

CHAPTER II

Will was merry; he might be careless. It would blow over. The best thing to do was to say nothing. Plainly Marion had stood by Will. Byrne had looked forward for weeks to seeking his pal and his sweetheart. But if they were not here, that closed it. He was not going to get out of MacLeod where they were. He could look them up after he came back from White Rock, with money in his pocket. Money from MacLeod.

"I'll go tonight, for the outfit and five hundred dollars," he said. "Half down, rest when I come back."

"Tis preposterous. I could get any o' a dozen to do it for fifty."

Byrne shrugged his shoulders.

"The trip is no worth sic' an amount," MacLeod went on. His speech thickened to a Scotch burr, sure sign that the subject was important.

"I'm not considering the value of the trip," Byrne answered.

"I'm considering the risk to my life. A big risk, MacLeod. The weather's none too good. If the spring thaw beats me to White Rock I may never get there, or back."

"You're a good woodsman Byrne you ken the trails—and I. Can trust ye. For that I'll offer ye a hundred dollars."

"I thank you for your good opinion," said Byrne dryly. "You flatter me. But that's my price."

He could see the struggle going on inside the man. Something was stirring the very soul of Alexander MacLeod. It went deeper than money or trading. The trader sighed.

"You press me hard, but you're a trusty man," he said. "'Tis a bargain then, gin ye start within the hour. I'll close the store and get what ye need mysel'. Marie 'll serve ye supper. And I'll gi' you a' the money in advance. I trust ye, Byrne. Ye must gang through."

The MacLeod could be liberal when it paid him to be. He left nothing necessary out of the equipment, choosing it carefully, packing it with experience. After he reached White Rock, Byrne planned to go out and take the stage at Horsehide when the weather mended. Until then he could u seone of the abandoned cabins, stay with Old Nipegosis, in a pinch. Then he would find Will and Marion.

Marie, Algoni squaw and housekeeper for The MacLeod, her face wrinkled like the bark of an old hemlock, her eyes sullen, brought Byrne a savory meal, with a pint of good Burgundy. She was a good cook, but Byrne felt an ancient grudge still hot in her old veins. There was hatred there, suppressed of all the white man's race. Many wondered why The MacLeod kept her. Byrne fancied it was because he sensed her enmity and loved to handle it, subdue it to his will. For much the same reason that the trader had kept an eagle caged until it died of longing for the crags.

Marie lit the lamps and closed the shutters. The old squaw was eminently efficient, but whenever she entered the room behind his back Byrne had a curious and unpleasant mental picture of a knife between his shoulder-blades.

MacLeod showed him the message. Byrne had expected some sort of a packet holding symbols, at least to have the envelope inscribed in Algonquin ideographs. But the address was written in MacLeod's bold English script.

TO NIPEGOSIS

By the hand of Richard Byrne

The envelope was sealed with wax. MacLeod wrapped it again in oilskin, handed it to Byrne, laying down also a money belt with the price tucked into its compartments.

"I've put in a new pipe and half a pound of my own tobacco," he anounced. "There are beef cubes and rice, besides pemmican and tea. Do ye wish a rifle as well as the Colt?"

Byrne decided against the rifle. It meant eleven pounds extra weight. If he had to get meat, he could shoot grouse with the revolver. It should be sufficient for protection. The danger did not lie that way. Though he was not quite so sure as he made ready. Once again the sinister suggestion of eerie menace came to him. He shook it off. MacLeod opened the rear door of his house, glanced about him.

"Good speed to ye, Byrne," the trader said. "This affair deals wi' my honor. t ea's for haste. Ye're well paid—in advance. Let none o'ertak' ye between here and White Rock."

The woods swallowed up Dick Byrne. He made no fire that night. The morning saw him pressing north. At this season a man took his life in his mands when he hit the trail.

The MacLeod was abed and asleep when there came a scratching on the frosty panes of the room where old Marie slumbered as lightly as a she wolf.

She heard it instantly, and was up, a robe about her bony frame. She opened a door and a shadow seemed to glide in, squatting down in the corner of the room, talking in tense, rapid whispers.

It was her foster-son, Kinoceti, known also—and mistrusted—as hating all white, not recognized by his own, save Marie, who had suckled him.

"I had word from Singush that Byrne was here, talking with MacLeod," he said. "Singush did not find me until a little while back."

"I thought you already on the trail to White Rock," said the squaw. "You said."

"There is plenty of time. No one can get here from the Post for twenty-four hours, and no one, even a red-coated trooper, pass me on the trail," he boasted. "The rest will not be ready to leave until tomorrow. I came for the cartridges. Did you get them?"

"Did I ever fail you? But Byrne has left with nightfall to go to White Rock. Me bears a message to Nipegosis. MacLeod gave him five hundred dollars to carry it swimtly and secretely."

"Ha" The breed's eyes were momentarily luminous, like those of a wild beast.

"He set down the numbers of the notes," warned the squaw. "You remember what happened to Namish? It is not easy for a breed to change a note."

Peace River Jack grunted. He loved money, but he loved his liberty far more. It was said that MacLeod notified all other traders of the numbers of the bank notes he was dispensing, sent all old ones to the bank to be exchanged. He remembered what had happened to Namish.

"The thousand dollars I shall get from the government will be all right," he said. "I will not touch these. But Byrne will never reach White Rock. As for Will MacLeod. . ."

"It is the girl I hate most," said the squaw. "With her white skin that must be kept so dainty, her linen that must be changed and washed. She told me that I was dirty, lazy, that I did not clean the corners. There should be no corners."

Peace River Jack grunted again. A squaw's sentiments did not interest him. He had got his cartridges, and he had got startling news. His mood was a little grim. He had to forego a pleasant night's carouse.

"I go," he said abruptly. "Byrne is good for a white man, but I know better trails at this time of year. I shall catch him before he crosses the barrens."

She opened the door again for him, and he was gone, bent in the night like a timber wolf, vengeful and cruel as the biting frost.

It was just twenty-four hours after Dick Byrne had left Bison Crossing, sixteen hours after Peace River Jack—Kinoceti, now that he was on the trail, which was not a peace trail—had started after, when another visitor arrived at Bisbon Crossing. He was not totally unexpected by The MacLeod, though visitors were rare at this season. He came on business that the weather might not postpone.

There was a weekly stage, a sleigh, that had dropped off Dick Byrne on its route to St. Joseph's Mission and Spruce City. This man came in a special runnered conveyance arriving behind a pair of tired, sweating, smoking horses that turned back on command of the passenger. They could rest at Twenty-Mile, five miles south of Bison Crossing. And they would be glad to rest.

It had been hard going. Snow was falling, steadily, neither moist nor dry, buut clogging, and threatening a chinook. All lights were out when Sergeant O'Rourke of the Royal Canadian Mounted dismissed the driver. Titularly he was a trooper, a horseman, but now he was afoot. He turned up the collar of his regulation fur coat and drew down his minkskin cap after he had adjusted the snowshoes he had brought with him. He had been to Bison Crossing before and he made as straight for MacLeod's as the growing drifts permitted.

MacLeod himself came at to the persisting pounding, flashing the ray of an electric torch on the intruder.

"O'Rourke, of the Mounted," said the sergeant. "I want a few words wish you, MacLeod."

Alexander MacLeod threw pitch pine on the backlog, then other wood. The fire flamed and blended with he light of the drawdown ceiling-lamp that the trader ignited. He offered liquor, which O'Rourke refused. The sergeant also seemed to prefer his own pipe to MacLeod's cigars. He had eaten, he said, and was not hungry.

"You'll stay the night? asked MacLeod.

"I'm thinking that I'll have to," answered O'Rourke. "I need some supplies, in the morning when I'll be leaving."

"Some special trip?" asked the trader.

O'Rourke grinned at him, standing and turning his muscular lean body in front of the fire, his parka off, his scarlet coat vivid.

"A special trip, MacLeod. On the King's business. And the Dominion's You're a keen man, you might guess why I'm here. Where is your nephew. William MacLeod?"

The trader's brows drew together, the veins knotted under the skin of his forehead.

"I've seen naught of him for months, he said. "Why should I know where he is?"

(To be continued)

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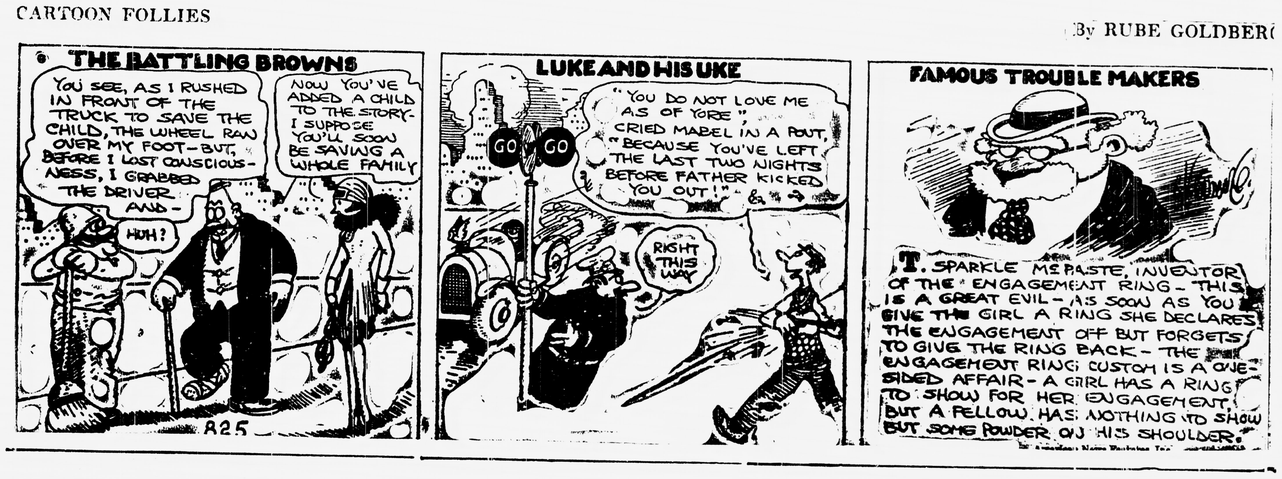
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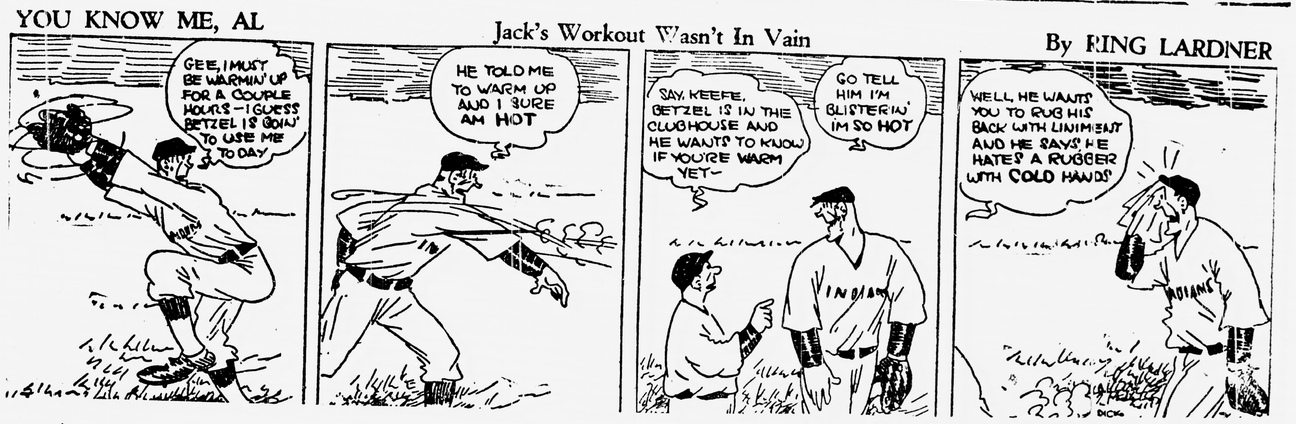
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