The BLUE RIDGE PATROL

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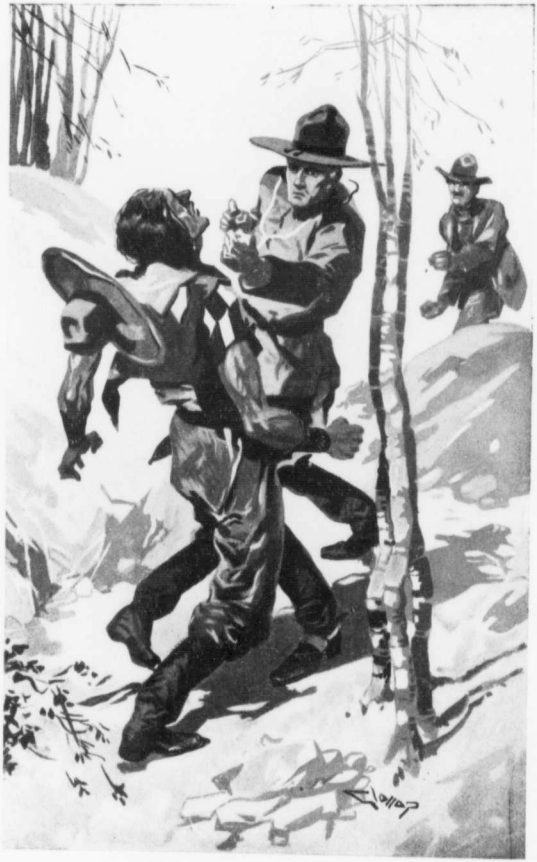
MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN



"WITH A STRAIGHT LEFT TO THE JAW HE TUMBLED HIS MAN INTO THE BRUSHWOOD."

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THE BLUE RIDGE PATROL

A STORY OF THE ROYAL NORTH-WEST MOUNTED POLICE OF CANADA

BY
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"UNDER WOLFE'S FLAG," "BLAKE OF THE MERCHANT SERVICE," "SLEEPY SAUNDERS," ETC., ETC.

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To
COLONEL JAMES WALKER
OF CALGARY,
ONE OF THE HEROES OF
THE ROYAL NORTH-WEST
MOUNTED POLICE
OF CANADA,
THIS STORY IS
Dedicated

THE BLUE RIDGE PATROL

CHAPTER I

It had been a red letter day for Angus McQuinlan, Captain of the School, and of the Rugger Fifteen at Ringwood. That afternoon he had led his team to victory against Hillmorton, hitherto their unbeaten rivals.

Ringwood had gone mad with delight. The victory had been snatched out of the very jaws of defeat by McQuinlan's dropped goal in the last three minutes of the most titanic struggle the old school had ever known.

"Good old Quin! Three hips for McQuin!" roared the field, and the cheering had scarcely ceased when the referee's whistle signalled the end of the game.

Then the real tumult began. Every Blue-cap who hadn't been in the game charged down the field upon their hero. The next

moment they were carrying the school Captain shoulder high through the crowd—back to the pavilion.

As they did so, someone started the old school song, so redolent of happy memories at Ringwood, of sports' victories such as this, of breaking-up scenes in the Quad, or even sorrowful farewells.

This song was "The Tarpaulin Jacket." For more than three generations, since they buried the Balaclava hero, who had hailed from Ringwood, tradition had on all occasions, both festive and sad, linked the old song with the school.

They sang it now as they carried their hero off the field, and they sang it lustily:

"A tall stalwart lancer lay dying,
And as on his death-bed he lay,
To his friends who around him were sighing,
These last dying words he did say"—

But when they neared the pavilion and came to the chorus, they roared it:

"Wrap me up in my tarpaulin jacket,
And say a poor buffer lies low,
And six stalwart lancers shall carry me,
With steps solemn, mournful, and slow."

All the shouting was over now, and Quin was very glad to be alone. He wanted to

think things over, for there was a lump in his throat and a heavy load at his heart.

It was McQuinlan's last term, and in a few more days he was to leave Ringwood for ever. Poor Quin! He didn't feel like a hero. How he had envied the striplings who had broken the tapes, charged down the field that afternoon, and cheered him so lustily!

"Lucky fellows!" muttered Quin. "You've got years at Ringwood yet, and I've got to quit. The worst of it is, I've got nowhere to go!"

The school Captain groaned inwardly. His father, who had imagined a great future for his boy, had been killed during the first months of the Great War. His mother, broken by grief, had not long survived him. Quin, therefore, was an orphan. Outside Ringwood he had no friends, save a few distant relatives, whom he scarcely knew. And the small patrimony had been nearly all spent upon his education.

His relatives, eager to do something to start the orphan in life, had dangled a junior clerkship in a London office before him. The pay would be small, the hours long, and the rest would depend upon himself. Quin had revolted at the idea.

"I want the open air," he told himself. "The wide spaces, and—and—adventure. An indoor life would kill me!"

McQuin's soul was in a tumult. There remained but another week to the end of the term. He rose from his chair and crossed the room, then with folded arms stood before the picturesque photo of his great chum, Tom Merry.

Tom had been Captain of Ringwood before Quin. They had been twin souls. For six years they had been almost inseparable. They had shared the same den, slept in the same dormitory, been through the mill of discipline and adventure together. And since Merry had left nearly a year ago, McQuinlan had been terribly lonely.

But Tom Merry was in Canada. Being of fine physique, like Quin, he had gained the ambition of his youth, and become a Trooper in the "Mounties," that wonderful band of disciplined adventurers, the Royal North-West Mounted Police. It had been Quinlan's great ambition to follow him.

"You're a lucky dog, Tom!" sighed Quin as he gazed at the framed photo. "I'd give all I possess if I were with you. We always declared that we would see the world together. And now—ugh! my luck's clean out. I'm to be a clerk in a London office, Tom, an' you're in clover. For if there's any adventure in these dull, post-war days, you get it in the Mounties."

Certainly the old Captain of Ringwood, in his wide-awake scout hat, scarlet tunic, dark-blue breeches with the wide, yellow stripes, field boots, jack spurs, brown leather gauntlets, Sam Browne equipment, revolver and bucketed rifle looked every inch the hero of adventure. And the magnificent animal on which he sat so easily was worthy of the Life Guards.

"But there, I've tried to join the Mounties, an' they won't have me," groaned McQuinlan.

Then he crossed the room again, and, sitting down in the old basket chair in which Tom Merry had sat so often in the old days, the unhappy Quin buried his face in his hands.

That night, the hero of Ringwood touched the very depths of despondency. And for the next four days this mood continued, until, on the fifth morning, two days before the end of the term, something happened which carried him at one bound into the seventh heaven of delight.

"Letter for you, McQuinlan," called Jukes, the junior prefect, who, as school monitor, received the morning's post, and passed the letters around.

"Really?" exclaimed McQuinlan, who wasn't expecting anything.

"Yes, quite a bulky packet. From overseas, too," said the junior prefect.

"Overseas?" McQuinlan tingled with excitement.

"Yes, Canada, I think, by the stamps," said Jukes.

"Great Christopher! Where is it, Jukes, old son?"

"In your den. I went to seek you and found you out. So I left it on the table there."

"Thanks," chirped McQuinlan, and the next instant he was bounding down the corridor in the direction of his den.

Yes, there was the letter, quite a bulky affair. And it was from his old chum, Tom Merry. Quin tore open the envelope and gave a little shout of joy. Here was a twelve-page epistle from the old Captain of Ringwood. And it promised to be the juiciest, most thrillsome packet he had yet received from the Great North-West. So it was.

But McQuinlan's future was so intensely concerned with the details of this ripe epistle, that the contents must be carried over into another chapter.

CHAPTER II

QUIN settled himself cosily in the easy chair and began to read. As he did so hope revived within him, and a gladsome smile spread over the face of the school Captain.

Blue Ridge Patrol,
R.N.W.M.P. Post,
Pine Creek,
North-West Territory.

DEAR QUIN,

Sorry to have been so long in replying to your last letter, which arrived at H.Q. after I had left. You'll understand the delay, old son, when you have read this epistle.

Well, Quin, I have just returned from the most thrillsome adventure I have ever experienced. My hat! that I'm alive at all to write this letter seems little short of a miracle.

But there you are, you get "thrills" in the Mounties. My only regret the whole time was that you were not with me. How you would have enjoyed it, you tough old rascal. You always did enjoy a tight corner.

It was up towards the Yukon Trail that the thing happened, seven hundred miles from the nearest settlement, beyond the Mackenzie River and the Great Salt Lake. Been some trouble for months past between the Dog-Faces and a band of half-breeds. The half-breeds were a bad lot, and had been cattle-rustling on the Indian preserves. Several Indians were killed and two of the half-breeds severely wounded.

We got wind of it when we were out on the Blue Ridge Patrol, and as the blow from the Baffin Ice had already commenced, we left our horses at Moose Rapids with a band of friendly Crees, and started off with a team of huskies. Tough rascals these dog-teams. Well, we got there just in time to prevent another attack. Things looked ugly at first. There were only three of us, Sergt. Masey, Trooper Duff and myself. There was a bit of gun work, and Masey was hit. But Duff and myself managed to break the gang, and make a couple of arrests.

Well, the job was getting back. Masey, we had to leave with the Indians. So Duff and I struck the home trail with the two half-breeds. We had some job of it, for Duff through sheer exhaustion fell sick on the home trail. This gave me double duty. But

after three days I fell in with Troopers Shorty and Cormack of the Yellow-Knife Patrol, and they helped me back to Pine Creek. Masey is now better and home again. And Duff is O.K.

Well, that's that, old son. But it isn't the real thing I set out to write about. Now listen with both ears, Quin. I had to escort both the half-breeds back to H.Q. at Regina. And there I was thanked for my work by the Assistant Commissioner of the Mounties. Fine chap he is, too. He told me I was a credit to the Force and a lot more tosh. Said he'd marked me out for promotion. Well, Quin, it was my chance, the chance I have waited for so long, an' I just barged in:

"Begging your pardon, Chief," I said, "there is only one favour I want of my superiors at present."

"And what is that, Trooper Merry?" he asked.

"My greatest chum is just now breaking his heart in the Old Country because he can't get into the Mounties and be with me," I said.

"Who is he?" asked the Chief.

"His name's Angus McQuinlan, an' he's captain of my old school at Ringwood," I said. Then I piled it on, but you deserved

it all, Quin. "Captain of best Rugger Fifteen in England he is. Five feet eleven inches in his stockinged feet, though he's only nineteen. Tough as hickory an' the best athlete I know, Chief." I went on, and I told him lots an' lots more.

Seemed to hit the old boy. For after raking over the papers on his desk, he pulled out your application. Good job you sent it in just when I begged you to. Your name was sort of familiar to him, you see. For after he had hummed and hawed for a minute, he said:

"Ahem, talking of Ringwood, Trooper Merry, do they still sing the old song there?"

You could have knocked me down with a feather, Quin. I thought for a moment, asking that question, that he was an Old Boy.

"You mean 'The Tarpaulin Jacket,' Chief?" I said.

"Yes," he replied. Then he began to hum it.

"*You* were at Ringwood, Chief, then?" I asked. But he shook his head.

"No; I was never there," he said. "But my greatest chum in the late War was there. And the night before he was killed, he would sing the old song, 'Wrap me up in my tarpaulin jacket.' And next day, poor chap, after the

attack on the Somme, we buried him in his old trench coat, as he wished. Poor Wilson! I have never forgotten him. And he talked such a lot about his old school."

Then the old boy was quiet for a minute, and I thought I had said enough, for I told him how the old song was still roared out at breaking-up, leave-takings, and whenever any great event had been pulled off in the sports' field.

"Look here," said the chief after a while. "There are practically no vacancies in the Mounties at present. But I like what you say about McQuinlan. He's rather on the young side. Nineteen's hardly old enough to face the North-West. But he seems the right stuff. I'll write this mail asking our London representative to interview him and size him up. Then if he's O.K. he shall come out."

"Thank you, Chief!" I said. And not knowing what else to do, I just got up and saluted.

Then the Chief shook me by the hand, congratulated me again, and at parting said, "By the way, Trooper Merry, when your friend, McQuinlan, comes out here, if we find him fit for top-notch work, I may post him to the Blue Ridge Patrol at Pine Creek."

So there you are, Quin. You're as good as in the Mounties already. But it's a man-size job, old boy. You must be prepared to rough it. There are only a handful of us all told, and we have a territory to administer and patrol which is twenty times the size of Old England.

Cheerio, Quin. Tell 'em about "The Tarpaulin Jacket" at Ringwood, an' remember me to everybody who hasn't forgotten me. An' when you come out, it's your old school chum who will be waiting to greet you.

Yours till the Gulf-stream freezes,

TOM MERRY.

To say that Angus McQuinlan was cheered by this letter from the outer edge of the world would be putting it too mildly. He was thrilled to the very core of his marrow.

Bounding from his chair he performed an Indian war dance about the study, and if he hadn't been Captain of Ringwood he would have whooped like a scalp-hunter as well. That would only have meant loss of dignity, for it would have brought the whole school buzzing about his ears. And they would have thought their hero had suddenly become mad. But he did want to shout, though, and tell everybody the good news.

"The jolly old tide's turned at last," he told himself. "I'm not going to be penned in an office all day, after all. I'm going—oh, golly! I'm goin' out to Merry—to the wide spaces of the earth, into God's open air."

Then, stepping across the room to Merry's photo again, he exclaimed:

"Good old Tom! I knew you'd move heaven an' earth to help me. And you've done it, old son. Cheerio! I'm coming out, Tom, an' if you and I get into the tightest corner that ever was, an' we're together, Great Christopher! it's what we both longed for."

After that Quin did another caper about the room. Then, calming down a bit, before he told the news to the Head, he sat down, pulled out an old letter received six months ago from the same source, and turned up a soiled and well-thumbed page, which dealt with the duties of a Mounty.

This was written when Tom Merry was quite new to the work, and the paragraph, which Quin had read fifty times, ran as follows:

"We've still got redskins in the North-West, Quin, including Blackfeet, Crees, and a few wandering bands of Algonquins, the old lords of Canada. Some of them are bitter enemies still, and will fight when they meet. But

some of the half-breeds are worse than the Injuns. They rustle the horses of their neighbours, steal the trappers' pelts, or turn bandit. But through all the Territory, from the northern prairies and the 'Big Sticks,' to the Mackenzie River, the Great Slave Lake, and right away to Baffin Island, and from the Old Hudson Bay Territory to the Yukon, the word of a Mounty is law."

The re-reading of this paragraph gave McQuinlan yet another thrill. Thanks to Merry he would soon be out on the Adventure Trail now. And, best of all, if things went well, the two chums would be hitting the trail together.

With these thoughts he folded the letter and went to tell the Dominie and Weston, the English master, all about the good news he had received.

CHAPTER III

AFTER an hour's serious chat with the Head, Quin packed all his traps in order that he might be in readiness for the expected summons to London.

So far he had kept his secret from the rest of the school. He had been lionised quite enough since the school victory over Hillmorton, and Quin hated adulation and flattery. With all his courage and genius for leadership, he was a modest youth.

"All I've done is to keep the flag flying as Tom Merry left it," he told himself. "I would rather have died than lowered it, and disgraced the traditions of Ringwood."

That night, however, McQuinlan's sleep was disturbed by strange dreams. The mingled anguish of leaving Ringwood, which had been his home for seven years, and the joyous prospect of rejoining Merry out in the Great North-West had strangely moved and disquieted his usually serene spirit.

Quin didn't often dream; at least, if he did, he rarely remembered his visions. But tonight half a dozen times he started up from some vivid dream experience. Then, his senses becoming normal, he laughed at his fears, lay down again—and another dream started.

In one dream, he and Tom Merry were riding the lone trail together. Through the Big Sticks, as the timbered land is called, they rode, over hill and dale, swimming the creeks, and camping by some tumbling cascade. And as they sat about the camp fire, they were so blithe and happy that they sang to their heart's content.

In one broken dream they were pursued by fierce grey wolves, and together they made a stand with their backs to a towering pine, blazed away with their rifles and beat off the ghoulish, ravening beasts.

Then the scene changed, and both Tom Merry and Quin were back at Ringwood leading the school fifteen to victory in a desperate, hard-fought field.

But once, sorely wounded and alone in the wilds, with life at its lowest ebb, Quin opened his eyes to find a redskin chief bending over him. From this terrible dream, McQuinlan awoke with a start. But the face of the Indian Chief, which was a friendly one,

remained for a few seconds, the features clearly outlined. Then gradually it faded away.

"Snakes alive, that was some dream!" gasped Quin. The details of the whole adventure he could not recall. The words "North Wind" however, remained, though who had spoken them he could not remember.

Day was just dawning in the east, and Quin lay awake thinking. He could sleep no more. This was to be his last day at Ringwood.

Half an hour later he got up and dressed. But by this time he had forgotten his realistic dream. Nor did he remember it again until many months after, when, in another land, and under northern skies, one daring adventure of his brought it suddenly back to his remembrance.

It was near midday when the telegram came which summoned Angus McQuinlan to report without delay at Canada House in London. And as all his traps were packed, Quin was ready in a few minutes.

"I'll just say good-bye to the Head and Weston," he decided. "Then I'll steal away before the morning lessons are over."

So thought Quin. But the school thought otherwise. He was not to slip away so easily. Someone had been talking, and the arrival of the telegram had given the game away.

"Quin's going!" was the surreptitious message passed from form to form.

"His luggage is in the front porch," ran another message. "He mustn't slip away without a cheer. What is the Dominie thinking about?"

But it was the rumble of the school 'bus entering the Doctor's Quad which caused the stampede. The Captain of Ringwood was leaving them for ever. He was their great hero. He had led them to victory a score of times. A giant in physique and leadership, he had won all their hearts. They would never see his like again.

"Quin shan't go without a 'hip,' boys!" said Jack Herridge. And there were tears in the Fourth-former's voice as he spoke.

But it wanted ten minutes yet to the mid-day bell. And at Ringwood discipline was rigorous.

"All the same it mustn't be," resolved Herridge. And, stealing out of the room, he reached the Great Hall, where the bell-rope came down from the turret. Grasping the rope, he gave three violent tugs, loud enough for a fire-alarm.

"Clang-clang-clang!" came the strident notes from the belfry. And heedless alike of form-master, prefect, or monitor, the Upper and

Lower Schools rose with one accord, and a wild stampede into the Doctor's Quad immediately ensued.

If this was a breach of discipline it passed unchallenged, for neither the Head nor Mr. Weston ever mentioned it. Perhaps that was because the end of the term was but twenty-four hours away. Or perhaps it was because another hero, a youth who had fought his battles cleanly, in the school and on the sports' ground, was bidding farewell to Ringwood.

Be that as it may, three minutes later there was a surging, excited crowd of one hundred and fifty youths, half blocking the Doctor's Quad. Someone had even banged to the big gates at the entrance, so that egress for the moment was effectively barred. And as for Jack Herridge, he had climbed to the top of the old mounting stone, and was making himself heard.

"Give him a rouser, boys!" he yelled. "Quin's going, an' he'll never come back again. We're losing the Captain. Three times three!"

"Hear, hear! Let it rip!" shouted Whelton. And the frenzied cheering which followed this outburst made the old quad ring with reverberating echoes.

"Hip-hip-hurrah!"

Three times three it was repeated. Quin was worth all that. Then someone else barged in. It was Ellsworthy of the Fifth.

"Up with the old song, boys!" he called. "Let the Captain of Ringwood hear it again!" And Ellsworthy himself started it. The rest took it up with vim.

> "A tall stalwart lancer lay dying,
> And as on his death-bed he lay,
> To his friends who around him were sighing,
> These last dying words he did say"—

There were voices that already choked with the emotion of it all, for the first words were sad. But so was the occasion of Quin's departure. And at the last line, as the youthful hero-worshippers pictured Ringwood without McQuinlan, their voices wavered, and nearly broke down. There was a lump in many a throat, and many a catch in the breath.

But they picked up for the chorus. This was always a rouser, chiefly perhaps because it was associated with so many happier events —victories in the Rugger and the Cricket field, breaking-up scenes, and old boys' gatherings.

Moreover, Jack Herridge, still astride the mounting stone, was beating time now, and urging them on.

"Let it go with a swing, boys!" he directed. And so it did.

"Wrap me up in my tarpaulin jacket,
And say a poor buffer lies low,
And six stalwart lancers shall carry me,
With steps solemn, mournful, and
slow."

Three more hips were given at the conclusion, then someone called for a speech. But McQuinlan fought shy.

The demand was so continuous and insistent that at length he had to comply.

"Sons of Ringwood," he began, and in an instant the silence in the quad was profound. "I am going away from you, and my heart is very heavy."

There was a pause, and with difficulty the Captain of Ringwood regained his composure, then continued:

"It is terrible!" he said; "and I feel it here." As he spoke, in clear manly tones, touched with emotion, he placed his left hand over his heart. "You—you will never understand until your turn comes. I—I have been happy with you. I—love this old place. But we cannot stay. The time comes for all of us, and we have to go. My time has come. I am going—to my old friend and yours, out

yonder on the outer rim of Empire. You remember your old captain, Tom Merry——"

The wave of emotion which had been so painful for everybody, speaker and listener alike, had passed swiftly. And at the mention of Merry, Quin's speech was punctuated by thunderous applause. Everyone had loved Merry, just as they loved McQuinlan. It was a happy thought that the two heroes were to be together in the future.

Quin was glad of that applause. It turned the tide in a different direction, and it gave him a chance to recover his feelings and make what haste he could with the few remaining words of his impromptu speech. He was smiling now.

"I'm glad you remember Merry," he said. "I shall tell him when we meet. He will be so glad to think he has not been forgotten. I have only got this more to say. Tom Merry is keeping the flag flying out yonder in the Great North-West. Your job is to keep it flying at Ringwood. Good-bye!"

Once again the thunder of applause broke forth. This time, even the rooks in the tree-tops were startled by the din, and flew round and round the grey, old buildings as if they, too, wished to give their quota of praise to a departing friend.

It was over now, and Quin was glad. With a final handshake for the Dominie, who was patting his shoulder in a friendly and familiar way, McQuinlan waved a hurried good-bye to the others, rushed down the steps, and into the waiting 'bus.

A moment later, glad that the ordeal was over, he was being whirled away down the drive, the rocketing cheers of his old school chums still sounding in his ears.

So ended for Angus McQuinlan the seven years of glorious adventure at Ringwood. But that same day he began another adventure, this time in real life, out in the big world, across the seas—adventure in the Great North-West, where the untamed Indian, the bear, the moose and the great herd of caribou still roam, and where, in the winter time the wolf packs are a terrible menace, and sometimes the blizzard, whooping down from the Baffin Ice, spreads its white mantle of death over man and beast.

CHAPTER IV

QUIN'S interview with the Canadian representative in London was both brief and successful. Lately, many hefty youths with a fine physique and a taste for adventure have gone straight from the public schools to the North-West Territory. Men from Eton and Harrow are at this moment serving with the Mounties. It is a magnificent school for healthy and enterprising youth who are willing to dare and to endure.

After a searching medical examination, therefore, and a rapid *vivâ voce*, Angus McQuinlan was recommended in the most unreserved manner for the post he sought. Then, after taking the oath to the King of England and the Dominion Parliament, he was enrolled as a trooper on probation for the R.N.W.M.P.

Three days later he sailed in the *Empress of Britain* for Quebec. From thence by the overland route he travelled to Regina, the capital of Saskatchewan, and the headquarters of the force.

At Regina he was put under instruction for six weeks. Passing all his tests in horsemanship, shooting, mounted patrol work, and the innumerable duties which fall within the scope of a Mounty's work, the Commissioner at H.Q., in accordance with his promise, posted him to the Blue Ridge Patrol, with its local centre at Pine Creek, some two hundred miles from the railway, and the nearest settlement of any size.

Quin, with another trooper, had been on patrol duty up the Muskwan River, and had just returned heavy with fatigue when the news reached him. It was Sergeant Keene, in charge of the sub-station near Regina, who handed out the message, just received over the wire.

"Ahoy, Trooper McQuinlan!" he shouted, and Quin looked up from the rough bench where he was cleaning his tarnished equipment after his long ride.

"Yes, Sergeant?" he queried.

"You're for the Blue Ridge Patrol, P.D.Q. When can you be ready?"

"In half an hour, Sergeant Keene."

"I'll give you an hour. It's a long trail. Get a good feed, and ask the Q.M. for ten days' rations. Then saddle up for inspection in an hour's time."

"Right, Sergeant," replied Quin, and despite his recent spell of duty his heart gave a great bound. He was to meet Tom Merry at last, and from thenceforward, to all appearances at present, the two school chums would seek adventure together.

It was a man-size job which had come to McQuinlan at last. Everybody in the force knew that the Blue Ridge Patrol, out in No-Man's land, beyond the Big Sticks, Indian Falls, and the wide, open spaces about the Great Slave Lake, was a job for picked men, even in the Mounties.

For nearly seven months of the year it meant the snow trail, with the thermometer often hovering about the dead line, and white blizzards from the frozen north twice as common and thrice as deadly as earthquakes in Ecuador.

There were other things also in that lone scout region—bands of wandering, untamed Indians, wild half-breeds, escaped bandits, and much-wanted men fled from the settlements to escape the penalties of the law. And in winter there were the wolves—heaps of them—lean-shanked fellows that stalked their prey, terrible when famished by hunger.

All these things made the Blue Ridge Patrol, with its illimitable stretch of almost unmapped

territory, one of the greatest adventures which still remains in an over-civilised world. And Quin's heart beat quickly at the thought of it all. He was all eagerness to start. But had he known to what fearful perils and dangers, what frightful tests of human endurance, he was heading, even McQuinlan's brave heart might have flinched.

In less than an hour Trooper Angus McQuinlan was ready. Tethering his horse at the door of the orderly room, he re-entered the shack, and reported for final instructions.

Sergeant Keene sighed as the young trooper stood before him. He disliked losing this hefty lad. But in the Mounties duty comes before sentiment, and stiffening his features he asked:

"Ready, Trooper McQuinlan?"

"Aye, ready, Sergeant!"

The N.C.O. stepped to the door, passed a quick glance over Quin's fresh mount, examined the equipment, saddle-bags, rations, pistols, rifle-bucket and ammunition. With the eye of an expert he rapidly saw that all was in order. Then in rather softened tones, he said:

"It's a long trail, lad. But as the snows have cleared now you'll get there in ten days unless the creeks are badly swollen. Half

the trail you know. After you've passed the Big Sticks near Hollow Ridge you follow an old Indian trail over Mount Nelson to Black Rock, then it's due north to Pine Creek. You've got the map?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Well, good-bye, lad. Remember me to Sergeant Masey. He's in charge of the Blue Ridge District. He's had twenty years at the game, and knows the Territory better than anyone in the force. He's a hard-boiled 'un is Masey. But you'll find him a white man. Good-bye, and good luck to you!" The sergeant lifted his hand in a gesture of farewell.

"Good-bye, Sergeant Keene," came the response, and McQuinlan wheeled his horse about and cantered off down the slope.

So for ten days Angus McQuinlan rode the Lone Trail, getting a shakedown sometimes with the lumber-jacks about the Big Sticks, or at a factor's post where the Indians and half-breeds brought their pelts, but more often sleeping in the open by his lonely camp fire.

On the afternoon of the last day, however, he came in sight of the Blue Ridge Mountains far away to the north. And, topping a pine-crested hill a little later, he caught a glimpse

of human habitations—frame buildings, a rude shack or two, one or two Indian tepees, and a more substantial log-frame house with the national flag floating above it.

"Pine Creek," decided Quin, and rested for a moment, gazing at the friendly blue smoke, the meandering creek, and the snug little post at the base of the forest of spruce and pine.

At that instant he saw a Mounty dash from the Police Post, mount a horse tethered near by, and come racing along the trail below him.

It was Tom Merry—now Corporal Merry —who had seen Quin silhouetted against the sky-line of the ridge, and had recognised him through the glasses.

Fifteen minutes later the old school chums met half way down the slope, each suddenly reining in his steed, and uttering an exclamation of joy.

"Tom!"

"Quin!"

These were the only words that escaped them as for fifteen seconds, leaning from their saddles, they gripped each other by the hand and looked into each other's eyes.

In this manner, after their fifteen months' separation, five thousand miles from their

old school, and on the very frontier of Empire, did the two sons of Ringwood meet again.

Then their tongues were unloosed, and they talked and laughed as if they hadn't a care in the world.

"And to think, Quin, that after all these months we should meet like this, almost at the very end of the world, boy!" said Merry.

"On the very rim of the jolly old earth, Tom," laughed the newcomer.

"But you've had a hard trail, old son, from Regina. You must be dog-tired."

"It was worth it, Tom. I'd have gone twice as far to be with you. Like a dream it seems to be with you again," said Quin.

And while they chatted, Quin, oblivious of his fatigue, and Merry of the passing time, the sun's rim touched the crest of Beaver Hill, and the first shadows fell across their path.

"But come along, Quin," said Merry; "how careless I am! Guess you're dying for a good feed, a decent wash an' change. See yonder, Number Two Patrol's just returned. An' they're signalling us. Reckon we'll have a merry beano to-night. Come along!"

And, wheeling about his horse, Merry led the way down the slope. As he cantered along

the rough trail, he burst out into a snatch of the old school song: "Wrap me up in my tarpaulin jacket——"

McQuinlan followed hard at his companion's heels, and, fatigued as he was with his ten days and nights out in the wilds, hitting the rough trail, swimming the creeks, and negotiating the scrub, he also joined in the old chorus, for never in all his life had this tired trooper been so happy as at this moment.

As the pair rode up to the post, Merry dismounted first just by the flagstaff, where Sergeant Masey, Troopers Duff, Cormack and Shorty awaited them.

"Trooper McQuinlan from Regina, Sergeant," said Merry. "Reporting for duty with the Blue Ridge Patrol."

"H'm! So you're McQuinlan?" said the N.C.O. as he first of all looked over his man with the keen, hawk-like eyes of a patrol leader.

"Yes, Sergeant," replied Quin, sitting his horse like a statue till the inspection was over.

"H'm! You'll do. Dismount! Take his horse, Cormack. They'll both want a feed, I reckon. Come inside, Trooper."

Quin dismounted, went inside with the sergeant, and handed over his credentials;

then finally he gave Masey Sergeant Keene's message.

At this, the grizzled old timer of the north trail relaxed a trifle, and chatted about his old comrade, Keene, for they had seen a good deal of service together.

The inspection over, things became more free and easy. Quin was supplied with a change of underwear, and Pemmican Joe, the mess attendant, prepared a hot bath for the newest arrival. Though the Blue Ridge was a rough trail, there was always warmth, food and comfort at the Post. There was even a telephone to the next post, which was at Fort Frazer. So the Pine Creek Station had some small connection with the outer world until the blizzards came and broke down the wires.

That night in the mess they had wild turkey and venison for supper, followed by hot coffee and a plum cake that had come in with the last mail parcels from Fort Frazer further south.

Shorty produced a ukelele after the meal, and then they sang the songs of the Old Country, "John Peel," "The Oak and the Ash," "Loch Lomond," and "Annie Laurie," with an infinite variety of coon songs, and some rag-time ditties.

But in between the songs, Tom Merry and Quin talked of Ringwood, the Rugger Fifteen, the Dominie and Mr. Weston, until, tired out, the patrol turned in for the night.

Thus ended Trooper McQuinlan's first day with the Blue Ridge Patrol.

CHAPTER V

TROOPER McQUINLAN was permitted forty-eight hours' rest after his fatigue of the last ten days. Then, on the third day, he reported back for duty with the patrol.

To Quin, nothing seemed to matter now. He and Merry were again together. No longer boys but men, each with a man's job, they found adventure together.

So the busy weeks sped by, and McQuinlan developed into a hardened Mounty. Sometimes he and Merry were sent out upon the same patrol. Once they went to Moose Rapids and along the Saskawanna Trail to Horse Shoe Gully. Thence they followed another trail to a half-breed camp beyond the Blue Ridge, where there had been rumours of fighting.

All was quiet, however, when they reached the camp, and, save for a few bands of roving Indians, quite peaceably inclined, and several trappers near the Great Salt Lake and the

Cameron Hills, they encountered no one but lumber-jacks.

They saw plenty of game, however. The moose and deer were plentiful, and several times they struck the spoor of a caribou herd. Save for food, however, they shot nothing that journey, except a bear, as Quin particularly wanted the skin.

Two months slipped away, and as yet little had happened to disturb the usual routine. Then suddenly, one day, the jangle of the telephone bell at Pine Creek awoke the silent post. Sergeant Masey leapt to the instrument, and the voice of Inspector Waters came over the wire.

"Hello! Hello! Hello! Are you there, Pine Creek?" came the hail. "This is Fort Frazer speaking. I want Sergeant Masey, quickly!"

"Masey speaking, Inspector," replied the Sergeant, who had recognised the voice, and knew by the tang in it that something was afoot. "Anything wrong, Inspector?" asked the patrol-leader, excitedly.

"Yes, there's a man-size job for your patrol, Sergeant," began the Inspector, hurriedly. "Are all your men out?"

"All out 'cept Corporal Merry, Trooper McQuinlan and myself. But Number Two

Patrol will be back from the ridge at sundown."

"The thing can't wait, Sergeant. You must saddle up an' away, the three of you. Listen! The Prince Rupert Transcontinental was held up at the Great Bear Divide two hours before dawn this morning. The wires were cut an' the line blocked by three masked men. There was some gun work, but the bandits had the best of it. The guard of the train was killed and the driver wounded. Some passengers were robbed an' ill-treated. Fifty thousand dollars and articles of jewellery were lifted. Then the bandits made a getaway."

"Yes, yes, Inspector?" called Masey, as the voice at the other end faltered for a minute. "Go on, please!"

There wasn't much more to it, for the Inspector had but ten seconds in which to rush his message through to Pine Creek.

"Hello! Are you there, Masey?"

"Yes, yes!"

"The men had double-mounts, Indian mustangs; one was a tall, broad man—Black Malson most likely. The other two were half-breeds. One man three fingers left hand. Hello! Hello! What in the name of blazes is the matter with the line? Saskawanna

Trail, we believe, making for the Yukon. Get——" Then came another break. And after that, silence.

"Hello-hello-hello, Inspector!" yelled Sergeant Masey. But not another word came through from the H.Q. at Fort Frazer.

Masey threw down the receiver after another useless minute. "Line's been cut!" he rasped. "Got enough to go on, however. But another minute and we should have got nothing. Fort Frazer's been a long time with the news. It's now three o'clock, and the hold-up happened before dawn. Guess that's because the wires at the Great Bear Divide were cut."

Stepping to the door the sergeant blew a shattering blast upon his service whistle. And within fifteen seconds Corporal Merry and Trooper McQuinlan, half-dressed from the rest room, where they had been standing easy after a ninety-six hours' patrol, came rushing up.

"Anything wrong, Serge?" exclaimed Merry. Such a blast was unusual in a quiet, deserted place like Pine Creek.

Masey didn't stop to explain—not just then.

"Boot an' saddle, boys!" he ordered. "Five days' rations an' sixty rounds apiece. Tell

Indian Joe to bring my horse round. We start in ten minutes."

Then the sergeant dashed back into the room, scribbled a few, brief orders for Troopers Duff and Cormack, who were expected back from the Blue Ridge Patrol at sundown, asking them to get further news from Fort Frazer as soon as the broken wires had been mended, then ride "hell for leather" up the Saskawanna Trail.

In three minutes he had finished. But by that time three horses stood at the door of the orderly room, while Merry and McQuinlan were just agog for further news.

"Injuns broken out o' the reserves, Serge?" asked Merry, slapping the well-groomed flank of his mount. "Or is it the half-breeds out cattle-rustling again?"

"Worse'n that, Corp," replied Masey, hurriedly buckling on his gun-belt. "The Transcontinental was held up by gun-men two hours before dawn this mornin'."

"The Prince Rupert Express?"

"Yep."

"Where?"

"Near the Great Bear Divide."

"Anybody hurt?"

"Guard killed an' driver wounded. Fifty thousand dollars stolen, an' some jewels. Now

the wires are cut 'tween here an Fort Frazer. Just as Inspector Waters was giving me the news. But I got enough to learn that the three masked gun-men rode off with double mounts up the Saskawanna Trail. Black Malson's the leader, most likely. An' there's a three-fingered Dog-Face with him, an' another half-breed."

"Gosh! It should be a honest-to-goodness sort o' shootin' business this time, Serge," said Corporal Merry, rubbing his hands with the thrill of it. But Masey was already giving final instructions to Indian Joe, who was now to remain sole occupant of the little post until the sundown patrol returned. The sergeant's words were few but picturesque.

"We're hittin' the Saskawanna Trail, Joe, right now," he began. "Three bad men hold-up whistling-horse. Wait here for Blue Ridge Patrol. Wampum belt with message inside."

The Indian grunted, then tickled his scalp-lock suggestively with a fore-finger.

"Bad medicine, Chief," he said. "Pemmican Joe honest Injun. Will keep guard, an' watch for patrol when the sun is amongst the pines."

Masey nodded, and slammed the self-locking door, then called to his companions.

"Ready, boys?"

"Aye, ready."

"Then mush! We should strike the Saskawanna Trail in twelve hours. An' if we're quick enough, we might make Horse Shoe Gully as soon as the Dog-Faces."

And, without another word the three Mounties put spurs to their horses and cantered off through the timber, then down Silver Bar Gulch, and up the opposite ridge.

Pemmican Joe, a full-blooded Cree Indian, who had been attached to Pine Creek Station for months past, watched them intently, saw them silhouetted against the crest of the distant ridge nearly an hour later, then, grunting in his customary manner, went round to his tepee, fetched the old muzzle-loader which was his particular fetish, and stood passively to attention like a statue in bronze outside the post.

Sergeant Masey, with a commission from H.Q. such as he had just received, spared neither horse nor man. Though he chatted with his patrol occasionally as he rode over the rough trail, he forced the pace all the while.

The Saskawanna Trail, used for centuries by the caribou herds and Indian hunters, led up through the Territory towards the upper reaches of the Peace River, and the Cameron

Hills, past the shores of the Great Slave Lake towards the Mackenzie River and the Yellow Knife Pass over the Yukon Boundary.

But this Old Indian Trail of the Saskawanna lay fifty miles away from Pine Creek, through the rough timber slopes, down swampy gulleys, and over broken, jagged ridges. A lesser man than Masey would have lost his way.

The North-West Mounties, however, as all the world now knows, are hard-bitten men. Tough as hickory, with muscles of whipcord, during the last fifty-four years, in a Territory ten times the size of Britain, they have brought peace out of chaos, and made even the wild half-breeds, lumber-jacks, bands of roving Indians, and free-booters respect the law.

It was on the summit of Buffalo Ridge, after a strenuous fifteen miles ride, that Masey ordered the first halt.

"Ease off, boys!" he called.

Dismounting, the sergeant flung off his heavy equipment and blanket, slackened the saddle-girth, then swept the long range of pine-clad hill, river, lake and valley with his glasses.

Merry and McQuinlan loosed their steaming, tired horses, allowing them to graze upon the tufted grass, then came to stand beside their leader.

"Smoke way down the valley, Sergeant," said the trooper, jerking his thumb towards a thin blue streak of vapour about fifteen miles away.

But Masey had already located it. "Yes, McQuin," he replied. "Lumber-jacks, I fancy, lighting their evening camp fire." For the long slanting rays of the sun behind the patrol lit up a long stretch of territory, with the stiff, upreared pile of Beacon Hill twenty miles away.

"Can't be the hold-up crush, can it, by any chance?"

"Nope!"

"They're double-mounted, Serge," put in Corporal Merry, taking a peep through the glasses. "They've had twelve hours at least, an' they'd ride hell for leather leading the double mount, an' change saddles every hour."

Sergeant Masey took another peep through the glasses at the thin, spiral column of blue smoke, then shook his head.

"Nope, 'tisn't the hold-up gang, Merry," he declared at length. "Malson and his crowd couldn't have got so far from the Great Bear Divide by now. It's a forty hours' ride, boys. An' the going wouldn't be any too easy for them, either."

Then McQuinlan, who had been taking a turn with the glasses, chirped in.

"No, it can't be the Black Malson crush, Sergeant," he said. "Malson's an old hand, and he wouldn't be such a fool as to light up a camp fire before dark. He isn't the sort of bird to give himself away like that."

"You're right, Quin," Masey decided. "An' look how they're pilin' on the wood. Nope, they're lumber-jacks, boys. An' we should be wastin' our time by stalking their camp."

"Then we'll camp here, Serge?" said Merry. "The horses are pretty well done."

"Just a few hours' rest, boys," ordered Masey. "Give the horses a rub down, Merry. An' Quin?"

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"Lay out a bit of a camp-fire behind those rocks on the lee side o' the ridge. But don't light it for another half hour till the sun's dipped. We don't want to give the hold-up gang the slightest hint that we're makin' for the Saska Trail."

"Right, Sergeant," replied the young trooper.

So, while Corporal Merry rubbed down the steaming horses with wisps of dry, tufted grass, and gave them a feed from the saddle-bags, then tethered them loosely to a tree,

McQuinlan scouted around for dry logs, and piled them up behind the rocks, which would make an effective screen for the blaze.

Then the sun went down, and the sable curtain of night lowered its folds over forest, river and hill.

"Get the blaze goin', Quin," ordered the Sergeant a few minutes later. "It will be safe enough now."

CHAPTER VI

AROUND the friendly glow of the camp fire that night the three Mounties rested for a while after the fatigue of their hurried trail.

A pannikin of hot tea, without milk or sugar, and a regulation "Maconachie" ration, warmed in the red-hot ashes of the fire, served them for supper.

After that the sergeant yarned for half an hour, telling one of his hair-raising adventures up the Mackenzie River, and the two school chums talked of their life at Ringwood.

"Only to think of it, Tom!" said Quin. "Eighteen months ago we were both at Ringwood. You were captain of the School Fifteen an' I was vice-skipper."

Tom Merry laughed as he looked at his chum. Six months in the Territory had already made McQuinlan hardy and weather-beaten.

"And now here we are," said Merry, "five thousand miles away, with scarcely a post every six weeks, an' still together, both hitting the trail on the outer rim of the world. Pardners

in a real adventure, an' sleeping on God's green turf under the northern stars."

Quin rubbed his hands with glee, and the sergeant smiled at the enthusiasm of the boys. They were still boys to him, with his twenty odd years in the Territory. But they were just the hefty, honest-to-goodness sort of boys upon whom he knew he could rely at a pinch. And the "pinch" or the "tight corner" he anticipated was now right ahead of them, for this little patrol was on the track of the worst "hold-up gang" left in the whole North-West.

"I wonder who's captain of the School Eleven this summer," said Merry.

"Grayson, I should think," replied his chum. "He was coming on well the last letter I received from Standridge."

"Standridge?" exclaimed Merry. "Oh, by the way, he said the Upper School wanted our photos, didn't he?"

"Yes—wanted 'em to hang up in the common room. I told him we hadn't got a camera at Pine Creek yet. But that the next time—hello, what was that?"

A blood-curdling howl had come from the timber, barely fifty yards away, and had caused McQuinlan to leap to his feet.

But his companions only smiled. Then Merry

got up, snatched a blazing pine brand from the fire and hurled it in the direction of the sound. Then he sat down again and lit his pipe.

The grey wolves were not dangerous yet. In a little while, when the Great North-West had donned its white mantle, hunger would drive the wolves from the timber and make them a menace to lonely travellers out in the wilds.

To-night, however, after tethering the horses close up to the camp, the three Mounties resolved to get a few hours' rest, rolled themselves in their great coats and blankets, and were quickly asleep.

It was Sergeant Masey who sounded the reveille, while it yet wanted three hours to dawn.

"Come along, boys," he said, quietly unrolling himself. "We must hit the trail in half an hour. The going's fairly good to Beacon Hill. Show a leg!"

A second order was unnecessary. Men who live near to nature do not lie long abed, unless they are sick. And in less than thirty seconds McQuinlan had relit the camp fire and was preparing a hurried meal, this time a pannikin of pemmican soup, that very convenient and easily carried preparation of food upon which

a scout can live for weeks. Pemmican, let it be said for the information of those who do not know it, consists of the lean parts of beef, buffalo meat or venison, pulverised almost into a meal. It can be kept for any length of time if no moisture is allowed to reach it. And when a little water and meal are added, it can be made into a sustaining stew by warming it in a pannikin over the camp fire.

"Ready, boys?" came the cheery call from Sergeant Masey, half an hour later.

"Aye, ready, Serge!" was the response. And as the horses had already been fed and watered, Masey kicked out the embers of the fire, in accordance with the R.N.W.M. Regulations, buckled on his Sam Browne belt, adjusted his chin strap, and mounted his horse.

"Keep to the left, Merry," ordered Masey, as the corporal cantered ahead. "We'll try the upper ford an' cross the river by Dead Injun Tree. Then it's almost a bee-line for Beacon Hill. Reckon we shall get a glimpse of the Saskawanna Trail from the top of the Ridge."

"Righto, Serge!" And in the darkness Merry headed left, for it wanted nearly two hours to dawn yet.

They reached the river an hour later, and as no other alternative offered, they breasted

the horses in and swam it from the point known as Dead Injun Tree. It was all in a Mounty's day. And there were half a dozen other creeks to swim further along the trail. So it was no use becoming disgruntled at damp clothes.

Dawn began to break as they crossed Bitter Root Valley. Just a shimmer of light on the eastern ridge at first, next a yellow streak which later made the pines stand out in a background of burnished gold. Then the rim of the sun appeared blood-red. Another day had come.

Twice they halted to give the horses a breather, and to have a quiet smoke. But in each case the rest was brief. Some of the creeks which now began to run northwards towards the Great Slave Lake were shallow, and the horses splashed through them, the water scarcely reaching to the stirrups.

Thus, a little after noon the three horsemen reached the crest of Beacon Hill, from which yet another wide expanse of Territory lay out like a huge panorama below them.

The wary sergeant had dismounted fifty yards below the crest, and the others had followed his example. The ridge was bare of trees at this spot, and the silhouette of a few horsemen, with the aid of good field glasses,

might have been easily possible from fifteen miles away.

The wearied beasts had been tethered below the crest, and the three men now peered above the ridge.

"There it is, the Saska, boys," said Masey. Then he began to count, "One, two, three——"

He was counting the tell-tale smoke columns which showed where, along the Saskawanna Trail, covering a distance of some forty miles, parties of hunters, half-breeds, or may-be lumber-jacks were camping.

Each Mounty took a spell at the glasses, then stood wrapped in thought. At its nearest point the trail passed within ten miles of the crest, but some three thousand feet below.

"The thing is," jerked out Merry, "round which camp fire are Black Malson and his gang sitting?"

That was the riddle which Sergeant Masey, with twenty years in the Territory, was now trying to solve. Seven miles at least lay between the first camp and the second. And another five miles lay between the second and third.

At present the existence of the various parties, in all probability, was unknown to each other. But for a party of redcoats to appear suddenly at any one of the camps would be most unwise.

The sergeant's eyes were still glued to the glasses, as though he were endeavouring to read everyone of those tell-tale smokes.

"One, two, three——"

Masey was re-counting the camp fires. And as he spoke, but half-aloud, he jabbed his fore-finger successively in the direction of the smoke columns, commencing at the most northerly. Then he lowered the field glasses and turned to his companions.

"Number One Camp," he went on. "They're half-breeds, or perhaps Indians straying from the reserves. Number Two, that's a trapper's fire. Number Three, that's the hold-up gang we're after, boys!"

McQuinlan, who didn't yet know this side of the sergeant's make-up, gasped. He thought the chief had gone crazy. "Bats in the belfry" he would have put it, had he and Merry been alone.

Merry only smiled and took another peep through the glasses. This intuition of the sergeant's was weird. It was more than that. It was hunky. The thing only came in sudden spasms, and on rare occasions. But the corporal had experienced it before. On two occasions, in fact. And each time the sergeant had been right.

The fact was, that in twenty years, the

Great North-West had whispered many of her secrets into Masey's ears. And this was one of them. With the foresight and cunning of an Indian sagamore he could read the riddle of a foot-print, a hoof-mark, a barked tree, or a broken twig in a manner that was remarkable. But a smoke column, five, ten or fifteen miles away, what of that? It was surely a different thing. Yet Masey's weird intuitions, as Merry already knew, had often enabled him to point out which was an Indian and which a paleface camp fire.

Having given his opinion, the leader of the patrol, with head bent, and deep in thought, paced the ground for a couple of minutes, while Merry, scrutinising the distant smoke columns, tried to find some explanation of the sergeant's discovery. But in this he failed. One blue spiral seemed to him almost exactly like another.

"Are you sure, Sergeant Masey?" he asked, as the patrol leader came abreast of him.

"Dead sure, Corporal!" came the emphatic response. "And look, Number Three Camp's in a hurry. They've stamped out the burning embers. No afternoon siesta for them. They're off, boys, up the Saska Trail!"

"Great Jumping Crackers! So they are!" exclaimed Merry. For as he looked again,

the third smoke column had petered out in a thin cloud of bluish vapour which hung suspended like filmy gauze above the distant tree-tops.

There was just a touch of thrill and excitement in Masey's voice. And for the next twenty seconds all three Mounties were peering over the ridge in the direction of Number Three Camp, which was the most southerly of the group.

"You're right, Sergeant," said McQuinlan. "Number Three Camp's in a hurry."

Masey straightened himself. "Unless I'm mistaken, boys," he said, "Black Malson's saddled up and his gang are now riding all out for the Yukon border. Saddle an' boot, quick! There isn't any time to lose."

And, mounting their horses, which had by this time enjoyed a breather, over the ridge and down through the timber went the patrol.

CHAPTER VII

Down that rough, precipitous slope Sergeant Masey and his men made all the haste they could. But the going was bad, and in places dangerous. Loose rocks and boulders made it very difficult. And once, sliding twenty feet, Corporal Merry only managed to pull up his horse on the very edge of a precipice.

"Dismount!" ordered Masey, and for the next twenty minutes the three men slithered down on foot, gripping the bridles of their steeds, and avoiding with difficulty the loosened rocks, which crashed down into the valley.

Once at the base of the slope they mounted again and rode off, Masey steering through the thickets of black spruce and alder by pocket-compass.

But before they reached their destination the horses were terribly fatigued. During the last twenty-two hours they had faced nearly fifty miles of rough country—hill and dale, creek and swamp. Only an Indian mustang could stand such a strain.

Three hours after leaving Beacon Hill, however, the trio had ridden to within an Indian bow-shot of the well-worn Saskawanna Trail. Here the cautious sergeant reined in his mount.

"That second camp must be somewhere just ahead of us, boys!" he said, speaking now in quiet tones. "Just move to the left a few yards, Merry, an' you'd better reconnoitre to the south, Quinlan. Somewhere behind this screen I guess there's the trapper's camp we saw way back on the slope."

"Right, Sergeant," and both scouts loosened the pistols in their belts, then wheeled their horses to the left and right. But with a gesture, Masey detained them a moment.

"I guess the hold-up gang must have reached the second camp more'n an hour ago," said the sergeant. "It's just possible they stayed awhile. If so, we may have to fight the whole crush. But the man we want is Black Malson, a giant of a fellow. I want to warn you, if Malson is really the man who held up the Prince Rupert Express, waal, when he spots the red tunic of a Mounty he'll shoot on sight. So if you spot the camp fire first, just fall back to this clearin'. Understand, boys?"

The scouts nodded, then moved off to the left and right, while Masey advanced alone through the thick scrub.

It was Quinlan who made the first discovery. He had ridden scarcely a hundred yards when, through a little opening, he caught a glimpse of a lonely trapper, in beaver cap and deer-skin hunting shirt, squatting beside his camp fire.

Wheeling about, the trooper stole quietly back, doubled on the sergeant's tracks, and came up with him. A moment later Merry rejoined them. All three had caught a glimpse of the old-timer. Masey had even recognised him, and, halting his companions in the timber, he rode boldly into the camp. It was Beaver Dan, who was now returning with his stores to winter quarters, in the region of the Cameron Hills. His usual custom was to set his lines and traps for the season between the foot of the hills and the western shores of the Great Slave Lake.

"Cheerio, Dan!" were the first words of the sergeant as he dismounted and clapped his old friend on the shoulder.

"Good-day, Sergeant Masey," replied the trapper, motioning his companion to a seat. "Ye've ridden hard the day." And the trapper jerked his thumb towards the wearied mount, which, after being unburdened of its trappings, had sunk upon the ground.

"Yes, Dan." And without another word

Masey whistled his companions out of the timber, then began to examine the trail which led away up towards the Saska.

The trapper smoked contentedly, nodded to the others as they came up and unsaddled, then continued smoking. Months and months alone in the wilds had made the trapper a man of few words.

It was Masey who spoke again first. "You've had visitors, Dan," he said, indicating the trail marks. "But they didn't stay long."

The trapper nodded quietly, and still went on smoking.

"Three men with double mounts—Indian mustangs. Passed here about two hours ago, I fancy," added Masey, coming back to the camp fire and rubbing his hands.

The old hunter smiled, shifted his pipe to the other side of his mouth, then said:

"Look agen, Sergeant Masey. It's reckoned in the Territory that ye're darnation clever, but ef ye can find the prints o' more'n four hosses on the last trail, I'll make ye a present o' the next silver fox pelt I take."

As he spoke the old man chuckled merrily. For he had "put one over" on the smartest member of the R.C.M.P. in the North-West.

Masey shrugged his shoulder and returned to the trail. Merry and Quin went to help

him. And for another ten minutes they carefully examined every hoof mark within fifty yards on either side of the little camp.

"Four horses an' two men," said Masey returning to old Dan. "Two of the horses were travelling light."

"That's better!" replied the trapper.

Corporal Merry turned to his chief. "Then what's happened to the third man?" he asked.

"Dunno," came the gruff reply. It was dawning upon Masey that he was following a blind trail. And there was a danger that his quarry might slip him after all. He was about to press the trapper further when the patter of an unshod Indian mustang was heard approaching from the south.

"Mush!" he whispered. "Here comes the third man!" The Mounties, at the signal, had scattered and drawn their horses under cover. And the next minute a desperate-looking half-breed, riding a wearied mustang which carried double-harness, drew into the little clearing.

The Mounties had him covered in a trice.

The lone rider was a man named La Rocque, one of Black Malson's half-breed accomplices. In the incredible period of thirty-two hours, since the hold-up, the desperadoes had ridden a forty hours' trail.

But one mustang had been ridden to death and the others to exhaustion. The condition of the half-breed's mustang, and the evidence of the second saddle which contained La Rocque's share of the robbery, plainly told its own tale.

La Rocque's horses had given out first. This had caused him to lag behind. He had urged his second mustang to the edge of a precipice, stripped the saddle, then shot the poor brute and rolled its carcase over the edge, lest the dead mount should provide a clue for the Mounties, who he knew would be already on his trail.

Not yet had the newcomer seen the redcoats, who had withdrawn with their horses to cover. But La Rocque, with a hellish gleam in his eyes, had spotted the trapper's pack-horse, tethered to a tree. And a fresh horse was the one thing he needed at this moment, if ever he were to hit the Yukon Trail.

Masey, who still had him covered, saw his game. It was to steal Beaver Dan's mount.

Leaping from his staggering horse La Rocque, whipping out his pistol, pointed it at the trapper.

"Ahoy, you dealer in skunk pelts!" he challenged. "I want your horse, quick! The red-coats are after me. Will you let me

have him or——" and as he spoke, La Rocque made a menacing gesture with his pistol-hand.

"Put that gun down," said the trapper, quietly, without rising from his seat. "The beast's worth a hundred an' fifty dollars. What'll you pay for him?"

It was evident that Beaver Dan was playing for time. His own rifle was leaning against a tree. And any attempt to reach it, he knew, would have been too dearly bought. He also knew, however, what was coming to the Yukon rider.

"Fifty dol——" The bandit stopped short. A faint rustle in the timber had made him suddenly alert. "Hell an' high water, the red-coats!" he half choked, backing so as to put the camp fire between him and two men who had suddenly stepped out of the nowhere, each covering him with a pistol.

"Drop that gun!" was Masey's first order, and there was a tone of mastery in his voice. La Rocque, who had just lowered his pistol to bargain with the trapper, obeyed.

"Now put 'em up!" commanded the sergeant.

The bandit held high his hands, both palms open outward. But his eyes narrowed and gleamed with murder.

What followed happened so quickly that it was scarcely possible for the human eye to follow it. But La Rocque, who was a desperate villain, had all the cunning of a redskin. He now stood with his hands still aloft but with the camp fire between him and the approaching Mounties.

Then, in a flash of time, when Masey and Merry were within two yards of their quarry, the bandit, with his jack boot, lifted a cloud of burning ash and glowing fire into the faces of the two men, scorching and temporarily blinding his opponents.

"Ha! Ha! Take that, you infernal redcoats! Thought you'd got a bead on me, did you? La Rocque isn't so easily outwitted."

"Shoot, Merry! I'm blinded!" shouted Masey.

Through the smoke both the sergeant and Merry fired. But it was mere pot luck. Neither of them could see their opponent, and the pain they were suffering was intense.

"It's La Rocque's turn to shoot, pigs!' yelled the half-breed. And having picked up his pistol, he was aiming at Masey, when ping came another shot, this time from McQuinlan.

La Rocque gasped, spun round, and clutched at his heart. Then he fell to the ground, for Quin's bullet had passed through his heart.

All this transpired within ten seconds of time. And the next instant McQuinlan was standing over the bandit, removing his weapons and making sure his man was dead.

His next thought was for his comrades. At a bound he was beside them. "Not hurt much, are you, Sergeant?" he asked.

"Blinded, boy, that's what I am. Serve me right, too, for not opening on the cunning serpent when I had a chance," said Masey.

"And you, Tom?" asked Quin.

"Oh, my eyes are chock full of burning fire, Quin. Get some water, quick, old man. I'm in torment! The half-breed's a goner, isn't he?"

"Dead as mutton!"

Dan rushed up with water in his camp bucket and helped both the wounded men to bathe their seared and scorched eyes and faces, while McQuinlan dashed back to his mount to get the first-aid sachet from his saddle-bag.

Then during a painful fifteen minutes for his companions, Quin washed the ashes and charcoal from their eyes, used oil and salve, and bandaged them both, for neither of them could bear the light of day.

How to get his comrades back to camp or to the nearest hospital, three hundred miles

away, was a poser. He greatly feared that both of them would lose their sight, and as for Black Malson, of course the rascal would get away over the Yukon border.

Sergeant Masey had other views, however. "Search that dead half-breed!" he ordered, for the leader of the patrol was still resolved to carry on.

McQuinlan searched the bandit. From both saddle-bags and from the pockets of the dead man he took fifteen thousand dollars in notes and a small packet of jewellery. This was La Rocque's share of the loot of the "Trans-continental." He, at least, hadn't lived long enough to enjoy it.

Masey, despite his great pain, evinced no small measure of delight at the find. "That settles it, boys!" he said, and there was just a touch of pride in his voice as he spoke. "It was the right trail we hit after all."

"An' now Black Malson will get away," said Merry, half removing his bandage to make sure he was not quite blind.

"He mustn't get away!" said the sergeant. "You must follow him, McQuinlan. Leave us with Dan. The Blue Ridge Patrol will reach here within another seven hours at the most. I left a message for them. And in twenty-four hours we shall have several other patrols racing

for the Saska Trail. Get away after the bandits, Quin!"

Quin hesitated. He didn't like to leave his comrades so handicapped and in such terrible pain. He knew that both were suffering more than they were willing to admit. But Masey was firm. He was issuing orders now, and no member of that loyal band, the R.N.W.M.P., ever stoops to disobey an order from a superior, nor even to question it.

"We've struck the trail of the worst bandits in the whole North-West," continued the sergeant. "We've bagged one member of the gang; the others mustn't get away. The trail's red-hot. Follow 'em up, McQuinlan."

Then turning to the trapper, he said: "I must commandeer your horse, Dan. You shall be paid for it. A hundred an' fifty dollars you said it was worth. Our mounts are absolutely done up."

"Take him, Sergeant," replied the trapper. "I know the money's all right. An' those beasts o' yourn couldn't carry a dead mountain goat for another three miles."

"Thanks," said Masey.

So McQuinlan, thrilled by the prospect of a daring adventure, changed saddles, and was astride the trapper's mount in a couple of minutes.

"Good-bye, Sergeant!" he called. "Cheerio, Tom! Sorry to leave you in such a plight."

"Just a word, Quin," called Masey.

"Yes, Sergeant," and the trooper reined in a moment.

"The odds are that with their jaded mounts Black Malson and his second man will camp somewhere about Horse Shoe Gully to-night. Don't rush them unless it's necessary. Just blaze a trail for the Blue Ridge Patrol. An' look out for Cormack an' Duff in the morning. Good-bye, and good luck!"

"Cheerio! Good luck, Quin!" called Tom Merry. "If you land 'em, Ringwood will be jolly proud of you, old son."

The next moment, the loneliest trooper in the Territory rode off up the Saskawanna Trail, in search of what promised to be, so far, his greatest adventure.

CHAPTER VIII

If it was adventure that Angus McQuinlan longed for as he stood on the threshold of his old school, barely eight months ago, well, he was in a fair way to get it now.

Single-handed, owing to the mishap which had befallen his companions, he was following hot upon the trail of the worst bunch of bandits in the whole Territory.

"Masey told me just to blaze the trail for the Blue Ridge Patrol," Quin muttered as he rode full pelt while the going was good. "But if there's half a chance I'll hook both Black Malson and his confederate before morning."

It was a grim job, but it all came in a Mounty's day.

Later, the track became almost lost in the rocky ground. But here and there, on the softer patches, McQuin picked up the hoof-prints of the four mustangs.

"The other camp we saw must be hereabouts," he surmised. "We spied three smoke columns from the crest of Beacon Hill

—half-breeds or Indians straying from the reserves, the sergeant thought."

No other camp was visible yet, however. And on he rode. The fact was, that the party had already moved. And soon Quin was passing the deserted camp of the half-breed hunters the smoke of whose fire had been observed from the ridge.

Several times the lonely Mounty barked the trees and left the secret code of the Mounties for the others to follow. Through the timber, the open plain, plantations of spruce and alder he rode, swam a couple of creeks, and topped high ground about Caribou Lake.

The sun had dipped again, and Quin was cresting the pine-clad ridge called Algonquin Hill, when he got his first glimpse of Horse Shoe Gully.

An exultant cry burst from his lips—he had caught that first tell-tale sign of a camp fire, the thin curl of blue smoke three miles ahead.

"At last!" he exclaimed, then took his bearings carefully, for it would soon be necessary to travel by dead reckoning.

His beast was jaded now, and could scarcely amble along. Dismounting, therefore, McQuin eased the mustang, slipped his arm through the bridle rein, and led the creature carefully down the rough, bouldered slope.

Forty minutes later he tethered the beast to a tree, examined the loading of his service pistol, then crept stealthily forward. It was dark now, but the time for action had come. Twice already he had caught a glimpse of a point of fire through the trees.

"Black Malson," he decided, and continued to advance, stepping warily until he was within sixty yards of the camp.

There Quin rested awhile, hidden by a huge rock which overhung the camp, fifty feet below. Occasionally he took a furtive peep at his quarry. It was evident that they considered themselves safe till dawn. Nevertheless, they were very watchful. They seemed to be expecting someone, for every now and then they peered through the timber in the direction whence they had come.

"They're expecting La Rocque," McQuinlan decided.

An hour the trooper waited, watching narrowly the while. And all the time he was revolving plan after plan in his mind. It would have been easy to shoot both bandits from his listening post. But he wanted to take them alive. If he could only separate them, it might be done.

Slowly the minutes passed, then the hours. Any doubt that might have remained in

McQuinlan's mind as to the identity of the culprits was removed when the tall, dark man took from his pocket a case of valuables. The trooper caught the glint of jewels, and saw the wads of notes which were being re-counted.

Then McQuinlan's hand was forced by a little unexpected diversion. A rustle in the dried underwood reached his ears. He turned quickly, and two glaring eye-balls were fixed upon his from a distance of barely five feet away.

It was a huge, grey timber wolf, a she-wolf with a couple of cubs playing at her heels. And a she-wolf with cubs is just about as deadly as six lions. Quinlan, without knowing it, had crept in close to the lair where the sleeping cubs had been lying, in a crevice beneath the boulder. And the mother of the cubs had just returned to suckle her young.

McQuinlan's blood froze with horror. His hand crept to his pistol. But to fire!—that would alarm the camp, and the bandits would immediately take to the woods.

For fully ten seconds he remained motionless, his eyes fixed upon those of the terrible she-wolf. Every second seemed an age, for every instant he expected the beast would spring and bury her deadly fangs in his throat.

The suspense became unbearable. And at the end of those ten seconds Quinlan resolved to end it all by putting a bullet through the creature's brain, then charging the camp to get his quarry.

It was Providence that now interposed, as McQuinlan still believes. For just at that instant, as he resolved to press the trigger, the startled neighing of a terrified horse, barely twenty yards away, distracted the attention of the wolf.

It was one of the Indian mustangs tethered to a tree, near by. Scenting the presence of a wolf, the beast became terrified, broke its tether, and stampeded into the wood.

With a sudden snarl the she-wolf, believing her cubs threatened by yet another enemy, turned tail and drew off, with the cubs at her heels.

That little diversion, however, precipitated yet another scene—the final dénouement of McQuinlan's little adventure.

Alarmed by the stampede of the first mustang, and fearing that the other three, which were kicking and plunging madly, would also break loose, Black Malson leapt to his feet and yelled to his companion.

"Quick, Pierre! The horses! If we lose 'em we're done."

Then followed a wild scramble. And Pierre Veldrick headed the rush from the camp fire into the scrub, making straight for the boulder where McQuinlan lay hid.

"Now for it!" resolved the trooper, slipping back his pistol. And as Pierre came ahead, the trooper leapt upon him, and with a straight left to the jaw he tumbled his man into the brushwood, unconscious.

Quin leapt upon him, turned him over, gripped his hands, and clasped the steel bracelets upon his wrists, noting as he did so that the man had only three fingers on his left hand.

The whole affair had taken but nine seconds. But even so it was a second too long. Black Malson, following at his companion's heels, hurled himself upon McQuinlan, even as the latter tried to leap away from his first prisoner.

"You swine!" he yelled. "You devil of a red-coat, take that!" And the next instant both Malson and Quin were engaged in a life-and-death struggle in the scrub.

It was a scene of terrible confusion. The three kicking, stamping horses a few yards away were plunging and straining every muscle to get away. And the wild creatures of the forest, amazed and bewildered by the commotion as the two strong men fought, rolling

over and over amongst the loose stones, rocks, and dead undergrowth, uttered weird howls of fear and drew away.

"You dog of a red-coat," hissed Malson, as he got his man under for the third time, "you would hang me, would you, you miserable skunk! You'll never live to!"

Though stunned and bleeding, McQuinlan knew what his opponent was doing. Having left his pistol belt with his other gear by the camp fire, Black Malson was now feeling for his hunting knife, which hung in its sheath at his waist. The trooper made yet another mighty effort to wrench himself free.

But Malson had muscles of iron, and was strong as a buffalo. And despite Quin's efforts the bandit held his man. He had to abandon the attempt to get his knife for the moment, however, as Quin was struggling for his life now.

"Then I'll strangle you, you devil of a red-coat!" hissed Malson, and the grip of his hand on Quin's throat made the trooper's eyes almost start out of their sockets. But McQuinlan still fought on. With a supreme and desperate effort Quin compelled his opponent to loosen the grip on his throat for a second. And an instant later the deadly struggle recommenced, this time on more equal terms.

Once McQuinlan got his opponent's throat. But Malson broke away, staggered to his feet, stepped back a pace or two, and dragged at the knife in his belt.

Quin took a hasty breath. This was his last chance. And even as Malson drew out his murderous knife, Quin launched himself upon his enemy, putting all his strength into another left to the jaw, and a crashing right to the temple. It was the latter blow which took effect, and saved the trooper's life.

Like a bullock marked for the slaughter, Black Malson dropped to the ground, gasped for a moment, then lay still as death, and Trooper McQuinlan fell exhausted beside him.

For half an hour they both lay there; then the trooper opened his eyes, and looked wearily about him. All was still as death, but a silvery moon shone down upon the deserted camp, and upon the pale, upturned face of the bandit.

"Great Christopher, I must have killed him!" gasped McQuinlan, sitting up and pulling himself together.

Then he scrambled to his feet as he gradually recalled all that had passed—the hold-up at the Great Bear Divide, the telephone message from Fort Frazer, the pursuit, the wounding of Sergeant Masey and Corporal Merry, then

the fight in the last camp at Horse Shoe Gully.

Quin looked at the two men. Pierre was still unconscious and moaning, while the bandit seemed lifeless, though he was still warm.

The trooper dragged both his prisoners to the camp, took Merry's hand-cuffs, which he had brought with him, from his tunic pocket, intending to fix up Malson, just as he had fixed the other bandit. Quin was taking no risks, for Malson might recover, and even now escape.

But the trick was never accomplished. Quin staggered and reeled, then held his left hand to his throbbing temple. His head was dizzy, things began to swim about him, and everything was strange. Instead of one fire, a dozen camp fires danced before his eyes, each one taking weird, fantastic shape like some mocking will-o'-the-wisp.

Out there too, by the edge of the timber, to his fevered mind, a score of hungry, grey phantoms appeared to be closing in upon the Mounty. Fierce wolves they seemed with cruel jaws, and red, lolling tongues. And as they approached they called to each other with fiendish howls.

Quin braced himself, dropping the hand-cuffs as he did so. "Go-o away, you brutes!"

he stammered, but his voice was ever so faint.

Then he stumbled towards the camp fire. He meant to pick up a blazing pine-log and hurl it at the intruders. But McQuinlan never reached the crackling blaze of logs. Dizzy and uncertain, he reeled again, then darkness fell upon him, and he sank unconscious, barely a dozen yards from his captives.

The camp fire burned low, shooting out fitful gleams every now and then, lighting up the clearing, and scaring the creatures of the wild which emerged from the timber.

Then the silent moon climbed above the tree-tops. Higher and higher it rose, and from the heavens looked down upon the still, unconscious forms of three men beside the pale ashes of a dying camp fire.

CHAPTER IX

SLOWLY the hours passed in that strange camp at Horse Shoe Gully, shrouded, as it seemed, by the mantle of death. Only the cry of the night-hawk, the howl of the forest wolf, or the weird call of the grey owl broke the stillness of that lonesome spot.

Then one of the three forms beside the dying camp fire stirred. It was Black Malson. Groaning wearily, he turned upon his back, and the gleam of white moonlight caused him to open his eyes.

A few minutes later he sat up and stared about him. "Pierre!" he called, softly to his fellow bandit. "Wake up, Veldrick."

There was no response to his call, and he crawled on hands and knees to where his companion lay, then shook him roughly.

"Hell an' high water!" gasped Black Malson. "Pierre's a goner. Gosh, but he's dead. What can have happened to him?"

The leader of the hold-up gang stopped suddenly. Everything had dawned upon him

now. The unexpected appearance of a Mounty at their camp on the previous evening, and the terrific fight which had ensued.

"Speak, Veldrick!" called Malson in fiercer tones this time, shaking his fellow accomplice more violently than before.

This rough treatment had the effect of causing Veldrick to open his eyes. His injury had not been fatal, but his faced was contused and his thoughts were still wandering.

"Who-o are you?" he asked, and stared at Malson without as yet recognising his late companion.

"It's Malson," replied his companion. "Thought I was alone, an' that you were a goner. Here, take a swig of this! It will pull you together."

Veldrick sat up and drank out of the flask which Malson had produced from his riding boot. But as he did so the clank of the chain uniting the steel bracelets on his wrists caused him to start.

"What's this, Malson?" he asked in alarm. "Not under arrest, am I?" Then as memory rushed back to the second man he broke into a volley of coarse oaths and staggered to his feet.

"That red-coat!" he hissed. "Where is he?"

"Hush!" whispered Malson, jerking his thumb in the direction of a prostrate form which he had just spotted a dozen yards away, and close to the fire. "Dead or asleep, I guess. Reckon I did for him last night afore I went into limbo myself."

"Let's make sure," said Veldrick with another oath.

"Hush, I tell you!" warned Malson. "Let sleepin' dogs lie, Pierre. I'll finish him myself afore we start. I just want to collect my wits." And the chief bandit took a deep drink at the flask, then tendered it again to his friend, who quickly drained it.

It wanted three hours to dawn yet. And Malson's first thought concerned the loot which he and his two fellow conspirators had been carrying at such speed the previous day, all the way from the Great Bear Divide.

Reassuring himself, therefore, that neither he nor Veldrick had been searched for the proceeds of the hold-up, he raised himself erect for the first time, though he swayed perilously as he did so.

He now made as though he would approach the third sleeper. But Veldrick, bent double with pain, gripped hold of him. "La Rocque?" he whispered. "Where can he be? Do you think——"

"Dunno," replied Malson, pushing his companion away. "P'raps the Mounties have got him. Or maybe he passed us in the night an' didn't see our camp. If so, he's away twenty miles up the Saskawanna by this time. Now for this blawsted red-coat!"

"Get his key?" croaked Pierre hoarsely. "I want to be rid of these goldarned bracelets."

"So you shall be in a minute. Whisht, now. Don't wake him!" And Malson, having left his pistol with his other gear when he raced to the stampeding mustang, and having been stripped of his knife during the fight, picked up a stout pine-log wherewith to bludgeon the prostrate Quin, should he show any signs of returning life.

Then he crept towards the unconscious Quin, with Veldrick limping after him, the chain about his wrists jangling at every step.

At that moment McQuinlan groaned and moved in his sleep, though he never opened his eyes.

"The Dog-Face is alive!" growled Malson.

"Kill him!" came the low snarl from the second man.

Malson needed no urging. This man, whoever he was, had nearly wrecked the scheme which, up to last night, had worked so successfully. But it was not yet too late. Evidently

this stray Mounty had struck their trail and had followed it single-handed.

"So much the worse for the hated red-coat, the symbol of law and order in the Territory," Malson decided. And the bandit, with red murder in his soul, knelt over his unconscious victim, searched his pockets and found the much-wanted key.

The next instant he stood above the prostrate man, and raised his rude club for one bludgeon stroke to finish his victim.

Then it was that the kindly Providence which so often counters the machinations of the wicked, intervened with a suddenness which, to the unknowing, might appear little less than miraculous.

Even as Malson stood with uplifted arm two eager eyes, keen as some old vulture, peered along a gleaming tube. There was a sputter of flame from the edge of the timber, the crack of a huntsman's rifle, and the bullet of some hidden but wide-awake forester swept the uplifted log from Malson's hand, narrowly missing the murderer's hand.

"Hell an' blazes!" yelled the bandit. But he didn't remain to become a target for a second shot. "The red-coats, Pierre!" he shouted. "We're surrounded. Quick!"

Galvanised into life, despite their recent

hurts, both the bandits turned quickly about, snatching up their weapons, which lay where they had stacked them on the previous evening.

"This way!" cried Pierre. "The horses—we've still got a chance. Come along, Malson!" And the next moment, speeding for their lives, they had disappeared into the timber. No one followed them.

Reaching their horses, they untethered the pair which had not stampeded, mounted, and rode off into the shadows.

Two minutes passed. From the edge of the forest the crackle of twigs announced the presence of the mysterious huntsman who had saved the life of McQuinlan.

Then an Indian with three feathers in his scalp-lock, dressed in fringed, deerskin hunting-shirt, leggings, and with moccasined feet, softly entered the clearing, his rifle at the trail, and his long hunting-knife at his beaded wampum belt.

Half-way across the moon-lit clearing he paused suddenly, cocked his head sideways, as if listening acutely to some distant sound, then sniffed the air suspiciously.

"Wah!" he muttered. "The muskrats will leave a trail that a blind mustang could follow!"

Next, with soft tread the hunter stole swiftly but silently up to the prostrate Quin, who,

at the recent commotion had merely opened his eyes slowly for an instant, then slipped back into the dark abyss of unconsciousness.

The Indian bent over the sick man for a moment, felt his heart, and then grunted.

"Ugh——!" he exclaimed. "The paleface sleeps and his spirit dreams. But he will awaken when the sun is amongst the pines!"

Having thus expressed himself briefly, Kabinook, the old sagamore, and once the chief of an important branch of the Algonquin tribe, threw a few logs on to the fire, blew a little flame from the apparently dead ashes, squatted himself passively on a fallen tree-trunk, placed his rifle across his knees, and waited for the paleface to emerge from his exhaustion and wounds.

Slowly the hours passed. The moon was sinking now, just dipping below the topmost branches of the trees. As it went to rest, the shadows deepened for a little while, and that dark hour before the dawn approached.

McQuinlan still slept on, but his sleep was sorely troubled. Several times he mumbled incoherently, words which must have sounded strange to his silent guardian. Once he shouted aloud in frenzy, calling for Tom Merry. Then he relapsed into silence for a while.

The strange watcher sat impassive and still,

his lined face mask-like, but his every sense alert. Once he spoke half aloud, when Quin called so frantically for Tom Merry.

"The Great Manito is speaking to my pale-face brother," said the old chief. And rising up, he brought water from a neighbouring creek and soothed the fevered forehead and still throbbing brow of the sleeper. After that Angus McQuinlan slept more peacefully.

This deep slumber after his utter fatigue and his recent injury, doubtless preserved his sanity and saved his life.

Lying like a log beside the now blazing camp fire he slept on, until at length, over the tree-tops there came the soft murmur of the dawn wind. Then a faint, saffron tint flushed the eastern sky, the stars gently faded out, the songsters in the timber awoke, and daybreak ushered in another dawn.

All this time, Kabinook watched and waited in silence. Surely, never before had any English youth ever had such a strange and wonderful guardian to watch over him while he slept and fought his way back from death unto life.

The morning sun was climbing now. Already it was half-way towards the tree-tops, when the sleeper showed the first symptoms of returning consciousness.

Quin yawned once or twice, then stretched himself. The next moment he opened his eyes and stared at the blazing, crackling fire towards which he had turned. His senses were returning, and he was wondering who had piled up the fire. Had he wakened in the night and fed it? He had no memory of it, nor of anything else for the moment, save the vivid dream from which he had just awakened.

"Anyhow, where am I?" he began to ask himself. "How did I come here? And—yaoup!"

As he spoke these things half aloud, he had unwittingly turned about, and for the first time his upturned gaze now fell upon the Indian chief, who sat placidly smoking upon the fallen tree-trunk a few feet away, with his loaded rifle across his knees.

Then as one transfixed, his heart beating wildly, and his pulse throbbing, McQuinlan stared full at the Algonquin, sat bolt upright, and asked, "Say, Chief, who-o are you?"

CHAPTER X

WHEN Angus McQuinlan awoke from his slumber and found himself alone in the clearing, save for the silent redskin who sat gazing at him so curiously from the fallen tree-trunk, his amazement was utterly bewildering. Seconds passed before he could frame the question that was shaping in his mind.

"I'm dreaming," was his first thought. "I shall wake up in a minute." But Quin was never more wideawake in his life. And gradually, as the first sensation of bewilderment passed, he began to realise it.

Then another thought gripped him. "I have seen this Indian chief before," he told himself. "But where and when? I cannot recollect. His face is as familiar to me as that of Tom Merry."

These were the thoughts that flashed like lightning through his brain as he stumbled back to his normal senses and framed with his lips that first question to the vision which still sat stolid and mask-like upon the log.

"Who—who are you?" he asked.

There was a moment's pause, for the words of a chief are never hurried, when he sits in council or smokes the peace pipe.

Then the redskin laid aside his pipe and straightened himself. "Ugh!" he grunted. "My name is Kabinook—the North Wind."

"North Wind?" echoed McQuinlan. Then as memory travelled backward through the mists, like a flash there returned to him that vivid, startling dream of his the night before he left Ringwood. "Ah-h!" he gasped. "Then I *have* seen you before. But it was in a dream. And now it has come true, just as I dreamt it!"

For a moment Quin was too bewildered to say more. As his strength came back, however, he managed to stammer: "But where is your wigwam, North Wind?"

At this, the old Indian sachem, who must have been at least eighty years of age, rose proudly to his full height, raised the open palm of his right hand, and swept it in a wide circle, as if to embrace forest, river, and lake, as far as the eye could travel.

"I understand," replied the Mounty, bowing his head in solemn acknowledgment, reverently allowing a full minute to pass before continuing. "The whole forest is North Wind's home."

"Wah!" exclaimed the chief, then sat down without another word. This paleface, by his reverent attitude and demeanour had gained the esteem of the Algonquin.

"My red brother is a Great Chief," Quin went on. "He is the son of mighty warriors who ruled the North-West before the coming of my people."

The Indian flushed with pleasure, and for an instant even his mask-like countenance relaxed into something of a smile.

"Wah! the red-coat is a sagamore," he said. "He loves the red men. Kabinook knows it. That was why he saved the life of his paleface brother."

Quin started violently and looked about him. In a flash his memory was flooded with all the details of the last two days, and he remembered everything—the news of the "hold-up" at Great Bear Divide, the pursuit, the incidents at the trapper's camp, and his own lone trail up the Saskawanna, the finding of the bandit's camp at Horse Shoe Gully, and the fight.

But the prisoners, where were they? Quin was on his feet in an instant. There was the camp fire in the centre of the clearing. But the prisoners had gone.

The chief was speaking, however, and with an effort Quin resigned himself. If the prisoners

had escaped perhaps the chief had news. In any case the pursuit could not be continued for a while. Quin would have to await the arrival of the Blue Ridge Patrol.

"Yes, yes, Chief!" he said. "You were speaking. I am silent." It was no use attempting to hurry the Algonquin. He must have his say. Afterwards, perhaps he would help.

Kabinook, who had read the thoughts of McQuinlan like a book, smiled, then waved his open palm towards the north, indicating the trail taken by the bandits.

"The muskrats have gone," he said, and indicated by another sweep of the hand, giving an arc of the sun's journey through the heavens, the hour of their departure.

"Six hours?" exclaimed Quin, making a rough reckoning by the sectional arc which Kabinook had given.

"Ugh!" replied the chief, signifying Yes. "But the dogs have left a trail that a stripling could follow."

Quin was relieved. This Indian was friendly to law and order. Perhaps he had suffered at the hands of the outlaws, bandits, and rum-traders. Possibly, even, he had received some kindness from the Mounties. In any case, it was pretty evident that Kabinook in some mysterious manner had arrived on the scene in

time to save his life. But how had it happened? McQuinlan was curious to know.

"Chief," he said, "you have saved my life from these bandits, whose trail I have been following since they held up the Iron Horse at the Great Bear Divide. Tell me how it happened. I must report it to Sergeant Masey."

"Maaseey?" repeated the chief, giving the name his own pronunciation, and smiling openly now for the first time.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Ugh! he is my brother. Many times he and the North Wind have followed the trail together, since the great snow, many, many suns ago, when the caribou failed and my people starved. It was Maaseey and his red-coats who brought us food. That is why the red-coats are always welcome to the wigwams of Kabinook."

The mystery was half solved now. But Quin was still eager for the details of the escape of the bandits.

"But how did you find the camp, Chief?" he asked. "Did you see the gang arrive?"

"Kaw," replied North Wind, which is the Indian word for No. "The wigwams of my people are but twenty arrow-flights beyond the Saska Trail."

"Then you saw the camp fire, perhaps?"

"Kaw. It was Mahnomo the mustang."

"You mean the bandit's horse which was stampeded by the wolves?"

"Ugh! Mahnomo was born and bred in the wigwams of Kabinook by the sweet waters of the Nahinna."

In a trice McQuinlan tumbled to the real truth. The mustangs had been stolen from the Indians, and when the first mustang broke loose in the night, instinct led him back to the lodges of the Algonquins. This roused the suspicions of Kabinook, who had taken his rifle and scouted round. His young men had scouted in other directions. But Kabinook had found the right trail even in the night-time, and had come upon the camp in Horse Shoe Gully.

"Extraordinary!" murmured Quin, as he reflected upon the chain of circumstances which had used even a tired mustang in the saving of his life.

But if the truth be known, even Kabinook had been greatly puzzled when he found a lone camp in the wilds of Horse Shoe Gully, whose only inhabitants were three wounded or dying men.

It was some two hours after the fight that he struck the camp. And the moon was then shining down upon the clearing. Scouting

round for sentries and finding none, he had entered the clearing, stealing across the open space like a ghost in the silvery moonbeams, and had looked intently into the face of each wounded man. Then, as Black Malson showed signs of awaking, the Indian had retired to the edge of the timber and waited stealthily.

From thence his keen, eager eyes had watched unceasingly. And the reader already knows how, at the very instant when Malson, intent upon murder, crept upon his victim, Kabinook's rifle spoke from the margin of the forest, saved the life of the trooper, and caused the sudden retreat of the bandits.

All this, Kabinook now explained in a few words and gestures. Then, as if he considered it the merest trifle, he added—'But my pale-face brother is hungry and weak. Let him eat. The trail he must follow is long."

"Thanks, Chief," replied the Mounty. "I feel better now. But I can never repay you for all you have done. May the Great Manito reward you!"

At these words the chief bowed his head solemnly for a moment. Then he set about piling more logs upon the fire, while McQuinlan produced some pemmican from his saddle-bags, brought his mount closer up to the camp, and, when the stew in the camp kettle was

ready, he begged the chief to share his rude meal.

It was early morning as yet, and the sun, measured by Indian time, was but amongst the pines as the two men sat down to breakfast and talked of the trail which lay before McQuinlan.

"Nearly seven hours start they've had, Chief," said Quin. "But some of the Blue Ridge Patrol are sure to arrive before noon. If only they were here now, so that we could at once follow while the trail's hot, I believe we could overtake the hold-up gang by night."

Kabinook shook his head, hinting that the trail would be longer than his paleface friend imagined.

If only Masey and Tom Merry hadn't been put out of action on the previous day, the bandits would already have been laid by the heels. So McQuinlan thought. And he felt almost angry with himself that he had not fired at sight upon the criminals the previous night, when he had surprised the camp and had its occupants at his mercy.

The idea, however, to his English mind, had savoured too much of murder, shooting a man down at sight, even though he were a bandit, and had killed the guard of the Prince

Rupert Transcontinental. His efforts to take the men alive, however, had nearly cost him his own life.

"If I see them again under such circumstances," he resolved, "I shall certainly——"

He stopped suddenly, for the old chief had leapt to his feet with the agility of a stripling. Someone was approaching the camp. Could it be that Black Malson was returning. If so, then there was need for caution. The crack of a rifle would in all probability be the first indication of his arrival.

Picking up his rifle, the Indian had already slipped into the forest, with a warning gesture for his companion to follow his example. The deep-seated instinct in every Indian's mind, when travelling in a country infested with possible enemies, is to avoid the clearing and make for cover.

A moment later, both scouts were hidden in the brushwood, and Kabinook was straining every nerve as well as using every sense to locate the possible danger.

The suspicious movements in the timber had come from the north—the route taken by Black Malson and Pierre Veldrick.

"Can't be the Blue Ridge Patrol, Chief," whispered Quin. "They would have arrived from the south."

The chief, scouting just ahead, and peering through the brushwood for a first glimpse of the stranger, made yet another warning gesture, then held up one finger.

No one was in sight yet, for the timber on his side was thick, and the trail through the forest winding. Their doubts, however, were soon to be set at rest. The click of a horse's hoofs was heard distinctly once or twice.

The stranger, whoever he was, must be mounted, unless he drove a packhorse. Perhaps it was a lone hunter or trapper. Maybe even a prospector out alone in the wilds of the Saska, looking for copper or silver veins.

Nothing of the sort. It wasn't any of these. And the next instant the snatch of a song, trolled by the careless stranger, caused Angus McQuinlan to lower his cocked rifle and shout for joy.

"Wrap me up in my tarpaulin jacket,
And say a poor buffer lies low,
And six stalwart lancers shall carry me,
With steps solemn, mournful, and
slow."

That was the burden of the song. And never before, in all his life, had the old school dirge, with its quaint and plaintive melody, so stirred the heart of Angus McQuinlan.

And while the Indian chief, nonplussed for once, looked on in amazement, his companion, throwing down his rifle, raised his hands to his mouth and gave a mighty yell of welcome.

"It's Tom Merry!" McQuinlan shouted. "Cheerio, Tom! Where are you?"

CHAPTER XI

McQUINLAN'S hail resounded through the timber, echoing down the woodland aisles. Instantly the voice of the approaching singer became silent. The song faded out suddenly, but from the depths of the forest there came an answering hail.

"Ahoy, Quinlan! Where are you? Ringwood, ahoy!"

"Here, Tom!" yodelled Quin, then, looking for some sign to guide his companion, who was still within the dark, green labyrinth, he snatched up his rifle and fired it into the tree-tops.

Merry caught the flash of fire and the powder smoke. And the next moment, putting spurs to his horse, the corporal, still wearing a bandage over one eye and his face showing the marks of his recent encounter with La Rocque, rode into the clearing and dismounted.

"So here you are, Quin," he began, gripping his companion's hand. Then he stopped suddenly as he saw the Indian. "Snakes alive,"

he gasped, "if it isn't the great chief, Sergeant Masey's old friend!" And as he spoke, Tom let go his bridle rein and held his rifle aloft with both hands to greet the most famous sagamore in the North-West Territory.

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian. But this time a pleased expression accompanied his customary monosyllable. And he advanced giving the peace signal of his tribe—his left hand over his heart, and his right hand aloft, the palm opened outward.

It was not the first time the chief had met Corporal Merry. But now he pointed with congratulative gesture to the stripes on Tom Merry's arm. The last time they had met was before Merry's promotion.

The corporal laughed. He was proud of those stripes, nevertheless. He had won them during that terrible trail last winter, and they had placed him, young as he was, second in command of the Blue Ridge Patrol.

"But come, now," he said, "tell me, what's happened, Quin? How far have you followed the trail of the hold-up gang? And how on earth did you cross the trail of our friend, Kabinook?"

McQuinlan told his tale quickly. The minutes were passing, and the bandits were

doubtless making ground rapidly. And as he spoke, Merry's face became serious.

"Great Christopher! Quin, it's been a close shave for you, old son. Stroke o' luck the chief here took a hand when that mustang broke away."

"And you, Tom?" asked Quin. "How did you get away? I thought you were laid up for weeks?"

"Oh, my affair was nothing. After my eyes had been well bathed with oil and rested for four hours I could see quite well. Only one eye troubles me a bit now. So I persuaded Masey, who will be a day or two in dock yet, to let me follow you up. I knew you'd got a man-size job riding alone after those desperate villains, and I rather feared you'd try to tackle 'em alone, or be led into an ambush, knowing you as I do. So he let me come on."

"But you'd gone past the camp, Tom," said Quin. "You came in from the north end, didn't you?"

"Yes, I rode a mile or two past the place. Missed the entrance to Horse Shoe Gully. Then I rode back. But I didn't expect to find you here now. Glad to have found you, though. And now, Quin, if you're fit, what about it?"

"I'm ready."

"Then we'd better start. The patrol can't be more'n three hours behind us. Leastways, not unless something holds 'em up."

"What about Kabinook?"

Both the Mounties looked at the Indian. If he could come, he would be of incalculable aid. Kabinook could follow the trail of a bird almost. They couldn't miss the enemy with his help.

The chief remained silent for a few seconds, then made the circle of the sun twice, pointed in the direction of his camp, then up the Saska Trail.

"Says he can't come for two days, Quin," explained Merry. "Business of some sort at his lodges. But in two days' time he'll be with us. He can pick up our trail."

Merry argued with the Indian for a few short moments, promising rich reward if he could accompany them at once. But the chief shook his head.

It appeared, as Merry afterwards explained, that nearly all the young men of Kabinook's tribe were away on a hunting pass, killing deer meat for the winter season which was close upon them. Moreover, a band of Blackfeet, the hereditary enemies of his people, were roving about the district, and he feared to

leave his squaws and children until the return of his young men, who were due back in two days' time.

"All right," said the corporal at length. "We shall look out for you later, Kabinook. But I guess we shall have landed the salmon in the net before that."

"Kaw," replied the chief, who possessed all the weird faculties of intuition and prophecy which Providence has bestowed upon the red man. "In the time of snow-shoes the salmon will be netted." Then without another word, or even a gesture of farewell, the Indian disappeared into the wood.

The two Mounties watched him go. Then Quin spoke. "Strange fellow, Kabinook, Tom?" he said. "But I owe him my life and hope I shall yet be able to pay the debt in some way or another."

The corporal remained silent for a moment. Then as he prepared to mount his horse he spoke again, still looking towards the forest where the Indian had disappeared.

"He is a great chief, Quin," Merry explained. "The last of his line. Masey says he must be nearly a hundred years old. Yet he is still keen and active. Time was when he and his people hunted and fished the streams as far south as Swan River and the Red Deer

Lake. Then the palefaces, who had been pushing westward, began to push northward. And Kabinook retired farther north to the region of the Peace River, the Great Slave Lake and Hudson Bay. In his time he has taken 'great plenty scalp' and he is known to all the surrounding tribes and bands of Indians as 'The North Wind.' Some day we will visit his wigwams. I have been there before. So has Masey, many a time. But for the moment, Quin, we've got a live trail to follow. So come along."

"Righto! Lead on, Tom. If we can't bag those 'misfits' within forty-eight hours now there are two of us, we ought to be soundly chawed."

Having run his quick eye over their equipment, saddle-bags, rations, etc., Corporal Merry led off back across the clearing, and out at the north end.

"Here's their trail," shouted Quin, after a couple of minutes' close inspection of the ground. "They've only got a mustang each this run. Two of the beasts must have stampeded during the night."

"Right away!" ordered the corporal, and moving off at a canter they passed through a stretch of timber and out into half-open country, up the Saskawanna Trail.

For six hours they rode hard, stopping only once to rest the horses and eat a little food. Then off they went again.

"The Mounties never quit a trail, old son," Merry remarked to his chum, "once they've started it. It's a tradition in the force. An' though I'd be mighty glad to see the Blue Ridge Patrol galloping up behind us, we've got to follow these low-down curs till we round 'em up."

"Don't worry. This trail's pretty hot anyhow," said Quin. "No chance of their getting away from us."

The corporal shook his head doubtfully, then jabbed his fore-finger towards the north. Tom Merry had experienced one winter in the North-West, and was far more weather-wise than his companion.

"I don't like the colour of that sky," he growled. "Looks like an early blow from the Horn Mountains and the Yellow Knife Hills. It's going to get worse, too. And if the snow comes it will hide the trail of these rascals in no time. It's early yet, though. Three weeks to the first fall. But out here the calendar gets wrong sometimes."

Up till now the skies had been clear, and the sun had shone brightly all day long. But the wind had been threatening to veer for

two days. And away to the northward the skies had become grey and chill.

McQuinlan bit his lips. He knew enough about the northern winter from hearsay to appreciate the difficulties that an early fall of snow would add to their journeying. If the snow continued, the horses would become useless—their feet would ball, and make progress impossible. A team of huskies and a sleigh would become absolutely necessary. And unless they could fall in with a fur-trading post with a spare team, and get extra rations, their pursuit of the bandits farther north, with the winter approaching, would be impossible.

"But we can't quit the trail now, Tom," said McQuinlan.

"Nope," replied his companion; then repeated the old maxim, "*Mounties never turn back.*"

Their only chance, therefore, was to get every ounce out of their mounts, press on for all they were worth, and overtake the gang.

"'Ware ambush!" warned the corporal a little later, as the trail narrowed down to barely six feet wide, with thick timber on either side, sloping upwards on either hand. "This is a likely spot. And if Black Malson's bein' driven, or his beasts are giving out, he'll make a stand an' pick us off at long range."

This necessity for caution delayed the pursuers. Raising his gloved hand for Quin to follow more slowly, and to cover his own movements, Corporal Merry rode ahead as soon as he entered the narrow defile.

Quin followed, his rifle at the ready and every sense alert. Any instant, from behind some tree or boulder in that sheltered covert, the crack of a treacherous, hidden rifle might send out its leaden messenger of death.

"Steady, Tom!" called McQuinlan, for he well knew that Black Malson would shoot on sight.

Scarcely had he spoken when from behind a huge, black rock a dark figure half leapt and half staggered from the wood, just a few feet in front of the corporal's mount, causing the horse to rear and plunge violently. In an instant McQuinlan had the man covered with his rifle. But Merry shouted:

"Don't shoot, Quin! The poor devil's ill or wounded!"

CHAPTER XII

QUIN lowered his rifle as he cantered up to the corporal, who was confronted by a wild-looking half-breed, whose name, it transpired, was Lavanche. The man was a half-blood Cree, and seeing the red-coats approach he had thrown himself in their way.

Lavanche, it appears, had a complaint to make. He had been riding a mustang and leading a pack-horse laden with furs to the Sabellum Trading Post, when two strangers overtook him. They were desperate-looking villains, who menaced him with pistols and stole his horses. Then jettisoning his pelts and stores, they had ridden off after beating him soundly and threatening him with death if he attempted to follow.

Merry flashed a look at Quin, then addressed the half-breed. "What were they like?" he asked.

"Bad medicine," sputtered the Cree. "One great, big, dark fella. Him cut about face. Other fella Dog-Rib——"

"How long since they left you, Lavanche?" asked the corporal, cutting short the half-breed's description.

"One, two, three hour," explained the Cree. "You folla up quick. You overtake an' save my mustangs."

"Three hours—and now they've got fresh mounts, Quin. They can change saddles every hour an' force the pace on us."

"Piece o' bad luck," replied his companion, "just when our mounts are about done, too."

"No help for it, old son. We must hit the trail. I'll just scribble a note for the Blue Patrol an' leave it with the Cree. He'd better stay here by his goods till they come up." Then, hastily scribbling on a page from his note book, and addressing it to Trooper Cormack, who, he expected, would be in charge of the second squad, should Masey have been unable to follow, Merry gave it to Lavanche, saying:

"Lookee, Big Wolf, great plenty red-coat coming up Saska Trail now. Give Big White Chief this message. He see you right. We go catchee bad men steal your mustangs."

The face of the unhappy Cree, thus addressed as "Big Wolf" by the Mounty, and promised further assistance, brightened considerably.

His affairs had now been taken over by the law, and he had sufficient faith in the red-coats to believe that all his losses would be made good.

"Big Wolf savvy," he grinned. Then as the Mounties rode off, he shouted, "You savvy Dog-Rib. He three-finger man, so," and held up his left hand.

"Hear that, Quin?" said the corporal. "The Dog-Rib's only got three fingers on his left hand. This clue's the hottest I've ever followed. If it weren't that the skulking curs had now got fresh mounts, I guess we'd overtake them before morning."

Two hours later, the horses were thoroughly done, however. It was found impossible to get another mile out of the poor beasts. So there was nothing for it but to camp for the night, feed and water the mounts, and trust that the weather would still hold good for the morrow.

That night Tom and Quin camped beneath a belt of black spruce. And as the wind now cut like a knife after sundown, they rigged up a screen of twigs and branches, to get what shelter they could, then lay down to rest.

Next morning, the horses having partially recovered, the camp was struck soon after sunrise, and the pursuit continued.

But that afternoon the biggest disappointment of the whole trail awaited them. Cresting a bluff, pine ridge, not far eastward of the Buffalo River, the two Mounties caught a glimpse of an arm of the Great Slave Lake. Waiting but a moment to sweep the trail southward with the glasses in the hope of glimpsing a dust column to mark the position of the second patrol, and failing to locate their reinforcements, they rode down-hill towards the great stretch of water.

Unfortunately for the pursuers, the great lake proved a fearful barrier. The corporal had ridden swiftly up to the water's edge in front of his companion. As he turned about to face Quin, a bitter cry of disappointment broke from his lips.

"By all the saints we've lost 'em, Quin!" he called. "Look there!" and Tom Merry pointed to where the bow of a canoe had but recently been shoved off from the land.

"But the mustangs, Tom?" said Quin. "They couldn't have taken them along. See, the hoof-marks lead away from the water, through the scrub yonder."

"Yes—an' you'll find the mustangs loose or dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, they've ridden the poor brutes almost to death. But to prevent the beasts being used

against them, in a place where new mounts are as scarce as hen's teeth, I guess they've shot them."

"Let's see," said Quin, and immediately set out to follow the hoof-prints, which led along the shore to where the scrub came up thick and deep.

But Merry had guessed aright. To Quin's utter disgust he found the dead mounts. They had been led into the timber, then shot, and their bodies half hidden by broken branches and twigs.

"Been another disturbance of some sort here, too," said Quin, who had been searching the scrub for some thirty yards further. "Something else's been dragged along here. Look."

"That's where they found the hunter's canoe cachéd," replied the corporal. "Seems to me Black Malson and his confederate were themselves baulked when they reached the lake. Appear to have wandered about a bit. Then they tumbled on the canoe cachéd hereabouts. That decided 'em. They resolved to leave the Saska Trail, which follows the lake for twenty odd miles, an' take to the water."

"The devils!" hissed Quin, who was now feeling, equally with Merry, the keen shaft of bitter failure. "They knew that the water leaves no trail."

"Yum-yum!" replied the corporal. "We're baulked at last, Quin, after keeping their trail warm all these miles."

It was at this moment that McQuinlan, who had continued his explorations, gave a mighty shout.

"Yo-hoi, Tom, here's another canoe!"

"Where?" asked his companion.

"Here. Come quickly, old man. There's a second canoe cachéd under these fir bushes. Guess we'll foll—— Great snakes, it's been smashed and staved in!"

Merry had rushed up to where Quin, standing nearly waist deep in the scrub, had been hauling at some hidden article. It was the bow of a light, native canoe. Now that he had dragged the thing clear, a shadow fell across his sunny face, and a very ugly word escaped his lips.

"That's Black Malson's work!" he rasped. "Confound him. Wish I had the beast here for five minutes!"

The corporal was alongside now, and the two hefty trail-makers were both standing side by side, gazing at the ruins of the second canoe. For fully a couple of minutes they looked at the wreckage in silence. Then the corporal spoke.

"Black Malson *means* to get away, Quin,"

he said. "Now he's cut the trail completely, an' left us at the water's edge. 'Tisn't the first time he's made a get-away, either." And the corporal wrinkled his brow in thought as he stood with folded arms gazing away over the wide stretch of water.

"He's as cunning as an Indian tracker," observed Quin, also becoming thoughtful, as the possibility of failure now loomed large before him. "Must have got a master mind, the rascal."

"He's got all that, has Black Malson," said Merry. "If he'd only use his brains to better purpose he'd be a power for good in the land. But there, 'tisn't in his nature."

"I suppose it isn't any good looking for a third canoe?" said Quin.

"You might try, old son," replied the corporal, who still remained deep in thought. "But I don't suppose there's another canoe cachéd along twenty miles o' shore line. Just Malson's luck to find the only two available. Got a nose for smellin' out a thing like that."

McQuinlan did look, searching the timber and the scrub thoroughly for the next hour. And after a while Merry joined in the hunt. But it wasn't any sort of use. Not another caché could be found. And as the sun was already

nearing the horizon, and the cold becoming intense, the search was ultimately abandoned, and a camp formed for the night, near the edge of the wood. Here, the trees broke the force of the wind, and provided some shelter for the tired horses and men.

Using their keen-edged belt axes, the Mounties soon collected a huge quantity of dead timber.

"Keep up a good fire, Quin," ordered the corporal. "If the Blue Ridge Patrol crest that hill-top I want them to see the blaze. I'd give something to have Sergeant Masey with us now. He knows the Great Slave Lake, the Mackenzie River District, an' the Yellow Knife Preserve on the other side the water better than any man in the force."

McQuinlan piled the dry pine logs high, and the blaze mounted like a beacon, warming the shivering Mounties, and heating the iron rations for supper.

Time after time, as the darkness deepened, Tom Merry turned to gaze southward at the pine ridge over which they had come. But no signal came from that direction, not even a rifle shot or a Very light to show that the second patrol had arrived.

"Can't think what's held 'em up, Quin," he said. "We've kept the trail warm for them. If I blazed one tree I blazed fifty between here

an' Horse Shoe Gully. Besides, they must have met the Cree half-blood, an' got our message."

"A tenderfoot could have followed us, Tom," said Quin, as he cut open the iron rations and emptied the steaming compound of meat and vegetables into the mess-tins.

Supper over and a fifteen minutes' smoke, the pair spread out their water-proof ground sheets and rolled themselves in their blankets. Despite the shelter of the trees close to windward, the night air was bitter.

"If this continues," grumbled Tom, "we shall have a blow from the Baffin with a blizzard before long. Guess we'll have to track a couple o' bears for their skins or we'll be frozen."

Quin didn't reply. Tom didn't usually get the camel's hump. But to-night the corporal, feeling the full weight of his responsibility, was a wee bit sore.

And no wonder. Here they were, two lonely troopers with no winter furs, rations getting short, and their quarry slipping out of their hands.

Quinlan thought of suggesting a run over to one of the North-West Trading Depôts, about seventy miles away, to get rations, winter furs, and a dog-team, should the snow come, then

continuing their pursuit. But he hesitated. He remembered Tom Merry's words, "*The Mounties never turn back.*"

Quin knew that Tom had been speaking but the truth, for scarcely ever a spring comes with its melting snows but the bones of some heroic member of the force is sure to be found lying stiff and stark under the white mantle of death.

"How big is the lake, Tom?" he asked, as he rolled himself into his blanket.

"As big as twelve English Counties, Quin," came the reply. "It's about two hundred miles long, and at this point it's more'n fifty miles across."

"More than twice as wide as the English Channel?"

"Yes."

"And the other side? Ever been there, Tom?"

"Only once. It's wild an' almost unexplored," replied the corporal. "Runs nearly a thousand miles towards the Arctic Seas. It looks as if Black Malson's changed his mind. Thinks it's too late for the Yukon Trail. Believes he can throw us properly off the scent, an' perhaps lie snuggo in some secret lair he knows either in the Yellow Knife District or the Horn Mountains. Got a caché

of food there, most likely. Then his game will be to slip off into the Yukon an' Alaska at the first sign of spring. D—n him. Good-night, Quin."

"Good-night, Tom."

So, filled with chagrin and disappointment too keen for words, the two chums, who were facing real life now, lay down to sleep. Near by, the horses, which had been loosely tethered and had been grazing till dusk, also lay down. And very soon King Morpheus, the tired man's friend, gently drew his mantle across the quiet camp.

While they slept and the first flakes of snow danced above them, or sizzled in the flames, the soft splash of paddles, not very far away, guided a birch-bark canoe down the Buffalo River, and into the lake some miles to the westward of the camp.

Slowly the minutes passed, and the fire, which had ceased to crackle by now, had burnt clear and bright in the frosty air. The radiant glow, however, to the keen eyes of a hunter, could be seen across the water at a great distance. And it was this tiny, distant point of fire which the vigilant oarsman glimpsed, in the early hours of morn.

Camp fires on the edge of the Great Slave Lake are never numerous. And this one

attracted like a magnet the silent voyager who had now reached the deep and quiet lake.

Hastily now he swept his light fishing canoe in that direction. Quiet as his paddle-strokes were, however, they awoke the now lightly-sleeping corporal, as the canoe approached the shore.

"Ahoy, there!" called Merry, sitting up suddenly. "Who goes there?"

CHAPTER XIII

ANGUS MCQUINLAN, catching the thrill in his companion's voice, while still far away in his dreams of Old England, broke through the meshes of sleep, gasped, and looked about him.

"Did you call me, Tom?" he whispered. But seeing his companion peering out through the darkness over the lake, his tone changed. "What is it?" he asked.

"Listen, Quin!" ordered the corporal. "Tell me if you can hear anything?"

"H'm, paddles," hazarded Quin, as he caught the splash of water.

"You're right. It's a canoe," and Tom Merry reached for his rifle, giving the challenge a second time. "Who goes there?"

"It must be the bandits returning," muttered Quin. "Guess their craft's begun to leak."

"Hist! Stand ready!" ordered the corporal. "Whoever it is he's coming close in. I'll challenge a third time. And if there's no answer I shall fire!"

Once more the corporal challenged. And this time his voice rung out clear as a bell. The answer that came back to them from barely a bow-shot away was distinctly un-English.

"Ugh!" came the guttural response, then a canoe beached upon the sand, a dark form sprang lightly to shore, and the greatest Indian chief in all the North-West stood with folded arms before the camp.

"Great Jumping Snakes, if it isn't our friend, the North Wind, blown in upon us!" exclaimed McQuinlan, who, being nearer the margin of the lake, had recognised the Indian first.

"Welcome, Kabinook!" said the corporal, giving the redskin sign of amity.

"Wah!" came the brief, monosyllabic greeting, as the Indian, having dragged his canoe ashore, held up his right hand, then without another word took his seat by the camp fire, on which, by this time, Quin was piling more logs.

At that moment Kabinook, with his vast knowledge of the Territory, his Indian craft and cunning, not to mention his wonderful methods of following a trail where the cleverest paleface would have blundered, was trebly welcome.

The two Mounties, in the feverish haste and anxiety of the two previous days, had forgotten the chief. Certainly he had promised to pick up their trail within a few days. But even Merry had scarcely expected to see him so soon.

After the customary pause, Merry broached the subject. "How did you get here so soon, Kabinook?" he asked. "And how on earth did you hit our trail in the dark?"

Not yet, however, was North Wind inclined to talk. Impassive and cold he sat by the camp fire gazing into the flames, as if he could see strange pictures in the now blazing logs.

Then he took out his calumet, a curiously carved pipe of Indian stone. McQuin threw him a roll of tobacco, and the next instant the chief was leisurely puffing clouds of smoke into the air.

"He'll talk when he's ready," said Merry, lighting his own pipe, wrapping his blanket about him, and squatting by the blaze, for the cold was intense.

They waited patiently for half an hour, wondering meantime by what secret way the chief had arrived. They were both young to the Territory yet, and their knowledge of the vast, inter-locking system of waterways

throughout the great North-West was insignificant compared with that of the chief.

The truth was that the chief, leaving his own camp less than twenty-four hours ago, and convinced that he would find his friends somewhere on the shores of the Great Slave Lake, had paddled up a small stream in his light, birch-bark canoe, carried the fragile craft over two portages, until, reaching the swift waters of the Buffalo River, he had been rapidly carried down stream by the current into the lake a little way to the west of the camp.

Paddling out into the lake some distance, the chief had espied the distant point of fire, which indicated the paleface camp. The rest had been easy. But his sudden and unexpected arrival had at first given the Mounties quite a scare.

At length, laying aside his pipe, Kabinook explained in a few brief sentences the manner of his journeying. That strange intuition, which is the gift of a few red men, had told the chief that not only would the bandits forsake the Yukon Trail and endeavour to hide their own trail by crossing the lake, but also, that a canoe capable of carrying three men would provide the best possible contribution for the pursuers. For without some such craft, further pursuit would be impossible.

It was not until the first faint whisper of dawn came from the distant ridge, however, that the chief showed any further interest. Then, as the shadows began to steal away, Kabinook rose quietly and walked to the margin of the lake, emitting a few grunts as he keenly searched the foreshore for some tell-tale mark or sign. Shortly afterwards he returned to the camp, throwing down something by the fire which he had lifted from the bottom of the canoe.

"Ugh!" he sputtered. "My young friends are hungry?"

It was a mountain goat, which the Indian had shot near the Buffalo River, and which would provide good meat for several days.

"Great Cæsar, Chief, but you've brought your breakfast too! Just when our rations were running out!" exclaimed Tom Merry, and immediately fell to skinning the goat, cutting off a huge joint and spitting it with a sharpened log against the fiercest part of the fire.

The sizzling joint was soon filling the morning air with a most delicious aroma, for the cold, icy weather now coming over the wide expanse of lake, had made them all hungry. And before long they were sitting down with their mess-tins filled with liberal portions of the

fresh, juicy meat. Thus far the Mounties had been so busy following the trail that they had had no opportunity for shooting game.

Kabinook began to talk more freely now. But even so the corporal had occasionally to urge him on. North Wind was never a man of many words.

"We're in a dilemma, Chief," began Merry, pointing to the marks of Malson's canoe on the shore. "Looks like the end of the trail. Even Kabinook cannot find a moccasin print in the lake. And the keel of the bandit's canoe leaves no trail in the water."

For the first time since his arrival the Indian's face relaxed into something approaching a smile. "Kaw," he replied. "The water gives no cover, save to the fishes."

"Holy smoke, but he's right!" chimed in McQuinlan, greatly impressed by the Indian's words.

"Spoken like a sagamore," said Merry. "But the thing is, how are we to pick up the trail on the other side, Chief, even if we cross the water in your canoe? The other shore is two hundred miles long, and there are scores of little bays and headlands. If we only knew in which direction the villains steered it might help us."

"Wah! the Bad Medicine palefaces would

cross the water by the swiftest trail," replied Kabinook.

"Swiftest trail?" echoed Quin. But the corporal had caught the redskin's meaning.

"You mean by following the current, Chief?" he said.

"Ugh!" And the Indian, rising to his feet indicated with a majestic sweep of his right hand the setting of the current in the lake towards the outlet where the Mackenzie River starts on its fifteen hundred miles of winding route towards the Arctic Seas.

"Gosh! he knows, Tom. Let the chief ferry us over."

And so it was decided. Quickly collecting all their transportable gear, and loosing the mustangs to make the homeward trail if they wished, the three voyagers were soon afloat in the light canoe.

Then, with strong, forceful strokes they paddled out into the lake, where the swift current, setting strongly westward, carried them along with very little effort on their part.

The crossing was not without danger. Fierce storms sometimes lash the waters of the Great Slave Lake into fury. And, if such a storm had broken that day, the light canoe with its heavy load would have stood no chance of reaching the opposite shore. It was cold, too, fearfully

cold. And during the long hours they were cramped in that little craft their sufferings were intense.

The point of landing was left to Kabinook. But even the Indian appeared to be in some doubt as to the point of disembarkation.

"Anywhere, Chief! We shall be frozen to death if we don't land soon and get near a fire!" urged Merry.

"Ugh!" came the guttural response, and once again the Indian sniffed the air in his peculiar manner, as if scenting a suitable landing spot. Then he turned to the corporal.

"The White Man's fort?" he said.

"You mean Fort Carey, Chief?" queried the corporal, and the Indian nodded. This was one of the old frontier forts, built years ago in the days of the French wars, and now used as a trading station for furs by the agents of one of the North-West Companies.

The idea seemed the most feasible. There at least they would be able to get food, winter clothing, a team of huskies should the threatened blow from the Baffin Ice come, and last but not least it might be possible to pick up from the incoming trappers and half-breeds some information about the bandits.

"Right! Go ahead, Chief," ordered Merry. And as the current would not serve them now

so fully, the voyagers worked with renewed zest at the paddles, and urged the boat shoreward.

A little later they espied the northern shore of the lake. Paddling now close in, the stout log buildings of the fort were soon observed. And the trio landed safely at Fort Carey, where a visit from the Mounties was always considered a red-letter day.

Their arrival at the fort was none too early. Had they delayed even another twelve hours in crossing the lake, in all certainty both the canoe and its occupants would have been lost; for that very day the north unlimbered its barrage of snow and ice. The cold, grey skies, which had held up their icy wool-packs till now, became lowering and threatening that afternoon. Before evening the air was filled with huge white flakes, and the first phase of the swiftcoming, northern winter was upon the land.

Next morning a white mantle of snow covered forest, open plain, and timbered slope. In places the drifts had already become impassable. Every trail ten minutes' old was completely obliterated, while trappers, lumberjacks and hunters within a radius of twenty miles were already hurrying to the fort for shelter or to obtain winter supplies of clothing and food.

Comfortably housed as they were for the moment, Corporal Merry and McQuin were, nevertheless, deeply chagrined. It seemed as if, after all their heroic endeavour, no chance of following the trail of the bandits further could possibly be offered till the winter had passed, and spring unlocked the land once again.

"What does the chief think now, Tom?" asked Quin, as next morning from the old wooden ramparts of the fort they gazed away upon the white landscape to the north, east and west, and the ruffled but deserted waters of the Great Slave Lake to the southward.

"The chief?" Tom replied. "Oh, he's silent as a dormouse. Hasn't spoken a word since we came here. Last I saw of him he was smoking the calumet with a band of Crees who camped in their tepees last night under the ramparts there."

"H'm, new arrivals, eh?"

"Yes, driven in by this sudden spell of bad weather," said Merry.

"Then I guess the chief was hunting for clues, nosing round amongst the newcomers. Some of them might have struck the trail of Malson and his confederate."

"Small chance," replied the corporal. "You see, there are fifty places where Malson, if

he knows the country, can lie snuggo for the winter. There's the Mackenzie District, and the Nahanni Country to the west. There are the Horn Mountains and the Blackwater, not to mention the Cameron Hills or the Yellow Knife Preserve. Most of 'em the size of the British Isles."

"H'm! pretty hopeless, then?" groaned Quin.

"It is, now that the snow's come, an' every trail is covered up in no time. The only chance is whether any of these fellows still coming in for supplies or shelter might have seen the hold-up gang. All we can do, therefore, for the moment, until this blow's over, is to pick up a possible clue in that way."

"It will make 'em suspicious, won't it, for a red-coat to be putting too many questions?" said Quin.

"'Course it will. No use letting 'em know what we're after. Some of these fellows are none too friendly. And while they would be glad to put us on a wrong trail, they wouldn't mind passing the tip to Malson how the ground lay, if they suspected why we're here."

All that day, therefore, Tom and Quin, presumably driven to the fort for shelter like the rest, who were a rough-looking crew, tried to gather what information they could. But it

led them nowhere. And when evening came they were no wiser.

On the evening of the second day at the fort, Merry sent his companion to find the chief. Quin went to the most likely place, the Indian tepees, for the chief would never sleep under a civilised roof. Ten minutes later, the Mounty returned.

"Kabinook has gone!" he reported.

"Gone?" echoed Merry.

"Clean disappeared. There isn't a trace of him. He left before dawn, when the snow-storm was at its worst."

CHAPTER XIV

THE disappearance of the Indian came as a staggering blow to Corporal Merry. It was some seconds before he could realise the fact which McQuinlan had reported. Even Tom, with his eighteen months' experience in the Territory, had not yet fully appreciated the peculiarities of Indian nature.

"Impossible!" he said. "I must go and see the other Indians."

Quin accompanied him. But they might just as well have remained in the fort. If the other redskins knew anything of Kabinook's mysterious journey, no red-coat could have dragged the information from them.

Kabinook to them was a mighty chief who kept his own counsel. More than that he was the lineal descendant of a hundred fighting warriors who had ruled the land from the frozen waters of Hudson Bay on the north to the Mexican Gulf on the south, and from the great lakes to the Big Salt Waters on the east and the west. There was no redskin on the continent

but would have lowered his feathered scalp lock to the famous sachem, North Wind.

"The great chief, North Wind, goes and comes when he will," said the sub-chief of the Crees to Merry. "Why should the paleface try to hold the North Wind?"

And with this firm but polite answer even Corporal Tom Merry, chief representative of law and order within sixty miles, had to be content.

"You don't think he's thrown up the trail, Tom, do you?" asked Quin, when they were back in the shelter of the fort once more.

"Most unlikely. Kabinook is the friend of Masey. The sergeant saved his people during the big freeze-up years ago, when even the caribou herds failed, and food in outer regions was as scarce as hen's teeth. Besides, the chief knows that the Mounted Patrols are the best friends of the redskins."

"Really?"

"Certainly. We protect their reserves from encroachment, save them from the boot-leggers an' rum-carriers, and from white collar bandits who cheat them on every possible occasion. No, the chief's a reason for going—a clue most likely, and we shall see him again unless he meets his death in some terrible freeze-up, or runs across the hold-up gang and gets a leaden packet."

As the storm still continued and the snow drifts were insufficiently frozen for travelling yet, Tom Merry and Angus McQuinlan kicked their heels for another three days at Fort Carey, where, by this time, two or three score of hunters, trappers, and lumber-jacks were being housed in the out-buildings, cooking their food at the great log-fires which burnt day and night in the court-yard, which was surrounded by the old wooden stockade.

While this enforced truce, caused by the severe weather conditions, continues, let us retrace our steps for a moment to get a glimpse of the Blue Ridge Patrol, every section of which, by this time, was being diverted towards the round-up of the worst gang of criminals in the North-West.

When Merry and McQuin, accompanied by the Indian, left their camp at dawn, and crossed the treacherous Great Slave Lake in that frail canoe, Number Two Section of the Blue Ridge Patrol, consisting of Cormack, Shorty and Duff, were already within three hours of the lake.

Returning from a ninety-six hours' patrol of the Ridge, and the Big Sticks about Moose Rapids and Indian Falls, the three troopers were staggered to find the Post at Pine Creek in charge of the solitary Indian, Pemmican Joe.

"What's afoot, Joe?" asked Cormack, who was in charge of the detachment, and rode up to the buildings first.

Indian Joe saluted solemnly, as he had seen the Mounties do, when an Inspector rode over to look at the patrol. Then he grounded arms, and began to explain, using Sergeant Masey's identical words:

"Bad medicine, Chief!" he said. "Whistlin' horse held up at Great Bear Divide. Bad men shoot an' kill. Blue Ridge roun' 'em up. Big Chief Masey, he leave wampum belt inside! He go take great plenty bandit scalp!"

A chorus of laughter greeted Pemmican Joe's words. Tired and jaded as they were, the Mounties couldn't resist the joke.

"This must be a film stunt, boys," jollied Shorty, as he rolled off his horse. "But where's the camera?"

"That's it!" exclaimed Duff. "It's a five-reel, kicking horse motion picture. Old England wants to see the Mounties on the screen. An' some cove from Hollywood has fixed up this rag." Then, pointing to Cormack, who was trying to force the orderly-room door, he added: "*Scene One.* Blue Ridge Patrol arrives! Red-coat forcing door of the shack where murder was committed."

There followed more laughter. But Cormack pulled them up short, for his face at least was serious. "Stow that, boys!" he shouted. "Something's come unstuck, somewhere. Orderly-room's locked. Key's missing. Post's deserted. An' there's no camera man in sight."

The tired men still persisted in their little joke, however. Shorty pretended to glimpse the man from Hollywood taking motion pictures from the cover of the wood. And, raising his rifle, he fired a shot into the trees which made Pemmican Joe to leap six feet into the air.

By this time, however, Cormack, having found the duplicate emergency key, opened the door of the hutment and entered, rushing back the next instant with Sergeant Masey's' scribbled note. "Shush, you squint-eyed baby!" he called to Shorty. "Pemmican Joe was right. Just listen to this——"

"Sunset Patrol, Blue Ridge, I/C. Trooper Cormack. Prince Rupert Transcontinental held up by masked men two hours before dawn. Message from Fort Frazer. 3 p.m. Entire Patrol ordered out. Saskawanna Trail District. Rest men and horses three hours then follow all haste. Get further news from Fort Frazer if line repaired. Believed cut by

bandits. Patrol will bring 10 days' rations & carry sixty rounds.

"A. E. MASEY, SGT."

The tired patrol gasped and stared at each other in turn. There wasn't a man of them who couldn't have done with twenty-four hours' sleep straight away. This, at the end of a ninety-six hours' very arduous patrol, rough going, swollen creeks, hill and dale all the time, wasn't exactly what they had been expecting.

"That takes the pluck out o' yer, boys!" grinned Cormack. "What about the camera man, now? Look pleasant, boys. He's jest ketching you fer the screen."

But the tired patrol had to smile in spite of their fatigue. And the irrepressible Shorty burbled forth again—"Next act on the screen —Trooper Duff plays hero out in the Big Sticks. Villains caught red-handed playing poker for the swag in Red River Gulch."

But it all came in a Mounty's day. And so, though the twenty-four hours' rest now due to the patrol had been shortened to three, the excitement of the promised round-up offered a thrill which three hours later sent these heroic, devoted men out on the trail with the zest of school-boys playing at Indians.

It was the condition of their horses, however, which delayed the patrol. That was why the advance detachment, though they watched eagerly for some smoke signal or dust-cloud behind them as they topped every ridge, never glimpsed a sign of the second party.

Quin and Merry had blazed a trail, however, which even a tender-pad could have followed.

Reaching the trapper's camp on the Saskawanna Trail before evening on the second day, Cormack's party found Masey with Beaver Dan, and heard the story of the first encounter with the rear-guard of the "hold-up" gang.

Sergeant Masey, whose injuries had not been very serious, decided to proceed with the detachment, though the pain in his eyes was still considerable. The tough old timer refused to fall out.

"It's the biggest, toughest job the Blue Ridge Patrol's struck for years. An' I'm stickin' to my job," declared the cold-blooded old scout. "So it's boot an' saddle, boys, after an hour's rest. Every minute counts just now. If a blow comes from the north before we've bagged those gangsters, they'll slip through our fingers. An' the Blue Patrol's got a reputation to lose."

"Right you are, Sergeant," replied Cormack, who was really glad to hand over his responsibilities as leader to Masey. "I guess if that

Dog-Rib had winged you when he fired, you'd have carried on just the same."

An hour later, therefore, bidding the trapper good-bye, the second detachment started off up the Saska Trail. Horse Shoe Gully was reached next morning. But Masey didn't stay long there. The signs which he noted about the place made him uneasy.

"Gosh! but there's bin some honest-to-goodness scrap here, boys," he said. "And the Malson crowd seem to have had the best of it. Saddle up again."

"Horses are clean done up, Serge," grumbled Cormack.

"I know it, worse luck!" replied Masey. "The others must be in the same plight. An' a few more miles may be all that's required. I guess the corporal an' McQuinlan have joined forces now, an' are sitting on the tails of the bandits. They're young at the game, our lads, especially McQuin. But it seems they're holdin' on, an' we mustn't fail 'em."

After the briefest possible halt, therefore, the patrol started off again, expecting every moment to come up with the two parties and find them engaged in a life-and-death struggle.

But two hours later the horses gave out altogether, and it was utterly impossible to get another mile out of them that day. A camp

was therefore pitched for the night. But ere the sun set, Masey sent Cormack and Duff to the crest of the next ridge to sweep the land northward with their glasses. They returned, however, without having anything to report.

"Not a sign of a camp fire anywhere, Sergeant," said Cormack.

"You picked up their trail at the top of the ridge, though, didn't you?" asked Masey.

"Yes, the ground was soft near the spring at the top. An' horses had been watered there quite recently."

Next day, starting soon after dawn, Masey pressed the trail. And at midday the party came upon the Cree half-blood with his message. It was while they were talking to him that Duff, gazing up the trail, gave a mighty yell.

"Look out, Sergeant!" he shouted. "Horses galloping towards us."

"Where away?" asked Masey, jerking his field glasses out of their case.

"Right ahead. Passing that clump o' black spruce. You'll see 'em in a minute. There they are! Galloping like mad."

Masey had already fixed them. Then a bitter exclamation broke from his lips. "Blue thunder!" he gasped. "Hell an' high water!

They're the patrol horses. I can recognise 'em. It's one of the black Muskwan that the corporal rode. An' the other must be McQuin's mount. But they're riderless!"

Horrified by this announcement, the other three Mounties leapt to the sergeant's side. And shading their eyes with their hands they peered along the trail towards the horses, which were still galloping wildly as though pursued by wolves.

"Must have been stampeded, Serge," suggested Cormack, unwilling to face the worst.

"Stampeded? Don't talk rot, Cormack!" rasped the sergeant. "Merry an' Quin have bin ambushed, an' shot from their saddles. I can see the saddle an' bridle straps dangling from the mounts."

CHAPTER XV

THE sudden alarm caused by the sight of the riderless horses of the advance patrol deepened into consternation as the other Mounties listened to the sergeant's words.

"Sure, the sergeant's right!" exclaimed Duff. "The men hev bin ambushed an' shot. And the hold-up gang hev got away."

Every shred of evidence seemed to confirm this pessimistic view of the present situation. But there wasn't any time for words. The horses, maddened apparently by the wolves, came lashing up the trail as if a whirlwind were behind them.

"Stop 'em! Hold 'em!" shouted Masey. And flinging their bridle reins to Shorty, Cormack and Duff dashed up the track, their arms outspread.

"Whoa, Beauty! Whoa, Roger!" they called, and with the agility and courage of their breed, the two Mounties flung themselves at the heads of the stampeding beasts, seized the dangling bridle reins, and, after being

dragged a score of yards, managed, by supreme effort, to bring the riderless horses to a stand.

No wolves were seen, and it was thought that the creatures of the wilds, scenting the Mounties camp, had eased off and taken to the woods again.

There followed a brief examination of the escaped mounts, which were snorting and blowing like sperm whales. Despite the cold, they were flecked with foam and simply reeking with steam from their over-heated bodies, while their eyes were wild and blood-shot, and their nostrils quivering with fright.

The sergeant's remarks were brief and pointed as he completed his hasty inspection. "H'm, rifles an' all equipment gone," he said. "Saddle-bags are missing too. Don't know what that means. Guess the Malson crowd bagged 'em. Can't understand, though, why the hold-up gang didn't pinch the horses."

"Suspected they'd got the Government mark on 'em, Serge," suggested Cormack. "That frightened 'em off. Feared the mounts might give 'em away."

"Guess you're right," replied Masey after a moment's further thought. "But the thing is, what's the next move?"

"That's up to you, Sergeant," said Shorty.

"Then we'd better get on an' find the dead bodies. Guess they're only a few miles ahead. Let the Cree have your mount, Duff. It's the worst used. You can ride McQuinlan's. And we'll take Merry's along in case one o' the others gives out. Saddle an' boot, boys!"

And once again the Blue Ridge Patrol hit the trail, leaving the half-blood Cree satisfied with the better value of his mount, which would enable him to transport his pelts to the distant fur-trading station before the season broke.

Sergeant Masey and his companions failed to discover any signs of another fight as they proceeded on their way. Neither did they find the dead bodies of their comrades.

But next morning, barely three hours after Kabinook and his two paleface friends had drifted out on the current of the Great Slave Lake, the second patrol came to a sudden halt, where the trail ended so abruptly on the shore of the lake.

"Too late!" exclaimed the Sergeant, as he wheeled round his horse. "Camp's deserted! But where in the name of thunder have they gone?"

"Over the water, Serge," hinted Duff, who had dismounted and was examining the marks of a canoe, and the prints of regulation boots.

Also something else which puzzled him greatly for a minute. Then suddenly one word broke from his lips:

"Injun!" he cried.

"Where?" asked Masey, drawing close to where Duff was examining the footprints.

"Indian moccasin, sure as this is the Great Slave Lake," said Duff.

They all examined it now. But it was Masey who first thrilled to the meaning of it all. He was getting over his "dumps" which had been occasioned partly by the pain in his still smarting eyes, and partly by the fear that Merry and Quin had been shot.

"Regulation boots all right," he confirmed. "Two pairs of 'em, which means that, up to this point, the corporal an' McQuinlan were alive, an' following the trail like blood-hounds. Good luck to 'em!"

"But the moccasin print, Sergeant?" queried Duff. "It's Injun sure as the sea's salt."

The leader of the patrol was still eagerly examining the tell-tale print. He even took out his pocket microscope to scrutinise it further. Then he straightened himself, and they saw that his eyes were gleaming with a curious light.

"Gosh! if it isn't the old chief who's with 'em, boys!" he exclaimed. "I could tell that

moccasin print in a thousand by the curious pattern on't."

"Not the 'Gonquin, Kabinook, Serge?" interrupted Cormack.

"Hell an' high water if 'tisn't, boys! It's our old friend, Kabinook, the North Wind. The boys must ha' found him here fishin' with his canoe. An' being hot on the trail, an' havin' a debt still owing to the red-coats for that service we did his people that last terrible freeze-up, danged if he 'ant throwed in his lot with 'em!"

"By Jupiter! Stroke o' luck, Serge, to find the chief," said Cormack, as he suddenly realised the full import of Masey's discovery.

"You're right. Guess the old chief's four score years to his credit at least. Yet if he could be persuaded to leave his wigwam an' join the Force as Indian tracker, there isn't many boot-leggers, cattle-rustlers, or bandits would escape the penalties of the law in the Territory."

"How long have they bin gone, Serge?" asked Shorty. "Not long, I guess. Camp fire's still burnin'."

"Barely four hours," estimated the patrol chief. "Gosh! if we'd only known an' could ha' got here in time. But there, we did all that any human could do. An' I guess there

isn't another canoe between here an' the Eagle River Station."

Neither was there. But even if a dozen canoes could have been found to transport the second detachment of the patrol across the lake, the feat could not have been accomplished.

Before they could have crossed, the north unlimbered, and the waves of the Great Slave Lake were lashed into such fury that no ordinary canoe could have lived through the gale. And when, next day, the first blizzard whooped down upon land, forest and water, the detachment, checked by the water-line, and threatened with death from exposure, were compelled to construct a rude shelter, build a big fire, and endure life under Arctic conditions as best they could.

For ten days, neither the lake nor the snow-drifted trail offered them a way of escape. So while Merry and Quin were entrenched within the rude walls of Fort Carey, Sergeant Masey and his companions, caught in the blizzard, narrowly escaped death from exposure in their timber and snow dug-out, on the southern shore of the lake.

It was the tenth day, late in the afternoon, when the fury of the northern gale abated. By that time the whole face of the country

had been changed. Then the thermometer dropped almost to the dead line. The snow hardened and at Fort Carey the teams of huskies were out, for the winter trails were open now until another blizzard came. The pleasant tinkle of sleigh-bells announced to all and sundry about the settlements that the Territory had changed its mode of life and transport.

It was on the evening of the tenth day that Corporal Merry and McQuinlan, killing time over a game of chess in the fort, were suddenly thrilled into life and action once again.

"There's an Injun at the gate of the fort wantin' to speak to the red-coats," announced one of the store-men.

"Indian?" echoed Merry, thrusting aside the chess-board.

"Yup. It's the Big Chief who blew in with you ten days ago, I fancy. He's come through that howling gale on snowshoes. Goodness knows where he's come from or what he wants! But he asks to see you particular, sir."

"Bring him in to me here, Jenson," said Merry. "I want to see him, too."

Three minutes later the Algonquin, shaking the snow from his deer-skin clothing and kicking off his snow-shoes, entered the room which had been engaged by the two Mounties.

"Ugh!" came his customary greeting. Then, without another word of explanation as to his mysterious journey, not even a word of complaint about the weather, Kabinook threw a heavy, fur-lined glove upon the table.

Quin picked it up, and together, both he and Merry, examined it closely. The glove, which was made of beaver, had two fingers stopped with wads of cotton wool. It belonged to a three-fingered man.

CHAPTER XVI

THE mysterious arrival of the Indian roused the two members of the Royal Mounted from the lethargy of their recent inaction. But when, with that guttural greeting of his tribe, the chief threw the mysterious riding gauntlet upon the table, McQuinlan gave a joyous but startled cry.

"Pierre Veldrick's glove!" he exclaimed. "It's the man I fought with in Horse Shoe Gully."

"You mean the half-breed confederate o' Malson's?" said Tom Merry.

"I do."

"Don't jump to conclusions too soon, Quin," said the corporal. "I dare say there are a dozen men in the North-West with two missing fingers. Get caught in their own traps sometimes, you know, when they are setting snares for their pelts."

"That may be," replied McQuinlan. "But they don't all lose the third and fourth fingers of their left hand when their traps go wrong. But what has the chief to say?"

The Mounties turned to Kabinook, who stood by the table with features impassive and dull, as though he had little interest in all this talk about three-fingered men.

The Algonquin had a lot to say, but he wasted very few words in the telling of it. He said nothing whatever about his own adventures. Six days and nights he had spent out in the snow-storm. And the marvel was that he still lived to tell the story.

Acting upon a strange, impelling intuition, and a few tit-bits of information he had gathered from the other Indians who had recently arrived at the fort, he had set out alone on his snow racquets with an extra blanket, and had travelled nearly a hundred miles on foot in weather which was appalling. No white man could have hit his own trail in such a snow-storm, much less have followed the trail of another.

North Wind had learnt, however, that some ten days previously, just before the storm broke, two men had landed on the north shore of the Great Slave Lake some three miles west of Windy Point, and from thence had trekked hurriedly inland on foot, in the direction of the Wahanni, one of the sheltered and timbered valleys of the Lower Horn Range.

It was Kabinook's great knowledge of the district that had helped him. He knew of three stout log shacks up the Wahanni Valley. They had been used by the prospectors for copper. But they had been deserted for two seasons.

Kabinook made stealthy visits to the first two shacks, and found them empty and bare. It was upon his fourth morning away from Fort Carey that he made his great discovery. At dawn he had observed a tell-tale column of blue smoke farther up the deep, pine-clad ravine.

The smoke came from the chimney of the third shack. And North Wind grunted with delight when he observed it. Someone, not a permanent occupant, had dug himself in this hidden retreat for the winter. And as there were no prospectors in the district now, Kabinook's suspicions were aroused.

All that day he hung about, hidden in the timber, waiting for the occupants to appear. He saw them go out apparently to shoot deer meat. But, misliking the gale, for it was still blowing hard with much snow falling, they came back again within an hour.

Then as darkness closed in on the fourth day, the Indian crept up to the shack. He even peeped in at the uncurtained window,

and caught a glimpse of the men's faces as they sat about the stove.

"Wah!" he muttered. "Bad men who held up the whistling horse."

On the outer threshold of the shack he picked up the beaver-skin gauntlet, which had been accidentally dropped as the owner took if off to force the door catch, which had rusted with disuse and stuck.

The next moment Kabinook, having learnt all he wished to know, crept quietly away, confident that within fifteen minutes the still-falling snow would completely obliterate his trail.

Hastening back to Fort Carey, with but two brief halts of three hours each, he had covered the distance to the fort on his snow-shoes, despite the terrible going, in the remaining forty-two hours.

"Great Cæsar, Chief!" exclaimed Corporal Merry, when in the fewest possible words the Indian had told this story. "You're a miracle. There isn't another man in the Territory who could have smelt out a trail like that. If we capture these gangsters, it will be your doing. And I shall recommend you to the Chief Commissioner for a Dominion pension, and the Special Service Medal."

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian, who was nevertheless more pleased with these words of

praise than he appeared to show. "Red-coats once brought food and medicine to my people when they were starving. It is nothing."

"It means that you're going to save the reputation of the Blue Ridge Patrol, and that's something," said Merry, clapping his hand upon the redskin's shoulder. "Masey will simply cry over you when he knows what you've done. But come, Chief, what about breaking your fast? I'll warrant you haven't tasted food for twenty-four hours."

This was perfectly true, though Kabinook said nothing whatever about either his hunger or his fatigue.

"Quick, Angus, old boy, get the chief the biggest pannikin of venison stew there is in the Fort," said the corporal.

When the chief had fed, and been supplied with a new set of buffalo robes as a gift, Corporal Merry took the Commandant of the Fort, who was a civilian fur-trader, into his confidence. Then he made his requisition for the morrow.

"The snow surface is all right now for the dog teams, I believe, Commandant?" he said.

"Yes, Corporal. It will be all team work from now on until the spring."

"Well, I want the best cariole and team of huskies you have in the place ready for the morning."

"You shall have 'em, Corporal. It's Dominion service. And I'll hold up the whole business of the place to help catch those murderous gangsters, who give the North West a bad name. There's Number One Team—eight 'Laska Dogs."

"Travelling furs, parka hoods, an' extra buffalo robes," went on Merry. "And say ten days' rations, with six days' dog-meat."

"And you start?"

"At dawn," replied Merry. "I want to be away before the other folks are astir. No bells on the huskies, therefore. They'd give us away."

"Right. Everything shall be ready half an hour before dawn, just by the big gates," said Ferguson, the commandant.

"One more thing, Mr. Ferguson," said the corporal to the commandant.

"Well?"

"The Blue Ridge Patrol, who have been following hard on our heels since we left the post at Pine Creek, must by now be near the mouth of the Buffalo River, waiting for this blow to cease. If the ice isn't too bad, an' you *could* get 'em over——"

"I can manage it," said Ferguson, who had secured his post by a hard-won reputation for doing the apparently impossible. "The ice

on the lake has only partly formed. An' we've got a special motor boat with cut-away bows for breaking up thin ice. I'll get the patrol over at the earliest possible moment. Then I'll give 'em the latest news."

"Thanks, Commandant."

And the next moment Ferguson left the two members of the Royal Mounted to arrange all the further details of the adventure.

CHAPTER XVII

NEXT morning, just as the icy breath of the northern dawn came sighing through the snow-laden trees about Fort Carey, a team of huskies without their customary bells, and accompanied by three fur-clad men, swung silently out of the old court-yard and turned sharply off westward up the Wahanni Trail.

The three men wore long, racquet-like snow-shoes on their feet. Kabinook, of whom Masey used to say that he could "almost follow the trail of a fish in the water," held the long driving reins. Merry and McQuin, in an effort to warm their limbs, raced alongside the quickly-moving cariole, for the early morning air had a bite in it, which nipped through their thick, bearskin furs.

An hour later the sun, which had now risen, shone brilliantly from a cloudless sky. But the air remained keen and cutting with the thermometer only two degrees above zero.

"Thank goodness the blow's over!" said Quin. "We don't want another blizzard till

this job's done. Do you think it will hold up, now, Chief."

The Indian shook his head doubtfully, glancing suspiciously towards the northern horizon.

"Frightfully weather-wise is the chief," said Merry. "But he's not very reassuring. However, we should reach the Wahanni Valley by sunset to-morrow. An' it shouldn't be a long job to smoke out that nest of hornets, an' get back to the fort."

All that day, with very brief occasional halts to rest and feed the dogs, the party travelled over the open trail, through deep drifts, along well-wooded valleys, and over several ever-steepening ridges. They were already among the foot hills of the Horn Mountain Range, which, farther west, join the Rockies of British Columbia.

"Ugh!" called the Indian guide towards sunset, then threw down the reins he had held all day.

It was the signal for camping. The dogs were unharnessed, then fed, and tied again near the camp lest they should stray. A snow dug-out was quickly prepared, and a huge fire of dried spruce and pine logs kindled.

The spot chosen was a deep, timbered valley, sheltered from the biting northern blast. And very soon the whole party, wrapped in their

furs, and warmed by a hot dish of pemmican stew, followed by coffee made of melted snow and a thick, black, juicy fluid carried in a flask, made themselves comfortable for the night.

So they thought. But that night it was little comfort and less sleep the tired voyagers enjoyed. The coming of the snow had unloosed yet another peril upon all travellers in those frozen wilds. A hideous howl came from the timber scarcely twenty yards away, and the Indian half-lifted his head.

The howl came from a huge, grey wolf, the leader of a mighty pack. He was sending forth his hideous call, to which hundreds of hungry, ravenous beasts would shortly respond.

Instantly the dogs took up the challenge, filling the valley with a horrid and noisome din.

"Quiet, there!" yelled the corporal, hurling a fire-brand to quieten the team.

But the hunting call had gone forth now. The leader of the pack had scented the quarry, and was calling his mates to a "kill." For twelve days the land had been snow-bound, and the hungry wolves, unable to satisfy their hunger in the normal way, had become daring enough to challenge other prey.

Here was the smell of warm, living things —dogs and men. Only that blazing fire of

logs kept the pack from charging upon the camp to tear and rend their human and animal prey.

Other packs had heard the call now, and from across the frozen creek, and both sides of the valley, the insatiable, ravenous, grey, wraith-like creatures came. And presently there was a ring of them, in serried ranks, almost countless in number, closing in upon the three men.

"Gosh! we've run into 'em this time," exclaimed Merry, getting out of his blankets and picking up his rifle.

"It will take us all our time to save the dogs," said Quin, as he listened to the ever-swelling chorus of maddened howls.

"We'll be lucky to save our own skins," replied the corporal. "Pile on more logs, Quin. They're more frightened of the fire than of the guns."

The dogs now became more furious than ever.

"Wah!" cried Kabinook, scarcely disguising his own uneasiness as he went over to the teamsters and beat one or two of the more ferocious brutes that snapped viciously at him. Then he untied the thongs which held them, and brought them closer into the camp.

The old Indian knew that the king of all the wolves was present that night, maddened

by hunger. "Mush, you curs!" he called to the team, almost as savage as the wolves now, for they perpetually replied to the challenge from the timber.

All the grey beasts from the northern jungle seemed to be there now, snapping, snarling, and showing their terrible fangs and red, lolling tongues. They were threatening to rush the camp every instant. Something had to be done!

Blazing logs were hurled at the beasts, which yelped and withdrew for a moment, but returned more furious than ever. Then the guns were loaded.

"Crack-crack-crack!" A dozen times the rifles spoke, as the beasts came within a few feet of the dug-out. And at every shot a grey monster fell writhing. It was torn limb from limb by the other wolves, who fed upon their fellow, then returned once more to threaten the camp.

So it lasted—one long, terrible nightmare throughout the dark hours, until, with the first tinge of dawn, the packs drew off, their hunger only a trifle appeased.

"Deuce of a night we've had, Quin!" remarked the corporal, when after barely half an hour's sleep the Indian, who had kept the fire burning brightly, roused his companions. Sleep, or the lack of it, scarcely troubled

Kabinook. He appeared to be capable of going a week without it.

A hasty breakfast followed. Then the dogs were hitched up again. It was found that, despite all their precautions, one husky was missing, having either strayed or fallen a prey to the wolves.

For another day the three men travelled hard, and, two hours before sunset, the Indian grunted, dropped the reins, and made a sweeping gesture with his hand towards a deep, wooded ravine.

"The Wahanni?" queried Merry. "The secret lair of the bandits?"

"Ugh!" grunted Kabinook. Then he held up one finger.

"An hour's journey?" guessed the corporal, who by this time had come to understand most of the Indian's grunts and gestures.

Kabinook nodded, and began to unhitch the dogs.

Then a brief council of war was held, near to the first of the deserted shacks which had been used by the prospectors.

It was decided that as the dogs might give tongue in reply to some stray timber wolf, it would now be necessary to leave them behind. The round up of the bandits, to be carried out successfully, must be in the nature of a complete surprise.

"Plenty dog-meat," said the chief. "Dogs tired. Eat and sleep. No fight if no hungry." Then he pointed to the empty shack.

"Right," exclaimed Merry, who had guessed the chief's intention. "We'll feed the dogs well, then shut 'em up in the shack an' hide the sleigh. No use anyone staying behind to guard 'em. We've got a man-size job before us."

The dogs were given a double meal, enough to satisfy the hungriest. After that, they were tethered within the shack, and the sleigh stowed away in the fuel shed.

Then, after a hurried meal and a rapid inspection of their rifles, pistols, and ammunition, Merry gave the order to proceed up the Wahanni Valley.

"Now mush, Chief!" he said. And the three men, their rifles at the trail, set out on snow-shoes to attack the bandit's secret lair.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was a grim and daring adventure upon which Tom Merry and McQuinlan had started now. If the bandits caught a glimpse of them across the snow-line the odds were greatly in favour of the Malson gang. The latter would shoot to kill. But it was all in the line of duty. And the two youths set their faces to the task.

"Mounties never turn back, Quin!" Tom reminded his friend, as they trudged up the narrow valley in single file, planting their snow-shoes as nearly as possible in the prints of the Indian.

"I know, Tom," replied his companion. "An' I'm not going to funk the coming fight."

"We're the representatives of law an' order in this big territory," continued Merry, making a wide sweep with his hand which embraced mountain, plain and forest. "An' we've run the worst crew in the North West into a corner.

It's either the hold-up gang or it's ourselves must go under."

The corporal, fully alive to his responsibilities, was resolved to see the thing through. And McQuinlan was equally resolute.

Up the narrow valley they went, winding in and out after Kabinook, climbing over steep boulders and slippery ledges where the icicles from the rocks were thick as a man's limbs.

An hour later they were in the danger zone.

"Hist!" came a sibilant note from the Indian, who had now stopped and signalled a warning.

"Are we there?" asked Merry in a low voice.

Kabinook, who was peering carefully over a ledge of rock, motioned with his head, then beckoned his companions to approach quietly. They did so, showing barely three inches of a target above the ledge, though dusk was already deepening into night. And there, in the little dip below, close to the overhanging trees and the now frozen stream, they saw a thin column of blue smoke ascending from a rude, log-built shack of considerable strength.

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian. "Three-finger man hide there. And Black Malson. Me follow trail from the Big Water. Wah!"

"H'm! Jolly snug, tight, little place too, Kabinook. But how are we goin' to land 'em?" said the corporal.

"Plenty easy," replied the Indian.

"How?" asked Quin. "Guess if they've got food and ammunition they could hold the place for weeks. 'Gainst rifle fire, at any rate. Those log piles will stop any bullet."

"Wah!" grinned the Chief. "Plenty cunning, plenty easy."

"We shall see, Kabinook," chimed in Merry. "But first of all I want to glimpse the men and make quite sure they're the chaps we want. You've met 'em both, Quin. As soon as it gets quite dark, therefore, I want you to come with me. Perhaps we can get a squint through that little window."

"Agreed," replied McQuinlan. "It will be dark enough in half an hour."

"Meanwhile, we'd better watch an' sit tight," said Merry.

It was cold work waiting for the dark. And save for stamping about in the snow on the other side of the ridge there was no way of keeping the blood from freezing. So the the three took it in turns to watch and take exercise.

The corporal thought it was just possible that, before turning in for the night, the

occupants of the shack, if they were at all suspicious, might step outside for a brief look around.

Nothing happened, however, in that direction. Evidently the bandits thought themselves absolutely secure from intrusion. And no wonder. In this snow-bound fastness of the remotest region upon earth, their trails hidden by the recent heavy snow, Black Malson and Pierre Veldrick were at that moment drinking to their hearts' content, for they had a caché of illicit liquor hidden in the glen. It was not the first time they had used this secret retreat to evade the police.

Moreover, the place was well supplied with food, and they had plenty of ammunition. The cabin had also been loop-holed for rifle fire in anticipation of just such a siege as that which now threatened.

As yet, however, the bandits were in blissful ignorance that, on this occasion, their trail had been successfully followed by the cleverest old timer of an Indian scout in the whole Territory.

There was one fly in the honey, however. Four days previously, Pierre, the half-breed, had declared that he had seen, just for the space of one second, the face of an Indian framed in the little window.

Malson had ridiculed the idea, and had even taken the bottle away from his weaker companion. But he also had been a trifle scared. And all the next morning they had searched far and near for any foot-print that might have strengthened Pierre's story.

Of course they had found nothing. The falling snow had obliterated whatever imprint the careful Kabinook had unwittingly left behind.

The half-breed had been very free with the bottle again to-night. And as he had inadvertently glanced once or twice at the window, Malson had intervened.

"Give me that bottle, Pierre," he commanded. "You'll be seeing things agen, you blithering Dog-Rib!"

The half-breed, thus challenged, scowled fiercely. But Malson was the stronger man, and never over-drank, himself.

"Hand over that drink, fool!" he thundered a second time.

Veldrick swore and looked threatening. But his master seized the bottle; and the next instant the two men were struggling together in the shack.

It was at this moment that McQuinlan and his companions had crept close up to the building.

The corporal, after very quietly trying the door and finding it barricaded, whispered to Quin:

"Sounds a bit like a rough house inside, old man. Let's creep round to the window. I want you to take just one peep, as you're the only one of us who's come into close contact with the hounds."

"Righto!" agreed Quin, and began to work quietly around to the other side of the shack.

"If it's really Malson, I'm going to challenge 'em and demand admittance."

Merry's idea seemed like asking for trouble. But, English-like, he had no wish to fire upon innocent persons by mistake. He must first make sure that it was Malson and Pierre who were in reality the occupants of the lair.

Quin crept close under the window, and then, stepping on to a packing case, he attempted to obtain a quiet glimpse of the interior of the shack. It was most unfortunate he did so at this moment. The quarrelling within had suddenly ceased as the corporal attempted the door.

"Hoi, there! Who the devil's that?" shouted Malson. "Someone tried the door just then!"

"Garn!" rasped the defiant Pierre. "Who's hearin' things now?" And he made another dive for the bottle which Malson held in his hand.

But with a lunge of his powerful fist, Black Malson hurled him aside, tumbling him into the furthest corner of the room. Malson's eyes were bulging now, and his face had assumed a most diabolical glare. It wasn't at the drunken half-breed he was looking, however. It was at the window.

Even as Veldrick charged him, and the powerful bandit swept him aside, Malson hurled the bottle at the window, smashing the glass into a hundred pieces. He had seen McQuin's face at the little window just for a second, and had recognised it.

"Red blazes, the police! Get up, Veldrick, you fool. The shack's surrounded!" he yelled.

And without a second's pause, even as McQuinlan withdrew his head amid a splinter of glass, Malson drew out his revolver and fired shot after shot through the broken window, yelling the while like an infuriated beast.

But even Pierre was sober now. This sudden dramatic change in their fortunes had cleared his head of liquor fumes, and he also whipped out his own automatic and joined in the fusilade.

"Crack! Rep–r–r–r–r!"

For fully three minutes, reloading and firing, stepping up to the window, and thrusting out an arm, the bandits in turn blazed away like a couple of maniacs armed with quick-firing guns.

"Back!" ordered Merry, only just in time. "Get under cover, Quin! They've gone stark mad, the pair of 'em!"

It was a miracle no one was hit. The wild fusillade of bullets had been fired aimlessly, however. No aim had been possible for the moment. But even as the trio retreated from tree to tree, and rock to rock, until they reached the ridge sixty feet away, then slithered to safety, the fire from the besieged party burst out afresh, this time at more regular intervals.

"Gosh! They've got the place loop-holed!" muttered the corporal.

"Which means we may have to starve 'em out," said Quin.

"Couldn't be done in weeks," replied Merry. "I guess this place was got ready, provisioned and all. The prospectors never made it as strong as that."

"First round to Malson, anyhow," observed McQuinlan. "We've rather made a mess of it, I'm afraid."

"My fault," said the corporal. "I ought to have taken the chief's word for it."

"Don't say that, Tom!" exclaimed his companion. "Nobody's hit so far. An' we've settled one thing that had to be fixed."

"What's that?"

"Well, we know now who's holding the jolly old fort. And if we have to stay here the whole winter, we'll get 'em in the end. Besides, I reckon the rest of the Blue Ridge Patrol will be here within three or four days at most."

"H'm! This is our game, McQuinlan," replied Tom Merry, with just a touch of hauteur in his voice. "An' we're goin' to get the hold-up gang before the patrol arrives."

"How?" asked the trooper. "The odds are against us. They've only got to skulk behind their barricades an' they can shoot down every man who approaches. Remember we're the attacking party."

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian. "Plenty cunning, plenty easy."

"What do you mean, Chief?" asked Merry.

"Great plenty smoke screen," explained Kabinook, pointing first to the dead timber lying around, then indicating the wind direction.

"Topping idea, Great Chief!" exclaimed the corporal. "We'll gather a pile of brush and

timber to windward an' make a smoke screen powerful enough both to blind 'em and to choke 'em! Come along, chums. Let's collect the stuff together in readiness. They can't see to aim straight when we get thick clouds of smoke surrounding their shack."

CHAPTER XIX

PLACING the Indian with loaded rifle where he could command a view of the doorway, which was the only possible exit from the shack, Corporal Merry and McQuinlan set to work with their belt-axes, and quickly gathered large quantities of dead timber and dry brush.

The moon hadn't risen yet, but the snow mantle which covered the ravine and hung thick upon the branches of the trees gave them sufficient light.

A gap in the ravine, through which the north wind howled and whistled, was stacked high with the fuel. From this point they reckoned that the shack, which was barely twenty yards away, would get the full effect of the smoke screen unless the wind shifted.

Great care was necessary, however, in piling up the huge stack, as the tiny window of the besieged fort commanded the gap. And great risk had to be run in building the fire.

"Look out!" shouted Merry, as he saw a rifle-barrel protrude from the opening, just

as Quin staggered up to the pile with a huge armful of brush. "They've drawn a bead on you."

"Crack-crack-crack!" came a sputter of fire. But Quin had leapt back just in time.

Kabinook, on his part, however, had not been less watchful, and he got a double round into the shack.

"Yaoup!" came a yell from within, as though someone had been hit.

But evidently no serious damage had been done, for the next instant both Malson and Veldrick were returning the Indian's fire.

For a couple of hours the desultory warfare continued. The besieged party wasted ammunition in profusion, whenever anybody showed so much as a finger above the snow-line. The Indian as well as the two Mounties frequently replied.

At last, just a little before dawn, such a huge pile of dead timber and brush had been accumulated that Merry believed with the strong wind blowing it would almost be possible to scorch the bandits out of their nest.

"You'll give 'em a chance to surrender first, Tom?" said Quin, as they rested from their labours for a while, and sat beside another fire they had kindled on the other side of the ridge.

"Certainly!" replied the corporal. "I shall challenge them properly at daybreak. It wouldn't be safe before. The rascals might get away."

An hour later, therefore, when the sun had risen, Merry tied a handkerchief on to the end of his rifle and waved it above the ridge, keeping his head well under cover for fear of treachery.

"Besieged party, ahoy!" he shouted. But there was no reply for a while. So he hailed the bandits again.

This time the wooden shutter, which had been rigged up across the window to provide something of a barricade, opened a few inches, and one of the bandits peeped out. It was Black Malson. So declared Quin, who had reason to remember the villainous face.

"What yer want?" he demanded savagely.

"Are you going to surrender, Malson?" asked the corporal.

"No!" came the defiant reply.

"It's your only chance."

"Why don't yer come an' fetch us, you dog of a red-coat?" snarled the bandit.

"I'll get you in the end, Malson," shouted the corporal. "So you might as well give in now. If I've got to starve you out I sit roun' till you chuck it."

"You can't starve us out. We've got twelve months' grub. An' the first red-coat who comes over the ridge gets a bullet through his head. So you'd better quit, I tell you. Black Malson's not the cove to put his head into the noose."

"Is that final?" asked the corporal, testily.

"Yup!"

"Then I'll smoke you out."

"Yaoup! Look out, Tom!" yelled McQuinlan, who had also been spying over the ridge. And leaping forward, he dragged his companion away just as Veldrick treacherously opened fire through a loop-hole, before the flag of truce was withdrawn.

The corporal narrowly escaped with his life, but the sniper's bullet pinged through McQuinlan's shoulder causing him to stagger and fall, then to roll down the ridge.

"Gosh! Are you hit, Quin?" exclaimed the corporal, becoming suddenly enraged.

"It's nothing, Tom," gasped Quin, catching his breath, but rising to his feet, clutching his shoulder. "Er—nothing serious, old man. I was afraid he'd got you."

"Crack-crack-crack!" The firing had recommenced now. The Indian was plugging the barricaded window and the loop-holes with shot after shot, taking cover behind a tree, and enjoying himself immensely. As for the

shack party, though they hadn't much of a target, they kept up a constant reply with their rifles and revolvers.

"Set fire to the stack, Kabinook!" shouted Merry. "It's no use wasting more words with that perfidious crew. We'll smoke 'em out. An' if that doesn't make 'em surrender, we'll burn the shack down."

Tom was angry now, terribly fierce too. But his first thought was for his chum. "Keep an eye on the door as well, Chief," he ordered. "I must attend to McQuinlan. If the vermin show so much as a hand, or try to escape while I'm busy, shoot 'em down!"

"Ugh!" grunted North Wind, and taking a piece of lighted tow he threw it upon the frost-dried brushwood and set it ablaze. Then he took up his post again with his rifle poised at the ready, covering the door of the shack.

Meanwhile, the corporal, having withdrawn his chum to safe cover behind the ridge, and getting what shelter he could from the piercing wind, helped him off with his furs and cut the matted tangle of blood and clothes from his wound, bathed it with warm water, which was handy in the billy, staunched the flow of blood, and, using his first-aid sachet, bound the injured shoulder as well as the circumstances would permit.

Quin bore the pain without flinching, though his pale features and his clenched lips told his companion how much he suffered during the process.

"No bullet in the shoulder, Quin," said Tom. "Must have gone clean through. Guess the bone's splintered some, though. But I don't think the artery was touched. Lucky. All the same it's bad enough with this terrible freeze-up."

"I'm all right, Tom," replied the patient. "Don't worry, old son. I've still got my left hand, an' I can shoot from either shoulder. So don't get the wind up. Guess it's only a flesh wound after all."

Pluck wasn't the word for it. But Quinlan didn't want to add to his leader's worries just then. If another casualty happened, the bandits might make a get-away after all. So he just asked Merry to fill him a pipe of tobacco, and insisted on returning to duty.

Five minutes later he was taking cover just below the ridge, and though his right arm was helpless, and dangled at his side, McQuinlan got in an occasional shot.

Tom Merry was terribly fierce now. He knew that the most drastic measures must be adopted, if Quin's arm was to be saved. The intense cold was sure to affect the wound. Gangrene

might set in, and amputation be necessary. The siege must be hurried, and McQuinlan must be wrapped in furs and rushed back to Fort Carey on the sleigh at the earliest possible moment.

The corporal was, therefore, back in the firing line as the huge mass of logs and brush began to burn fiercely.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed, as the tongue of flame reached up, then twisted towards the shack. "That ought to get 'em."

But there was more flame than smoke, for the dry weather which had preceded the frost had drained the dead timber of its sap.

"Ugh!" exclaimed North Wind. "Too much Indian smoke! Too little paleface smoke!"

The chief was referring to the old taunt of the red man against the early palefaces. For when the war hatchet was carried, the Indians used only the driest wood for their fires, thus emitting very little smoke, while the white men, little knowing the danger they incurred, piled on the faggots wet or dry as they came most handy. In that way, many a paleface camp was descried by hostile foes owing to the greater visibility of the thick smoke column.

The present defect was soon remedied, however. Snow was piled upon the fire, as no water was available. And in a moment the

biggest smoke screen the Wahanni Valley had ever seen was wrapping its mantle about the shack.

Stupefied by the smoke, half-choked and stifled by the heat, for the besiegers still piled on the fuel, of which they had an unlimited supply, the bandits were now getting the worst of it.

"Shoot, Veldrick!" ordered Malson. "Stand up to 'em! We've hit one of the goldarned red-coats. If only we can—ugh–h. Darn this confounded smoke!" And Malson coughed and sputtered as the reek and fumes poured in through the window and every crevice of the shack. "Put down that bottle, you infernal Dog-Rib!"

Veldrick had been drinking steadily now, ever since he had recognised McQuinlan.

"What's the—hic—use, Malson?" replied the now drunken half-breed. "You said 'No surrender,' didn't you, pard? An' I'm not goin' to surrender. Ef the red-coats ketch us, we'll only be hung. An' I've found a better way."

"What do you mean?" snarled Malson, after emptying another magazine of rifle fire and both his revolvers at the attacking party.

"What I mean is when the red-coats close in, there's one way out for all of us," replied the liquor-sodden man, who had been stealthily

drinking half the previous night—drinking the boot-legger's worst concoction too.

"A way out? Where?"

"Through the roof! An' the red-coats will go up with us!"

As he spoke, Veldrick drew his pistol, and pointed it to a mysterious package which for two years had rested on the top of the only cupboard the shack contained. It was a packet of dynamite—a hundred sticks and cartridges of it—which had been carelessly left there by the last prospecting party. And there was enough of it to blow a hole in the side of the ravine, which would have held a good-sized English village.

"Say when, Malson! Ha-ha-ha! Tell me when the red-coats are comin'! We'll go up together!"

CHAPTER XX

THERE was a yellow streak in Malson, despite his ferocity and bull-dog courage. Entrenched behind that thick barricade which no rifle bullet could penetrate he had shown both tenacity and daring. He believed that if he persisted, another questing bullet might so reduce the attacking force that escape might yet be possible.

That was why, for fourteen hours, since the first appearance of the police, he had fought so doggedly, cursing his accomplice who had soddened himself with drink.

But that dynamite! He had forgotten all about that till now. It was a wonder the heat of the flames from the fire without hadn't already fired the stuff. Had Malson even known how to handle the deadly "blasting gelatin" he would not have been so scared. For he could have opened the parcel, separated the sticks and thrown them singly into the camp of the Mounties during the night. The

danger then—for the shack at least—would have been trifling.

But dynamite was a mysterious and terrible property to the bandit, who had never used it personally. When, therefore, in the smoke-filled room, the drunken idiot who had been his confederate, first laughed like a maniac, then, staggering to his feet, pointed his revolver at the deadly parcel barely six feet away and began to count, Black Malson was filled with sudden terror.

"Ha–ha–ha!" laughed the maniac. "One—two—three! Crack!"

With a yell Malson had leapt upon Veldrick and tried to wrench the pistol from his grasp. And together they went down struggling, the pistol exploding and the bullet shattering the cornice of the cupboard within a few inches of the deadly "gelatin."

It was the nearest thing yet. Had the bullet hit the package, the impact upon the closely sealed dynamite would have blown the shack into a thousand fragments and rent a fissure in the ravine big enough to divert the watercourse for a hundred yards. Worse than that—it would have ended the lives of three other men, unworthy of such a fate.

The deadly struggle within the hut had coincided with a determined attack from with-

out. Corporal Merry, hearing the quarrel within, and suspecting that the bandits were fighting, had crept down through the curtain of smoke, peeped in at the window, then signalled to his companions.

In less than five seconds the Indian, and also McQuinlan, despite his wound, had closed up.

"Batter in the door, Tom!" shouted Quin.

The corporal was already doing it, using his axe with such quick and hefty strokes that first the panelling, then the frame-work gave way.

"Hands up!" he shouted, dashing through the smoke into the shack. "Put 'em up, or I'll shoot!" And to show he meant business, Merry fired two rounds just wide of his victims.

The two men were still in a life-and-death grapple on the floor. Veldrick had emptied four of his five chambers in the direction of the explosive. But each time Malson, wild with fear, had spoilt his aim.

Veldrick, wrenching his arm free, was attempting another shot. It was his last cartridge.

"Mind! He's aiming at the dynamite!" yelled Malson, more terrified now of the deadly gelatin than of arrest. "Stop him an' I'll go quiet!"

"Dynamite?" echoed Merry, and with his

heavy regulation boot he kicked the half-breed's pistol from his hand and got a grip upon Malson.

The same instant, Kabinook closed upon Veldrick and held him in a grip of vice.

"The wristlets, Quin! Can you manage 'em, old son?"

"Sure!" replied McQuinlan. And though his right arm still hung limp and useless, he managed with his other hand to snap the iron bracelets of the law first upon Malson, as Merry knelt upon his victim, then upon the liquor-maddened half-breed.

"Got 'em both!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as he allowed his gasping prisoner to rise. "But it was a near thing, old son!" And as he spoke, the corporal made a gesture with his disengaged hand towards the mysterious package on the shelf.

And in fact it was so near that in all their lives neither Tom Merry nor Angus McQuinlan had ever sailed so close to the spectre, death.

"Now for the loot, Malson," said the corporal. "Where have you stowed it?"

But the bandit, now that the terrible fear of sudden death had passed, was regaining something of his customary ferocity. He was annoyed to think that his own confederate, Veldrick, had failed him at the last moment.

He was even now resolved upon heroics, and would attempt a get-away if a chance offered. He glowered at the corporal.

"Out with it, Malson!" said Merry, shaking his captive roughly. "Where have you hidden the loot from the hold-up at the Great Bear Divide?"

"Find it!" snarled the bandit.

"All right. So I will," replied Merry. Then turning to the Indian, he said:

"Rope 'em together, Kabinook! Tie 'em up with that wolf knot o' yours."

The Indian's features relaxed into a smile. And within fifty seconds he had triced the two bandits together in a double-clove-hitch of the Algonquin pattern, so tightly, that the half-breed squealed. Another twist of the knotted splice, and even Malson yelped with pain.

"The loot, Malson," the corporal asked quietly this time. "Where have you stowed it?"

It was then the bandit capitulated, for the Indian was ready with another twist of the splice. And Merry, in his eagerness to get Quin back to the fort, was still fierce.

"Under the floor board," growled Malson. "Near the door."

Quickly the loose board was found and

all the loot recovered. Including the money found upon La Rocque at the trapper's camp, the full fifty thousand dollars, and the complete haul of jewellery taken from the passengers of the "Transcontinental" were recovered. Then Merry gave the word to march.

But ere they were half way back down the ravine to the first shack where the huskies had been tied, they encountered the rest of the Blue Ridge Patrol, with Sergeant Masey, the old time frontiersman, in command.

The greeting between the two detachments was thrillsome and exciting. And when Masey's party saw the "hold-up" gang in irons, the cheering was immense.

"I'm proud of you, lads!" said the old sergeant, patting McQuinlan gently on his wounded shoulder, and giving each a grip of his hand. "And the Blue Ridge Patrol's proud of you, aren't we, boys?"

"Hip-hip-hurrah!" came the response in the shape of a second cheer.

"But I knew you'd pull it off. *The Mounties never turn back.* You're youngsters at the game yet. But in time you'll be leaders, an' Commissioners, I guess," said Masey.

Then, lifting his right hand towards the sky, and placing his left hand across his breast, the

old scout gave the true redskin greeting to the chief.

North Wind acknowledged the salutation with true Indian solemnity, making the circle of the sun thrice in reply. Then in his soft musical tone, he made the following brief speech, for in mystic Indian signs the old scout had been thanking his old friend for taking up the trail, and helping the patrol.

"Ugh! It is nothing. Kabinook has only been teaching the young palefaces how to follow a trail. North Wind is the friend of the red-coats. He has not forgotten the trail which they made to the wigwams of my people, when the caribou failed, and there was no food in the land. The Indian never forgets his friends. But it is long since my paleface brother followed the trail to the lodge of Kabinook. And the face of the Manito is hidden from North Wind, when my brother comes not again to smoke the calumet, the peace pipe, with North Wind."

The Indian made as though he would depart. His work for the white men was finished. But Masey held him for a while.

"Listen, North Wind, greatest Chief of all the Red Men," said the patrol-leader. "I have been remiss. But I will come again to the wigwam of my red brother when the

flowers return, and the singing birds fill the woods. Then will we fish the streams, trap the beaver, and hunt the red deer together. And when I come again, my hands will not be empty. The Great White Chief at Regina shall hear all that North Wind has done for his children of the Blue Ridge Patrol."

North Wind bowed his head in acknowledgment of this tribute from a white man. Then lifting high his right hand once again in farewell greeting, he parted from his friends, climbed the ridge to reach a distant trail which led back to the lodges of his people, heavy with sorrow at leaving his friends.

Masey halted his patrol, until ten minutes later, the figure of the old chief was outlined in silhouette on the skyline. And for an instant the redskin once more lifted his hand, open-palm towards the palefaces, then disappeared.

"He is a great chief!" said Masey. Then stiffening his upper lip, he gave the order—"March, the Blue Ridge Patrol."

. . . . .

Two days later the patrol arrived safely at Fort Carey. The Great Slave Lake now being frozen, the prisoners were taken over the ice direct to Regina to be tried for the "hold-up" of the Prince Rupert Express at the Divide.

McQuinlan, whose condition was now feverish, was left under the charge of the medical attendant of the fort. And Corporal Merry remained with the sick man.

That was months ago.

The two chums are O.K. now, and are both back at Pine Creek, serving with the famous

BLUE RIDGE PATROL

THE END

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