

A Tale of the Ragged Range

Edith G. Bayne



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PART I.
A STARRY dusk had fallen upon the foothills and the heavy dew of a late August evening glistened among the shadows by the roadside when a lone horseman in scarlet coat emerged from the barracks yard at Briggs' Landing and took his way along the old northern and now seldom-used trail which led over the mountains into British Columbia. The moon had not yet risen but the prolonged twilight diffused a soft radiance over gray road, scrub bush and hillside and the mare appeared to know her way without much guidance, stepping along confidently, ears forward, lusting for adventure, even as her rider, the dead branches of old wind-falls crackling under her feet like whip-lashes.

"Take any route you please, but round up those rustlers," had been the C. O.'s instructions. "I'm tired of complaints from Bar X ranch. Another has just come in. Sight their lair, if it takes you all of a month. Then telegraph from Hinton or Cliffedge for a posse."

It was a "ticklish" errand, requiring nice diplomacy and the utmost caution, for Alkali Sam, the leader of the rustlers was a cool, desperate and utterly relentless man, combining rough bravado and cruelty with a foxy cleverness, and invariably outwitting the Mounted Police. Obviously a detachment of the force could not be spared unless capture were certain. Too often had Alkali Sam slipped through the net before, and he was somewhat of a joke at the barracks. It was with little elation therefore that John Danforth received the brief order to ride eighty miles into the mountains on what he privately considered a wild-goose chase; yet the journey, irrespective of its purpose, held the spice of adventure and Danforth yielded to its lure.

He planned to cover the greatest possible amount of territory during darkness and come upon the rustlers sometime the following day, in their mountain fastness. So he spurred the mare along and rode rapidly through the night. The trail wound up over the Ragged Range, the ascent becoming narrower and more perilous with each step but about midnight the summit was achieved and Danforth halted on a ridge which flanked his trail and gazed downward where a thousand feet below the Fraser wound its tortuous way, thundering through Red Canyon. As he paused momentarily on the edge of the beetling bluff, a ribbon of smoke, gray and wisp-like rose in the dim moonlit distance hanging ghost-like over the valley. At the same instant the shrill whistle from a train rent the stillness with astounding suddenness, echoing and re-echoing a score of times and finally trailing away among the confines of the eastern mountains. Then, piercing the inky blackness of the valley below, a meteor-like stream of light appeared followed by a winding tail of lesser lights, flickering like a myriad will-o'-the-wisps, in the gloom. Sliding noiselessly through the canyon this snake-like apparition vanished as suddenly as it had come.

Danforth knew it must be past midnight and he rode on now at a foot-pace. Beaky was exhausted and man and beast were hungry. Dismounting and leading the mare down to a coulee where a little spring gurgled invitingly, Danforth made a fire of twigs and boiled some coffee in his tin canister. In the saddle bag were a bundle of hay for the mare and his own cold lunch and after this short halt for rest and refreshment, the first gray streaks of the summer dawn began to appear over the eastern range and Danforth again took up his journey, his eyes mechanically seeking out the distance and the reins lying loosely on the mare's neck.

PART II.

The little teacher of Red Ridge school-house had remained overtime to correct the first week's examination papers of the autumn term and outside the small

log building lengthening shadows were falling athwart the trail. The sun was just dipping behind the tallest mountain crest of the range, and the long bar of sunlight in which the dust-motes lately held high carnival, faded from within the schoolroom where Kate Marston, her head bent over the desk, toiled late. The children had gone nearly two hours ago, two or three lingering on their shaggy mountain ponies in the hope that "teacher" would soon be ready to ride home with them. Finally they too had departed and now the only living creature apparently on this part of the mountain slope beside herself was her faithful pony, which was tethered to a poplar tree at the door, and which champed and pawed the ground with restless fore-hoof. Miles apart to the west and east and down in the valley lay the ranches. Red Ridge school had been built at the most central point of this mountain district and stood lonely and picturesquely aloof in the upper middle distance looking down upon the far-flung verdant valleys of the Fraser. When the last paper had been blue-penciled and the whole pile bundled into the desk, Miss Marston, glancing at her little clock, discovered that it was long after five. With a great sigh of relief she leaned back and stretched her arms over her head indulging in a hearty yawn. It was seldom she remained so late, having a four-mile gallop ahead of her each evening, but fear was no part of her nature and the ride down the mountain held no terrors for the Nova Scotian girl who was equally at ease on the sea or in the saddle. Gathering up her hat and sweater-coat and locking the school-house door, she mounted her shaggy little pony and set off down the trail towards Cliffedge, at a fairly brisk pace. There had been talk in the village of night-riders and cattle-rustlers among the mountains. Some had been seen at intervals all summer and others remained in hiding while the police scoured the region spasmodically and unsuccessfully. The leader of the gang that had robbed Bar X ranch had twice slipped from custody during the year. He was wanted on a score of charges and his dark sinister face with its long white welt across the left cheek (relic of an ancient and glorious tilt with an Italian in Vancouver) was reproduced on handbills throughout four provinces with the accompaniment of: "Five thousand dollars reward." But he seemed to bear a charmed life.

The scent of pine and wolf-willow filled the air, now delightfully cool after the day's swelter and the girl drew a dozen invigorating breaths, her eyes idly following the fugitive shadows of her own form and the pony's as they flitted along the stony road. The valley was soon lost to view and she had entered upon the last half of the journey on the pine-clothed slope, when, as she bent to urge the little animal into a livelier pace the dark form of a man loomed up in the road, not ten yards from the pony's head. She saw at a glance that he was armed, though he made no sign of drawing the revolver from his belt. Instead he wore an ingratiating smile which sat ill upon his swarthy face, with its neglected beard. The little teacher was in a quandary. The very appearance of the man left no doubt in her mind as to her peril and with a suffocating heart throb she covered him with her own empty pistol which had lain for months unused in the saddle-holster. At first she had contemplated a mad dash past the fellow but reflecting instantly that such a course would be futile she swerved and boldly confronted him with upraised weapon. He had advanced and seized the pony's bridle but now fell back a pace or two, and swore roundly. She had little faith in the marathonic ability of the pony. He was lazy and his legs were short. Unless constantly urged forward he maintained always a gentle jogging gait, highly conducive to pleasure-travelling but wholly inadequate in a race for life. The little hamlet of Cliffedge was almost two miles away and there

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