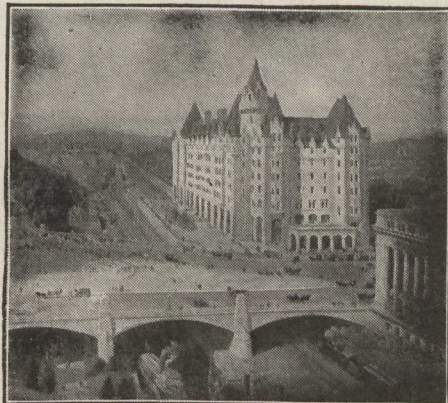
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