

MacNeil decided to proceed along the river bank and look for a trail leading down to the river bottom where he might find shelter from the storm until day-break. For more than a mile he trudged keeping as close to the river as he dared, but found no place where he could make the descent. Finally he concluded that it would be wiser to keep a discreet distance from the treacherous embankment, and climbing into the saddle, he turned off to the right.

His tired horse fought on mile after mile through the deepening snow. The only sound above the howl of the storm was the creak of leather and Custer's laboured breathing.

A curious sense of detachment and poignant loneliness stole over MacNeil. He tried to dispel the feeling by talking to himself, his head buried deep in the fur collar of his buffalo coat. Seemingly interminable hours passed before the mantle of darkness began to lift.

Dawn was at last approaching—but the storm still raged, everything was still obscured. Exactly when Custer came to a full stop again MacNeil couldn't remember, but he cautiously dismounted and took a step forward, suspecting another cut bank. Instead he came in contact with the sharp barbs of a wire fence and could hardly restrain a shout of joy. Human habitation of some kind must be near.

Following the fence for about three quarters of a mile he came to a log cabin from whose chimney comforting wisps of smoke rose gamely an inch or two and were whisked away. He pounded on the door, and after a short wait it opened slightly and a gruff voice said, "Come in".

* * *

COVERED with snow as he was, MacNeil's identity was not revealed until he was inside.

"Well, I'll be darned", explained his host. "A Mountie. What the devil are you doing out in a storm like this?"

MacNeil admitted that he was lost. The old chap began brushing the snow off, but MacNeil protested through chattering teeth.

"Just a minute, old-timer. What about my horse?"

The other pondered a moment. "Ain't got much of a stable", he commented, "but we'll fix him up some way." He reached up to a rafter for a lantern. "Folks call me Bull Jensen."

Donning cap and mackinaw, he opened the door. As the two men stepped outside a blast of wind blew the light out. But there was enough brightness in the vague grayness of dawn, and they soon located the horse standing with arched back on the lee side of the little building. The so-called stable was nothing more than a lean-to covered with willow branches and sod, but it afforded some protection from the wind. MacNeil removed saddle and bridle and covered the shivering animal with the saddle blanket, while his companion forked some coarse swamp hay into the manger.

Back inside the cabin, a one-room affair with earthen floor, MacNeil warmed himself before the open fire-place and got his first good look at the man who lived there.

Jensen was probably 65 or 70 years old, stockily built with a bristling, reddish beard and unkempt hair that reached his shoulders. His kindly face lighted up when the policeman offered him a plug of tobacco.

"You smoke, I suppose?" smiled MacNeil.

"Sure do. An' eat it too. Haven't seen any for nigh on three weeks. Don't get out much in this weather."

As MacNeil crouched before the fire, the old man disappeared for a minute or two and came back carrying a copper pot filled with snow.

"Don't suppose you'd object none to a cup of coffee?" he chuckled.

Presently MacNeil was munching a stale bannock and supping hot coffee.