

CHAPTER III

"He's wanted for the killing of Jacques Regnier," O'Rourke continued steadily. "That's no news to you. He disappeared the day after the murder, two days before we could get here to investigate the crime. His sister went with him. It was the middle of winter and we got no true trace of them. Now we have word. It's going to go hard with him when we land him, as we will, the way things look; on the evidence and the fact of his running away. It looks as if he minght hang. MacLeod.

"'Tis aght to me," muttered The MacLeod.

"He's in White Rock, with his sister," O'Rourke said suddenly, watching the trader to try and surprise him into some confirmation of his news. The source seemed fairly certain, but it was a long way to White Rock and they had already followed many futile trails misled by false rumors.

Alexander MacLeod shrugged his shoulders.

The Mountie sergeant took seat in front of the fire, tamping down fresh tobacco on the dottel in his pipe while MacLeod stood erect, one shoulder and eyebrow savagely awry, glowering.

"I'll commandeer supper and such supplies as I need in the King's name, for all of which I'll leave you a voucher on the R. C. M. P."

"You're welcome to all of them," MacLeod replied sourly, "though there's no reason I should supply ye free with the means to hunt my kin. But you'll have a sup of good Scotch wi' me, sergeant? I ken you're but doing your duty. And you'll stay the night? 'Tis bad weather."

"And may be worse," answered O'Rourke. It was not like The MacLeod to be so free with his Scotch, so pressing with his hopes for others' comfort. Not without very good reason. "That same duty keeps me from your good liquor and sends me on."

He got his pipe going wondering pondering.

Even as Dick Byrne had done, he likened MacLeod to an old dog-fox.

"I'd like to know," O'Rourke told himself, "just how much he had to do with his nephew's getaway. The lad's sister went with him. And he wants me to stop over night. He's a bit too kind. I've got a hunch he was not as surprised to see me as he might have been. He's got a lot to say of what goes on in this neck of the woods and little there is he doesn't know. He might have sent some one ahead to White Rock to warn Will MacLeod of pursuit.

"It would not be Peace River Jack, for he would be double-crossing himself. That breed would sell his soul for the thousand-dollar reward. But there might have been a leak. It's dirty weather, but the wind's shifting at that. I might get a break. At any rate I'll try for one."

The snow stopped falling within an hour after O'Rourke had set out on the trail to apprehend Will MacLeod for murder. Within another hour, on a steadily falling thermometer, a crust was falling so that he could glissade over the surface at good speed. He toted a rifle and a pair of bearpaw extra snowshoes for special circumstances. The weather could not be depended upon for more than a few hours at a time.

There men upon the same trail. Dick Byrne, unconscious he was followed. Kinoceti, swift in pursuit, knowing the country as a wolf or moose might know it, the contours where one might avoid the bitter wind; gent upon an errand fraught with villainy and greed. Then O'Rourke of the Mounted, handicapped but steadfast, Nemesis of the Law; intent upon bringing in him man if he had to follow him all the way to the North Pole.

It was hard going. Dick Byrne faltered a little in his stride. He had made thirty-eight miles the day before through softening snow that braked his efforts and stiffened his sinews, softened as they were by months in Musketoon.

Daylight was failing and he was crossing a strip of barrens. There was timber ahead he must reach for a fire. Then Elk River—and the White Rock, the end of his mission.

born Wednesday, April 23, at Memorial Hospital.

The wind was rising with sunset in a freakish trick of the season. Drifts had filled up the valleys and disguised the slopes, but he knew he was almost through. All about was utmost solitude. He had seen no living thing. He ached to make fire, eat, and dig in. The cold pressed in on him constantly. It was like running water, it never stopped its attack.

The coming gale whined, gathering force. It gnawed into the exposed spot on his left cheek and he forged on toward the trees. He set all his virility into reaching the goal where he could get flame, meat, sleep. It was a hard game he was bucking. It tested a man to the limit. You must make no slips. If you once went down. . .

Fifty below, and getting colder. The tress appeared to retreat in the growing gloom. Suddenly the wind seemed to explode like a great bomb. Its whine changed to a shrill shriek—a howl. Byrne staggered, head down against the blustering, bellowing rage that cowed him. He was using up the last of his resistance and vitality to get to the timber.

Among the trees, well alee from the storm, there stood a sardonic figure, watching Byrne's desperate progress. Peace River Jack had overtaken, and was awaiting the white man, through his native knowledge of the terrain. He slid out his rifle from its elkhide sheath against the frost, shook off a fur mitten, after he had pumped a cartridge into the breech. A thousand - dollar cartridge, stolen by old Marie from MacLeod for the undoing of MacLeod. This was a play that accorded well with the grim, sardonic humor of Peace River Jack.

He saw Byrne get into shelter, select a birch, strip off its bark with the inflammable inner lining. His mood let him wait, like a cat with a mouse. He put his mitten on again, covered his exposed rifle, waited while Byrne skillfully made his fire, started his supper, tea and rice with beef cubes, melted pemmican, Swedish bread.

That got going. Now Byrne needed a backlog, more fuel, so his fire would last all night. Not too easy a job with a hand-ax.

A spurt of fire spat from the spruce. The report of the rifle sounded dully, but shook down snow from the laden branches. Peace River Jack cursed his aim. He had stood too long. He had his man down, thrashing in the snow, but. . .

The rifle belched again. Dick Byrne stretched out, limp.

Peace River Jack glided out of his cover and looked at his victim by the flickering, mounting light of the fire Byrne had kindled. He saw the dark stain of blood on the snow where it had spurted from the first wound in Byrne's thigh. He saw the brighter blotch on his forehead, and chuckled. Byrne would not reach White Rock. But Kinoceti would, staying near by in an old rendezvous of the tribes, awaiting the arrival of his friends, and of one other man.

He looked down at the white man with a sudden flare of ferocity, of vengeance satisfied, muttered a sentence in his mother tongue, and vanished.

The fire crackled and burned bright with flames of orange, red and violet as gas pockets in the wood were reached. Byrne crawled toward it, leaving a splotcly trail. He did not know what had happened, how it happened. The last bullet, creasing his skull, left him still stupid, though conscious of his peril. He was crippled. There was no help. He might—must—stop the bleeding from his

He improvised a tourniquet. The intense cold would assist his surgery, but he was doomed. He had food for a day or so, but so soon as his scanty fuel gave out he was done. He had lost too much glood. The frost would embrace him like a coiling serpent, it would get into his wounds. He would be dead before dawn, stiff as the frozen salmon they fed the ravenous sleigh dogs.

He managed, half mechanically, to arrange the fire to get the maximum of heat with the minimum of wood. Without a backlog the heat dissipated. The sky had cleared. The wind was over and the stare showed, brilliant as spear points piercing purple fabrics.

They seemed to bring eternity closed. He would know all about that before those stars paled to the next sun, Byrne told himself. Orhe would know—nothing.

The wood he fed changed to flaming gases, to carbon, to ash that glowed briefly and faded. What had been living trees turned to dust. And he—a living man?

Grulgingly he fed the fire another precious stick. He would fight as long as he could.

Thoughts came in sudden rushes like flashbacks in an illassembled film. Why had Will gone away? Why had they not written him? Marion—she was not far from loving him—would have if he had made good. But he had failed. He was going out now. She would find some one else.

Plenty of men to love a gril like Marion. Not many like her. Not any.

The invention! There was the cam, he finally contrived and never been satisfied with. Now he suddenly saw the perfect device. A thought that meant something, was worth money.

But what was the use of it now? Wasted.

He could not last much longer. Somebody had shot at him. Who? Why?

Another thought shot across his mind. It was a grisly one, but this was a grisly situation. Whoever found him, eventually, would discover his money belt, with the five hundred dollars in it he had failed to earn. It might be an honest man, or at least one fearful of MacLeod, anxious to get in his favor. And the money was MacLeod's.

Dick Byrne had no one especially to leave it to—unless it might help Marion. But it was not his. He had failed. He got out a small notebook and a pencil and wrote briefly:

Money in my belt belongs to Alexander MacLeod. Five hundred dollars.

Richard A. Byrne.

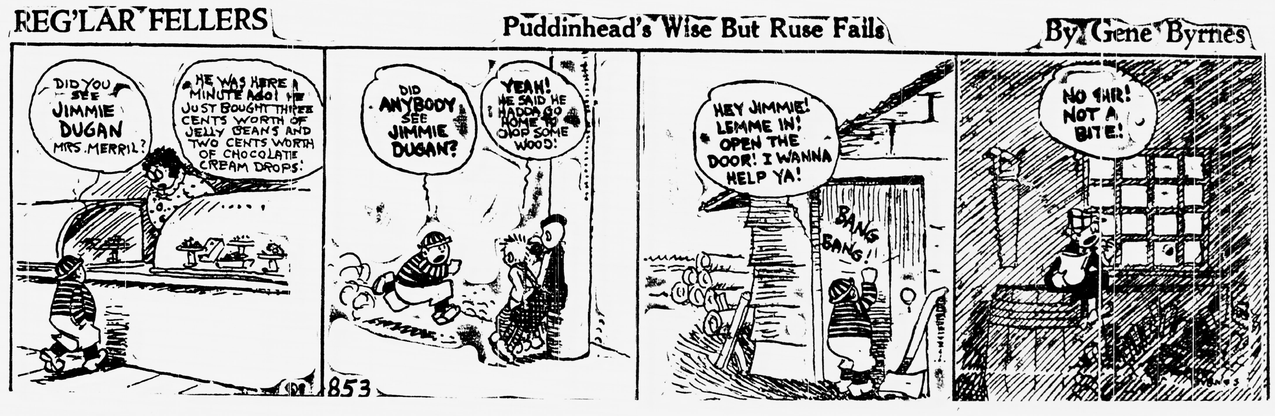
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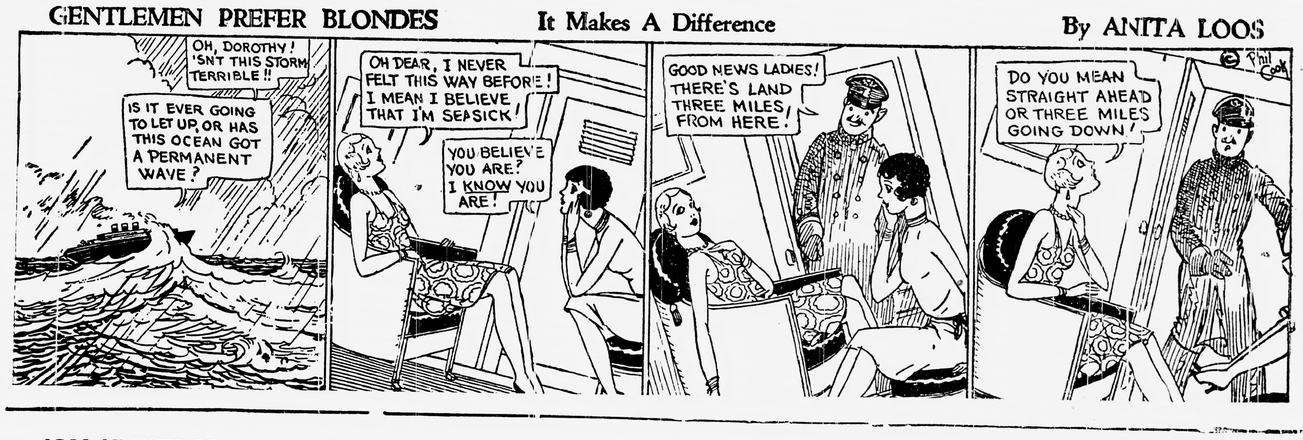
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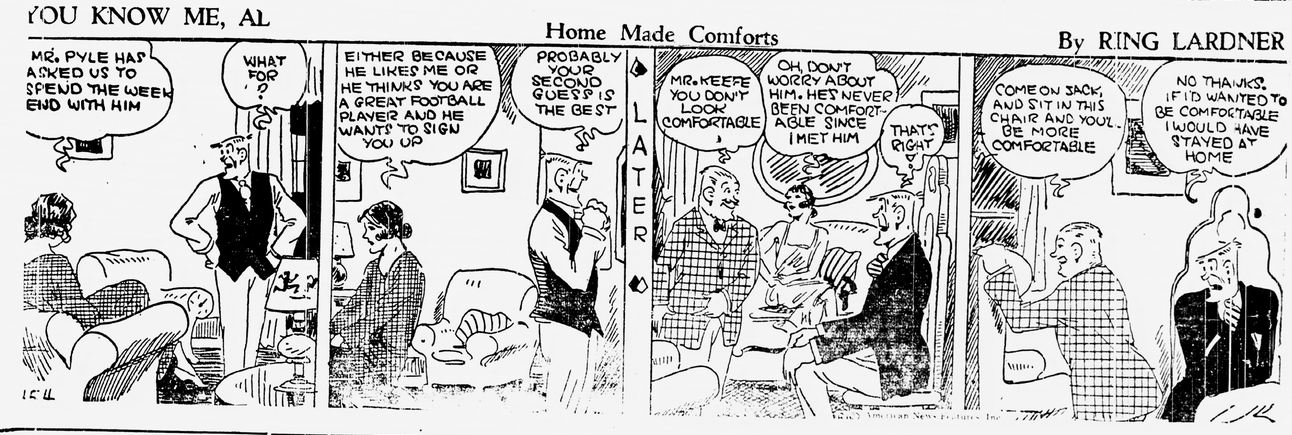
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