

A TENDERFOOT'S WOOLING

—BY—
CLIVE PHILLIPPS WOLLEY
(AUTHOR OF "GOLD, GOLD IN CARIBOO," ETC.)

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CHAPTER XXV (Con.)

"You don't know yet, Mr. rarr-clough," she said sweetly. "The foreman next."

Jim Combe hesitated a moment, and a queer smile spread over his face. He remembered that if a pack of cards is shot over a smooth surface it is not impossible to guess where the low cards will be, the least painted offering the least resistance, and he picked his card carefully.

His rule was justified. The card he chose had only one pip on it, but for a moment his face clouded. Then he smiled again.

"Ace low, you said, Mrs. Rolt?"

"I thought that Jim Combe was a square player," she said, but there was no censure in her tones. "You know the rule, Jim. I stand back. You turn, Al."

"Give me a little 'un, ma'am."

She hesitated. "It is not pleasant to send an old friend to his death, and the cards which had been cut were all high."

"You want me to cut for you, Al?"

"If the Boss don't mind, ma'am."

Rolt nodded to her to humor the old man, but her hand shook as she turned up a five of spades.

"Oh, Al, I'm so sorry."

"Then you ain't got no call to be. It's what I asked for, ain't it, and I mostly asks for what I want," and he swung gaily round on his heels to leave the room.

"Hold on, Al!" said a quiet voice at his elbow. "There is one more to cut yet."

"Tain't no use, Mr. Anstruther. You ain't fit to go, and there ain't anything there no lower than a five."

"There are three lower, Al. If you please, Mrs. Rolt."

Mrs. Rolt looked up into the quiet smiling face, and saw a light in it which she had never seen before. It was as if Anstruther knew what lay in store for him, and the knowledge made him hold his head more proudly.

"He is right, Al. You pledged yourselves that all should cut. Take your card, Frank."

As she spoke Kitty Clifford moved from her friend's side uncertainly towards Anstruther, and then stood hesitating, her lips trembling and her sweat-drops full of unshed tears.

"What is it, Kitty? Do you want to cut for him?"

She tried to answer, but no sound came from her parted lips.

"She'll die for you, Frank?"

"Will she die for you, Kitty?"

And he held out his hand to her. For a moment the boy and girl stood there hand in hand, and then a flash of chance, forgetful of the world and reckless of the betrayal of their secret.

It was a strange betrothal, but such it seemed to all who saw them. In a silence which could be felt, the girl's white hand began to move uncertainly over the pack, touching a card here and another there, as if afraid to choose.

"The others had drawn their lots at once. To them it seemed that minutes elapsed whilst that little hand wandered over the table, and each man prayed in his own fashion that she might choose aright."

At last, like a child who fears to see the knife, she shut her eyes, and clutching a card, held it up to Anstruther, over whose face a proud smile spread as bright and genuine as daylight.

"Thank you, dear. You have saved my honor. You don't mind if I spoil your pack, Mrs. Rolt. I shall want this card by and by more than you will," and kissing it, he put it into his breast pocket.

But Kitty caught at his hand and cried to him to show it to her.

"Another time, dear. It is the best card in the world for me."

"What was it, Frank? Show it to me, or show it to me!"

"Not now, Kitty," and bending down, he kissed her white brow before them all, and with his arm round her waist, half led, half carried, her to Mrs. Rolt.

"Take her away now. For God's sake take her away!" he said, and Mrs. Rolt led Kitty sobbing from the room.

"Oh, Mary! Mary! I have killed him, Frank—"

But Frank Anstruther stood back from the weak pleading hands, and as the two women left the room, he was the only face left in it on which there was no sign of sorrow.

"When the door closed, he sat down on the edge of the table and began to roll a cigarette.

"Let's see that card, pardner. You ain't putting up a job on us?"

"No, Al. There it is," and he showed him the two of hearts.

"Holy smoke! The two-spot! She couldn't have drawn a lower if she'd tried to!"

"Or better. Luck is for the young, Al," and this curiously-minded young man from Piccadilly began to hum a light air to himself, the words of which were:

"He ain't no good about the house. He ain't no good about the house."

CHAPTER XXVI

"You said, Combe, that I should not be able to find my way to Soda Creek?"

Anstruther was still sitting on the table rolling his cigarette.

"In the dark. It would not be light all the time you were on the road. But you don't have to, it is not likely we are going to let you suicide after that."

Anstruther smiled a little superciliously.

"That has nothing to do with the question. Would you mind coming here for a moment?" and he went to the window.

"That is the road to Soda Creek; the way we came?"

Combe nodded.

"But that is the direct way, as the crow flies?"

"Yes, only there's a bit of a canyon in the way."

"I know. But after?"

"There wouldn't be any after. There's no way across the canyon until you come to the place where the road crosses it. It's four hundred feet deep with sides like the walls of a house."

"If there was a bridge across it, it would shorten the distance by a mile, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, by two, I should think. But there isn't any bridge and the Indians ain't going to wait whilst we build one."

"Could one be built? How wide is the canyon?"

"Not more than twenty or thirty feet at the Buck's Jump. It could be bridged there easily enough; but what's the good of talking. It ain't built."

"Where is the Buck's Jump. There, isn't it?"

"Yes, right against that big lone pine with the broken top."

"Very nearly in a direct line for Soda Creek?"

"In a plumb straight line. That pine might have been put there for a surveyor's post."

"So I thought," said Anstruther, and he stood there measuring the distance with his eye, and noting the landmarks.

Combe watched him, and at last, with an obvious effort, he said:

"Forgive me, Anstruther. Perhaps you don't think it is my business, but I've got to speak. I know just how you feel, and it's the way a man ought to feel, but you know you can't go now. It wouldn't be a square deal to Miss Clifford."

"Leave Miss Clifford's name out of the question, please. I'm very much obliged to you for what you suggest, but there are some things you don't understand. I'm going, and there's an end of it."

"When I am ready," Anstruther answered, and left the room.

"Pretty rough on them kiddies, ain't it, Jim?" said Al, when Anstruther had left the room, and she's dead stuck on him. But I guess he's right."

"Right?" snorted Combe. "Right? Just to think of himself? No, I don't think he's right, and I'll take blanketed goods as he doesn't do it."

"Whatever Al was about to say was lost, for at that moment the door sounded from the upper story. The rifles were wanted at the windows. With a rush the two men went to their places, and for the next twenty minutes they had their whole attention occupied by what they saw from their posts.

A cloud of dust was coming towards them at railroad speed, and at first they flattered themselves that Horseley and his specials had broken the cordon and were coming to their relief. But the riders who emerged from the cloud were Chilcotens, reckless whooping devils, painted as none of the white men had ever before seen. Indians painted in British Columbia, their greasy locks, powdered with swansdown, and eagle's plumes drooping from their heads to half way between their shoulders.

At break-neck gallop they rode to within a hundred yards of the house, and then like a flight of starlings they diverged, following their leader in single file in a wild circuit round the building brandishing their weapons and discharging them in mid career.

In spite of the pace at which they came several bullets struck the house, and one was so well-aimed that it smashed through a chest of drawers behind which Rolt was kneeling; but one of the Indians' horses pitched on its head, and before its rider could extricate himself, several bullets found him.

"Only the canter past, I fancy, Al," said Rolt, coolly, blowing the smoke out of his barrels. "Where is Anstruther?"

"I seed him go into his room as we came upstairs. He hasn't been up here to see the show. He's up to his neck in them trunks of his, I reckon."

"What?"

"Kander sortin' out his duds and gettin' good and ready for his passair."

Jim glanced quickly through the window, and as the Indians were already loping back to their lines, then he put his rifle up against the wall and left the room quietly.

Al noticed him and seemed about to follow him, but thought better of it, and muttering "Let 'em settle it themselves," he kept his place at the window.

Anstruther's door was wide open, but from where he stood Jim could not see into the room, neither could he hear anyone moving in it, but to prevent accidents he sat down and took off his boots, and then with them in his hand, stole quietly along the passage and peeped through between the door and the jamb.

Anstruther had gone, but the room could not be said to be empty, for the floor of it was covered with mountains of clothes, as Jim had never dreamed of, piled pell mell in a great heap, whilst, as he said afterwards, there were "boots enough for a battalion, and coats like blankets at a potshack."

As he looked he heard the horses stamping in the kitchen.

"Going," he muttered, and without stopping to think, he ran down into the kitchen.

But the sight which met him there staggered Jim Combe, so that he stood gapping with his boots still in his hand.

"Anstruther in full hunting costume

—pink coat, immaculate leathers, top hat, and gloves—turned and faced him. His horse, looking enormous alongside the weedy country horse, was standing as still as a sheep in the middle of the room, facing the window from which Anstruther had retreated to take the ashes.

"What in—"

"Going to bed, Jim?" asked Anstruther easily, interrupting him and looking with a grin at Combe's boots.

"Sorry to bother you, but before you turn in you might put those up against the wall," and he pointed to the ash-tray.

"Say I'll be back soon. So Combe and, before Combe had realized what was happening, Anstruther swung very lightly into his saddle and put his horse at the window.

Combe saw Anstruther touch the great horse with his heel, heard the "Up, boy," as they came to the window sill, and then the beat of the great quarters were gathered before it and like a cat on the move, came a well-broken Heythrop hunter, Bay-dy-gore reared and popped over in space.

The little cramped jump would have done more to unseat Combe than it worst back, but the man from Piccadilly sat as if he was in a rock chair.

So quietly had Anstruther made his preparations, and the Indians' team had served him so well, that, with the single exception of Jim Combe, no one had any idea until they saw him from the windows, trotting quietly towards the Indians, who had just returned to their lines, their horses a trifle puffed by the wild gallop through the canyon.

For a hundred yards he trotted quietly, and then stopping unconsciously, as if he had been at a meet in his own country, he turned and uncovered to the ladies, smiling and calling a message to them, the words of which they could not catch.

Considering the probability of a volley it was very gallant, for, as he looked, and at any rate it was better, and more merciful to Kitty than a tearful leave-taking.

Perhaps he meant it so, but Anstruther was never one of those who parade their good intentions.

Replacing his hat and waving his hand to them, he turned in his saddle, and in a quiet, steady trot towards the Indian lines, the great horse reaching at his bit and showing plainly how good the turf felt under his feet after so many days on a boarded floor.

"Great heavens! The boy has gone mad!" cried Rolt. "Can no one stop him?"

"Best let him play his own hand now, Boss," growled Al, whose eyes were beginning to glitter with excitement and understanding. "He knows his long suit. None of us do. Maybe he's going to play peace-maker."

This may have been the idea which kept the Indians quiet, though that could hardly have been Al's reading of the middle, or the old man's thin nostrils would not have been working so nervously, and though such an attitude as Anstruther's would have been in keeping with the traditions of old time Hudson Bay factors when going to a solemn meeting, he carried no white flag or other willfully misleading emblem.

But he rode unarmed. Except for his horn-handled hunting crop, he carried nothing, sprang in this fashion, restraining his horse to the steepest trot, he advanced with the utmost concern to within fifty yards of the wondering Chilcotens without a shot fired or a word spoken, whilst his friends watched him with their hearts in their mouths.

At fifty yards from the Indian line, a dozen voices challenged him, but without haste as without pause.

Then there was a clank of Winchester pumps, and a rifle went up to redskins' shoulder. Before the butt touched flesh, in the last second of grace, Anstruther spoke to his horse, and touched him with his spurs, "so that the gallant beast, unused to such diverged, following their leader in single file in a wild circuit round the building brandishing their weapons and discharging them in mid career."

In spite of the pace at which they came several bullets struck the house, and one was so well-aimed that it smashed through a chest of drawers behind which Rolt was kneeling; but one of the Indians' horses pitched on its head, and before its rider could extricate himself, several bullets found him.

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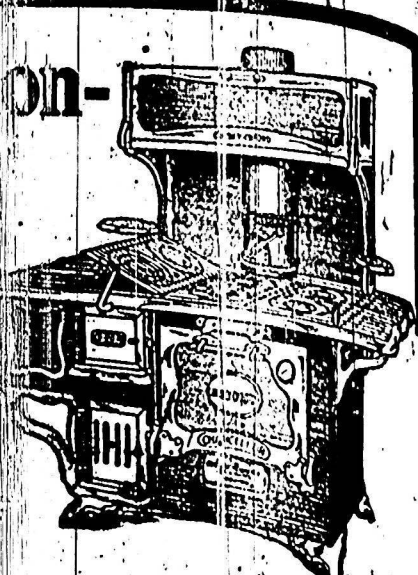
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GOOD IDEA

Jones was at the theatre, and behind him sat a lady with a child on her lap, which was crying miserably.

Unable to stand it any longer, Jones turned smilingly to the lady and said: "That that infant of yours best christened yet, ma'am?"

"No, sir," replied the lady.

"If I were your husband, I should call it 'Good Idea,'" said Jones.

"And what would 'Good Idea' say?" the lady indignantly asked.

"Because," said Jones, "it should be carried out." The lady Jones, who had to be carried out.

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