



Moonchild's Christmas Present

—BY—

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IT was Christmas eve in Macleod. The sun was shining brightly and the warm chinook wind was rapidly melting away the snow. "A regular old-timers' Christmas," the senior staff sergeant said, as he looked out of the window of the sergeant's mess. The North West Mounted Police in the post were having a lively time preparing for the morrow; liquor was plenty and duties few, and inspection of kit worried no man's soul just then. It was lunch time in the mess and the N.C.O.'s were enjoying themselves heartily. Several of the sergeants on detachment were in for Christmas, and the chairman looked around upon twenty as fine specimens of the British soldier as were to be met with in that year of grace, 1888, or, for that matter, now. Those old foes, Miller and Pepper, were once more at it. This time, however, Miller had the upper hand. Neither he nor the mess had forgotten the prompt manner in which Pepper had raised his hands and surrendered his revolver earlier in the year at Miller's request, and consequently Pepper was almost silent, his usual flow of bludgeon, wit and elephantine badinage having escaped him. Presently, however, the conversation turned on the murder of Heyburn, a constable, by a Blood Indian rejoicing in the peaceful name of Moonchild.

"No news about the Indian yet I suppose?" said Wright. "Don't suppose we will hear of him until the spring?"

"Now, you bet," replied Hewson, "Mr. Indian is lying low in some comfortable tepee, and not very far off either I should say."

Just here the conversation was broken into by the appearance of an orderly in the door.

"Sergeant Miller to report to the Major in the orderly room, please," he said.

"No rest for the wicked," remarked Miller as he rose from the table, casting a regretful glance at the warm room and the numerous bottles flanking the plates.

In a few minutes he returned, not in the very best of tempers, to judge by his face.

"Here's a pretty go," he exclaimed. "The O.C. has got news that Moonchild is camped just across Drowning Ford on the Kootenay, and I've got to take a party and fetch the beggar in. Got to make a night trip of it too."

"How's that?" inquired the rest.

"Well, the Major says that there are a lot of young bucks around his tepee and that I must avoid trouble by coming on the camp just at dawn, before the outfit get waked up. That means a long ride to-night."

"Sorry for you my boy," remarked Pepper. "Never mind, be not weary in well-doing, you know, I'll remember you in my prayers."

"Or in your cups, which would be more like it, I expect" retorted Miller.

"Well, anyhow, old man I hope that you will be able to give Mr. Moonchild his little Christmas box of a pair of wristlets. When do you start?"

"About 5 o'clock. The trail is pretty good, and with this warm weather it won't be much of a job getting there."

"I'd advise you to take your buffalo coats along all the same. You never know what this sort of a day is going to turn out," said the sergeant-major.

"No, I don't think I will. They will be in the way if any trouble comes along, and would only interfere with a fellow's movements," Miller replied. "Let's have some more purge now," and once more the mess sat around the table, enjoying their pipes and their "purge" (the irreverent name given the beer supplied in the canteen).

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It was growing dusk that evening when Miller and his men rode out of the post. He had six constables with him, all rather looking on the trip as a nuisance, that was all. None of them took any account of the probable danger in it. That never bothered them for an instant. They despised the Indians with a thorough contempt and each man considered himself equal to rounding up the whole Blood Nation and running it in to the post if necessary. Still, it was a beastly bore to have to leave the post on Christmas Eve on such an errand, and all they hoped was that they would be back in time for dinner on the morrow. It was slow work riding; the chinook wind had melted the snow quite a bit, and in some places the ground was bare and even muddy. Then, too, they did not wish to make too good time, as they would have to camp out all night in any event.

As the evening passed, however, the weather, with that happy faculty of sudden change for which the Northwest climate is noted, gave the party a free and unasked-for exhibition of the great falling feat. From 40 above to zero was for it, as those who have lived in Alberta well know, as easy "as falling off a log." The wind fell entirely and the cold settled down evidently to stay. The party was in ordinary winter clothing, (fur caps and mitts, fatigue clothes, with heavy duffle socks and cowskin moccasins), and luckily did not miss their buffalo coats very much, though it was a case of occasionally dismounting and running along to keep comfortably warm.

It was fairly late and pitch dark when the Kootenay river was reached. It could be heard roaring in the distance. The chinook of the last week or so had evidently broken up the ice, and Miller was afraid that the crossing would be difficult, if not impossible, in the dark. On reaching the river edge, he found that the ice was covered with water, running with quite a current, and he could not see whether the centre of the river was open or not. To venture across in the black night, unable to see a yard ahead, or to tell where the river was running was too risky. Once a horse and man got into that fierce torrent, God help them, carried swiftly down between two walls of ice—a momentary struggle, then sucked under the ice where it still remained solid; a despairing grasp at its cruel and slippery edges, a few awful moments and then a lifeless mass slowly swept down stream, to be lodged on some sand bar and await the spring, before the eye of man should rest on what once was a gallant rider and his steed.

Miller halted his men among the cottonwoods which fringed the river banks and the party dismounted, tying their horses to the trees. A short consultation was held as to the best method of discovering whether or not the river was indeed open in the middle. Finally Miller took a long tepee pole, over which he happened to stumble, and waded out knee deep into the ice cold water, sounding in front of him, as he went, with the pole. It was desperately cold, and the current was fairly strong. The water rose over his knees and he was forced to return to the bank in a few minutes without having been able to get far enough out to find the opening. One of the men then volunteered to try, but he got no farther out than Miller.

"Well boys," said Miller, "I guess there is only one thing to do, and that is camp here for the night, make the crossing in the early dawn and trust to luck to get our man quietly."