

Treasure Trail

By Frederick Niven

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There was a long pause. The horses jogged on. Rounding on the herd, we turned southward. "He did 'get it' finally, you say," I prompted.

"He certainly did," said Bunt, "and the story of it is what a man with an imaginary mind like you ought to make into one of your fiction tales."

"Is it about a treasure?" I asked with apprehension. For ever since I once made a tale (of fiction) out of one of Bunt's stories of real life, he has been ambitious for me to write another, and is forever suggesting motifs which invariably — I say invariably — imply the discovery of great treasures. With him, fictitious literature must always turn upon the discovery of hidden wealth.

From: "The Passing of Cock-eye Blacklock" — By Frank Norris.

CHAPTER ONE

"Spacemints"

Possibilities of quaint histories seem to lurk in the names of many of our West-Canadians. For example, the "Crazy" and the "Tip and Run," the "Seven" and the "Good-enough." These names raise our curiosity; we wish to know why they are so called. The "Surprise" is obvious; the "Eureka" is a mystery. This "This is It" — what about the "This is It"? It was sold the day by its original owner to the Columbia and Oregon River Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company for two hundred thousand dollars. Some price! Some price in these days when the lease to "try out" a property is much more usual than a big figure for an outright purchase. But that is a financial side issue, you may have seen in the stocks and shares columns of your daily paper, or in the "Miner and Prospector," if you subscribe to it. "The play's the thing," said a character in Shakespeare. Here the story is the thing, more than the bald dollar transaction; for this, in fact, is the story of the "This is It!"

And to begin:

A mile north of Colvill, Washington, an elderly man sat whittling a stick on his verandah, a black spaniel dog between his feet catching flies. A parrot, in a large wicker cage hanging from the projecting roof, now and then called in a falsetto voice: "Miggles! Miggles!" paused, and then "Mar-r-garet! Whuar are ye?" it enquired.

This parrot the man, Scotty by name, Scott by nature, had brought from Ecuador, where he had prospected and found, and sold, a mine. The dog, Darkie by name, and Darkie by hue, he had brought from West Australia where he had once dry-blown the sand for "colour." But neither the land of Ecuador nor West Australia inveigled him. It sufficed him that he had seen them. This, where he was, was "God's Country" to him. Yet he sat and crooned in a poignant tone: "oh! oh! I'm longing for my ain folk."

"Though they be but lowly, pur, and plain folk, I am far beyond the sea. But my heart will ever be At hame in dear auld Scotland, wi' my ain folk!"

When he had not seen for close on forty years. "Did you call, father?" came a girl's voice, following the tip-tap of her heels and Margaret MacPherson stood in the doorway.

"It was the bird!" said her father, Angus.

Then they both looked to north and saw a cloud of dust rising on the wagon-road that came winding toward them out of British Columbia, and twisted on south into Oregon, Nevada, California. Quick-stepping, bringing the cloud of dust nearer and making it seem to increase in volume, came a string of horses, in good condition. Ahead of the string was a large, heavy rider in big Stetson hat, scarfed and chapped. To rear was another man, a featherweight, riding with his scarf over his mouth.

"Jack has the best o' t," said Angus MacPherson. "He is ahead of the dust. Poor Piccolo in the rear maun be near choking."

"Why do you speak such broad Scots, father?" asked Margaret, laughing.

"It's the mood of the moment," her father answered, in another mood. "Say, Jack Tremaine is sure on velvet in the van; and if Piccolo ain't hittin' the grit at the trail-end of that there string of cayuses you can call me a bull-frog!" and then he crooned softly again:

"Though they be but lowly, pur, and plain folk, I am far beyond the sea. But my heart will ever be At hame in dear auld Scotland, wi' my ain folk!"

and whistled his stick.

"Where are they been, I wonder," said Margaret. "I haven't seen them around for a long time."

"Didn't you hear? They got a move on at last, as soon as the snow went, to go and see where that bunch of their horses had strayed to. They must have strayed a long way to judge by the time they've been gone searching for them."

"Oh, but I'm longing for my ain folk," remarked the parrot.

"Quit, quit!" Angus addressed it. "Cut that out. Forget it. This is God's Country, where things happen. You'll make me honsaick, give me what they call

nostalgia! We've quit that mood, Ecuador."

"Search me!" said the parrot inconsequentially.

"That's better," muttered Angus.

The horses, making dusty procession across the near landscape, changed from quick-step to lope, and Jack Tremaine, in the lead, let them lope on, reined in and turned aside till the rider called Piccolo was level with him. There they sat in their high saddles, silhouetted against that dropping whirl of dust; and Margaret and Angus MacPherson looked at them as at figures in a play. Piccolo (raw down the scarf from his mouth and expectorated in the way a man does after such employ. Then the riders saw them and waved their hats.

"How is it stacking up?" hailed the old Scot.

"Fine and dandy!" came Tremaine's stentorian voice; and a little faint sound, like the beat of a lamb in spring, the shouting voice of Piccolo (whose speaking voice, at times, was not unlike that of a finch up a tree) wavered to them: "Fine and dandy!"

They rode aside to MacPherson's house and dismounted, hats off to Margaret.

"Give them a drop of that buttermilk to clear the dust, Mauggis dear, Miggles I mean," said Angus. "Hitch and ascend," he added to the two men.

"We'll carry a heap of dust on to your porch," said Jack.

"Well, I can wash it for colour," replied Angus lightly.

They sat down, and then Piccolo, the Welshman of the high voice (Piccolo, of course, was not his name but his sobriquet because of that voice. David Thomas was his name), said, or shushed: "It's good to be home!"

"I guess," said Angus. "I see you, horses think so by the way they're near, the grit once they knew they were near."

"Gee," said Jack, "some hunt they've given us."

"Gone far?" enquired Angus.

"You b'char life," said Tremaine. "They had kept moving north these two years. That big fire on the lower Monashee range years ago cleared off the timber. They evidently just kept on a-going. The way the fire ran direct on the course. Up north further it had gone toward the tops of the hills and left the valleys, so they just continued on, mounting up and straying from one grass pocket to another. Say, it's a peculiar formation away up on the tops of these lower Monashees. To look up you'd think there was timber all along the crests; but there ain't a crest. It's a rolling land on top, grass t'run d to hay, meadows, water pools and rock-slides fanning into them from the higher peaks. Guess the horses wintered in the valleys where the forest had been cleaned out and grass grew, then moved on, following the snow, to these upland meadows. They would've even had to come down every two days for water, as you see them do in dry belts. Thank you, miss. This here buttermilk is sure a delectable beverage. There is a whole raft of good reasons to be brought forward for running a milch cow to pasture."

"Have you been far?" asked Margaret.

"Today?"

"No. The whole trip."

"Oh, I guess eighty miles north of the Boundary in an air line and maybe a hundred and eighty by the windings of the trail."

Piccolo, who was nervous or shy, sat dusting himself down with his hat, but was not satisfied that he was even then fit to sit there. So he rose, and walking to the verandah's end drew off his chaps and hung them over the rail there. Returning to his chair he left his partner to talk social talk to Margaret and sipped his thick buttermilk. His throat was full of dust. He murmured: "Par-don me!" and went again to the extreme end of the verandah to expectorate. Once more he came back and sat down and commenced to clear out a pocket of his coat. He took out the contents carefully, put them into the left- and right-hand pockets, and then shook the rig pocket side-out over the porch edge. Jack Tremaine cast occasional glances toward him wondering why he thus busied himself; Margaret looked in the direction of these slightly twinkling glances of Jack's, but paid no further heed to Piccolo; Angus absently surveyed him. Then suddenly his eyes were focused keenly on the queer shy man. There was more than dust shaken from that pocket. There was a shower of little stones that woke the retired prospector up violently.

Said he: "What were you packing the rocks in your pockets for? Surely these splinters don't sit in from the hoofs of your cayuses?"

"If I'd fallen into the water at a ford we had to make up there I'd have sunk I guess," said Piccolo, and smile.

"And it would have been a cold sink too."

Angus laughed lightly. He wanted to ask about the little pieces of rock, and wondered how to go about it without showing that he thought them of value. The old secrecy of the discoverer of precious ore was upon him. It was obvious to him that Piccolo Thomas had not the slightest suspicion of the possibilities of the little stones.

But Angus did not require to ask any further questions, leaving orirect, for Piccolo returned to the subject.

"These little stones," said he, giving his pocket a final flip and putting it straight again. "That was a long way off. We wanted to save ammunition, you see, and we wanted supper, and there were fool-hens clucking all round us in the woods. We might have water till dusk and swanked up and smoke some down; or we might have watched where they roosted and just crept up easily and grabbed the legs of one or two, and yanked them down; but we were awful hungry. It was cold, too. The snow ain't all gone even in some of the lower valleys, patches still layin'

there where there's a shadowed side. We had appetites all right. So I just filled my pocket with stones and went crawling along through the bush and knocked over a couple of these fool-hens for our supper. I got as near as ten feet and let fly twice and knocked over two with the first two shies."

"Are they thick up there, then?"

"You bet. Clucking in the bush all round you."

"I must go after them some time," said Angus.

"Oh, they ain't so thick south where the hills drop down. That was away north after we'd found the last bunch of horses. Jack stayed around to hold them while I went after the fool-hens. We must have been an awful way north then. We could see a lake, and I guess it couldn't be any other than Flat-Bow Lake."

"The fool-hens are thick up there, eh?" said Angus; and had any astute person been listening he would have known that MacPherson had no interest in fool-hens whatever.

"You bet. Up a bit. Say, it's beautiful there now. In another two months when the snow's all off, it must look wonderful. It's wonderful enough at present."

"Uh-huh!" said Angus.

"Well, Piccolo," interrupted Jack, "I guess we got to spraddle our horses and move on again. Thanks for the refreshment, Miss MacPherson."

They rose. Piccolo scuttled to the verandah end and shyly drew on his chaps. They stepped from the porch, mounted, and with a sweep of their hats to Margaret wheeled away and rode off, trailing a dual pennon of dust. Angus watched them till a roll of the plain hid them. Margaret had gone indoors. He rose and descended to the ground in front of the porch, only his dog and Ecuador watching him, and picked up a handful of the stones dropped by Piccolo when clearing out his pocket. He felt the weight of them, playing them up and down in his palm like a boy at the game called, in Auld Scotland, "chuckie-stones." Then he drew a long trembling breath and expelled it.

"So!" he said. "Eighty miles north of the Boundary by air-line and maybe a hundred and eighty as the land lies."

"Search me! Search me!" whooped Ecuador and startled Angus, so greatly lost was he in a consideration of the game in his hand.

"These," he murmured to himself, "are what the prospectors of these parts call 'spacemints'."

When he returned to his seat on the porch he was much like Shakespeare's Launcelot Gobbo who sat discussing with himself pos and cons as if he were two distinct characters, or like Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde.

"One hundred and eighty miles north of the Boundary," he mused, and also: "Are ye going to look for it yourself?"

"Among the open grass-land on the summit. Rock slides fan down into them he mused, and also: "Are ye going to tell Piccolo what these splinters of rock look like to you?"

"It is vague, but close enough for an old prospector," he mused, and also: "It would be a fair thing to tell Piccolo 'nyhow'."

"Morally it is Piccolo's," he told himself, and replied to himself: "It's not 'ing of the kind. He doesn't know what he picked up."

"You will make good through his ignorance," something in him whispered, and something else exclaimed: "Precisely!"

"Search me!" shrieked the parrot. Then there followed a long time during which the conflicting voices were too low down in him, ever so tedious, fogged to follow. They just whispered away in his subconsciousness—or unconsciousness, almost, to toy with words of the psychoanalysts. But the argument must have been going on. It bubbled up loud in Angus's "inward ear" again. He made a gesture of impatience that astonished the dog prone at his feet, nose on paws, staring at nothing before it. It looked up startled. Said Angus to it:

"Look here, Darkie, it is fair ridiculous to suggest that Piccolo has the slightest claim to this. He picked these stones to throw at fool-hens. They are, in his estimation, not specimens of silver-galena at all—no, not in the slightest sense. They are missiles—were, mark you, past tense—for to throw at fool-hens. They served their purpose to him. He killed his supper and his partner's. These are the little stones cast away in the discard. Ye would be a fool to imagine he had any claim." H rubbe! a hand over his face and round to the back of his neck. "If no a fool y would be quitoic," he ended.

Then he took snuff, as was his way when perturbed, and sneezed.

"Now that's the way the cards lie on the table, Mr. Angus MacPherson," said he. "There is no call upon ye to say a word to Piccolo; but, being a quitoic sort of body, ye are doubtless going to do so."

He sat back, almost contented; but only for a moment. He was a complex Scot, and anon added:

"Ye are a fraud. The truth is that ye are doubtful if ye have sufficient indication for to find the whereabouts unaided by yo Piccolo. Ye are trying to make y'erself out q'ixotic when ye are only anny. Your rightness is but fifty y'ings as the Book says. Well, the most of this is that, whatever the reasons and arguments, I have a hunch, as they say in t' country, that I am going to t'll Piccolo."

Ecuador threw up his head, duffled his feathers, and laughed like a demon.

Then he cried: "Miggles! Miggles! Miggles! Mar-r-garet, whuar are ye?"

From the door Margaret answered: "What do you want, Polly?"

She had been in the doorway, then, thought her father. For how long? Had she been there while he examined the stones? He was very fond of Margaret, but he had a view of her sex—that its members should not be told anything till it was done. That view amounted almost to superstition.

"Hullo!" he said. "I didn't hear ye."

Been there long?"

"I came out just now while you were — what's the word, dad?—havering to the dog."

"Oh! Ye did, did ye?" said he. It struck him as highly probable that he had been talking aloud. He knew that to be a habit common to prospectors who lived much alone—but it pleased him to consider that Margaret thought he had only been "havering to the dog." That was satisfactory.

(To be continued)

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