

I had understood his colloquialisms but poor Boggs was still in the dark.

"I say, why is the blighter unloading us out here?" he demanded, irritably, for his feet were asleep.

"Jump down," I ordered briskly. "We're going to do a constitutional up to the house."

"And don't waste time knocking on the door," advised the driver. "Just walk right in."

The schooner went on, and I stood gazing after it till it was lost to sight among the poplars. Miss Elliott waved her handkerchief to me—all the way.

Well, we reached the odd little house within half an hour. It was a good mile's walk and the path was beastly. And when we got there we walked in without knocking as we had been told to do. A good thing too for we might have worn our knuckles off; there was absolutely nobody about, either in the house or around the farm.

"Most extraordinary thing. Surely, Billy and the servants cannot be all away."

"Servants!" jeered Boggs. "There aren't any such people in this land they say. You will find that Mr. Smith, who is very probably in the town on business, does his own chores."

"I shan't contradict you my dear fellow," I remarked with a glance about the single room. "My word, it looks like it! He seems to have acquired some slovenly habits since I saw him last. I say, are you hungry?"

"Am I?" and my companion's tone was eloquent.

"Well, I suppose we shall have to rustle the grub as they say out here. Can you cook eggs, Boggs? I see half a dozen up there on that dirty shelf."

Boggs shook his head dubiously.

"When I was butler for Lady Rillchester I occasionally made egg soufflé," he observed, "but I have forgotten the knack."

"Oh well, I'll see if I can fry them. What is this utensil—a fry-pan or a skillet?"

"A skillet, I believe. Shall I kindle a fire? And you can look in the pantry, sir, for more edibles. I think I see some tinned goods."

I got out some of the rude crockery and tinware and we scouted about and found stale bread, oleo, and a canister partly full of tea—a cheap brand but better than none. Somehow we made a meal but it was rather awful you know.

It was mid-afternoon when we returned from a ramble about the estate, having seen not a living soul anywhere and how the time passed from then on till dark I cannot recall. But it was with mingled feelings we watched night come down over the great lone foothill land. Here were we, two utter strangers to the country, stranded in this remote spot and without a weapon of any kind except an old muzzle-loader which I had noticed hanging on the wall. Indians, bears, wolves, wild buffalo—all these terrors loomed up in the imagination with oppressive insistency and it was with difficulty we made up our minds to go to bed. But we did, finally, after another cheerless meal.

I don't know what wakened me so suddenly. It may have been premonition. At any rate I started up broad awake some time in the night. Raising myself upon an elbow I listened intently, but at first could hear nothing except the regular breathing of Boggs in the bunk above. The light of a full moon streamed in at one of the dirty little casements and the few articles of furniture in the room could be faintly distinguished in their rude setting. So convinced was I that something was wrong I found myself unable to go asleep again, but presently I wrapped myself in my greatcoat once more and lay back to watch for dawn. I closed my eyes once and no doubt might have succeeded after a time in falling asleep again had not the unmistakable sound of human footsteps fallen on my ear.

"Ah, it's dear old Billy returning."

I said to myself. Feeling much relieved I rose to a sitting posture and commenced to hunt about for my waistcoat in a pocket of which reposed my matchcase. But almost at the moment, and giving me scarcely a second to drop down again, the owner of the steps or whatever you would call him, began to open the door very cautiously. It was this intense care on his part that warned me to be on my guard. (Billy would have been whistling or singing as he returned home.)

Watching from my corner I saw the door creak open slowly, very slowly, and then something blotted out the shaft of light that lay athwart the doorsill. It resolved itself into a human form.

But this hardly surprised me. What did amaze me was the man himself, a tall chap with spurs, a revolver holster, and knee boots. Billy is short and rotund and seldom goes armed as I understand it is against the law even in this country. Well, my midnight prowler stood there for fully three minutes apparently listening intently. Then very quickly he disappeared and had he not left the door open I might have fancied I had been the victim of a nightmare.

"Boggs, I say Boggs!" I called softly to the bunk overhead.

"Hello," came faintly back.

"Look sharp! There's a thief or an Indian or something prowling about. I saw him not a moment ago."

"A dream, possibly sir."

"I tell you I saw him, and very distinctly. Keep perfectly still like a good

fellow. I shall get that old gun and be ready for his next appearance."

"Perhaps it was a ghost, sir," Boggs remarked with a quite audible yawn.

But I told him to hush up, and crawling carefully across the room, bumping into two chairs and the table on my return, I succeeded in my design and was no sooner back in the bunk with the muzzle-loader than the footsteps again became audible. Next we heard voices.

"Two of them!" I muttered, and crouched lower.

"He's here all right, I heard his snores," said the voice that evidently belonged to the man I had seen.

"Be ready then," said the other.

Then the dull ray from a dark-lantern bobbed about and presently he who held it pushed back the shutter and swept the room. It searched me out and remained fixed. I dodged and it followed me. I tried to skip aside but it trailed me about as though I were a bally operatic star you know.

"Ho! He's drawing a bead on us," said the first. "Put that gun down!"

"Here, let me get the bracelets on him before he starts something," said the other. "Stay right where you are Fred, and keep the door covered."

"Come forward at your peril!" I cried.

Boggs, at this point saw fit to put in his oar.

"I say, we expect the owner of this place to return at any moment and he will make it jolly hot for you!"

The visitors both started and for a second the searchlight left me and travelled higher.

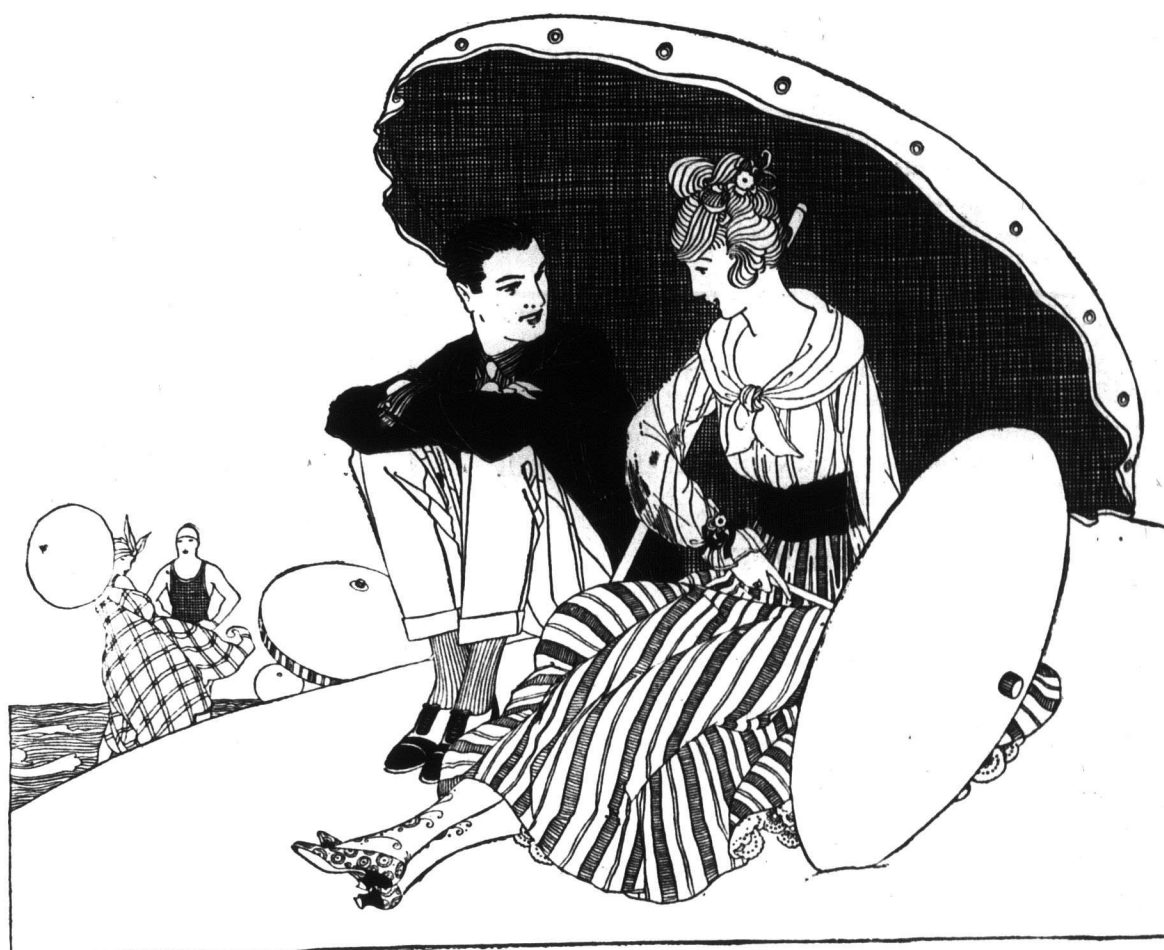
"Who's that?" demanded the man who held the lantern.

"Must be an accomplice," hazarded the other one.

And up came the cover of the lantern and the room was flooded with light.

"My word!" I gasped, letting my gun drop with a clang. "It's the Mounted Police!"

For our visitors wore the scarlet tunics



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