THRILLING LIVES

SOLDIER POLICE OF THE PLAINS

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AT THE SIGN HIS BRAVES SURROUNDED THE TWO MEN AND A DOZEN RIFLES WERE LEVELLED AT THEIR HEADS.

PICTURE to yourself a country whose lower lateral boundary line is eighteen hundred miles long and whose northern limit is the Arctic Circle, two thousand miles away—a very ocean of land, silent, limitless, awe inspiring.

The big, transcontinental express thundering along its far way seems lost in the vastness of it, a sort of helpless, hopeless measuring worm seeking the impossible. Day after day prairie wastes and wheat fields, furze covered hills and barren sloughs alternate in dreary succession from the car window. Now and then solitary houses drift by in the offing like solitary sails at sea. By night there's the North Star, telling of the boundless north, with its mountains, lakes and ice fields, trackless, soundless, mysterious, almost incomprehensible in area.

Picture to yourself this half a continent of land and then conceive of its being policed by eight hundred odd cavalrymen, policed and held firmly in hand from its earliest days of savagery and border ruffianism, through all its rebellions and vicissitudes, right up to its present day and wonderful development into wheat fields and gold fields.

The headquarters of the Northwest Mounted Police—King Edward gave them the prefix "Royal"—are at Regina, capital of the Northwest Territories, a raw, unfinished city of the prairie about one hundred miles due north of the border line of Montana and North Dakota.

From Regina the slender lines of control branch out—west to the Yukon, east to civilization, south to the forty-ninth parallel, the great boundary line between this country and Canada, and north to the unexplored fastnesses of the forest wilderness.

There are eight districts in all, with divisional headquarters in the largest town in each district, and from there the control reaches out in the form of detachments, where one or more constables live in seclusion and make daily rides over their spacious allotments of territory.

Two miles out of Regina are the barracks, a dozen long, low buildings, where the new recruits—"rookies," they are called—are drilled, bunked and fed until they are ready for and given their detachments.

It is a very busy post. From the time the bugle sounds for "morning stables" till the close of day it is ride and drill, drill and ride, with numerous duties interspersed.

It is picturesque, too. The full dress uniform consists of scarlet tunic with yellow facings, blue cloth breeches with yellow stripes, white helmet, cavalry boots and overcoat. In winter a fur overcoat and moccasins are worn and in summer khaki suits and cowboy sombrero.

Sometimes the big transcontinental train brings in a crew of enlisted men, who are met and marched to the barracks. They are serious faced as a rule; they have no illusions about the service they are about to enter. They enlisted, every man, not under the inspiration of marching bands, flying colors and all the panoply of war, but quietly, grimly, and for some good reason which each man chooses to keep to himself.

They are a heterogeneous crowd, as a rule, so far as antecedents are concerned. Side by side with a second son of some illustrious English family stands a Cockney, h-less and audacious, or an Eastern log driver, or a man from Toronto with the twang of that city, or a Frenchman from Quebec, or a cowboy from Montana.

There are Scotch halfbreeds and Irish thoroughbreds, and each man talks at first the speech of his race; "but after a bit," said an Irish sergeant, with a grin, "they all learn to swear in one tongue, and that's good enough prairie English."

There's a tradition that oftentimes in the rough barracks one may hear the soft drawl of a London club.

"Maybe," said the Irish sergeant sceptically, "but whoever that was, he talked in his sleep then. Sure, there's no time to drawl by the daytime."

The individual histories of the men of the Mounted Police are no doubt as interesting as the story of the force itself; and in almost every case a natural question rises to the lips of the visitor—"How did you come to take on?"

They used to ask a similar question in the early days of Texas when many of the settlers came to that State, not because they especially admired it, but because it was liberal in laws and confines and they had some excellent reason for hurriedly leaving home. Most of them made excellent citizens, but all of them buried their past behind them, and a few curious ones promptly decided that it was unwise to ask any question bearing upon their past, even the simple one of "How did you happen to come to Texas?"

The innocent visitor at Regina, as well as the newly enlisted man on the force, finds very speedily that the same question is generally tabooed there.

One day at headquarters the Commissioner of the Mounted Police paused for an instant as he was reviewing a line of recruits and scrutinized searchingly the face of a high heeled young cow puncher.

"Your face seems familiar to me," he said quietly. "Where have I seen you before?"

The new recruit winked blandly and kept a discreet if somewhat worried silence. The Commissioner racked his memory.

"Why, see here," he finally exploded, "I had you before me once for cattle thieving!"

"Sure," said the puncher eagerly; "sure, and I brought my rope with me," he added appealingly. "Now, sir, if you're short of horses and need any"——

In the same line that morning and touching elbows with the former horse thief was a former officer in a famous Irish regiment, whose father is a King's counsellor in London, and yet another Englishman whose first and second names proclaim his family to be, as it is, one of the finest of the county aristocracy.

This last man I knew quite well. He had been sent to Iowa to learn ranching, after the English apprentice idea, and at the end of four years was given his dower right—a considerable sum—with which to purchase his own farm. About this time he met up with a mining sharper from the Black Hills, at the end of which acquaintanceship he found himself minus his fortune, farm and confidence in human nature and filling a minor position in a Deadwood store.

He drifted north and joined the police simply because he preferred a saddle to a clerk's stool, and his past record was as clean as a schoolboy's; but he and the former horse thief became devoted friends and two of the most trusted members of the force.

In the Far West they judge a man, so the saying goes, "as he stands in his boots." The Mounted Police force uses [illegible] the same judgment.

Family, past education, these do not count, except as they prove themselves in the present. It is the man himself they weigh, the man in his boots. He must pass a rigid physical examination. They take big men, but smaller men are preferred. They must not measure under five feet nine inches in height nor less than thirty-eight and a half inches around the chest. They must be tough of sinew and muscle, quick, self-reliant, able to withstand hardships and possess brains and a fair moral tone. The service does the rest.

And a very remarkable service it is. Given eight hundred raw recruits, with their curious differences of race, breeding and previous conditions of livelihood, it seems very wonderful that they should become so unified that one grows to think of them not as individuals, but as redoubtable bulwarks of law and order—that they should become so powerful that a single one of them standing alone in a wilderness has all the controlling force of a great army.

Some years ago, when the Canadian Pacific Railroad Company was forcing its trunk line across the continent, a small army of Saultaux and Cree Indians, under command of the infamous Chief Piapot, came down from the north to stop the construction work. Railroads portended civilization, and civilization meant the cessation of whiskey smuggling over the border. Hence Piapot's magnanimous resolve.

They did interrupt the work, and they so terrified the "navvies" that the chiefs of construction hastily appealed to the Mounted Police, just as every one did then and does now when things, no matter what, go wrong in the Territories. And the Mounted Police sent a single constable and companion guide to quell the disturbance.

The chief of construction was inclined to laugh outright when he saw the number of aids sent him. Two men to put a quietus upon half a thousand Indians, naked savages, who had put to rout as many "navvies" and left them cowering in their cabins!

The arrival of the two men brought forth a fresh riot from the Indians. Troops of young braves circled around and around them, shouting loudly their war whoops, "La-la-la-la" and "La-la-oo-ee!" and offering every manner of insult. But whatever of effect the uproar was intended to have was evidently completely lost upon the two men. Their immobile faces changed not a bit. They searched out the tepee of Chief Piapot and walked directly toward it.

Piapot met them at the tepee with an evil leer and a cocked rifle.

The constable pointed to the north. "Get!" said he.

Piapot's face worked diabolically and he tapped his rifle suggestively. At the sign his braves surrounded the two men and a dozen rifles were levelled at their heads. The air rang with frenzied war whoops of defiance.

It was a delicate moment, the chief of construction thought. The savages, even their chief, were half crazed with liquor. Piapot was murderous in his normal state. Now, with a rifle in his hands and fiendish defiance written in his face, the lives of the two surrounded men seemed to him just then to be of little value.

But the constable at that moment, the critical moment, did a most surprising thing. He pushed aside Piapot's rifle in his calm, self-reliant, almost solemn way and sticking one long leg within the tepee he kicked the key pole down. Then he strode forward, levelling tepees right and left in the same manner, and Piapot, looking at him—being a wise chief—looking also beyond him, away east to the Dominion government at Ottawa, concluded gracefully to obey that first forceful injunction of "Get!"

Before this—in fact, just after the Custer massacre—another Indian chief, none other than the famous Sitting Bull, crossed the border into Canada and proceeded to make some very bad but thoroughly characteristic moves. In a friendly encounter with the Blackfeet Indians he killed six of their number and pursued a seventh, who was wounded, directly up to a post of the Mounted Police.

There were but twenty men at the post and Sitting Bull had five hundred war veterans under him. This aspect of military order, coupled with the insignificance of a post filled him with righteous indignation. Dashing up to the barracks, he threw himself from his pony and jabbed his pistol into the stomach of a man who met him at the door.

The man at the door happened to be a veteran of the police, "Big Jack" Collins, and much to the chief's surprise he seemed not to be alarmed at all at this brusque manner of introduction; nor was he affected greatly by the sight of Sitting Bull's warriors, a bloodthirsty mob, who had surrounded the barracks and waited only for their chief's command to raze it and scalp the inmates.

On the contrary, he was as calm in features and as correct in deportment as if the affair were an ordinary incident of daily routine and as easily taken care of. The man at his side, Sergeant McDonald, seemed quite as unruffled; and Sitting Bull, being blessed like Piapot with an imagination, began to see things.

When they invited him into the barracks he obeyed, much to his own surprise, and they closed the door behind him. While he found himself listening to a terse description of the law of the territories [illegible] a short time he also found himself forgetting that he had five hundred men surrounding twenty in the wilderness, and felt somehow that the situation was reversed and that he was sitting quite alone before a white man's tribunal in the law abiding East.

So, when his impatient warriors began storming the barracks door and screaming for their prey, he obeyed the simple command two men gave him and ordered them off. From that on, moreover, he and his braves were under control of the Mounted Police. He came into a wilderness expecting savage liberty, and found instead the subjecting power of a reservation.

Then there's that Golden incident, when a single constable faced a mob, not of red savages, but worse, of white desperadoes. It happened in the early days of Golden, when the new mining camp was filled with whiskey smugglers, gamblers and renegades of all descriptions, "a museum," so one man described it, "of red hot divvies gathered from every den of iniquity in the States."

A "tenderfoot" was killed one night, and Sergeant Fury, a bulldog little man, set out from his post all alone to get the murderer. He found him in a saloon, thick with smoke, ruffians and liquor fumes, and, though it seems incredible, he collared him, and, pressing a revolver between his shoulder blades, shoved him out of the door and had him running down the road before the mob collected itself. They followed in hot pursuit, but found themselves stopped at a bridge, where another quiet man stood behind two revolvers. He was none other than Major Steele, the First Commissioner of the mounted police.

The authority of the police does not always avail, however. Sometimes a man gives up his life while calmly asserting it, and there's a vacant cot in the barracks with a number over it for some other man to own, some other man who signs the enlistment oath.

"All this do I swear without any mental evasion, equivocation or secret reservation, so help me God," and thereupon he consecrates five years or more of his life to daily risks, lonely patrols and extraordinary hardships.

The bleak winters, when the mercury goes down to 70 degrees below and a cup of tea will freeze at arm's length from the fire, and where sun blindness leads men off the trail to perish in the ice fields—these claim more details than bullets or knife thrusts.

The mounted policeman of the Northwest stands ready to journey alone to the Arctic Circle should such a call come. There are no distance limits in this country.

One year a constable brought a demented man [illegible] tance of thirteen hundred miles, and this in the midst of winter. For forty-four days he travelled over the white, soundless plains, with never a human voice to greet his ears save the night ravings of a lunatic. The men of the boundary patrol have a path one thousand miles long, and travel, all in all, a million miles a year.

One New Year's day three constables set out in a raging snowstorm to catch a horse thief. They had but this meagre clew, that he might be found somewhere two hundred miles to the north and west. A week later they brought him back to the post, after arresting him in a halfbreed settlement, where his associates outnumbered them a hundred to one.

Again, when a miner, O'Brien by name, was murdered during the first onrush to the Alaskan gold fields, they tracked and caught the criminals, with no clews whatever to aid them. To-day the famous stage road from Dawson to Whitehorse, three hundred and twenty miles long, is as well policed as any small street in New York, and is far safer for pedestrians.

Ever since England began sending her "second sons" to Canada there has been some disposition upon the part of the more practical settlers to make fun of them. It is well enough in this connection to remember that since the founding of the Northwest police they have constituted the bulwark of its strength and given many lives to its advancement.

One night toward the end of a lonely patrol during which the two men had not spoken to each other for days, one of them, a graduate of Balliol, by the way, scribbled some verses down as he sat by the campfire. The next morning the other found the crumpled piece of paper near the dead ashes of the fire. Some of the verses give an idea of the "second son" and the fact that he fills a rather valuable place as a policeman if not as a rancher:—

"We drown in unknown waters,
We burn in forest flame,
We freeze on northern barrens;
Some meet a self-sought shame.
Fever, frost and hunger,
Thirst 'neath a cloudless sky;
Bullet, spear and knife thrust—
Thus do your wastrels die.
What should they know of our troubles,
Our hopes, or fears, or care
Who sit in the ingle corner,
Where the glowing embers flare?
Truly they dream of empire
In their listless island way,
But little they reck that empire's cost
[illegible]