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Al and the Buzzard Perplexed

BY CLOUDESLEY JOHNS

HE heat-haze streaked the steely sky, and deep in the shimmering dry mist the distant reaches of shining gray seemed to crawl and writhe, but in the foreground the long rolling billows of sand lay motionless. High in the quivering air a great buzzard wheeled lazily in wide circles which lapped each other as the black scavenger completed each one, for he was watching two men that walked in the heated silence of the desert, and he kept the central point of his circular flights directly above them.

One of the men staggered as he walked, sometimes leaning forward and reaching toward the ground with his hands, as if he would lie down, but he always straightened up in terror and lunged on after his companion. Besides the glaze of his eyeballs, seared by the dry heat, there was a glare of hopeless horror in them; this man struggled on only because the other walked ahead. At last he fell.

"Wait, Frank!" he cried.

"For what?" asked the other, turning around.

The fallen man groaned, reeling from side to side on his knees, holding his hands away from the sand which had blistered them when they were plunged into it.

"For me," he pleaded with terrified eagerness; "I'm coming in a minute—in just a minute I'm coming. I—I only tripped, that's all. Don't you see I'm coming?" He half rose to his feet, but fell back—"Oh, God, Frank; wait for me, just a minute! I'm coming!"

Frank laughed thickly, and his puffed lips remained twisted in a horrid grin as he replied, opening his jaws wide to give play to his swollen tongue:

"Yes, you will!" he sneered. "But for me you'd be miles back there. He knows better," indicating the soaring buzzard by a jerk of his head; "look at him."

The buzzard was still wheeling

around, but the circles were suddenly grown narrower and the bird had come down closer. The dying man looked up and screamed.

"He'll have you next thing you know," mumbled Frank, still grinning, his tongue more hindrance than help to his speech. "He's followed such fellows as you in the desert before." He turned sharply about, the grin disappeared, and started on.

With a look of horror at the descending buzzard, a glance of fury at his departing companion, the weaker man tottered to his feet and staggered after.

"Wait Frank!" he entreated.

"Wait nothing!" retorted Frank.

"What's the good, anyhow? You can't make it, though it's not over five miles now; but I will. You'll never have the spending of that gold, Al, and you know it; might as well lie down and take your medicine."

Al had been reeling again, but now he

stiffened up, plunging along after his brother, the glare in his eyes showing more fury than terror.

For an hour they went on, Frank moving more and more slowly, yet leaving his brother farther and farther behind, Al toiling onward in wrathful despair. The buzzard grew impatient watching these men in the clutch of death, feebly clinging to life; he flew far away, soon appearing only as a black speck in the distance, and then was engulfed in the throbbing heat-haze; but his flight was still in a circle. When at last he returned he saw one of the men lying on the sand, and flew a little faster.

Frank, looking round from time to time, saw that his brother had fallen again, and went back.

"What do you want?" growled the fainting Al.

"The gold, Al; it ain't over three miles now, and I guess I can carry

yours and mine, so even if I don't find the place again I'll have enough to marry on, anyhow. Here! drop that, you fool! What good's the stuff to you?" But Al clung with weak hands to the belt.

"Let me alone!" he mumbled. "I'll make it if you do, you thief!" and holding by Frank's coat he raised himself to his feet. Frank stood still till Al had lifted himself, and then he sneered:

"Oh, yes, you'll make it, you will! Why you can't travel fifty yards, you baby!" He broke away from his brother then, and walked on.

Al kept on his feet, dragging them through the powdery sand while the tortured body swayed and rocked.

How quickly men succumb when death pounces upon them suddenly!—a gasp, perhaps; a thrill of terror at the shock; a rolling up of the eyes and quivering of the muscles as the mind becomes blank. And then the weaken-



Indian Encampment on the Rainy River along the Canadian Northern Railway.