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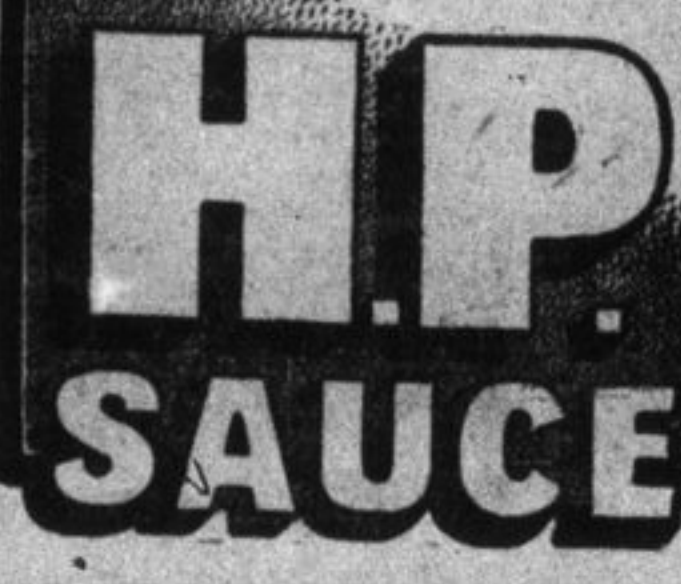
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CHAPTER XXIII

In the absence of Rolt, Jim Combe took command of the party at the ranch, and military law was declared: that is to say, Jim insisted upon looking on the house as in a state of siege, though, as Anstruther protested, there was not an Indian in sight, nor, he averred, ever likely to be again.

The men were divided into watches, so that there was not an hour of the day or night when some of them were not on guard, whilst no work was undertaken which could lead the defenders to any distance from their base.

On the first day after the departure of the posse, shots were heard over the hog's back, and Jim, who made a reconnaissance in person, reported that a band of Chilcats was killing cattle, but though the loss inflicted would be serious, he would not listen to Anstruther's suggestion that an attempt should be made to drive off the marauders.

He was determined that the story of the burning-stacks should not be repeated. It was better to lose anything than to expose the women to the danger of a rush upon the house.

On the second day there was not even the sound of a shot to keep up the vigilance of the defenders, and the scouting party sent out by Jim reported all clear to the sky line.

"Our people have driven the Indians clear out of the country," as asserted Anstruther. "Arson at night is the limit of their daring. It is not likely that such miserable devils would make a stand against armed white men."

But Jim thought otherwise, and decreed the destruction of certain barns and outhouses beyond the corral, as affording dangerous cover for an attacking force.

They are valuable buildings in a country where lumber is not so plentiful as it is at the coast, and Mrs. Rolt watched the destruction of them with a sore heart.

"It seems a pity, doesn't it?" she said, as she and Kitty, with Anstruther, watched the work. "but I suppose Jim is right."

"He must be," asserted Anstruther, but his tone belied his words. "It would be a terrible sell if the Indians really had gone for good, as Mr. Anstruther thinks."

"We could put up with that, Kitty, don't you think, although I confess that I don't like seeing my buildings go."

appeared, and Rolt was beginning to hope that when the help sent for arrived, there would be no work for the helpers to do.

Mrs. Rolt was the life of the party, but though she called the men on their silence and insisted upon songs in the drawing-room at night, and though Dr. Frotheroe and her husband did all that they could to aid and abet her, her attempts were not crowned with success.

Every night, at least three different inmates of the ranch stole out to go over the defences. There was always some one missing from the group around the piano, trying the doors and re-arranging the barricades whilst no one was looking.

The blow fell in the third night. The whole prairie land had been swallowed up in gloom in which no star showed, no wind moved, when Mrs. Rolt woke her husband with a gentle pressure of his arm.

"Don't make a noise, dear," she whispered, "but listen. I suppose it is only a rat."

"Not even that, Polly. It must have been your fancy. Go to sleep, little woman, and don't worry."

But at that moment a low knock sounded on the bed-room door. Incomely Rolt rose and opened it. Jim Combe was there with his rifle in his hand.

"Bring your gun along, Rolt. They are trying to fire the house."

In silence the two crept down the stairs, at the foot of which stood Anstruther. Old man Jack Fairclough, with their Winchester in their hands, the doctor was not there, but Jim led the way into a small room which jutted out from the face of the house, a room which they had laughingly christened the excrecence. Rolt had built it on as a conservatory for his wife, to connect with his own study.

Both sides of it, as well as the top, being of glass, it was the weakest point in their defences, and in it, therefore, had been piled more than his share of furniture barricades. It formed the foot of a letter L, of which the main front of the house was the stem.

This room was in absolute darkness when the men entered it, but it seemed to Rolt that something stirred feebly in the corner of it.

Presently a voice, barely audible even to their straining ears, whispered: "Are you there, Jim?"

Combe moved silently across towards the voice. "Put that in your pocket for me, will you, old chap, until we've played this hand? Are you ready now? Has each man picked his panel? Never mind the glass. Ready!"

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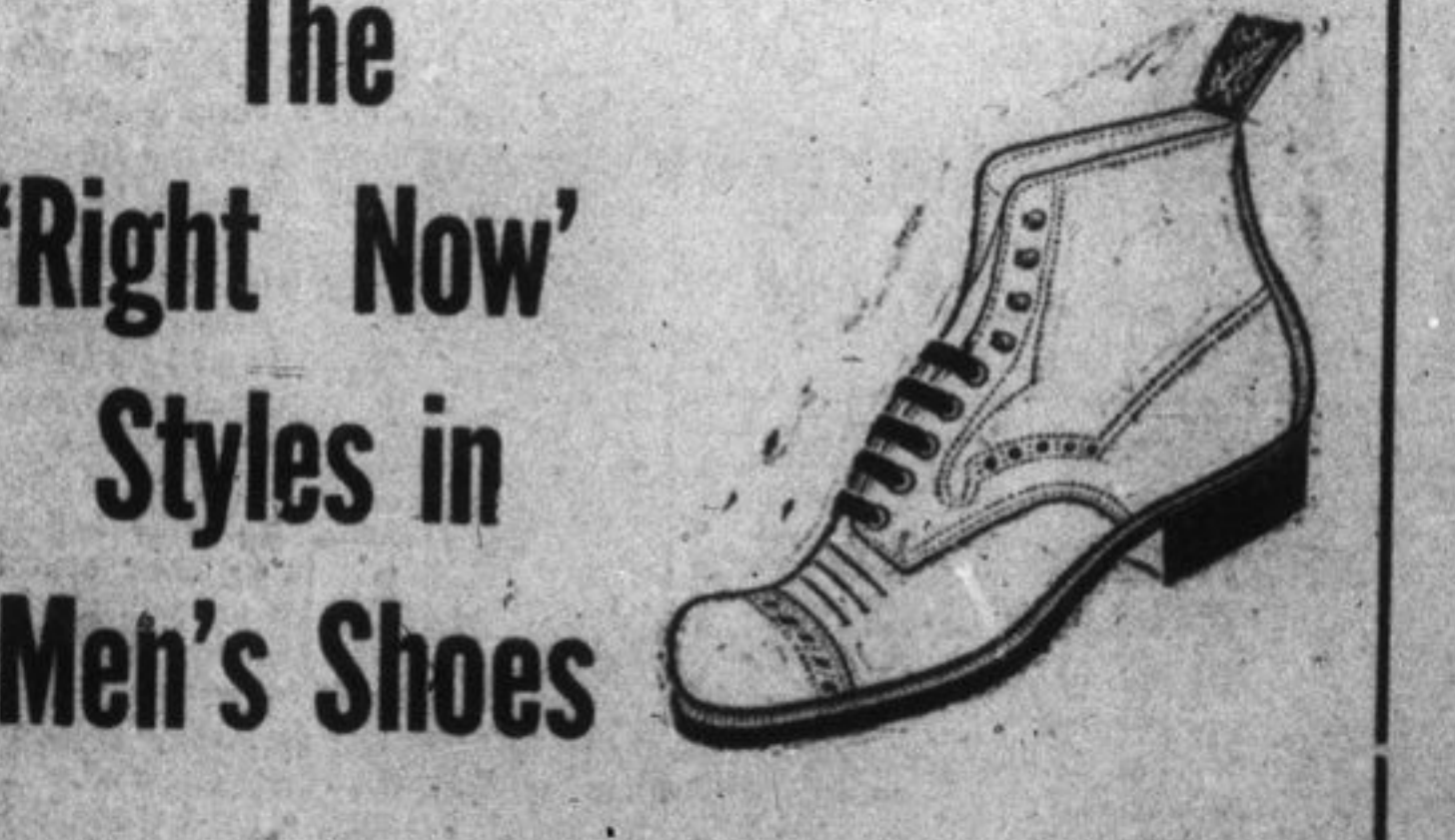
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(To be continued.)