

Treasure Trail

By Frederick Niven

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(Continued from last issue)

Piccolo, a meagre, melancholy figure, was mixing flour and water for a meal when they came to the camp.

"Well, you got a great camp here," said the policeman. "It is surely amazing how one can get out of the snow. Look, there is a cut-bank all earth already. You can even see the old fir cones lying down there below. Right sheltered here."

Spring was truly taking these heights by assault. Swerving around the knoll to lee of which they camped ran a small creek; but it was covered all by ice, not snow-laden ice, but glare ice, clear as glass. They could see the water rushing below as through a natural window (and not rocky water—the creek-bed pebbles were visible under its rush); and that water, compressed there, running full, carried bubbles of air of various sizes that flew past constantly, pressed between the hurrying stream and its ice lid. Yet maybe but a thousand feet below they could glimpse, between the holes of the forest, a flicker of foam showing where the creek ran uncovered. At one place Piccolo had cleft a hole in the ice with an ax, where he could dip a can for water instead of using snow.

As Piccolo acted as chef, the policeman and Angus sat down, and the former took from him who was so far known to Angus and his partner as the man in brown. The envelopes he first looked at.

"Mr. John Grafters has his name, it seems," he remarked. "A good name too! Then, in a changed voice, he added: 'Well, he is dead.'"

He considered one or two of the letters. "This one," he said, "to somebody else, but with a memo, scribbled on it for him, seems to me, by a process of deduction, to refer to you gentlemen. Listen"; and he read:

"Dear Cyrus: I am giving this note to Bob Merritt to hand to you. He is to show you the two guys it refers to. They are supposed to be going to the new camp called Kokanee on Flat-Bow Lake just in a natural way to see how chances are up there, but there is more in it than that I think. The little cuss, called David Thomas, with a squeaky voice which makes him known as Piccolo, has some floats of ore from somewhere between the boundary and the West Arm of Flat-Bow Lake. They will very likely get a canoe at Kokanee and row back to the West Arm and down it, to pick up south to the place. You can haze them off when they get to their location, or jump the claims and register ahead of them so as to have the law with you. They can only say their say and you can deny. Your word will be as good as theirs. Keep track, anyhow, at your end, however you work it. Send somebody after them to Kokanee. I expect you will know someone up there to help. If you can go yourself so much the better. The ore the squeaky-voice brought in looks like Ophir all right. So long.

M.B.

"The incompetent tools of this Cyrus followed too close," rumbled Angus. "I suppose they were afraid of losing our tracks. Incompetent!"

As for Piccolo, by the time the policeman read the initials "M.B.," the flush that had come to his face over the words "squeaky-voice" had gone. It was maybe more a flush of self-consciousness than rage over a soubriquet not to his mind, smacking with the words of the death of the man in brown had strangely affected him, eliminating rage.

"I see it is written across this letter," said the policeman, "Pass to Grafters. Quite a governmental kind of crook this Cyrus is. I know now who Hawke was in with. There is only one Cyrus down there that this means—Cyrus Ogglestein. Guess Grafters must have had a talk with his boss, for there is a note in another writing, here at the bottom of the letter: 'Walter Hawke, Kokanee, big dark man, grey eyes.' Guess Grafters wrote that when he had his pow-wow and marching orders from Boss Cyrus."

But Piccolo was hardly listening to all that. He noted, but did not remark, that the boss of the "crook outfit" had probably, at that interview, told the man in brown that Hawke was conversant with the telegraph. What mainly

caught him in the epistle was something else. He had a finger up pointing triumphantly at Angus.

"Now Scotty," said he, "I don't want to seem opinionated to my elders, and I don't want to go scrapping with folks any more—life being so short among these almighty mountains—but you see I was right about Movie Bill, whether he smokes cigars or not, mark you, and always says: 'No, thank you, a pipe or a cigarette for mine. Nix on cigars, or whatever you brought up in proof that he was innocent. There's the M.B.' He put that Cyrus crook, whoever he is, wise to us."

Angus nodded his head up and down several times, mouth twisting, as one accepting unpalatable truth.

"It certainly looks like it," said he. "I only stood up for him because almost any one would condemn him for anything, without listening to the evidence, on the strength of his face; and it always seemed to me that there was a good expression among what ye might call—or I might call, I should say," he altered the phrasing with hard voice, "superficially a tough look. Well, say no more. We do surely get disappointed in people."

"We surely do," agreed the policeman. Piccolo tried to renew his good cheer and with forced air of gaiety chanted: "Grub pile! Grub pile!"

Over the meal Angus, after long thought, saw fit to acknowledge the truth of their odyssey in its entirety to the policeman.

"The fact is," said he, "we are heading for a bit south of the West Arm. We come from Colvalli, Washington State. But we did not come in over-land, north, because we had indications that a person, or persons, were on to it that Piccolo here had found some jim-dandy floats, as ye might say. We wanted to put them off. So we came to Kokanee."

He told him, in short, all the story as we know it from the incident of the fool-hens and the missiles that proved to be "spacaminis".

The policeman nodded, lifted his tea pannikin to drink, and held it away from his mouth. It was of tin, and hot.

"Say," he said, smiling, whimsical, "ain't it astonishing how hot that water got when we boiled it?"

"That was all he had to say!" Angus eyed him thoughtfully. For himself, such a remark was entirely in his vein when thinking about something else and not ready for speech upon it.

He wondered if the policeman was similarly inclined at such moments. It appeared that he was, for thereafter he mused a long spell and they ate in silence.

Then said he: "I told you that you could not make the divide yet."

Piccolo waved a hand toward the lower forest. He seemed desirous to stand up for, to defend, MacPherson.

"It would take about three months to cut through that forest," he shrilled.

"Yes," said the policeman, "but long before that, if you sat here waiting, you could get over the divide all right. And now you've got so far—Oh, you've done darn well!—now you've made this far all you've to do is to get round the next ridge. Now I wouldn't try it on top. You can't do that for another fortnight. You'll lose only a week by working down to the bases of the slides here, and then working back up on the west side. Once you get round, move up again. Don't forget; move up again at once. If you kept low you'd have to cut a trail all the way; but if you keep up you will strike an old Indian trail."

He jabbed a finger before him in air, pointing at the rib of mountain, white wetted, where they were.

"It is right through there. If you could tunnel through you'd come out at it—there," and he dropped his hand again. "Kootenay Indians made it. They were never great on going up after grizzly; they preferred easy fishing, and deer down below; but now and then one of them had the craze for a necklace of bear-claws—grizzly ones—for the fun, or to show the sand he had in him. Maybe he had seen some Blackfoot east of the Rockies honoured for a grizzly bear necklace, and he got whetted up, too, to go and do likewise. Oh, they did some travel in the old days. Up on Kootenay Lake, now, the railroad from Kaslo into the Skeena country practically follows an old Indian trail. That road to the mine you came up," and he jerked a

thumb over his shoulder, "was once Injun trail. They came up from Flat-Bow up this side of the Olsaks; then they went over the divide, later in the year though, and down to the West Arm to where they used to have fishing camps for the red-fish. The trail may be grown over a bit with willow-bush, but you can get down by it all right. It goes beside a creek, the white man name for which I only know as Creek Two—that's counting from the beginning of the arm. The Kootenays call it Salmon Berry creek. They used to go up it a long ways, from the other side, after salmon berries, consequently the further down it you go the better it will be." He paused. "That cache of yours back there," he went on, "it seems a pity to leave it. How about me helping you to tote it across to here tomorrow, and you could tote it around and leave it to the other side of the ridge in case you needed it."

Angus looked at Piccolo; Piccolo looked at Angus. Then Angus shook his head.

"It seems awful extravagant to leave it," he answered, "but it is only one extra sack of flour and one whack of bacon, and one bag of beans. And forty years ago I left Aberdeen. To go for it, and come back again over these snow-slides," he shook his head.

"All right," said the policeman. "I don't hanker to do it more often than necessary, but I've got my snow-shoes, and in the morning before more slides begin I could go back and bring it this far for you."

"Thank ye, but we'll leave it," said Angus. "We're loaded to the limit now."

"Waste not, want not, I know; but there's the other adage: 'Time waits on no man.' And whoever knows our business at Colvalli did not come with us. They sent a message for their cronies to dodge our steps—do dog our steps I should say. That might only be because we knew them by sight."

"I know him," put in Piccolo. Angus looked at him and sighed.

"Don't rub it in," he said. "I thought he was a friend."

The policeman drew forth his pipe for a post-prandial smoke. "If you don't mind," he added, "I'll camp with you till tomorrow and be up good and early before the sun gets on that store, and skim back lively across it."

"If we don't mind!" ejaculated Angus. "How about your horse?" asked Piccolo. "You didn't walk up, did you?"

"No sir! But he's all right. I left him at the mine stables and hiked on my snow shoes under my arm till I hit the snow. I knew I was near the end, near finding out whatever I had to find out when I heard at the mine that Hawke and Grafters had had the gall to ask leading questions about you, and how far ahead you were."

As he spoke there was a sudden whispering sound that increased in volume. They stood up in their little close group of fir and saw as it were the surface of the mountain sliding forward.

"That covered him again, I guess," remarked the policeman. "And I guess that one has been getting ready to come for a long time, and will be the last for today. It is getting kind of cold again."

Piccolo looked very grave. "Would Grafters have a hard death?" he asked.

"No, neither of them. I saw them go. They had their feet knocked from them by the fallen ice, and got knocked on their heads too. Stunned—and then suffocated by the snow before they could come back to consciousness, I guess. It just poured over Hawke like emptying a sugar bag on a fly. The old mountains are terrible, but they are merciful too in their way." He looked along the fan of snow. "That will be all right for me to cross in the early morning. But mark you, you fellows, can't cross the next ones. They are fierce—on the south slope. Get the sun there a lot. You have just got to go down, as I say, and around their butt-ends, if it takes you all of a week. Then up to the creek that runs south and west out of the glacier on the other side. You maybe won't pick it out at once—the trail I mean; but as you go down creek there, and the timber thickens, you'll see it all right. It's wonderful. Here's the end of winter—up here and the thermometer going away down to below zero at nights; and down in Kokanee, by golly, the grasshoppers are out. By the time you reach the West Arm the bluebirds will be there."

Angus did not notice the laughter in his voice, taking it all, from beginning to end, for a serious speech, not knowing him well enough to realize that he had (that little policeman of the bent grim and humorous) a way of finishing the serious with a jest.

"I hope not," he said. "Bluebirds around by then! I hope not!"

Then he saw that the Kokanee policeman was smiling.

"Ah well," said he, "I feel serious about the question of haste for I have that premonition—what we might call a hunch—that as well as sending folks

following us to Kokanee to spy upon our business, that fellow Movie Bill" (there he had said it) "might quite readily go out himself overland north to look for the place where Piccolo made his ore find. Man, Piccolo, you are over simple. You blabbed, I believe."

He was irascible. He was annoyed that the policeman had spoken the truth regarding the high snow, and that they could not make the divide and travel speedily on their way. His pride was hurt, the pride of the old prospector. He was downcast in the matter of Movie Bill. And finally he was chagrined with himself for having admitted that he had come to believe that Movie Bill had been a traitor to their friendship. There were the definite initials to be sure; but Angus looked to take out. I don't blame you. But, dang it, I blamed myself for not getting a boat the way Bill—the way the writer of the letter imagined we would do. Now, I am not—definitely—convinced he wrote that letter. I never saw his calligraphy, but that does not believe in it if it would be his hand of writing!"

And even Piccolo (dense though he was in some matters), perhaps because of a recent softening of his own heart, suddenly realized that here was not evidence of argumentativeness in MacPherson, but evidence of his refusal to believe in the treachery of one he had treated as a friend.

While they were setting up their tent as a lean-to to shelter all three, a roaring fire before it, turning it into a very cave of warmth, night poured up and enveloped them, a night of deep blue with the glimmering whiteness of the upper snows oddly illumining it; and overhead, as if frosted, slow-moving tall Orion, the tilted Dipper, and then the ghostly moon with its influence of unearthly quiet.

To be continued.

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