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## CHAPTER XIV

### WHAT CAME OF THE GRIEVOUS EXPERIMENT

**F**OUR or five hours after he had been told Philip's story, Dr. McGil was thinking of the doctor's story. He dreamed of it while he was asleep. In a way for which he could not account, the story had a peculiar effect upon him, and developed in him a desire to know the end. He awoke in the morning anxious to resume the subject with McGil, but the doctor disappointed him. During the whole of the day he made no direct reference to his position in the North, and when Philip once or twice brought him back to the matter he evaded any discussion of it, giving him to understand, without saying so, that the matter was a closed incident between them, only to be reopened when he was able to give some help to the search. The doctor talked

## PHILIP STEELE

freely of his home, of the beauty and the goodness of his wife, and of a third member whom they expected in their little family circle in the spring. They discussed home topics—politics, clubs and sport. The doctor disliked society, though for professional reasons he was compelled to play a small part in it, and in this dislike the two men found themselves on common ground. They became more and more confidential in all ways but one. They passed hours in playing cribbage with a worn pack of Pierre's cards, and the third night sang old college songs which both had nearly forgotten. It was on this evening that they planned to remain one more day in Pierre's cabin and then leave for Fort Smith.

"You have hope—there," said Philip in a casual way, as they were undressing.

"Little hope, but the search will begin from there," replied the doctor. "I have more hope at Chippewayan, where we struck a clew. I sent back my Indian to follow it up."

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

They went to bed. How long he had slept Philip had no idea, when he was awakened by a slight noise. In a sub-conscious sort of way, with his eyes still closed, he lay without moving and listened. The sound came again, like the soft, cautious tread of feet near him. Still without moving he opened his eyes. The oil lamp which he had put out on retiring was burning low. In its dim light stood the doctor, half dressed, in a tense attitude of listening.

"What's the matter?" asked Philip.

The professor started, and turned toward the stove.

"Nervousness, I guess," he said gloomily. "I was afraid I would awaken you. I've been up three times during the last hour—listening for a voice."

"A voice?"

"Yes, back there in the bunk I could have sworn that I heard it calling somewhere out in the night. But when I get up I can't hear it. I've stood at the door until I'm frozen."

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"It's the wind," said Philip. "It has troubled me many times out on the snow plains. I've heard it wail like children crying among the dunes, and again like women screaming, and men shouting. You'd better go to bed."

"Listen!"

The doctor stiffened, his white face turned to the door.

"Good Heavens, was that the wind?" he asked after a moment.

Philip had rolled from his bunk and was pulling on his clothes.

"Dress and we'll find out," he advised.

Together they went to the door, opened it, and stepped outside. The sky was thick and heavy, with only a white blurr where the moon was smothered. Fifty yards away the gray gloom became opaque. Over the thousand miles of drift to the north there came a faint whistling wind, rising at times in fitful sweeps of flinty snow, and at intervals dying away until it became only a lulling sound. In one of

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

these intervals both men held their breath. From somewhere out of the night, and yet from nowhere that they could point, there came a human voice.

"Pier-r-r-r-e Thoreau—Pier-r-r-r-e Thoreau—Ho, Pierre Thoreau-u-u-u!"

"Off there!" shivered the doctor.

"No—out there!" said Philip.

He raised his own voice in an answering shout, and in response there came again the cry for Pierre Thoreau.

"I'm right!" cried the doctor. "Come!"

He darted away, his greatcoat making a dark blur in the night ahead of Philip, who paused again to shout through the megaphone of his hands. There came no reply. A second and a third time he shouted, and still there was no response.

"Queer," he thought. "What the devil can it mean?"

The doctor had disappeared, and he followed in the direction he had gone. A hundred yards

## PHILIP STEELE

more and he saw the dark blur again, close to the ground. The doctor was bending over a human form stretched out in the snow.

"Just in time," he said to Philip as he came up. Excitement had gone from his voice now. It was cool and professional, and he spoke in a commanding way to his companion. "You're heavier than I, so take him by the shoulders and hold his head well up. I don't believe it's the cold, for his body is warm and comfortable. I feel something wet and thick on his shirt, and it may be blood. So hold his head well up."

Between them they carried him back to the cabin, and with the quick alertness of a man accustomed to every emergency of his profession the doctor stripped off his two coats while Philip looked at the face of the man whom they had placed in his bunk. His own experience had acquainted him with violence and bloodshed, but in spite of that fact he shuddered slightly as he gazed on the unconscious form. It was that of a young man of splendid

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

physique, with a closely shaven face, short blond hair, and a magnificent pair of shoulders. Beyond the fact that he knew the face wore no beard he could scarce have told if it were white or black. From chin to hair it was covered with stiffened blood.

The doctor came to his side.

"Looks bad, doesn't he?" he said cheerfully. "Thought it wasn't the cold. Heart beating too fast, pulse too active. Ah—hot water if you please, Philip!"

He loosened the man's coat and shirt, and a few moments later, when Philip brought a towel and a basin of water, he rose from his examination.

"Just in time—as I said before," he exclaimed with satisfaction. "You'd never have heard another 'Pierre Thoreau' out of him, Philip," he went on, speaking the young man's name as if he had been accustomed to doing it for a long time. "Wound on the head—skull sound—loss of blood from over-exertion. We'll

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have him drinking coffee within an hour if you'll make some."

The doctor rolled up his shirt sleeves and began to wash away the blood.

"A good-looking chap," he said over his shoulder. "Face clean cut, fine mouth, a frontal bone that must have brain behind it, square chin—" He broke off to ask: "What do you suppose happened to him?"

"Haven't got the slightest idea," said Philip, putting the coffee pot on the stove. "A blow, isn't it?"

Philip was turning up the wick of the lamp when a sudden startled cry came from the bedside. Something in it, low and suppressed, made him turn so quickly that by a clumsy twist of his fingers the lamp was extinguished. He lighted it again and faced the doctor. McGill was upon his knees, terribly pale.

"Good Heaven!" he gasped. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing, Phil—it was *he*! He let

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

it out of him so unexpectedly that it startled me."

"I thought it was your voice," said Philip.

"No, no, it was his. See, he is returning to consciousness."

The wounded man's eyes opened slowly, and closed again. He heaved a great sigh and stretched out his arms as if about to awaken from a deep slumber. The doctor sprang to his feet.

"We must have ice, Phil--finely chopped ice from the creek down there. Will you take the ax and those two pails and bring back both pails full? No hurry, but we'll need it within an hour."

Philip bundled himself in his coat and went out with the ax and pails.

"Ice!" he muttered to himself. "Now what can he want of ice?"

He dug down through three feet of snow and chopped for half an hour. When he returned to the cabin the wounded man was

## PHILIP STEELE

bolstered up in bed, and the doctor was pacing back and forth across the room, evidently worked to a high pitch of excitement.

"Murder—robbery—outrage! Right under our noses, that's what it was!" he cried. "Pierre Thoreau is dead—killed by the scoundrels who left this man for dead beside him! They set upon them late yesterday afternoon as Pierre and his partner were coming home, intending to kill them for their outfit. The murderers, who are a breed and a white trapper, have probably gone to their shack half a dozen miles up the creek. Now, Mr. Philip Steele, here's a little work for you!"

MacGregor himself had never stirred Philip Steele's blood as did the doctor's unexpected words, but the two men watching him saw nothing unusual in their effect. He set down his ice and coolly took off his coat, then advanced to the side of the wounded man.

"I'm glad you're better," he said, looking down into the other's strong, pale face. "It was

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

a pretty close shave. Guess you were a little out of your head, weren't you?"

For an instant the man's eyes shifted past Philip to where the doctor was standing

"Yes—I must have been. He says I was calling for Pierre, and Pierre was dead. I left him ten miles back there in the snow." He closed his eyes with a groan of pain and continued, after a moment, "Pierre and I have been trapping foxes. We were coming back with supplies to last us until late spring when—it happened. The white man's name is Dobson, and there's a breed with him. Their shack is six or seven miles up the creek."

Philip saw the doctor examining a revolver which he had taken from the pocket of his big coat. He came over to the bunkside with it in his hand.

"That's enough, Phil," he said softly. "He must not talk any more for an hour or two or we'll have him in a fever. Get on your coat. I'm going with you."

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"I'm going alone," said Phil shortly. "You attend to your patient." He drank a cup of coffee, ate a piece of toasted bannock, and with the first gray breaking of dawn started up the creek on a pair of Pierre's old snow-shoes. The doctor followed him to the creek and watched him until he was out of sight.

The wounded man was sitting on the edge of the cot when McGill reëntered the cabin. His exertion had brought a flush of color back into his face, which lighted up with a smile as the other came through the door.

"It was a close shave, thanks to you," he said, repeating Philip's words.

"Just so," replied the doctor. He had placed a brace of short bulldog revolvers on the table and offered one of them now to his companion. "The shaving isn't over yet, Falkner."

They ate breakfast, each with a gun beside his tin plate. Now and then the doctor interrupted his meal to go to the door and peer over the broadening vista of the barrens. They had

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

nearly finished when he came back from one of these observations, his lips set a little tighter, a barely perceptible tremor in his voice when he spoke.

"They're coming, Falkner!"

They picked up their revolvers and the doctor buttoned his coat tight up about his neck. For ten minutes they sat silent and listening. Not until the crunching beat of snow-shoes came to their ears did the doctor move. Thrusting his weapon into his coat pocket, he went to the door. Falkner followed him, and stood well out of sight when he opened it. Two men and a dog team were crossing the opening. McGill's dogs were fastened under a brush lean-to built against the cabin, and as the rival team of huskies began filling the air with their clamor for a fight, the stranger team halted and one of the two men came forward alone. He stopped with some astonishment before the aristocratic-looking little man waiting for him in Pierre's doorway.

PHILIP STEEL

"Is Pierre Thoreau at home?" he demanded.

"I'm a stranger here, so I can not say," replied the doctor, inspecting the questioner with marked coolness. "It is possible, however, that he is—for I picked up a man half dead out in the snow last night, and I'm waiting for him to come back to life. A smooth-faced, blond fellow, with a cut on his head. It may be this Pierre Thoreau."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the man kicked off his snow-shoes and with an excited wave of his arm to his companion with the dogs, almost ran past the doctor.

"It's him—the man I want to see!" he cried in a low voice. "My name's Dobson, of the—"

What more he had meant to say was never finished. Falkner's powerful arms had gripped his head and throat in a vise-like clutch from which no smother of sound escaped, and three or four minutes later, when the second man came through the door, he found his comrade

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

flat on his back, bound and gagged, and the shining muzzles of two short and murderous-looking revolvers leveled at his breast. He was a swarthy breed, scarcely larger than the doctor himself, and his only remonstrance as his hands were fastened behind his back was a brief outburst of very bad and very excited French which the professor stopped with a threatening flourish of his gun.

"You'll do," he said, standing off to survey his prisoner. "I believe you're harmless enough to have the use of your legs and mouth." With a comic bow the little doctor added, "Monsieur, I'm going to ask you to drive us back to Fort Smith, and if you so much as look the wrong way out of your eyes I'll blow off your head. You and your friend are to answer for the killing of Pierre Thorean and for the attempted murder of this young man, who will follow us to Fort Smith to testify against you."

It was evident that the half-breed did not understand, and the doctor added a few explan-

## PHILIP STEELE

atory words in French. The man on the floor groaned and struggled until he was red in the face.

"Easy, easy," soothed the doctor. "I appreciate the fact that it is pretty tough luck, Dobson, but you'll have to take your medicine. Falkner, if you'll lend a hand in getting me off I won't lose much time in starting for Fort Smith."

It was a strange-looking outfit that set out from Pierre Thoreau's cabin half an hour later. Ahead of the team which had come that morning walked the breed, his left arm bound to his side with a *babiche* thong. On the sledge behind him lay an inanimate and blanket-wrapped bundle, which was Dobson; and close at the rear of the sledge, stripped of his great-coat and more than ever like a diminutive drum-major, followed Dudley McGill, professor of neurology and diseases of the brain, with a bulldog revolver in his mittened hand.

From the door Falkner watched them go.

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Six hours later Philip returned from the east. Falkner saw him coming up from the creek and went to meet him.

"I found the cabin, but no one was there," said Philip. "It has been deserted for a long time. No tracks in the snow, everything inside frozen stiff, and what signs I did find were of a woman!"

The muscles of Falkner's face gave a sudden twitch. "A woman!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, a woman," repeated Philip, "and there was a photograph of her on a table in the bedroom. Did this Dobson have a wife?"

Falkner had fallen a step behind him as they entered the cabin.

"A long time ago—a woman was there," he said. "She was a young woman, and—and almost beautiful. But she wasn't his wife."

"She was pretty," replied Philip, "so pretty that I brought her picture along for my collection at home." He looked about for McGill. "Where's the doctor?"

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Falkner's face was very white as he explained what had happened during the other's absence.

"He said that he would camp early this afternoon so that you could overtake them," he finished after he had described the capture and the doctor's departure. "The doctor thought you would want to lose no time in getting the prisoners to Fort Smith, and that he could get a good start before night. To-morrow or the next day I am going to follow with the other team. I'd go with you if he hadn't commanded me to remain here and nurse my head for another twenty-four hours."

Philip shrugged his shoulders, and the two had little to say as they ate their dinners. After an hour's rest he prepared a light pack and took up the doctor's trail. Inwardly he rankled at the unusual hand which the little professor was playing in leaving Pierre's cabin with the prisoners, and yet he was confident that McGill would wait for him. Mile after



Two shining muzzles were leveled at his breast



## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

mile he traveled down the creek. At dusk there was no sign of his new friend. Just before dark he climbed a dead stub at the summit of a high ridge and half a dozen miles of the unbroken barren stretched out before his eyes. At six o'clock he stopped to cook some tea and warm his meat and bannock. After that he traveled until ten, then built a big fire and gave up the pursuit until morning. At dawn he started again, and not until the forenoon was half gone did he find where the doctor had stopped to camp.

The ashes of his fire were still warm beneath and the snow was trampled hard around them. In the north the clouds were piling up, betokening a storm such as it was not well for a man in Philip's condition of fatigue to face. Already some flavor of the approaching blizzard was carried to him on the wind.

So he hurried on. Fortunately the storm died away after an hour or two of fierce wind. Still he did not come up with McGill, and he

## PHILIP STEELE

camped again for the night, cursing the little professor who was racing on ahead of him.

It was noon of the following day when he came in sight of the few log cabins at Fort Smith, situated in a treeless and snow-smothered sweep of the plain on the other side of the Slave. He crossed the river and hurried past the row of buildings that led to post headquarters. In front of the company office were gathered a little crowd of men, women and children. He pushed his way through and stopped at the bottom of the three log steps which led up to the door.

At the top was Professor McGill, coming out. His face was a puzzle. His eyes had in them a stony stare as he gazed down at Philip. Then he descended slowly, like one moving in a dream.

"Good Heavens," he said huskily, and only for Philip's ears, "do you know what I've done, Phil?"

"What?" demanded Philip.

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

The doctor came down to the last step.

"Phil," he whispered, "that fellow we found with a broken head played a nice game on me. He was a criminal, and I've brought back to Fort Smith no less person than the man sent out to arrest him, Corporal Dobson, of the Mounted Police, and his driver, Francois Something-or-Other. Heavens, ain't it funny?"

That same afternoon Corporal Dobson and the half-breed set out again in quest of Falkner, and this time they were accompanied by Pierre Thoreau, who learned for the first time what had happened in his cabin. The doctor disappeared for the rest of the day, but early the next morning he hunted Phil up and took him to a cabin half a mile down the river. A team of powerful dogs, an unusually large sledge, and two Indians were at the door.

"I bought 'em last night," explained the doctor, "and we're going to leave for the south to-day."

## PHILIP STEELE

"Giving up your hunt?" asked Philip.

"No, it's ended," replied McGill in a matter-of-fact way. "It ended at Pierre Thoreau's cabin. Falkner was the third man to work out my experiment."

Philip stopped in his tracks, and the doctor stopped, and turned toward him.

"But the third—" Philip began.

The little doctor continued to smile.

"There are more things in Heaven and earth, Philip," he quoted, "than are dreamed of in your philosophy. This love experiment has turned out wrongly, as far as preconceived theories are concerned, but when I think of the broader, deeper significance of it all I am—pleased is not the word."

"What I can't see—" Philip was stopped by the doctor's lifted hand.

"You see, I am relying on your word of honor, Phil," he explained, laughing softly at the amazement which he saw in the other's face. "It's all so wonderful that I want you

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

to know the end of it, and how happily it has turned out for me—and the little woman waiting for me back home. It was I and not Falkner who cried out just before you turned the lamp-wick down. A letter had fallen from his coat pocket, and it was one of my letters—sent through my agent. Understand? I sent you for the ice, and while you were gone I told him who I was, and he told me why I had never heard from him, and why he was in Pierre Thoreau's cabin. My agent had sent him north with five hundred dollars as a first payment. To cut a long story short, he got into a card game in Prince Albert—as the best of us do at times—and as a result become mixed up in a quarrel, in which he pretty nearly killed a man. They've been after him ever since, and almost had him when we found him, injured by a blow which he received in an ugly fall earlier in the night. It's the last and total wrecking of my theory."

"But the girl—" urged Philip.

## PHILIP STEELE

"We're going to see her now, and she will tell you the whole story as she told it to me," said the doctor, as calmly as before. "Ah, but it's wonderful, man—this great, big, human love that fills the world! They two met at Nelson House, as I had planned they should, and four months after that they smashed my theory by being married by a missionary from York Factory. I mean that they smashed the bad part of it, Phil, but all three couples proved the other—that there exist no such things as 'soul affinities,' and that two normal people of opposite sexes, if thrown together under certain environment, will as naturally mate as two birds, and will fight and die for one another afterward, too. There may not be one in ten thousand who believes it, but I do—still. At the last moment the man in Falkner triumphed over his love and he told her what he was, that up until the moment he met her he drank and gambled, and that for his shooting a man in Prince Albert he would sooner or

## WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT

later get a term in prison. And she? I tell you that she busted my theory to a frazzle! She loved him, as I now believe every woman in the world is capable of loving, and she married him, and stuck to him through thick and thin, fled with him when he was compelled to run—and her faith in him now is like that of a child in its God. For a time they lived in that cabin above Pierre Thoreau's, and perhaps they wouldn't have been found out if they hadn't come up to Fort Smith for a holiday. Falkner told me that his pursuers would surely stop at Pierre's, and so we fixed up that little scheme to get rid of you so that you would in no way be to blame for what happened. He told me where I'd find his wife. By this time he has a good start for the States, and will be there by the time I get his wife down."

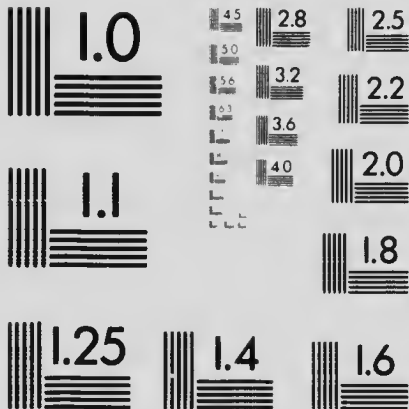
Philip had not spoken a word. Almost mechanically he pulled the photograph from his pocket.

"And this—" he said.



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PHILIP STEELE

The doctor laughed as he took the picture from his hand.

"Is Mrs. William Falkner, Phil. Come in. I'm anxious to have you meet her."

## CHAPTER XV

### PHILIP'S LAST ASSIGNMENT

**P**HILIP, instead of following the doctor, laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Wait!" he said.

Something in the seriousness of his manner drew a quick look of apprehension over the other's face.

"I want to talk with you," continued Philip. "Let us walk a little way down the trail."

The doctor eyed him suspiciously as they turned away from the cabin.

"See here, Phil Steele," he said, and there was a hard ring in his voice, "I've had all sorts of confidence in you, and I've told you more, perhaps, than I ought. I don't suppose you have a suspicion that you ought to break it?"

"No, it isn't that," replied Philip, laughing

## PHILIP STEELE

a little uneasily. "I'm glad you got away with Falkner, and so far as I am concerned no one will ever know what has happened. It's I who want to place a little confidence in you now. I am positively at my wits' end, and all over a situation which seems to place you and me in a class by ourselves—sort of brothers in trouble, you know," and he told McGill, briefly, of Isobel, and his search for her.

"I lost them between Lac Bain and Fort Churchill," he finished. "The two sledges separated, one continuing to Churchill, and the other turning into the South. I followed the Churchill sledge—and was wrong. When I came back the snow had covered the other trail."

The little professor stopped suddenly and squared himself directly in Philip's path.

"You don't say!" he gasped. There was a look of amazement on his face.

"What a wonderfully little world this is, Phil," he added, smiling in a curious way.

## PHILIP'S LAST ASSIGNMENT

"What a wonderfully, wonderfully little world it is! It's only a playground, after all, and the funny part of it is that it is not even large enough to play a game of hide-and-seek in, successfully. I've proved that beyond question. And here—you—"

"What?" demanded Philip, puzzled by the other's attitude.

"Well, you see, I went first to Nelson House," said McGill, "and from there up to the Hudson's Bay Company's post in the Cochrane River, hunting for Falkner and this girl—a man and a woman. And at the Cochrane Post a Frenchman told me that there was a strange man and woman up at Lac Bain, and I set off for there. That must have been just about the time you were starting for Churchill, for on the third day up I met a sledge that turned me off the Lac Bain trail to take up the nearer trail to Chippewayan. With this sledge were the two who had been at Lac Bain, Colonel Becker and his daughter."

## PHILIP STEELE

For a moment Philip could not speak. He caught the other's hand excitedly.

"You—you found where they were going?" he asked, when McGill did not continue.

"Yes. We ate dinner together, and the colonel said they were bound for Nelson House, and that they would probably go from there to Winnipeg. I didn't ask which way they would go."

"From Nelson House it would be by the Saskatchewan and Le Pas trail," cried Philip. He was looking straight over the little doctor's head. "If it wasn't for this damnable DeBar—whom I ought to go after again—"

"Drop DeBar," interrupted McGill quietly. "He's got too big a start of you anyway—so what's the use? Drop 'im. I dropped a whole lot of things when I came up here."

"But the law—"

"Damn the law!" exploded the doctor with unexpected vehemence. "Sometimes I think the world would be just as happy without it."

## PHILIP'S LAST ASSIGNMENT

Their eyes met, sharp and understanding.

"You're a professor in a college," chuckled Philip, his voice trembling again with hope and eagerness. "You ought to know more than I do. What would you do if you were in my place?"

"I'd hustle for a pair of wings and fly," replied the little professor promptly. "Good Lord, Phil—if it was my wife—and I hadn't got her yet—I wouldn't let up until I'd chased her from one end of the earth to the other. What's a little matter of duty compared to that girl hustling toward Winnipeg? Next to my own little girl at home she's the prettiest thing I ever laid my eyes on."

Philip laughed aloud.

"Thanks, McGill. By Heaven, I'll go! When do you start?"

"The dogs are ready, and so is Mrs. William Falkner."

Philip turned about quickly.

"I'll go over and say good-by to the detach-

## PHILIP STEELE

ment, and get my pack," he said over his shoulder. "I'll be back inside of half an hour."

It was a slow trip down. The snow was beginning to soften in the warmth of the first spring suns by the time they arrived at Lac la Crosse. Two days before they reached the post at Montreal Lake, Philip began to feel the first discomfort of a strange sickness, of which he said nothing. But the sharp eyes of the doctor detected that something was wrong, and before they came to Montreal House he recognized the fever that had begun to burn in Philip's body.

"You've set your pace," he told him. "It's that—and the blow you got when DeBar threw you against the rock. You'll have to lay up for a spell."

In spite of his protestations, the doctor compelled him to go to bed when they arrived at the post. He grew rapidly worse, and for five weeks the doctor and Falkner's wife nursed

## PHILIP'S LAST ASSIGNMENT

him through the fever. When they left for the South, late in May, he was still too weak to travel, and it was a month later before he presented himself, pale and haggard, before Inspector MacGregor at Prince Albert. Again disappointment was awaiting him. There had been delay in purchasing his discharge, and he found that he would have to wait until August. MacGregor gave him a three weeks' furlough, and his first move was to go up to Etomami and Le Pas. Colonel Becker and Isobel had been at those places six weeks before. He could find no trace of their having stopped at Prince Albert. He ran down to Winnipeg and spent several days in making inquiries which proved the hopelessness of any longer expecting to find Isobel in Canada. He assured himself that by this time they were probably in London and he made his plans accordingly. His discharge would come to him by the tenth of August, and he would immediately set off for England.

Upon his return to Prince Albert he was de-

## PHILIP STEELE

tailed to a big prairie stretch of country where there was little to do but wait. On the first day of August he was at Hymers when the Limited plunged down the embankment into Blind Indian River. The first word of it came over the wire from Bleak House Station a little before midnight, while he and the agent were playing cribbage. Pink-cheeked little Gunn, agent, operator, and one-third of the total population of Hymers, had lifted a peg to make a count when his hand stopped in mid-air, and with a gasping break in his voice he sprang to his feet.

The instrument on the little table near the window was clicking frantically. It was Billinger, at Bleak House, crying out for headquarters, clear lines, the right of way. The Transcontinental—engine, tender, baggage car, two coaches and a sleeper, had gone to the devil. Those, in his excitement, were his first words. From fifty to a hundred were dead. Gunn almost swore Billinger's next words to the line. It was not an accident! Human hands

## PHILIP'S LAST ASSIGNMENT

had torn up three sections of rail. The same human hands had rolled a two-ton boulder in the right of way. He did not know whether the express car—or what little remained of it—had been robbed or not.

From midnight until two o'clock the lines were hot. A wrecking train was on its way from the east, another from division headquarters to the west. Ceaselessly headquarters demanded new information, and bit by bit the terrible tragedy was told even as the men and women in it died and the few souls from the prairies around Bleak House Station fought to save lives. Then a new word crept in on the wires. It called for Philip Steele at Hymers. It commanded him in the name of Inspector MacGregor of the Royal Mounted to reach Bleak House Station without delay. What he was to do when he arrived at the scene of the wreck was left to his own judgment.

The wire from MacGregor aroused Philip from the stupor of horror into which he had

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fallen. Gunn's girlish face was as white as a sheet.

"I've got a jigger," he said, "and you can take it. It's forty miles to Pleak House and you can make it in three hours. There won't be a train for six."

Philip scribbled a few words for MacGregor and shoved them into Gunn's nervous hand. While the operator was sending them off he rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and buckled on his revolver belt. Then Gunn hurried him through the door and they lifted the velocipede on the track.

"Wire Billinger I'm coming," called back Philip as Gunn started him off with a running shove.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A LOCK OF GOLDEN HAIR

**A**S the sun was rising in a burning August glare over the edge of the parched prairie, Philip saw ahead of him the unpainted board shanty that was called Bleak House Station, and a few moments later he saw a man run out into the middle of the track and stare down at him from under the shade of his hands. It was Billinger, his English-red face as white as he had left Gunn's, his shirt in rags, arms bare, and his tremendous blond mustaches crisped and seared by fire. Close to the station, fastened to posts, were two saddle-horses. A mile beyond these things a thin film of smoke clouded the sky.

As the jigger stopped Philip jumped from his seat and held out a blistered hand. "I'm

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Steele—Philip Steele, of the Northwest Mounted.”

“And I’m Billinger—agent,” said the other. Philip noticed that the hand that gripped his own was raw and bleeding. “I got your word, and I’ve received instructions from the department to place myself at your service. My wife is at the key. I’ve found the trail, and I’ve got two horses. But there isn’t another man who’ll leave up there for love o’ God or money. It’s horrible! Two hours ago you’d ’ave heard their screams from where you’re standing—the hurt, I mean. They won’t leave the wreck—not a man, and I don’t blame ’em.”

A pretty, brown-haired young woman had come to the door and Billinger ran to her. “Good-by,” he cried, taking her for a moment in his big arms. “Take care of the key!” He turned as quickly to the horses, talking as they mounted. “It was robbery,” he said—and they set off at a canter, side by side. “There was two hundred thousand in currency in the ex-

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press car, and it's gone. I found their trail this morning, going into the North. They're hitting for what we call the Bad Lands over beyond the Coyote, twenty miles from here. I don't suppose there's any time to lose—"

"No," said Philip. "How many are there?"

"Four—mebby more."

Billinger started his horse into a gallop and Philip purposely held his mount behind to look at the other man. The first law of MacGregor's teaching was to study men, and to suspect. It was the first law of the splendid service of which he was a part—and so he looked hard at Billinger. The Englishman was hatless. His sandy hair was cropped short, and his mustaches floated out like flexible horns from the sides of his face. His shirt was in tatters. In one place it was ripped clean of the shoulder and Philip saw a purplish bruise where the flesh was bare. He knew these for the marks of Billinger's presence at the wreck. Now the man was equipped for other business. A huge

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"forty-four" hung at his waist, a short carbine swung at his saddle-bow; and there was something in the manner of his riding, in the hunch of his shoulders, and in the vicious sweep of his long mustaches, that satisfied Philip he was a man who could use them. He rode up alongside of him with a new confidence. They were coming to the top of a knoll; at the summit Billinger stopped and pointed down into a hollow a quarter of a mile away.

"It will be a loss of time to go down there," he said, "and it will do no good. See that thing that looks like a big log in the river? That's the top of the day coach. It went in right side up, and the conductor—who wasn't hurt—says there were twenty people in it. We watched it settle from the shore, and we couldn't do a thing—while they were dying in there like so many caged rats! The other coach burned, and that heap of stuff you see there is what's left of the Pullman and the baggage car. There's twenty-seven dead stretched out along the

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track, and a good many hurt. Great Heavens, listen to that!"

He shuddered, and Philip shuddered, at the wailing sound of grief and pain that came up to them.

"It'll be a loss of time—to go down," repeated the agent.

"Yes, it would be a loss of time," agreed Philip.

His blood was burning at fever heat when he raised his eyes from the scene below to Billinger's face. Every fighting fiber in his body was tingling for action, and at the responsive glare which he met in Billinger's eyes he thrust his hand half over the space that separated them.

"We'll get 'em, Billinger," he cried. "By God, we'll get 'em!"

There was something ferocious in the crush of the other's hand. The Englishman's teeth gleamed for an instant between his seared mustaches as he heeled his mount into a canter along the back of the ridge. Five minutes later

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the knoll dipped again into the plain and at the foot of it Billinger stopped his horse for a second and pointed to fresh hoof-marks in the prairie sod. Philip jumped from his horse and examined the ground.

"There are five in the gang, Billinger," he said shortly. "All of them were galloping—but one." He looked up to catch Billinger leaning over the pommel of his saddle staring at something almost directly under his horse's feet.

"What's that?" he demanded. "A handkerchief?"

Philip picked it up—a dainty bit of fine linen, crumpled and sodden by dew, and held it out between the forefinger and thumb of both hands.

"Yes, and a woman's handkerchief. Now what the devil—"

He stopped at the look in Billinger's face as he reached down for the handkerchief. The square jaws of the man were set like steel

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springs, but Philip noticed that his hand was trembling.

"A woman in the gang," he laughed as Philip mounted.

They started out at a canter, Billinger still holding the bit of linen close under his eyes. After a little he passed it back to Philip who was riding close beside him.

"Something happened last night," he said, looking straight ahead of him, "that I can't understand. I didn't tell my wife. I haven't told any one. But I guess you ought to know. It's interesting, anyway—and has made a wreck of my nerves." He wiped his face with a blackened rag which he drew from his hip pocket. "We were working hard to get out the living, leaving the dead where they were for a time, and I had crawled under the wreck of the sleeper. I was sure that I had heard a cry, and crawled among the debris, shoving a lantern ahead of me. About where Berth Number Ten should have been, the timbers had telescoped

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upward, leaving an open space four or five feet high. I was on my hands and knees, bare-headed, and my lantern lighted up things as plain as day. At first I saw nothing, and was listening again for the cry when I felt something soft and light sweeping down over me, and I looked up. Heavens—"

Billinger was mopping his face again, leaving streaks of char-black where the perspiration had started.

"Pinned up there in the mass of twisted steel and broken wood was a woman," he went on. "She was the most beautiful thing I have ever looked upon. Her arms were reaching down to me; her face was turned a little to one side, but still looking at me—and all but her face and part of her arms was smothered in a mass of red-gold hair that fell down to my shoulders. I could have sworn that she was alive. Her lips were red, and I thought for a moment that she was going to speak to me. I could have sworn, too, that there was color in her face, but it must

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have been something in the lantern light and the red-gold of her hair, for when I spoke, and then reached up, she was cold."

Billinger shivered and urged his horse into a faster gait.

"I went out and helped with the injured then. I guess it must have been two hours later when I returned to take out her body. But the place where I had seen her was empty. She was gone. At first I thought that some of the others had carried her out, and I looked among the dead and injured. She was not among them. I searched again when day came, with the same result. No one has seen her. She has completely disappeared—and with the exception of my shanty there isn't a house within ten miles of here where she could have been taken. What do you make of it, Steele?"

Philip had listened with tense interest.

"Perhaps you didn't return to the right place," he suggested. "Her body may still be in the wreck."

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Billinger glanced toward him with a nervous laugh.

"But it was the right place," he said. "She had evidently not gone to bed, and was dressed. When I returned I found a part of her skirt in the debris above. A heavy tress of her hair had caught around a steel ribbing, and *it was cut off!* Some one had been there during my absence and had taken the body. I—I'm almost ready to believe that I was mistaken, and that she was alive. I found nothing there, nothing—that could prove her death.

"Is it possible—" began Philip, holding out the handkerchief.

It was not necessary for him to finish. Billinger understood, and nodded his head.

"That's what I'm thinking," he said. "Is it possible? What in God's name would they want of her, unless—"

"Unless she was alive," added Philip. "Unless one or more of the scoundrels searching for valuables in there during the excitement, saw

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her and carried her off with their other booty. It's up to us, Billinger!"

Billinger had reached inside his shirt, and now he drew forth a small paper parcel.

"I don't know why—but I kept the tress of hair," he said. "See—"

From between his fingers, as he turned toward Philip, there streamed out a long silken tress that shone a marvelous gold in the sun, and in that same instant there fell from Philip's lips a cry such as Billinger had not heard, even from the lips of the wounded; and before he could recover from his astonishment, he had leaned over and snatched the golden tress from him, and sat in his saddle staring at it like a madman.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE GIRL IN THE WRECK

**I**N that moment of terrible shock—in the one moment when it seemed to him as though no other woman in the world could have worn that golden tress of hair but Isobel, Philip had stopped his horse, and his face had gone as white as death. With a tremendous effort he recovered himself, and saw Billinger staring at him as though the hot sun had for an instant blinded him of reason. But the lock of hair still rippled and shone before his eyes. Only twice in his life could he remember having seen hair just like this—that peculiar reddish gold that changed its lights with every passing cloud. He had seen it on Isobel, in the firelight of the camp, at Lac Bain—and he had seen it crowning the beautiful head of the girl back home,

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the girl of the hyacinth letter. He struggled to calm himself under the questioning gaze of Billinger's eyes. He laughed, wound the hair carefully about his fingers, and put it in his coat pocket.

"You—you have given me a shock," he said, straining to keep his voice even. "I'm glad you had foresight enough to keep the lock of hair, Billinger. At first—I jumped to a conclusion. But there's only one chance in a hundred that I'm right. If I should be right—I know the girl. Do you understand—why it startled me? Now for the chase, Billinger. Lead away!"

Leaning low over their saddles they galloped into the North. For a time the trail of the five outlaws was so distinct that they rode at a speed which lathered their horses. Then the short prairie grass, crisp and sun-dried, gave place to a broad sweep of wire grass above which the yellow backs of coyotes were visible as now and then they bobbed up in their quick, short leaps to look over the top of it. In this

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brown sea all trace of the trail was lost from the saddle and both men dismounted. Foot by foot they followed the faint signs ahead of them, while over their backs the sun rose higher and began to burn with the dry furnace-like heat that had scorched the prairies. So slow was their progress that after a time Billinger straightened himself with a nervous curse. The perspiration was running in dirty streaks down his face. Before he had spoken Philip read the fear that was in his eyes and tried to hide the reflection of it in his own. It was too hot to smoke, but he drew forth a case of cigarettes and offered one to Billinger. The agent accepted one, and both lighted in silence, eying each other over their matches.

"Won't do," said Billinger, spitting on his match before tossing it among the grass. "It's ten miles across this wire-dip, and we won't make it until night—if we make it at all. I've got an idea. You're a better trailer than I am, so you follow this through. I'll ride on and

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see if I can pick up the trail somewhere in the edge of the clean prairie. What do you say?"

"Good!" said Philip. "I believe you can do it."

Billinger leaped into his saddle and was off at a gallop. Philip was most eagerly anxious for this opportunity. Scarcely had the other gone when he drew out a linen handkerchief and the crumpled lock of hair from his pocket and held them in his hand as he looked after the agent. Then, slowly, he raised the handkerchief to his face. For a full minute he stood with the dainty fabric pressed to his lips and nose. Back there—when he had first held the handkerchief—he thought that he imagined. But now he was sure. Faintly the bit of soiled fabric breathed to him the sweet scent of hyacinth. His eyes shone in an eager bloodshot glare as he watched Billinger disappear over a roll in the prairie a mile away.

"Making a fool of yourself again," he muttered, again winding the golden hair about his

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fingers. "There are other women in the world who use hyacinth besides her. And there are other women with red-gold hair—and pretty, pretty as Billinger says she was, aren't there?"

He laughed, but there was something uneasy and unnatural in the laugh. In spite of his efforts to argue the absurdity of his thoughts, he could feel that he was trembling in every nerve of his body. And twice—three times he held the handkerchief to his face before he reached the rise in the prairie over which Billinger had disappeared. The agent had been gone an hour when the trail of the outlaws brought him to the knoll. From the top of it Philip looked over the prairie to the North.

A horseman was galloping toward him. He knew that it was Billinger, and stood up in his stirrups so that the other would see him. Half a mile away the agent stopped and Philip could see him signaling frantically with both arms. Five minutes later Philip rode up to him. Billinger's horse was half-winded, and in

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Billinger's face there were tense lines of excitement.

"There's some one out on the prairie," he called, as Philip reined in. "I couldn't make out a horse, but there's a man in the trail beyond the second ridge. I believe they've stopped to water their horses and feed at a little lake just this side of the rough country."

Billinger had loosened his carbine, and was examining the breech. He glanced anxiously at Philip's empty saddle-straps.

"It'll be long-range shooting, if they've got guns," he said. "Sorry I couldn't find a gun for you."

Philip drew one of his two long-barreled service revolvers and set his lips in a grim and reassuring smile as he followed the bobbing head of a coyote some distance away.

"We're not considered proficient in the service unless we can make use of these things at two hundred yards, Billinger," he replied, replacing the weapon in its holster. "If it's a

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running fight I'd rather have 'em than a carbine. If it isn't a running fight we'll come in close."

Philip looked at the agent as they galloped side by side through the long grass, and Billinger looked at him. In the face of each there was something which gave the other assurance. For the first time it struck Philip that his companion was something more than an operator at Bleak House Station. He was a fighter. He was a man of the stamp needed down at Headquarters, and he was bound to tell him so before this affair was over. He was thinking of it when they came to the second ridge.

Five miles to the north and west loomed the black line of the Bad Lands. To a tenderfoot they would not have appeared to be more than a mile distant. Midway in the prairie between there toiled a human figure. Even at that distance Philip and Billinger could see that it was moving, though with a slowness that puzzled them. For several minutes they stood breath-

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ing their horses, their eyes glued on the object ahead of them. Twice in a space of a hundred yards it seemed to stumble and fall. The second time that it rose Philip knew that it was standing motionless. Then it disappeared again. He stared until the rolling heat waves of the blistered prairie stung his eyes. The object did not rise. Blinking, he looked at Billinger, and through the sweat and grime of the other's face he saw the question that was on his own lips. Without a word they spurred down the slope, and after a time Billinger swept to the right and Philip to the left, each with his eyes searching the low prairie grass. The agent saw the thing first, still a hundred yards to his right. He was off his horse when Philip whirled at his shout and galloped across to him.

"It's her—the girl I found in the wreck," he said. Something seemed to be choking him. His neck muscles twitched and his long, lean fingers were digging into his own flesh.

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In an instant Philip was on his feet. He saw nothing of the girl's face, hidden under a mass of hair in which the sun burned like golden fire. He saw nothing but the crumpled, lifeless form, smothered under the shining mass, and yet in this moment he knew. With a fierce cry he dropped upon his knees and drew away the girl's hair until her lovely face lay revealed to him in terrible pallor and stillness, and as Billinger stood there, tense and staring, he caught that face close to his breast, and began talking to it as though he had gone mad.

"Isobel—Isobel—Isobel—" he moaned. "My God, my Isobel—"

He had repeated the name a hundred times, when Billinger, who began to understand, put his hand on Philip's shoulder and gave him his water canteen.

"She's not dead, man," he said, as Philip's red eyes glared up at him. "Here—water."

"My God—it's strange," almost moaned

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Philip. "Billinger—you understand—she's going to be my wife—if she lives—"

That was all of the story he told, but Billinger knew what those few words meant.

"She's going to live," he said. "See—there's color coming back into her face—she's breathing." He bathed her face in water, and placed the canteen to her lips.

A moment later Philip bent down and kissed her. "Isobel—my sweetheart—" he whispered.

"We must hurry with her to the water hole," said Billinger, laying a sympathetic hand on Philip's shoulder. "It's the sun. Thank God, nothing has happened to her, Steele. It's the sun—this terrible heat—"

He almost pulled Philip to his feet, and when he had mounted Billinger lifted the girl very gently and gave her to him.

Then, with the agent leading in the trail of the outlaws, they set off at a walk through the sickening sun-glare for the water hole in the edge of the Bad Lands.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE BATTLE IN THE CANYON

**H**UNCHED over, with Isobel's head sheltered against his breast, Philip rode a dozen paces behind the agent. It seemed as if the sun had suddenly burst in molten fire upon the back of his neck, and for a time it made him dizzy. His bridle reins hung loosely over the pommel. He made no effort to guide his horse, which followed after Billinger's.

It was Billinger who brought him back to himself. The agent waited for them, and when he swung over in one stirrup to look at the girl it was the animal ferocity in his face, and not his words, that aroused Philip.

"She's coming to," he said, straining to keep the tremble out of his voice. "I don't believe she's much hurt. You take this canteen. I'm going ahead."

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He gave Philip the water and leaned over again to gaze into the girl's face.

"I don't believe she's much hurt," he repeated in a hoarse, dry whisper. "You can leave her at the water hole just beyond that hill off there—and then you can follow me."

Philip clutched the girl tighter to him as the agent rode off. He saw the first faint flush returning into her cheeks, the reddening of her lips, the gentle tremor of her silken lashes, and forgetful of all else but her, he moaned her name, cried out his love for her, again and again, even as her eyes opened and she stared up into the face of the man who had come to her first at Lac Bain, and who had fought for her there. For a breath or two the wonder of this thing that was happening held her speechless and still lifeless, though her senses were adjusting themselves with lightning swiftness. At first Philip had not seen her open eyes, and he believed that she did not hear the words of love he whispered in her hair. When he raised

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her face a little from his breast she was looking at him with all the sweet sanity in the world.

A moment there was silence—a silence of even the breath in Philip's body, the beating of his heart. His arms loosened a little. He drew himself up rigid, and the girl lifted her head a trifle, so that their eyes met squarely, and a world of question and understanding passed between them in an instant.

As swift as morning glow a flush mounted into Isobel's face, then ebbed as swiftly, and Philip cried: "You were hurt—hurt back there in the wreck. But you're safe now. The train was wrecked by outlaws. We came out after them, and I—I found you—back there on the prairie. You're safe now."

His arms tightened about her again.

"You're all right now," he repeated gently. He was not conscious of the sobbing break in his voice, or of the great, throbbing love that it breathed to her. He tried to speak calmly.

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"There's nothing wrong—nothing. The heat made you sick. But you're all right now—"

From beyond the hill there came a sound that made him break off with a sudden, quick breath. It was the sharp, stinging report of Billinger's carbine! Once, twice, three times—and then there followed more distant shots!

"He's come up with them!" he cried. The fury of fight, of desire for vengeance, blazed anew in his face. There was pain in the grip of his arm about the girl. "Do you feel strong—strong enough to ride fast?" he asked. "There's only one man with me, and there are five of them. It's murder to let him fight it alone!"

"Yes—yes—" whispered the girl, her arms tightening round him. "Ride fast—or put me off. I can follow—"

It was the first time that he had heard her voice since that last evening up at Lac Bain, many months before, and the sound of it thrilled him.

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"Hold tight!" he breathed.

Like the wind they swept across the prairie and up the slope of the hill. At the top Philip reined in. Three or four hundred yards distant lay a thick clump of poplar trees and a thousand yards beyond that the first black escarpments of the Bad Lands. In the space between a horseman was galloping fiercely to the west. It was not Billinger. With a quick movement Philip slipped the girl to the ground, and when she sprang a step back, looking up at him in white terror, he had whipped out one of his big service revolvers.

"There's a little lake over there among those trees," he said. "Wait there—until I come back!"

He raced down the slope—not to cut off the flying horseman—but toward the clump of poplars. It was Billinger he was thinking of now. The agent had fired three shots. There had followed other shots, not Billinger's, and after that his carbine had remained silent.

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Billinger was among the poplars. He was hurt or dead.

A well-worn trail, beaten down by transient rangers, cut through the stunted growth of prairie timber, and without checking his speed Philip sped along it, only his head and shoulders and his big revolver showing over his horse's ears. A hundred paces and the timber gave place to a sandy dip, in the center of which was the water hole. The dip was not more than an acre in extent. Up to his knees in the hole was Billinger's riderless horse, and a little way up the sand was Billinger, doubled over on his hands and knees beside two black objects that Philip knew were men, stretched out like the dead back at the wreck. Billinger's yellow-mustached face, pallid and twisted with pain, looked over them as Philip galloped across the open and sprang out of his saddle. With a terrible grimace he raised himself to his knees, anticipating the question on Philip's lips.

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"Nothing very bad, Steele," he said. "One of the cusses pinked me through the leg, and broke it, I guess. Painful, but not killing. Now look at that!"

He nodded to the two men lying with their faces turned up to the hot glare of the sun. One glance was enough to tell Philip that they were dead, and that it was not Billinger who had killed them. Their bearded faces had stiffened in the first agonies of death. Their breasts were soaked with blood and their arms had been drawn down close to their sides.

As he looked the gleam of a metal buckle on the belt of the dead man nearest him, caught Philip's eye. He took a step nearer to examine it and then drew back. This bit of metal told the story—it bore the letters R. N. W. M. P.

"I thought so," he muttered with a slight catch in his voice. "You didn't follow my good advice, Bucky Nome, and now you reap the harvest of your folly. You have paid your debt to M'sieur Janette."

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Then Philip turned quickly and looked back at Billinger. In his hand the agent held a paper package, which he had torn open. A second and similar package lay in the sand in front of him.

"Currency!" he gasped. "It's a part of the money stolen from the express car. The two hundred thousand was done up in five packages, and here are two of 'em. Those men were dead when I came, and each had a package lying on his breast. The fellow who pinked me was just leaving the dip!"

He dropped the package and began ripping down his trouser leg with a knife. Philip dropped on his knees beside him, but Billinger motioned him back.

"It's not bleeding bad," he said. "I can fix it alone."

"You're certain, Billinger—"

"Sure!" laughed the agent, though he was biting his lips until they were flecked with blood. "There's no need of you wasting time."

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For a moment Philip clutched the other's hand.

"We can't understand what this all means old man—the carrying off of—of Isobel—and the money here, but we'll find out soon!"

"Leave that confounded carbine," exclaimed Billinger, as the other rose to mount. "I did rotten work with it, and the other fellow fixed me with a pistol. That's why I'm not bleeding very much."

The outlaw had disappeared in the black edge of the Bad Lands when Philip dashed up out of the dip into the plain. There was only one break ahead of him, and toward this he urged his horse. In the entrance to the break there was another sandy but waterless dip, and across this trailed the hoof-prints of the outlaws' mounts, two at a walk—one at a gallop. At one time, ages before, the break had been the outlet of a stream pouring itself out between jagged and cavernous walls of rock from the black heart of the upheaved country within.

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Now the bed of it was strewn with broken trap and masses of boulders, cracked and dried by centuries of blistering sun.

Philip's heart beat a little faster as he urged his horse ahead, and not for an instant did his cocked revolver drop from its guard over the mare's ears. He knew, if he overtook the outlaws in retreat, that there would be a fight, and that it would be three against one. That was what he hoped for. It was an ambush that he dreaded. He realized that if the outlaws stopped and waited for him he would be at a terrible disadvantage. In open fight he was confident. His prairie-bred mount took the rough trail at a swift canter, evading the boulders and knife-edged trap in the same guarded manner that she galloped over prairie-dog and badger holes out upon the plain. Twice in the ten minutes that followed their entrance into the chasm Philip saw movement ahead of him, and each time his revolver leaped to it. Once it was a wolf, again the swiftly moving

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shadow of an eagle sweeping with spread wings between him and the sun. He watched every concealment as he approached and half swung in his saddle in passing, ready to fire.

A quick turn in the creek bed, where the rock walls hugged in close, and his mare planted her forefeet with a suddenness that nearly sent him over her head. Directly in their path, struggling to rise from among the rocks, was a riderless horse. Two hundred yards beyond a man on foot was running swiftly up the chasm, and a pistol shot beyond him two others on horseback had turned and were waiting.

"Lord, if I had Billinger's gun now!" groaned Philip.

At the sound of his voice and the pressure of his heels in her flank the mare vaulted over the animal in their path. The clatter of pursuing hoofs stopped the runner for an instant, and in that same instant Philip halted and rose in his stirrups to fire. As his finger pressed the

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trigger there came to his ears a thrilling sound from behind him—the sharp galloping beat of steel upon rock! Billinger was coming—Billinger, with his broken leg and his carbine! He could have shouted for joy as he fired. Once—twice, and the outlaw was speeding ahead of him again, unhurt. A third shot and the man stumbled among the rocks and disappeared. There was no movement toward retreat on the part of the mounted men, and Philip listened as he slipped in fresh cartridges. His horse was panting; he could hear the excited and joyous tumult of his own heart—but above it all he heard the steady beat, beat, beat of those approaching hoofs! Billinger would be there soon—in time to use his carbine at a deadly rate, while he got into closer quarters with his revolver. God bless Billinger—and his broken leg!

He was filled with the craze of fight now and it found vent in a yell of defiance as he spurred on toward the outlaws. They were

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not going to run. They were waiting for him. He caught the gleam of the hot sun on their revolvers, and saw that they meant business as they swung a little apart to divide his fire. At one hundred yards Philip still held his gun at his side; at sixty he pulled in his mare, flattened along her neck like an Indian, his pistol arm swinging free between her ears. It was one of the cleverest fighting tricks of the service, and he made the movement as the guns of the others leaped before their faces. Two shots sang over his head, so close that they would have swept him from the saddle if he had been erect. In another moment the rock-bound chasm echoed with the steady roar of the three revolvers. In front of the flaming end of his own gun Philip saw the outlaw on the right pitch forward in his saddle and fall to the ground. He sent his last shot at the man on the left and drew his second gun. Before he could fire again his mare gave a tremendous lunge forward and stumbled upon

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her knees, and with a gasp of horror Philip felt the saddle-girth slip as he swung to free himself.

In the few terrible seconds that followed Philip was conscious of two things—that death was very near, and that Billinger was a moment too late. Less than ten paces away the outlaw was deliberately taking aim at him, while his own pistol arm was pinned under the weight of his body. For a breath he ceased to struggle, looking up in frozen calmness at the man whose finger was already crooked to fire. When a shot suddenly rang out, it passed through him in a lightning flash that it was the shot intended for him. But he saw no movement in the outlaw's arm; no smoke from his gun. For a moment the man sat rigid and stiff in his saddle. Then his arm dropped. His revolver fell with a clatter among the stones. He slipped sidewise with a low groan and tumbled limp and lifeless almost at Philip's feet.

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"Billinger—Billinger—"

The words came in a sob of joy from Philip's lips. Billinger had come in time—just in time! He struggled so that he could turn his head and look down the chasm. Yes, there was Billinger—a hundred yards away, hunched over his saddle. Billinger, with his broken leg, his magnificent courage, his—

With a wild cry Philip jerked himself free. Good God, it was not Billinger! It was Isabel! She had slipped from the saddle—he saw her as she tottered a few steps among the rocks and then sank down among them. With his pistol still in his hand he ran back to where Billinger's horse was standing. The girl was crumpled against the side of a boulder, with her head in her arms—and she was crying. In an instant he was beside her, and all that he had ever dreamed of, all that he had ever hoped for, burst from his lips as he caught her and held her close against his breast. Yet he never could have told what he said. Only he knew

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that her arms were clasped about his neck, and that, as she pressed her face against him, she sobbed over and over again something about the old days at Lac Bain—and that she loved him, loved him! Then his eyes turned up the chasm, and what he saw there made him bend low behind the boulder and brought a strange thrill into his voice.

"You will stay here—a little while," he whispered, running his fingers through her shining hair. There was a tone of gentle command in his words as he placed her against the rock. "I must go back for a few minutes. There is no danger—now."

He stooped and picked up the carbine which had fallen from her hand. There was one cartridge still in the breech. Replacing his revolver in its holster he rose above the rocks, ready to swing the rifle to his shoulder. Up where the outlaws lay, a man was standing in the trail. He was making no effort to conceal himself, and did not see Philip until he was

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within fifty paces of him. Even then he did not show surprise. Apparently he was unarmed, and Philip dropped the muzzle of his carbine. The man motioned for him to advance, standing with a spread hand resting on either hip. He was hatless and coatless. His hair was long. His face was covered with a scraggly growth of red beard, too short to hide his sunken cheeks. He might have been a man half starved, and yet there was strength in his bony frame and his eyes were as keen as a serpent's.

"Got in just in time to miss the fun after all," he said coolly. "Queer game, wasn't it? I was ahead of you up as far as the water hole. Saw what happened there."

Philip's hand dropped on the butt of his revolver.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Me? I'm Blackstone—Jim Blackstone, from over beyond the elbow. I guess everybody for fifty miles round here knows me. And I

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guess I'm the only one who knows what's happened—and why." He had stepped behind a huge rock that shut out the lower trail from them and Philip followed, his hand still on his revolver. "They're both dead," added the stranger, signifying with a nod of his head that he meant the outlaws. "One of them was alive when I came up, but I ran my knife between his ribs, and he's dead now."

"The devil!" cried Philip, half drawing his revolver at the ferocious leer in the other's face.

"Wait," exclaimed the man, "and see if I'm not right. The man who was responsible for the wreck back there is my deadliest enemy—has been for years, and now I'm even up with him. And I guess in the eyes of the law I've got the right to it. What do you say?"

"Go on," said Philip.

The snake-like eyes of the man burned with a dull flame and yet he spoke calmly.

"He came out here from England four years

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ago," he went on. "He was forced to come. Understand? He was such a devil back among his people—half a criminal even then—that he was sent out here on a regular monthly remittance. After that everything went the way of his younger brother. His father married again, and the second year he became even less than a remittance man, for his allowance was cut off. He was bad—bad from the start, and he went from bad to worse out here. He gambled, fought, robbed, and became the head of a gang of scoundrels as dangerous as himself. He brooded over what he considered his wrongs until he went a little mad. He lived only to avenge himself. At the first opportunity he was prepared to kill his father and his step-mother. Then, a few weeks ago, he learned that these two were coming to America and that on their way to Vancouver they would pass through Bleak House Station. He went completely mad then, and planned to destroy them, and rob the train. You know how he

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and his gang did the job. After it was over and they had got the money, he let his gang go on ahead of him while he went back to the wreck of the sleeper. He wanted to make sure that they were dead. Do you see?"

"Yes," said Philip tensely, "go on."

"And when he got there," continued the other, bowing his head as he filled an old briar pipe with tobacco, "he found some one else. It's strange—and you may wonder how I know it all. But it's true. Back in England he had worshipped a young girl. Like the others, she detested him; and yet he loved her and would have died for her. And in the wreck of the sleeper he found her and her father—both dead. He brought her out, and when no one was near carried her through the night to his horse. The knowledge that he had killed her—the only creature in the world that he loved—brought him back to sanity. It filled him with a new desire for vengeance—but vengeance of another kind. To achieve this vengeance he

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was compelled to leave her dead body miles out on the prairie. Then he hurried to overtake his comrades. As their leader he had kept possession of the money they had taken from the express car. The division was to be made at the water hole. The gang was waiting for him there. The money was divided, and two of the gang rode ahead. The other two were to go in another direction so as to divide the pursuit. The remittance man remained with them, and when the others had gone a distance he killed them both. He was sane now, you understand. He had committed a great crime and he was employing his own method of undoing it. Then he was going back to bury—her."

The man's voice broke. A great sob shook his frame. When he looked up, Philip had drawn his revolver.

"And the remittance man—" he began.

"Is myself—Jim Blackstone—at your service."

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The man turned his back to Philip, hunched over, as if bent in grief. For a moment he stood thus. There followed in that same moment the loud report of a pistol, and when Philip leaped to catch his tottering form the glaze of death was in the outlaw's eyes.

"I was going to do this—back there—beside her," he gasped faintly. A shiver ran through him and his head dropped limply forward.

Philip laid him with his face toward a rock and stepped out from his concealment. The girl had heard the pistol shot and was running up the trail.

"What was that?" she asked, when he had hurried to her.

"The last shot, sweetheart," he answered softly, catching her in his arms. "We're going back to Billinger now, and then—home."

THE END

