

# THE BARRIER

By Rex Beach

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(Continued from last week)

About 9 o'clock the next morning a faint and long drawn cry came from the farthest limits of the little camp. An instant later it was echoed closer, and then a dog began to howl. Before its voice had died away another took it up sadly, and within three breaths from up and down the half mile of scanty water front came the cry of "Steam-bo-o-a-t!" Cabin doors opened and men came out, glanced up the stream and echoed the call, while from sleepy nooks and sun warmed roofs wolf dogs arose, yawning and stretching.

Downstream came the faint sighing whoof-whoof of a steamer, and then out from behind the bend she burst. Her cabin deck was lined with passengers, most of whom were bound for the "outside," although still clad in mackinaw and overalls. They all gazed silently at the hundred men of Flambeau, who stared back at them till the gangplank was placed, when they came ashore to stretch their legs. One of them, however, made sufficient noise to make up for the silence of the others. Before the steamer had grounded he appeared among the Siwash deck hands, his head and shoulders towering above them, his white teeth gleaming from a face as dark as theirs, shouting to his friends ashore and pantomiming his delight to the two Gale children, who had come with Aluna to welcome him.

"Who's dose beeg, tall people w'at stan' longside of you, Miz Gale?" he called to her; then, shading his eyes elaborately, he cried in a great voice: "Waal, waal, I b'lieve dat's M'sieu Jean an' Mamselle Mollee! Ba gar! Dey got so beeg w'ile I'm gone I don' know dem no more!"

The youthful Gales wriggled at this delicious flattery and dug their tiny moccasined toes into the sand.

Lieutenant Burrell had come with the others, for the arrival of a steamer called for the presence of every soul in camp, and, spying Necla in the outskirts of the crowd, he took his place beside her. He had lain awake for hours, thinking of her and had fallen asleep with her still in his mind, for the revelation of her blood had come as a shock to him.

He had sprung from a race of slaveholders, from a land where birth and breed are more than any other thing, where a drop of impure blood effects an ineradicable stain. Therefore the thought of this girl's ignoble parentage was so repugnant to him that the more he pondered it the more pitiful it seemed, the more monstrous. Lying awake and thinking of her in the stillness of his quarters, it had seemed a very unfortunate and a very terrible thing. During his morning duties the vision of her had been fresh before him again, and his constant contemplation of the matter had wrought a change in his attitude toward the girl, of which he was uncomfortably conscious and which he was glad to see she did not perceive.

The men were pouring off the boat now, and through the crowd came the tall Frenchman, bearing in the hollow of each arm a child who clasped a bundle to its breast. His eyes grew brighter at sight of Necla, and he broke into a flood of patois. They fairly bombarded each other with quick questions and fragmentary answers till she remembered her companion.

"Oh, I forgot my manners! Lieutenant Burrell, this is Napoleon Doret—our Poleon!" she added, with proud emphasis.

Doret checked his volubility and stared at the soldier, whom he appeared to see for the first time. The little brown people in his arms stared likewise, and it seemed to Burrell that a certain distrust was in each of the three pairs of eyes, only in those of the man there was no shyness. Instead, the Canadian looked him over gravely from head to heel, seeming to note each point of the unfamiliar attire; then he inquired without removing his glance:

"Were 'bouts you live, eh?"

"I live at the post yonder," said the lieutenant.

"W'at bizness you work at?"

"The lieutenant has been stationed here, foolish," said Necla. "Come up to the store quick and tell me what it's like at Dawson."

In spite of the man's unfriendliness, Burrell watched him with admiration. There were no heels to his tufted fur boots, and yet he stood a good six feet two, as straight as a pine sapling, and it needed no second glance to tell of what metal he was made. His spirit showed in his whole body, in the set of his head and, above all, in his dark, warm face, which glowed with eagerness when he talked, and that was ever—when he was not singing.

"I never see so many people since I left Quebec," he was saying. "She's

jus' lak beeg city—mus' be t'ree, four t'ousan' people. Every day some more dey come, an' all night dey dance an' sing an' drink w'iskee. Ba gosh, dat's fine place!"

"Are there lots of white women?" asked the girl.

"Yes; two, t'ree hundred. Mos' of dem is work in dance halls. Dere's one fine gal I see, name' Marie Bourgette. I tell you 'bout her by an' by."

"Oh, Poleon, you're in love!" cried Necla.

"No, siree!" he denied. "Dere's none of dem gal look half so purty lak you." He would have said more; but, soyring, the trader at the entrance of the store, he went to him, straightway launching into the details of their commercial enterprise, which, happily, had been most successful.

Among the merchandise of the post there were for sale a scanty assortment of firearms, cheap shotguns and a Winchester or two, displayed in a rack behind the counter in a manner to attract the eye of such native hunters as might need them, and with the rest hung a pair of Colt's revolvers. One of the new arrivals, who had separated from the others at the front, now called to Gale:

"Are those Colts for sale? Mine was stolen the other day." Evidently he was accustomed to Yukon prices, for he showed no surprise at the figure the trader named, but took the guns and tested each of them, whereupon the old man knew that here was no "Cheechako," as tenderfeet are known in the north, although the man's garb had deceived him at first glance. The stranger balanced the weapons, one in either hand; then he did the "double roll" neatly, following which he executed a move that Gale had not witnessed for many years. He extended one of the guns, butt foremost, as if surrendering it, the action being free and open, save for the fact that his forefinger was crooked and thrust through the trigger guard; then, with the slightest jerk of the wrist, the gun spun about, the handle jumped into his palm, and instantly there was a click as his thumb flipped the hammer. It was the old "road agent spin," which Gale as a boy had practiced hours at a time. But that this man was in earnest he showed by glancing upward sharply when the trader laughed.

"This one hangs all right," he said; "give me a box of cartridges."

He emptied his gold sack in payment for the gun and ammunition, then remarked:

"That pretty nearly cleans me. If I had the price I'd take them both."

Gale wondered what need induced this fellow to spend his last few dollars on a firearm. Then he inquired:

"Bound for the outside?"

"No, I'm locating here."

The trader darted a quick glance at him. He did not like this man.

"There ain't much doing in this camp. It's a pretty poor place," he said guardedly.

"I'll put in with you, from its looks," agreed the other. "It's got too many

soldiers to be worth a d—n." He snarled this bitterly, with a peculiar leering lift of his lip, as if his words tasted bad.

"Most of the boys are going up river," said Gale.

"Well, those hills look as if they had gold in them," said the stranger, pointing vaguely. "I'm going to prospect."

Gale knew instinctively that the fellow was lying, for his hands were not those of a miner, but there was nothing to be said. His judgment was verified, however, when Poleon drew him aside later and said:

"He's bad man."

"How do you know?"

"She's leave Dawson d—n queeck. Dose mounted police t'row 'im on de boat jus' before we left." Then he told a story that he had heard. The man, it seemed, had left Skagway between two guns, upon the disruption of Soapy Smith's band of desperadoes, and had made for the interior, but had been intercepted at the pass by two members of the citizens' committee who came upon him suddenly. Pretending to yield, he had executed some unexpected coup as he delivered his gun, for both men fell, shot through the body. No one knew just what it was he did nor cared to question him overmuch.

The next heard of him was at Lake Bennett, over the line, where the mounted police recognized him and sent him on. They marked him well, however, and passed him on from post to post as they had driven others whose records were known, but he had lost himself in the confusion at Dawson for a few weeks until the scarlet coated riders searched him out, disarmed him and forced him sullenly aboard this steamer.

Old Man Gale cared little for this, for he had spent his life among such men, but as he watched the fellow a scheme outlined itself in his head. Evidently the man dared not go farther down the river, for there was nothing save Indian camps and a mission or two this side of St. Michael's, and at that point there were a court and many soldiers, where one was liable to meet the penalty of past misdeeds; hence he was probably resolved to stop here, and, judging by his record, he was a man of unsettled convictions.

The trader stepped to the door and, seeing Burrell on the deck of the steamer, went down toward him. It was a long chance, but the stakes were big and worth the risk. He had thought much during the night previous—in fact, for many hours—and the morning had found him still undecided, therefore he took this course.

"Necla tells me that you aim to keep law and order here," he began abruptly, having drawn the young man aside.

"Those are my instructions," said Burrell, "but they are so vague"

"Well, this camp is bigger than it was an hour ago, and it ain't improved any in the growth. Yonder goes the new citizen." He pointed to the stranger, who had returned to the steamer for his baggage and was descending the gangplank beneath them, a valise in each hand. "He's a thief and a murderer, and we don't want him here. Now, it's up to you."

"I don't understand," said the lieutenant, whereupon the trader told him Doret's tale. "You and your men were sent here to keep things peaceable," he concluded, "and I reckon when a man is too tough for the Canuck police he is tough enough for you to tackle. There ain't a lock and key in the camp, and we ain't had a killing or a stealing in ten years. We'd like to keep it that way."

"Well, you see, I know nothing of that shooting affray, so I doubt if my authority would permit me to interfere," the soldier mused, half to himself.

"I allowed you were to use your own judgment," said the elder man.

"So I am, I suppose. There is one chance, Mr. Gale. If you'll back me up I'll send him on down to St. Michael's. That is the most I can do."

The lieutenant outlined his plan, and as he went on the trader nodded approval.

The young man gazed back at him so squarely, his eyes were so pleasant and friendly, his whole person breathed such straight up honesty and freshness that shame arose in the old man, and he had hard shift to keep his glance from wavering. Without forethought he answered impulsively:

"He's desperate and he's dangerous. I sold him a 45 just now." He was about to tell him where the man wore it and to add a word concerning his dexterity with the gun when the very fearless deliberation of the youth deterred him. On second thought Gale yielded to an impulse to wait and see how Meade Burrell would act under fire. If the soldier emerged scathless it would give him a line on his character. If he did not—well, that would

be even better.

The crowd was coming back to the steamer, which had discharged her few bundles of freight, and there was no one inside the log post as they entered except Doret and the stranger, who had deposited his baggage at the rear and was talking with the Frenchman at the bar. At sight of the lieutenant he became silent and turned carelessly, although with a distrustful stare. Burrell wasted no time.

"Are you going to locate here?" he began.

"Yes."

"I notice you go skeleton rigged," the soldier continued, indicating the man's baggage. "Pretty small outfit for a miner, isn't it?"

"It's plenty for me."

"Have you enough money to buy your season's grub?"

"I guess that's my business."

"My orders are to see that all newcomers either have an outfit or are able to buy one," said Burrell. "Those that are not equipped properly are to be sent down river to St. Michael's, where there is plenty of everything and where they will be taken care of by the government. Mr. Gale has only sufficient provisions to winter the men already in this district."

"I can take care of myself," said the man angrily, "whether I'm broke or not, and I don't want any of your interference." He shot a quick glance at Poleon Doret, but the Frenchman's face was like wood, and his hand still held the neck of the whisky bottle he had set out for the stranger.

"Come," said the officer peremptorily. "I have heard all about you, and you are not the kind of citizen we want here, but if you have enough money for an outfit I can't send you away. If you haven't—"

"I'm broke," said the man, but at the note in his voice Poleon Doret's muscles tightened, and Burrell, who also read a sinister message in the tone, slid his heavy service revolver from its holster beneath his coat.

"Give me your gun," he said. "I'll unload it and give it back to you at the gangplank."

"All right; you've got the upper hand," said the man through lips that had gone white. Drawing his weapon from beneath his vest, he presented it to the officer, butt foremost, hammer underneath. The cylinder reposed naturally in the palm of his hand, and the tip of his forefinger was thrust through the trigger guard.

Burrell lowered the barrel of his revolver and put out his left hand for the other's weapon. Suddenly the man's wrist jerked, the soldier saw a blue flicker of sunlight on the steel as it whirled, saw the arm of Poleon Doret fling itself across the bar with the speed of a striking serpent, heard a smash of breaking glass, felt the shock of a concussion and the spatter of some liquid in his face. Then he saw the man's revolver on the floor half-way across the room, saw fragments of glass with it and saw the fellow step backward, snatching at the fingers of his right hand. A smell of powder smoke and rank whisky was in the air.

There are times when a man's hand will act more swiftly than his tongue. Napoleon Doret had seen the manner of the stranger's surrender of his gun and, realizing what it meant, had act-

ed. At the very instant of the fellow's treachery Doret struck with his bottle just in time to knock the weapon from his hand, but not in time to prevent its discharge. The bullet was lodged in the wall a foot from where Gale stood. Aiming a sweeping downward blow with his Colt, Burrell clipped the Skagway man just above the ear, and he reeled. Then as he fell the officer struck wickedly again at his opponent's skull, but Doret seized him by

the arm.

"Ba gar, don't kill 'im twice!" Burrell wrenched his arm free and turned on Doret a face that remained long in the Frenchman's memory, a face suffused with fury and convulsed like that of a sprinter at the finish of a race. The two men stared at each other over the fallen figure for a brief moment until the soldier gained mastery of himself and sheathed his weapon, when Poleon smiled.

"I spoil a quart of good w'iskee on you. Dat's wort' five dollar."

The lieutenant wiped the liquor from his face.

"Quick work, Doret," he said. "I owe you one."

Gale's face was hidden as he bent over the prostrate man, fingering a long and ragged cut which laid the fellow's scalp open from back of the ear to the temple, but he mumbled something unintelligible.

"Is he hurt badly?"

"No; you clipped him too low," said the trader. "I told you he was bad."

They revived the man, then bound up his injury hastily, and as the steamer cast off they led him to the bank and passed his gripsacks to a roustabout. He said no word as he walked unsteadily up the plank, but turned and stared malignantly at them from the deck. Then as the craft swung outward into the stream he grinned through the trickle of blood that stole down from beneath his wide hat and cried:

"I'd like to introduce myself, for I'm coming back to winter with you, lieutenant! My name is Runnon. And until the steamer was hidden behind the bend below they saw him standing there gazing back at them fixedly.

As Burrell left the two men at the store he gave his hand frankly to the French Canadian and said, while his cheeks flushed:

"I want to thank you for saving me from my own awkwardness."

Doret became even more embarrassed than the lieutenant at this show of gratitude and granted churlishly. But when the young man had gone he turned to Gale, who had watched them silently, and said:

"He's a nice young feller, ole man. Sapre! W'en he's mad his eye got so red lak my undershirt."

But the trader made no reply.

### CHAPTER III

#### WITHOUT BENEFIT OF CLERGY.

WHEN the steamer had gone Napoleon Doret went to look for Necla and found her playing with the younger Gales, who reveled in the gifts he had brought. Never had there been such gorgeous presents for little folks.

The elder girl laughed gladly as Poleon entered, though her eyes were wet with the pity of it.

"You seem to bring sunshine wherever you go," she said. "They have never had things to play with like other children, and it makes me cry to watch them."

"Ho, ho," he chuckled, "dis ain' no time for cryin', ba gosh! I guess you don't have so much present w'en you was lit' gal you'self, w'at? Mebbe you tink I forget you. Waal, I didn't."

He began to undo the fastenings of a parcel he carried in his arms.

"Don't you dare open it!" cried Necla. "W'at's that 'air the fun." She was a child herself now, her face flushed and her hands a-tremble. Taking the package to the table, she hurriedly untied the knots while he stood watching her, his teeth showing white against his dark face and his eyes half shut as if dazzled by the sight of her.

"Oh, why didn't you tie more knots in it?" she breathed as she undid the last, and then, opening the wrappings slowly, she gasped in astonishment. She shook it out gently, reverently, a clinging black lace gown of Paris make. Next she opened a box and took from it a picture hat with long jet plumes, which she stroked and pressed fondly against her face. There were other garments also—a silken petticoat, silk stockings and a pair of high heeled shoes to match, with certain other delicate and dainty things which she modestly forbore to inspect before the Frenchman, who said no word, but only gazed at her, and for whom she had no eyes as yet. Finally she laid her presents aside, turning to him, said in a hushed, awe-stricken voice:

"It's all there, everything complete! Oh, Poleon—you dear, dear Poleon!" She took his two big hands by the thumbs, as had been her custom ever since she was a child, and looked up at him, her eyes wet with emotion. But she could not keep away from the dress for long and returned to feast her eyes upon it.

"You lak it, eh?" pressed Poleon, hungry for more demonstrative expression.

"Oh-h!" she sighed. "Where on earth

did you get it? Why, it must have cost a fortune!"

"Wan night I gamble in beeg saloon. Yes, sir! I gamble good dat night. den I play roulette, den I dance. I see a new dance gal. She's French gal, from Montreal. Dat's de one I tol' you 'bout. Ba gar, she's swell dress' too. She's name' Marie Bourgette."

"Oh, I've heard about her," said Necla. "She owes a claim on Bonanza creek."

"Sure, she's friend's wit' Charlie McCormack, dat riche feller, but I don' know it dis tam', so I ask her to dance wit' me. Den we drink a bottle of champagne—twenty dollar."

"Mamselle, I say, 'how much you charge for sell me dat dress?'"

"For w'y shall I sell 'im? she say, 'I don' wear 'im before till tonight, and I don' get no more dress lak dis de t'ousan' dollar.'"

Necla exclaimed excitedly.

"For w'y you sell 'im? I say, 'because I'll tak' 'im down to Flambeau for Necla Gale, w'at never had no dress lak dat in all her life.' W'at, sir, dat Marie Bourgette she's hear of you before, an' your dad, too—mos' all dose Cheechakos know 'bout Old Man Gale—so she say:

"'W'at lookin' kind of gal is dis Necla?'"

"I tell her all 'bout you. W'en I'm t'rough she say:

"'But maybe your little frier' is more bigger as I am. Maybe de dress won't fit.'"

"'Ha, you don' know me, mamselle! I say, 'I can guess de weight of a cribboun to five pound. She'll be same de la'kin' one inch roun' de waist.'"

"'Poleon Doret,' she say, 'you air no Frenchman to talk lak dat. Look here! I can sell dis dress for fousan dollar tonight, or I can trade 'im de gol' mine on El Dorado creek to some dose Swede w'at want to catch a pig, but I'm goin' sell 'im to you for five hundred dollar, jus' w'at I pay for 'im. You wait here till I come back.'"

"'No, no, Mamselle Marie, I'll go long, too, for so you don' change your min', I say, 'An' I stan' outside de door till she pass me de whole world.'"

"'Don't forget de little shoes,' I say, 'an' dat's how it come.'"

"'And you paid \$300 for it?' Necla said, agabst. The Canadian shrugged.

"'Only for de good heart of Marie Bourgette I pay wan t'ousan,' said he. 'I mak' seven hundred dollar de profit.'"

"It was very nice of both of you, but—I can't wear it. I've never seen a dress like it except in pictures, and I couldn't"—She saw his face fall and said impulsively:

"I'll wear it once anyhow, Poleon, just for you. Go away quick now and let me put it on."

"Dat's good," he nodded as he moved away. "I bet you mak' dose dance hall women look lak sucker."

No man may understand the girl's feelings as she set about clothing her-



She hesitated modestly when she saw the low cut.

again in her first fine dress. Time and again she had studied pictures from the "outside" showing women arrayed in the newest styles and had closed her eyes to fancy herself dressed in like manner.

Poleon's eye had been amazingly correct, for the gown fitted her neatly save at the waist, which was even more than an inch too large now, showing the fact that she had worn such a corset as the well-to-do Marie Bourgette was accustomed to.

Continued next week.

The loafer may make a bit of some people, but he doesn't get paid for it.