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THE TURF MEET

THE great brown shadows of the rolling hills had quite filled the hollows between and were slowly climbing up the western slope of every undulation when Shock reached the lip of the broad river bed in which lay the little fort town.

The white clump of buildings standing by themselves he knew to be the barracks of the North-West Mounted Police. The flag floating above showed that, as well as the air of military neatness about them.

The town straggled along two intersecting streets, and then frayed out over the flats in isolated and dejected-looking shacks. The more imposing buildings on the main street Shock guessed were the hotels and stores. One of the latter he recognised from its flag as that of the ancient and honourable Hudson's Bay Company. On a back street here and there stood a house surrounded by a garden and scrubby trees, a pathetic attempt to reproduce in this treeless country what in other lands had been fondly called home.

Away on every side stretched the vast sweep of rolling prairie to where the amber of the sky-line mingled with the grey blue of the earth.

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How insignificant, how miserable and wretched in the midst of this expanse of sky and earth, seemed the huddling bunch of dejected buildings, and yet the whole interest of heaven above and earth around centred in those straggling shacks, for they were the abodes of men.

From feasting his heart upon the marvellous beauty of the expanse of rounded hills, with their variegation of sunlight and shadow, and the expanse of cloudless sky, deep blue overhead and shading by indefinable transitions through blues and purples into pearl greys and rose tints, and at last into glorious yellow gold at the horizon, Shock, with almost a shudder, turned his eyes to the little ragged town beneath him. How marvellous the works of God! How ugly the things man makes!

It was partly the infinitude of this contrast that wrought in Shock a feeling of depression as he followed the trail winding down the long slope toward the town. As he became aware of this depression, he took himself severely to task.

"What's the matter with me, anyway?" he asked himself impatiently. "I'm not afraid of them." And yet he had a suspicion that it was just this that troubled him. He was afraid. The feeling was not one with which he was unfamiliar. Often before a big match he had been shamefully conscious of this same nervous fear. He remembered how his heart had seemed too big for his body, till he felt it in his throat. But he remembered now, with no small comfort, that once the ball was kicked his heart had

always gone back to its place and its work and gave him no further concern, and to-day he hoped this might be his experience again.

It was a great day at the Fort, nothing less than the Spring Meeting of the South Alberta Turf Association; and in that horse country, where men were known by their horses rather than by personal characteristics, the meeting of the Turf Association easily took precedence over all other events, social or political.

This spring, to the interest naturally centring in the races, there was added a special interest, in that, behind the horses entered for the Association Cup, there gathered intense local feeling. The three favourites were representative horses. The money of the police and all the Fort contingent in the community had been placed on the long, rangy thoroughbred, Foxhall, an imported racer who had been fast enough to lose money in the great racing circuits of the East, but who was believed to be fast enough to win money here in the West.

The district about the fort town was divided into two sections, the east and the west. In the eastern section the farming industry was carried on to an almost equal extent with ranching; in the west, up among the hills, there was ranching pure and simple. Between the two sections a strong rivalry existed. In this contest the east had "banked" on Captain Hal Harricomb, rancher and gentleman farmer, and his black Demon. The western men, all ranchers, who despised and hated farmers and everything per-

taining to them, were all ranged behind the Swallow, a dainty little bay mare, bred, owned, and ridden by a young Englishman, Victor Stanton, known throughout the Albertas, south and north, as "The Kid," or, affectionately, "The Kiddie," admired for his superb riding, his reckless generosity, his cool courage, and loved for his gentle, generous heart.

Already two heats had been run, one going to the Demon and one to the Swallow, Foxhall sustaining his Eastern reputation as a money-loser.

The excitement of the day had gradually grown in intensity, and now was concentrated in the final heat of the Association Cup race.

All unconscious of this excitement and of the tremendous issues at stake, Shock sent his little cayuse peacefully trotting along the trail to where it met the main street. The street was lined on either side with men and horses. Something was evidently going on, but what Shock could not see.

But no sooner had he turned up the street than there was a fierce outburst of yells, oaths, and execrations, and at the same moment he heard behind him the pounding of hoofs.

Hastily glancing over his shoulder, he saw thundering down upon him half a dozen or more mounted men. In vain he tugged at his cayuse. The little brute allowed his stubborn head to be hauled round close to the shaft, but declined to remove his body; and, indeed, had he been ever so eager, there would hardly have been time. A big black horse was plunging wildly not more than ten feet behind him. A

fierce oath, a shower of dust and gravel in his face, a flash of legs and hoofs, and the big black was lifted clear over Shock and his cayuse, and was off again down the street between the lines of yelling men.

"Here, blank your blank head! Git off the course! Don't you know nothin'?"

When Shock came to himself, he was aware that a tall, lanky cowboy in chaps, woollen shirt, and stiff, broad-brimmed hat was pounding his cayuse over the head with his heavy whip.

Shock never knew how it happened. All he remembered was a quick rush of blood to his brain, a mad desire to punish the man who was brutally beating his pony, and then standing by the shaft of his buckboard waiting for the man to get up.

"Gad, sir!" exclaimed a voice over his shoulder, "that was a clever throw!" There was genuine admiration in the voice.

Shock looked up and saw an old gentleman, with white, close-cropped hair and moustache and erect military form, regarding him with admiration. He was riding a stout hunter, docked in English style.

"And served you perfectly right, Ike," continued the old gentleman. "What business have you to strike any man's horse?"

"What the blank blank is he doing on the course?" said Ike wrathfully, as he slowly rose from the ground and came toward Shock.

"I say, stranger," he said, coming over near to Shock and looking him carefully in the eye, "I'll give

you twenty-five dollars if you do that agin. You took me unbeknownst. Now, git to work."

Shock's heart had got back to its right place and was beating its steady beat. The old scrimmage smile was on his face.

"But I do not want to do it again, and I did take you unawares."

"Look-a-here," said Ike, touching Shock with his forefinger on the breast, "do you think you kin do it agin?"

"Don't know that I could," said Shock quietly. "But I do know that I do not intend to try. And, in fact, I do not know how it was done."

"Ikey does," drawled a voice.

There was a delighted roar from the crowd that had gathered round. Ike looked round the circle of grinning men for a second or two.

"Say," he said slowly, "if any blank, blank son of a she-ape thinks he knows how to do that trick when I'm a-watchin', here's his opportunity right naouw—fer fun, or fer money, or," lowering his voice and thrusting forward his face a little, "fer blood."

The laugh died out from the crowd. There was a silence for a moment or two, and then the same voice drawled, "Nobody's hungry, I guess, Ikey," and Ike turned from them with a grunt of contempt.

"Now," he said, coming back to Shock, "I'd like to hear you talk."

Ike threw himself into an attitude of defence, but Shock's position never changed, nor did the smile fade from his face.

"I have nothing to say except that I do not know how it happened. I saw my horse being abused, and—well, I acted a little hastily, I fear."

"Hastily!" exclaimed the old gentleman, who had remained in the crowd. "Nonsense! Perfectly right, I say, and Ike knows it. What would you do, Ike, if you saw a fellow pounding Slipper over the ears?"

"Poundin' Slipper?" said Ike slowly, pausing to turn his quid of tobacco in his cheek. "Poundin' Slipper," he repeated with even greater deliberation. "Knock his blank face into the back of his head."

"Then it seems to me, Ike, you were let off easy." The old gentleman smiled grimly down upon the cowboy, who was still wrathful, but more puzzled than wrathful. The smiling man at the pony's head looked so thoroughly good-natured that it was hard to push a quarrel, but still Ike's dignity had been injured.

"What I beg to remark is," he continued, returning to the attack, "kin he do it agin? Does he have any lingerin' suspicion that he is capable of that act?" Ike reserved his best English for serious occasions. "If he does, I'm willin' he should extempore at it."

"Good man, Ikey!" drawled the voice again from the crowd. "I'll back Ikey to his last pant's button."

Shock stood silent and smiling, while Ike stood facing him, more and more puzzled. Shock was an entirely new experience. He would not fight, he would not run away, he would not even get angry.

At this point the old gentleman interfered.

"Now, Ikey," he said, "it is time you were learning some manners. This gentleman is no pugilist. He has neither the desire nor the intention of fighting you, which is perhaps all the better for you. That is a poor way to treat a stranger the first day he arrives in our town. Perhaps you will allow me to be of some service to you," he said, turning to Shock.

"Thank you," said Shock simply. "I am in need of a doctor first of all. Two of my friends at Loon Lake are very ill. Is there a doctor in this town?"

"There is," replied the old gentleman. "Dr. Burton. But I very much fear that he will hardly be fit for service to-day. Unfortunately, our doctor, though a remarkably clever practitioner, is not always—well, to be quite frank, he is very frequently drunk. Get him sober and he will do you good service."

"How shall I accomplish that?" asked Shock, with a feeling of despair in his heart, thinking of the Old Prospector in his pain and of little Patsy lying in semi-unconsciousness in the back room of the Loon Creek Stopping Place. "I must have a doctor. I cannot go back without one."

"Then," said the old gentleman, "you will need to kidnap him and wait till he sobers off."

"I shall try," said Shock quietly.

The old gentleman stared at him.

"By Jove!" he said, "I believe you mean to. And if you do, you'll succeed."

"Can you direct me to the house of Mr. Macfarren?" inquired Shock.

"Certainly. That is his house among the trees," pointing to a cottage with a verandah about it, which stood back some distance from the main street. "But if you wish to see Mr. Macfarren, you will find him down at the other end of the street at the finishing post. He will be very busily engaged at the present, however, being one of the judges in this race, and if it is not of immediate importance I would advise your waiting till the race is over. But stay, here he comes. The man in the centre is Mr. Macfarren."

As he spoke he pointed to a tall man, with a long, grizzled beard, riding a pony, followed by two younger men splendidly mounted. The elder of these was a man strongly built, face open and honest, but showing signs of hard living. He rode a powerful black horse, whose temper showed in his fierce snatching at the bit. Just now the horse was covered with foam, reddened at the flanks and mouth with blood.

His companion was much younger, a mere boy, indeed. His fair hair, blue eyes, and smooth face accentuated his youthful appearance. It was his youthful face and boyish manner that gave him his name among the cattle men, and his place in their hearts. But though they called him "The Kid," and often "The Kiddie," and thought of him with admiring and caressing tenderness, no man of them failed to give him full respect; for boy as he was, he had a man's nerve, a man's grip, his muscles were all steel, and with all his smiling gentleness none of them would think of taking a liberty with him. Earlier in the day he had won from a dozen competitors that

most coveted of all honours in the ranching country, The Bucking Belt, for he had ridden for the full hundred yards without "touching leather," the *out-law* specially imported from the other side.

As the three men rode up the rider of the black horse was heard to say, "That's the fellow that nearly spilled me. And if Demon hadn't been mighty quick in recovering, it would have been a blank nasty mess."

"I say," said Macfarren, in a loud, blustering tone, "don't you know enough to keep off a race-course when a race is being run?"

Shock was much taken aback at this greeting.

"I beg your pardon, but I didn't know this was a race-course, nor did I know that a race was on."

"The deuce you didn't! Hadn't you eyes to see?"

To this Shock made no reply, but taking a letter from his pocket said quietly, "You are Mr. Macfarren, I believe. I have a letter for you from Mr. McIntyre."

At this the other two rode away. Mr. Macfarren opened the letter with a scowl. As he read the flush on his face deepened.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he burst out, in an angry tone. "I wrote both the Superintendent and McIntyre last week that it was a piece of folly to plant a man here, that we didn't require and didn't want a man. The community is well supplied already with church services, and as far as the Presbyterians are concerned, they would find the support of a minister an intolerable burden."

For a moment or two Shock stood in speechless

amazement. It was disconcerting in the extreme to be told by the man upon whom he had chiefly depended for support and counsel that he was not wanted.

"Your letters would not have reached them in time, I suppose," he said at last.

"Well, that's the fact, at any rate," replied Macfarren roughly. "We won't want a minister. We are thoroughly well supplied. We don't need one, and we cannot support one."

He was turning away without further words when he was arrested by the sharp and peremptory voice of the old gentleman, who had remained behind Shock during the conversation.

"Macfarren, this gentleman is a stranger, I presume. Will you kindly present me?"

"Oh—ah—certainly," said Macfarren, wheeling his pony and looking rather ashamed. "Mr. ——" looking at the letter.

"Macgregor," said Shock quietly.

"Mr. Macgregor, this is General Brady, one of our leading ranchers."

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, sir," said General Brady, shaking Shock warmly by the hand. "You will find us rough and wild, but, sir, I am glad to say we are not all a blank lot of boors."

"Thank you, sir," said Shock, with a sudden flush on his face.

"Oh—ah—certainly we are glad to have you visit our town," said Macfarren, as if trying to atone for his former rudeness. "And, of course, it is no fault of yours, Mr.—ah——"

"Macgregor," said the General shortly.

"Yes, Mr. Macgregor. There's a deuce of a mistake been made, but I take it you will not suffer. There are plenty of—ah—positions—places, I believe, where you will find—ah—opportunity. But if you will excuse me, I am busy for the moment. I shall doubtless see you again before you leave."

Shock bowed in silence.

"Blank cad!" muttered the General. Then turning to Shock he said, with hearty interest showing in his tone, "Where do you put up, Mr. Macgregor?"

"I do not know the town at all. I shall have to look about for a boarding place of some kind, I suppose." Shock's smile was rather uncertain.

The General was evidently interested in this stranger, and touched by his forlorn condition.

"The Royal there," pointing down the street, "is the best hotel. They do you there not so badly. They may give you accommodation for a night, but I fancy it will be rather difficult to find a boarding house. But," he added heartily, "why not come to me in the meantime? Mrs. Brady and myself will be most happy to have you visit us for a few weeks, till you find quarters. I have, unfortunately, an engagement that will keep me late in town to-night, else I should insist on your accompanying me at once—an engagement which I cannot well break. In short, this is our annual spring meeting of the Turf Association, and there is in connection with it some sort of social function to wind the thing up to-night, and Mrs. Brady, being one of the patronesses, and I my-

self being more or less interested—the president of the Association, indeed—we cannot avoid putting in an appearance. And indeed, we enjoy it, sir. We thoroughly enjoy it. It brings to our present crude and somewhat limited life a little bit of the past. But to-morrow I shall be glad to ride down for you, sir, and bring you up to my little place.”

The cordial kindness of this stranger, upon whom he had no claim, touched Shock greatly.

“Thank you again,” he said. “I cannot tell you how much I feel your kindness. But if you will allow me, I would rather accept your invitation later. I feel I must get settled to my work at once. I have been long on the way, and my work is waiting me.” Then, after a pause, he added simply, “But your kindness makes me think of a word I have read, ‘I was a stranger, and ye took me in.’”

The General bowed in silence, and seeing that Shock was not to be persuaded, shook hands with him once more. “Come when you will, sir, and stay as long as you can. The sooner you come and the longer you stay, the better we shall be pleased.” And with another courteous bow the General rode off to attend to his duties as President of the Turf Association.

As Shock turned back to his buckboard he found Ike waiting him. Ike had been an interested witness of all that had taken place, and while his sympathy had gone completely with Shock and against Macfarren, he had not been quite able to shake off the feeling of humiliation under which he suffered.

“Say, stranger,” he said, touching Shock on the shoulder, and speaking in a low and almost respectful tone, “there aint a man in the Territories has ever put the dust onto Ike Iveson’s pants. Here’s twenty-five dollars,” diving deep into his hip pocket and pulling out a plug of tobacco, a knife, and a roll of bills, “which is a standin’ offer to any man who can circumvent that there trick. And I want to say,” he continued, with a subdued eagerness in his tone, “I’ll make it fifty if you do it agin.”

Ike’s tone was persuasive. There was nothing of resentment in it. It was the tone of a man who had come upon an interesting and puzzling experience, and was anxious to investigate.

“No,” said Shock, backing away from Ike, “I cannot take that. Besides, it was not a fair throw.”

“Well,” said Ike, much mollified, “that’s so, that’s so. And I consider it something handsome in you sayin’ so. But that offer stands.”

“All right,” said Shock, smiling a little more broadly. “I’ll remember. And when I want fifty dollars very badly I may come to you. But,” he added, looking Ike up and down, “I’ll have to be pretty hard pushed before I try.”

“It’s a bargain, stranger,” said Ikey, offering a languid hand. Shock grasped it warmly. A slight tremour ran over Ike’s lanky frame as Shock’s hand closed on his.

“Je-roo-sa-lem!” he ejaculated, drawing in his breath, as Shock turned away. “I’ll be ready fer you next time. I prefer a grizzly myself.” He

looked down at his finger nails. "Didn't expect to see 'em on," he observed. "And say, boys," turning to the crowd, "I surmise he's a preacher, a blank fire-escape."

At once Ike became the object of various comments.

"A preacher, Ike? Say, you'll have to change your ways and go to meetin'."

"What's Ikey's church, anyway?"

"Don't know as I ever heard."

"Oh, Ikey aint mean, he treats 'em all the same."

"Well, I guess Ikey 'll have to dust toward the skyline."

Ike listened for a time unmoved, and then drawled out quietly, "What I want to remark to you jay birds is, that if ever you have any misunderstandin' with that there ascension ladder, he'll make you say more prayers in a minute than you've said for the last ten years of your mortal life. And if ever he gits after you the only thing that'll save you will be your dust."

So saying Ike slouched off down the street, keeping his eye on Shock's buckboard. He watched him go into the Royal and in a few minutes come out again, followed him to the International, and soon after to the Ranchers' Roost.

"Guess he's purty nigh tangled up now," said Ikey, with considerable satisfaction. He had a scheme of his own in mind. "There aint a six-foot hole in this hull town, and he'd take purty nigh seven. Now, what's his next move?"

Shock appeared undecided. There was evidently

no place for him in the town. He had a deepening sense of being not wanted. The town was humming with life, but in that life there was no place for him. Awakening a strange sense of fellowship the words came to him, "He was rejected of men."