

Treasure Trail

By Frederick Niven

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(Continued from last issue)

"That's the number there are," he said, stressing the last word. "Were there three of you before Bantling behaved as if he did not understand? Throw up your hands?"

Greer went grim, and it was as if a film obliterated his gaze. "Well, Mr. Greer, I won't ask you any more questions. You can tell the truth; also you can lie. You might fool me between lies and truth. But we'll take you along with us. And yet I don't know!" he ejaculated. His eyes blazed suddenly. He bent forward again. "Just one more question," said he. "Have you, or have you not, any other partner now in the hills with you?"

Greer thought hard. He looked down. Then he stared straight at Angus, meeting his gaze. "Yes!" he said, spitting out the word as though, thought Angus, in a rage at being questioned.

"We'll hit your trail, Pic," he said. "You say the best way is up the south bank after dark?"

"That's all right," said Angus. "You will go first. I will wait on this side till Mr. Greer gets over with my kit. You'll look after him till I get across with my rifle. He shall pack my kit for me. You can leave your rifle and Bantling's here, Mr. Greer. You will have no more need of a shooting iron than he has. Pic and I have enough for this little expedition. Ay man! It is wonderful how our prayers are answered. You wanted to see the location of these wonderful specimens. Piccolo will lead you to it; I will come in the rear. If we encounter your other friend, advise him to drop his shooting iron."

Greer looked at the gun in his hands and obeyed. They walked up stream to where were the boulders on which Piccolo had crossed on his return to the camp.

"Lead on, Piccolo," said Angus. "No, no, Mr. Greer; I said you'd wait on this bank till he gets across. Stay with me. I will tell you when to start over."

Piccolo leapt with his load skilfully balancing from rock to rock. The water sprayed them, but he kept his feet. When he was on the south bank he unslung his rifle and waited.

"You can skip over now," said Angus to Greer. "And don't try to skidoo, as you might say. Maybe Piccolo is shaken somewhat by riding the world of your partner to wish to polish you off, but I am not. I am in no way desirous to have your blood on my head, Mr. Greer. You have every chance. But it is not for me to part yet. If you tried to come me you would not go far. I can shoot."

Greer believed he probably could; and having taken the series of leaps across the south bank, he merely sat down there to watch Angus make the crossing, with an ardent hope he would slip off one of the boulders and fall into the creek. If that happened, thought he, Piccolo would certainly leap to assist, and then—

Half way over Angus paused, upright on a stone, the spray wetting his legs, a green cauldron as if boiling below him for the creek was full from the recent meetings of snow on the peaks. He stood there staring stonily at Greer then, wonderfully agile, he leapt on and came to the south bank beside them.

"Ay!" he said, and bent toward his captives. "I didn't fall, no Piccolo had no occasion to drop his rifle and come to my aid." Under his bushy brows he peered at Greer. "I pride myself that I am some slight student of physiognomy. Your face was like a book as I balanced on you mid-stream rock. And it wasn't like the Book of Saints, Mr. Greer. Now try to be a good lad. No tricks." And again he said: "Lead on, Pic."

They had started late, so there was no stop till dusk. Ahead, Greer trudging between them with MacPherson's pack on his back, Piccolo turned and called to his partner:

"Here's a good camp-place. Will we stop here or go further?"

"Is it far to the next good camp-place?" asked Angus.

"Quite a ways; and it would be an easy trip to the top tomorrow. I cleared it coming down."

"Well stop, here, then," said Angus. "Drop your load on my load, I should say, Mr. Greer, and help Piccolo to make camp."

He sat down on a fallen tree, rifle across his knees, and taking up a piece of stick whittled the end for kindling wood. When the meal was cooked, in a voice that would have seemed mockingly

courteous from any one else, he said: "Be seated, Mr. Greer. Yonder. Kindly take the end of the table, so to speak."

Had any one watched from a distance he would have noted nothing odd. The billy of tea circulated from one to the other. All ate as if contented.

But when the meal was over Angus said: "I've been thinking. In this kind of affair I have no previous experience to go upon, but your story of your partner's about trussing up Pic gives me an idea. Pic wants a sleep; so do I. I have no intention of mounting guard on you, Mr. Greer. You will sleep in between us, but you will sleep with your hands tied behind your back."

"I do not trust ye, Dr. Fell. The reason why I cannot tell. But this I know, and know full well—I do not trust thee."

Mr. Greer. It goes against the grain to talk in this way to an unarmed captive; but we must have a thorough understanding," he rumbled.

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Greer. "You might just as well let me go. I've lost." "No, sir," replied Angus, "not yet; we'll not let you go yet. You might rejoin your other partner."

"Shucks! I have no partner around now. I was only bluffing." Angus nodded at him. "So!" he said. "Well, I do not trust ye, Dr. Fell."

Piccolo did not relish the idea of them both going to sleep. "Hadin' we better take turns about keeping awake," he suggested. "His partner might be around and see our fire and—"

"Man, man," said Angus, "don't you know that I waken at the slightest sound? A man can be over-careful. It's not the Anglo-Saxon, nor yet the Celtic way, to be over-careful. The over-careful man will not go to sleep, sits up watching, and is tired in the morning. You have no blanket, Mr. Greer. You can have one of mine."

Greer looked at him, with a brief lift of his brows as of astonishment. He took the blanket, however, without a word.

"I'll give him one of mine," said Piccolo. "That's all right," said Angus. "I've only used one since we got down in these low valleys." He turned to Greer.

"When you are ready I will just tie your hands behind your back," he said. For a brief moment it looked as though there was going to be trouble. Greer's fists clenched at his sides. Angus stood foursquare before him, looked down at the clenched fists frowning.

"You seem kind of tense, Mr. Greer," he remarked. "I notice your hands are clenched."

"Hell!" said Greer, and submitted to being handcuffed.

As soon as they lay down Angus fell asleep. Piccolo, he knew, would lie for hours with eyes open, ears alert, and only succumb at last, overcome, to the urgent pleas of sleep. For himself he slept sound till perhaps four of the morning, when he rose and put more wood on the fire for warmth.

Greer was fast asleep. Piccolo did not move. Angus had then another nap, and wakened with the first of the day, first up. When Greer and Piccolo opened their eyes it was to find him tossing a flap-jack in the pan with a deft accustomed twist of the wrist from a hundred camp-fires in many lands, and to see the lid of the billy danching up and down over the boiling water.

"Gee, you're a wonderful man, old-timer," said Greer.

"Good morning. I'm all that," said Angus, "and I'm awful easy flattered." Greer, though perhaps he was not adopting a wrong attitude to his captor, thought he had and relapsed into silence again.

The sun was high over the eastern fir-frilled slopes that rise above Give-Out when again they were in line of travel, trudging up the quick rising edge of the creek; and about noon they saw the boles of the upper timber that stood like some wild cathedral pillars round them. Onward there was a spread of light, the last stately columns, by contrast, dark upon their side and as if stencilled trees, or silhouetted, against a blaze of light. A few more yards of tramping and they came out to these upland meadows of which Angus had been told at Colvall by the astonished Tremaine, rancher, amazed at that high "feed."

And there before them was a little bunch of horses grazing. The three men stood clustered, coming out of the woods, staring at them. There were three horses without saddles—riding or pack-saddles;

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presumably, thought Angus, pack-horses these—and there were three all saddled for riding, two unbridled, all bridled. "Why didn't you unsaddle the saddle-horses?" asked Angus.

"We rode down on them as far as the going was good, and then just took the bridles off and turned them around to go back and join the pack-horses. We knew they wouldn't go further than this grass and the other horses," said Greer.

"I see. And what might be the explanation for the dark horse being bitted? Whose horse is that?"

He asked; but he knew! He thought he had misjudged Movie Bill; he would not misjudge again. He would be told; he would hear, not hazard—even though he knew! He did not look at Greer. He looked stonily before him.

"Guess you've seen it before," answered Greer. "It's Movie Bill's all right."

"So!" said Angus. He turned to Piccolo. "Ah well," he said, "this lets me out, as Flynn of Virginia said. You were right—I was wrong—and be ready for him, Pic. He's a crack shot. I know that. He can shoot, can that glum-faced fraud and imposition."

And then Greer spoke again. "Yes, b'gosh!" he ejaculated. "That's Movie Bill's horse, all right. All right. He said solitaire was his long suit." Angus turned to him.

"Solitaire? What do you mean? He's not in—with you?"

"He's sure not in with you, anyhow!" said Greer, who had lost.

The thought pleased him that these two might not win after all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Don Quixote of Washington State "Now Piccolo," said Angus, "it behoves us to be watchful, to be on the alert, or to keep your eyes skinned, as a might be said. You, Greer, you are in a different case from Movie Bill. You have never eaten of my saleratus and given me gifts of arrowheads. I do not feel hurt by your behaviour. You are reasonably far less a subject for my rage than Movie Bill. But oddly enough I could blow off the top of your head without commination if you got up to any capers. With Movie Bill—if there is to be any shooting it will go hard against me to draw a bead on him."

"I'll see to that!" shrilled Piccolo. "He has never eaten my saleratus! He called me a Welshman and told me to go to h— once; and the way he looked at me! Huh! I don't forget!" (He had evidently forgotten how remembered grievances seemed a small thing to him under stress of an emotion but a short

time previously.) "I can shoot too. I took a prize once at the Cheyenne Fall Fair for rapid fire."

"You did!" murmured Angus. "You are a wonderful twig indeed." That word "twig" had its effect on Piccolo. It recalled to him the feeling of utter lack of resentment he had felt when the man in brown (who had called him "twig") came to his end. His face was suddenly elongated.

"I hope, I hope," he said, "there may be no more shoot-ups." Greer laughed outright, a callous laugh.

Angus turned to him, gazing sternly under his tufted brows. The edges of his mouth came down grimly. "You are a poor sort of a body, Mr. Greer," said he. "Dang it, despite what he's done to me, that Movie Bill is a better man than you. He has streaks, sir; he has streaks! He has qualities, sir; you have none. Now I tell you, contemplation of you gives me a pain in my neck, as ye might say; you afflict me with that tired feeling; you get my

goat, as might be said. Any tricks from you, should we meet him, and I shall surely put you out of harm's way. Your first name is Alfred, isn't it? You will be planted before you know where you are if you get up to any tricks, and your initials 'A.G.' will be on a bit stick set up over you for the squirrels to sit upon and crack nuts."

"Oh, you don't know what I'm laughing at!" said Greer, and was shaken with interior merriment.

(To be continued)

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