PHILIP STEELE

of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police

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SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I—Philip Steele, son of a Chicago millionaire, lover of adventure and out-door life, enlists at Regina in the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police. In his cabin station far up in the north he gets orders to go to the Hudson Bay Company post at Lac Bain, to join Bucky Nome, a fellow police officer. In Chicago Steele had met and greatly fancied a very beautiful young woman, Isobel Becker.

CHAPTER II—On Steele's arrival at Lac Bain the company's factor there, Breed, orders him to go on to Fort Churchill, on the Hudson's Bay, to meet and assist Col. Becker, a high official in the company's service, who is on his way to visit the Lac Bain post on a tour of investigation. He finds the colonel, and with him the unexpected Isobel Becker. The fondness between them convinces Steele they are husband and wife.

CHAPTER III.

A Skull and a Flirtation.

IT was late afternoon when they came into Lac Bain, and as soon as Philip had turned over the colonel and his wife to Breed, he hurried to his own cabin. At the door he encountered Buck Nome. The two men had not met since a month before at Nelson House, and there was but little cordiality in Steele's greeting as he went through the formality of shaking hands with his associate.

"I'm going to say howdy to 'em," explained Nome, pausing for a moment. "Deuce of a good joke on you, Steele! How do you like the job of bringing in an old colonel's frozen wife, or a frozen colonel's old wife, eh?"

Every fiber in Steele's body grew tense at the banter in the other's voice. He whirled upon Nome, who had partly turned away. "You remember—you lied down there at Nelson to get just such a 'job' as this," he reminded. "Have you forgotten what happened—after that?"

"Don't get miffed about it, man," returned Nome with an irritating laugh. "All's fair in love and war. That was love down there, 'pon my word of honor it was, and this is about as near the other thing as I want to come."

There was something in his laugh that drew Steele's lips in a tight line as he entered the cabin. It was not the first time he had listened to Nome's gloating chuckle at the mention of certain women. It was this more than anything else that made him hate the man. Physically, Nome was a magnificent specimen, beyond doubt the handsomest man in the service north of Winnipeg; so that while other men despised him for what they knew, women admired and loved him—until, now and then too late for their own salvation, they discovered that his moral code was rotten to the core.

Such a thing had happened at Nelson House, and Philip felt himself burning with a desire to choke the life out of Nome as he recalled the tragedy there. "And what would happen—now?" The thought came to him like a dash of cold water, and yet, after a moment, his teeth gleamed in a smile as a vision rose before him of the love and purity which he had seen in the sweet face of the colonel's wife.

He chuckled softly to himself as he dragged out a pack from under his bunk; but there was no humor in the chuckle. From it he took a bundle wrapped in soft birch bark, and from this produced the skull that he had brought up with him from the South. There was a tremble of excitement in his low laugh as he glanced about the gloomy interior of the cabin. From the log ceiling hung a big oil lamp with a tin reflector, and under this he hung the skull.

"You'll make a pretty ornament, M'sieur Janette," he exclaimed, standing off to contemplate the white thing barning and bobbing at him from its string. "Mon Dieu, I tell you that when the lamp is lighted Bucky Nome must be blind if he doesn't recognize you, even though you're dead, M'sieur!"

He lighted a smaller lamp, shaved himself, and changed his clothes. It was dark when he was ready for supper, and Nome had not returned. He waited a quarter of an hour longer, then put on his cap and coat and lighted the big oil lamp. At the door he turned to look back. The cavernous sockets of the skull stared at him. From where he stood he could see the ragged hole above the ear.

"It your game tonight, M'sieur Janette," he cried back softly, and closed the door behind him.

They were gathered before a huge fire of logs in the factor's big living-room when Philip joined the others. A glance told him why Nome had not returned to the cabin. Breed and the colonel were smoking cigars over a ragged ledger of superduous size, which the factor had spread out upon a small table, and both were deeply absorbed. Mrs. Becker was facing the fire, and close beside her sat Nome, leaning toward her and talking in a voice so low that only a murmur of it came to Steele's ears. The man's face was flushed when he looked up, and his eyes shone with the old fire whic made Philip hate him.

As the woman turned to greet him Steele felt a suddenly sickening sensation grip at his heart. Her cheeks, too, were flushed, and the color in them deepened still more when he bowed to her and pointed the two men at the table. The colonel shook hands with him, and Philip noticed that one or twice after that his eyes shifted uneasily in the direction of the two before the fire, and that whenever the low laughter of Mrs. Becker and Nome came to them he paid less attention to the columns of figures which Breed was pointing out to him.

When they rose to go into supper, Philip's blood boiled as Nome offered him arm to Mrs. Becker, who accepted it with a swift, laughing glance at the colonel. There was no replonse in the older man's pale face, and Philip's fingers dug hard into the palms of his hands. At the table Nome's attentions to Mrs. Becker were even more marked. Once, under pretext of helping her to a dish, he whispered words which brought a deeper flush to her cheeks, and when she looked at the colonel his eyes were fixed upon her in silent inquiry. It was abominable! Was Nome mad? Was the woman—

Steele did not finish the thought in his own mind. His eyes encountered those of the colonel's wife across the table. He saw a sudden, quick catch of breath in her throat; even as he looked the flush faded from her face, and she rose from her seat, her gaze still upon him.

"I—I am not feeling well," she said. "Will you please excuse me?"

In an instant Nome was at her side, but she turned quickly from him to the colonel, who had risen from his chair.

"Please take me to my room." she begged. "Then—then you can come back."

Once more her face turned to Steele. There was a pallor in it now that startled him. For a few moments he stood alone, as Breed and Nome left the table. He listened, and heard the opening and closing of a second door. Then a footstep, and Nome reappeared.

"By Heaven, but she's a beauty!" he exclaimed. "I tell you, Steele—"

Something in his companion's eyes stopped him. Two red spots burned in Steele's cheeks as he advanced and gripped the other fiercely by the arm.

"Yes, she is pretty—very pretty," he said quietly, his fingers sinking deeper into Nome's arm. "Get your hat and coat, Nome. I want to see you in the cabin."

Behind them the door opened and closed again, and Steele shoved past his associate to meet Breed.

"Buck and I have a little matter to attend to over at the cabin," he explained. "When they—when the colonel returns tell him we'll be over to smoke an after-supper with him a little later, will you? And give our compliments to—her."

With a half-sneer on his lips he rejoined Nome, who stared hard at him, and followed him through the outer door.

"Now, what the devil does this mean?" Nome demanded when they were outside. "If you have anything on your mind, Steele—"

"I have," interrupted Philip, "and I'm going to relieve myself of it. Pretty? She's as beautiful as an angel, Buck—the colonel's wife, I mean. And you—" he laughed harshly. "You're always the lucky dog, Buck Nome. You think she's half in love with you now. Too bad she was taken ill just at the psychological moment, as you might say, Buck. Wonder what was the matter?"

"Don't know," growled Nome, conscious of something in the other's voice which darkness concealed in his face.

"Of course, you don't," replied Steele. "That's why I am bringing you over to the cabin. I am going to tell you just what happened when Mrs. Becker was taken ill, and when she turned a trifle pale, if you noticed sharply, Buck. It's a good joke, a mighty good joke, and I know you will thoroughly appreciate it."

He drew a step back when they came near the cabin, and Nome entered first. Very coolly Philip turned and bolted the door. Then, throwing off his coat, he pointed to the white skull dangling under the lamp.

"Allow me to introduce an old friend of mine, Buck—M'sieur Janette, of Nelson House."

With a sudden curse Nome leaped toward his companion, his face flaming, his hands clenched to strike—only to look into the shining muzzle of Steele's revolver, with Steele's cold gray eyes glittering dangerously behind it.

"Sit down, man—right there, under the man you killed!" he commanded. "Sit down, or by the gods I'll blow your head off where you stand! There—and I'll sit here, like this, so that the cur's heart within you is a bull's-eye for this gun. It's M'sieur Janette's turn tonight," he went on, leaning over the little table, the red spots in his cheeks growing redder and brighter as Nome cringed before his revolver. "M'sieur Janette's—and the colonel's; but mostly Janette's. Remember that, Nome. It's for Janette. I'm not thinking much about Mrs. Becker—just now."

Steele's breath came quickly and his lips were almost snarling in his hatred of the man before him.

"It's a lie!" gasped Nome chokingly, his face ashen white. "You lie when you say I killed—Janette."

The finger of Steele's pistol hand twitched.

"How I'd like to kill you!" he breathed. "You won his wife, Nome; you broke his heart—and after that he killed himself. You sent a report into headquarters that he killed himself by accident. You lied. It was you who killed him—by taking his wife. I got his skull because I thought I might need it against you to show that it was a pistol instead of a rifle that killed him. And this isn't the first man you've sent to hell, Nome, and it isn't the first woman. But your next won't be Mrs. Becker!"

He thrust his revolver almost into the other man's face as Nome opened his lips to speak.

"Shut up!" he cried. "If you open your dirty mouth again I'll be tempted to kill you where you sit! Don't you know what happened tonight? Don't you know that Mrs. Becker forgot herself, and remembered again, just in time, and that you've taken a little blood from the colonel's heart as you took all of it from—his?"

He reached up and broke the string that held the skull, turning the empty face of the thing toward Nome.

"Look at it, you scoundrel! That's the man you killed, as you would kill the colonel if you could. That's Janette!"

His voice fell to a hissing whisper as he shoved the skull slowly across the table, so close that a sudden movement would have sent it against the other's breast.

"We've been fixing this thing up between us, Bucky—M'sieur Janette and I," he went on, "and we've come to the conclusion that we won't kill you, but that you don't belong to the service. Understand?"

"You mean—to drive me out—"

One of Nome's hands had stolen to his side, and Steele's pistol arm grew tense.

"On the table with your hands, Bucky! There, that's better." he laughed softly.

"Yes, we're going to drive you out. You're going to pack up a few things right away, Bucky, and you're going to run like the devil away from this place. I'd advise you to go straight back to headquarters and resign from the Northwest Mounted. MacGregor knows you pretty well, Bucky, and knows one or two things you've done, even though your whole record is not an open book to him. I don't believe he'll put any obstacles in the way of your discharge although your enlistment hasn't expired. Disability is an easy plea you know. But if the inspector should think so much of you that he is loath to let you go, then M'sieur Janette and I will have to fix up the story for headquarters, and I don't mind telling you we'll add just a little for interest, and that the woman and the people at Nelson House will swear to it. You're the making of a good outlaw, Bucky," he smiled tauntingly, "and if you follow your natural bent you'll have some of your old friends after you, good and hard. You'd better steer clear of that, though, and try your hand at being honest for once. M'sieur Janette wants to give you this chance, and you'd better make good time. So get a move on, Bucky! You'll need a blanket and a little grub, that's all."

"Steele, you don't mean this' Good God, man—" Nome had half risen to his feet. "You don't mean this!"

With his free hand Philip took out his watch.

"I mean that if you are not gone within fifteen minutes I'll march you over to Breed and M'sieur Janette, tell them the story of M'sieur Janette, here, and hold you until we hear from headquarters." he said quickly. "Which will it be. Nome?"

Like one stunned by a blow Nome rose slowly to his feet. He spoke no word as he carefully filled his pack with the necessities of a long journey. At the door, as he opened it to go, he turned for just an instant upon Steele, who was still holding the revolver in his hand.

"Remember, Bucky," admonished Philip in a quiet voice, "it's all for the good of yourself and the service."

Fear had gone from Nome's face. It was filled now with a hatred so intense that his teeth shone like the fangs of a snarling animal.

"To hell with you," he said, "and to hell with the service; but remember, Philip Steele, remember that some day we'll meet again."

"Some day," laughed Philip. "Good-by, Bucky. Nome—deserter!"

The door closed and Nome was gone.

"Now, M'sieur Janette, it's our turn," cried Steele, smiling companionably upon the skull and loading his pipe. "It's our turn."

He laughed aloud, and for some time puffed out luxurious clouds of smoke in silence.

"It's the best day's work I've done in my life," he continued, with his eyes still upon the skull. "The very best, and it would be complete,

M'sieur, if I could send you down to the woman who helped to kill you."

He stopped, and his eyes leaped with a sudden fire. "By George!" he exclaimed, under his breath. His pipe went out; for many minutes he stared with set face at the skull, as if it had spoken to him and its voice had transfixed him where he stood Then he tossed his pipe upon the table, collected his service equipment and strapped it in his pack. After that he returned to the table with a pad of paper and a pencil and sat down. His face was strangely white as he took the skull in his hands.

"I'll do it, so help me all the gods, I'll do it!" he breathed excitedly. "M'sieur, a woman killed you—as much as Bucky Nome, a woman did it. You couldn't do her any good—but you might—another. I'm going to send you to her, M'sieur. You're a terrible lesson, and I may be a beast; but you're preaching a powerful sermon, and I guess—perhaps—you may do her good. I'll tell her your story, old man, and the story of the woman who made you so nice and white and clean. Perhaps she'll see the moral, M'sieur. Eh? Perhaps!"

For a long time he wrote, and when he had done he sealed the writing, put the envelope and the skull together in a box, and tied the whole with habitulse string. On the outside he fastened another note to Breed, the factor, in which he explained that he and Bucky Nome had found it necessary to leave that very night for the West. And he heavily underscored the lines in which he directed the factor to see that the box was delivered to Mrs. Colonel Becker, and that, as he valued the honor and the friendship of the service, and especially of Philip Steele, all knowledge of it should be kept from the colonel himself.

It was eight o'clock when he went out into the night with his pack upon his back. He grunted approval when he found it was snowing, for the track of himself and Nome would be covered He moved silently away, and turned his face into the thin trail that buried itself in the black forests of the West.

CHAPTER IV.

The Silken Scarf.

A LONELINESS deeper than he had ever known—a yearning that was almost pain, oppressed Philip as he left Lac Bain behind him. Half a mile from the post he stopped under a shelter of dense spruce. and stood listening as there came to him faintly the distant howling of a dog. After all, had he done right? He laughed harshly and his hands clenched as he thought of Bucky Nome. He had done right by him. But the skull—Mrs. Becker—was that right?

Like a flash there came to him out of the darkness a picture of the scene beside the fire—of Mrs. Becker and the colonel, of the woman's golden head resting on her husband's shoulder, her sweet blue eyes filled with all the truth and glory of womanhood as she had looked up into his grizzled face.

And then there took its place the scene beside the fire in the factor's room. He saw the woman's flushed cheeks as she listened to the low voice of Bucky Nome, he saw again what looked like yielding softness in her eyes—the grayish pallor in the colonel's face as he had looked upon the flirtation. Yes, he had done right. She had recovered herself in time, but she had taken a little bit of life from the colonel, and from him. She had broken his ideal—the ideal he had always hoped for, and had sought for, but had never found, and he told himself that now she was no better than the rest of the hyacinth letter, whose golden beauty and eyes as clear as an angel's had concealed this same deceit that wrecked men's lives. M'sieur Janette's clean, white skull and the story of how and why M'sieur Janette had died would not be too great a punishment for her.

He resumed his journey, striving to concentrate his mind on other things. Seven or eight miles to the south and west was the cabin of Jacques Pierrot, a half-breed. who had a sledge and dogs. He would hire Jacques to accompany him on his patrol in place of Bucky Nome. Then he would return to Nelson House and send in his report of Bucky Nome's desertion, since he knew well enough after the final remarks of that gentleman that he did not intend to sever his connection with the Northwest Mounted in the regular way. After that—he shrugged his shoulders as he thought of the fourteen months' of service still ahead of him. Until now his adventure as a member of the Royal Mounted had not grown monotonous for an hour. Excitement, action, fighting against odds, had been the spice of life to him, and he struggled to throw off the change that had taken hold of him the moment he had opened the hyacinth-scented letter of Mrs. Becker.

"You're a fool," he argued. "You're as big a fool as Bucky Nome. My God — you—Philip Steele—letting a married woman upset you like this!"

It was near midnight when he came to Pierrot's cabin, but a light was still burning in the half-breed's log home. Philip kicked off his snowshoes and knocked at the door. In a moment Pierrot opened it, stepped back, and stared at the white figure that came in out of the storm.

"Mon Dieu—it ees you—Mee-sair Philip!"

Philip held out his hand to Jacques, and shot a quick glance about him. There had been a change in the cabin since he had visited it last. One of Pierrot's hands was done up in a sling, his face was thin and lusterless. In the little wilderness home there was an air of desertion and neglect, and Philip wondered where Pierrot's rosy-cheeked, black-haired wife and his half dozen children had gone.

"Mon Dieu—it ees you, Mee-sair Philip," cried Pierrot again. his face lighting up with pleasure. "You come late. You are hongree?"

"I've had supper," replied Philip. "I've just come from Lac Bain. But what's up, old man—?" He pointed to Pierrot's hand, and looked questionably about the cabin.

"Eh—lowia—my wife—she is at Churchill, over on the bay," groaned Jacques. "And so are the children. What! You did not hear at Lac Bain? Iowia is taken seek—ver' seek—with a strange thing which—ugh! —has to be fixed with a knife, Mee-sair Philip. An' so I take her to the doctor over at Churchill. an' he fix her—an' she is growing well now, an' will soon come home. She keep the children with her. She say they mak' her think of Jacques, on his trap-line. Eh—it ees lonely—dam'—dam' lonely, and I have been gone from my Iowia but two weeks tomorrow."

"You have been with her at Fort Churchill?" asked Philip, taking off his pack and coat.

"Oui, M'sieur," said Jacques, falling into his French. "I have been there since November. What! They did not tell you at Lac Bain?"

"No—they did not tell me. But I was there but a few hours, Jacques. Listen—"

He pulled out his pipe and began filling it with his back to the stove.

"You saw people—strangers—at Fort Churchill, Jacques? They came over on the London ship, and among them there was a woman—"

Pierrot's face flushed up with sudden animation.

"Ah—zee angel!" he cried. "That is what my Iowia called her, M'sieur. See!" He pointed to his bandaged hand. "Wan day that Indian dog of mine did that, an' w'en I jumped up from the snow in front of the company's store, the blood running from me, I see her standing there, white an' scared. An' then she run to me with a little scream, an' tear something from her neck, an' tie it round my hand. Then she go with me to my cabin, and every day after that she come to see my Iowia an' the children. She wash little Pierre, an' cut his hair. She wash Jean an' Mabelle. She laugh an' sing an' hol' the baby, an' my Iowia laugh an' sing! an' she takes down my Iowia's hair, which is so long that it falls to her knees, an' does it up in a wonderful way an' says she would give everything she got if she could have that hair. An' my Iowia laugh at her, because her hair is like an angel's—like fire w'en the sun is on it; an' my Iowia tak' hers down, all red an' gold, an' do it up in the Cree way. And w'en she brings the man with her— he laughs an' plays with the kids, an' says he knows the doctor and that there will be nothing to pay for all that he is done. Ah—she ees wan bee-eautiful angel! An' this—is w'at she tied around my hand."

With new life Pierrot went to a covered box nailed against one of the log walls and a moment later placed in Philip's hands a long white, silken neckscarf. Once more there rose to his nostrils the sweet, faint scent of hyacinth, and with a sudden low cry Philip crushed the dainty fabric in a mass to his face. In that moment it seemed as though the sweetness of the woman herself was with him, stirring him at last to confess the truth—the thing which he had fought against so fiercely in those few hours at Lac Bain; and the knowledge that he had surrendered to himself, that in going from Lac Bain he was leaving all that the world held for him in the way of woman and love, drew his breath from him in another broken, stifled cry.

When he lowered the scarf his face was white. Pierrot was staring at him.

"It makes me think—of home," he explained lamely. "Sometimes I get lonely, too. There's a girl—down there—who wears a scarf like this, and what she wears smells like a flower, just as this does—"

"Oui, I understand," said Pierrot softly. "It is the way I feel when my Iowia is gone."

He replaced the scarf in the box, and when he returned to the stove Philip explained why he had come to his cabin. With Pierrot's promise to accompany him with dogs and sledge on his patrol the next day he prepared to go to bed. Pierrot also was undressing, and Philip said to him casually.

"This woman—at Churchill—Jacques—what if some one should tell you that she is not so much of an angel after all—that she is, perhaps, something like—like the woman over at Lac la Biche, who ran away with the Englishman?"

Pierrot straightened up though Philip had thrust a knife-point into his back. He broke forth suddenly into French.

"I would call him a liar, M'sieur," he cried fiercely. "I would call him a liar, once—twice—three times, and then if he said it again I would fight

him. Mon Dieu, but it would be no sin to kill one with a mouth like that!"

Philip was conscious of the hot blood rushing to his face as he bent over his bunk. The depths of Pierrot's faith shamed him, and he crawled silently between the blankets and turned his face to the wall. Pierrot extinguished the light, and a little later Philip could hear his deep breathing. But sleep refused to close his own eyes, and he lay on his back, painfully awake. In spite of the resolution he had made to think no more of the woman at Lac Bain, his mind swept him back to her irresistibly. At last he rose silently from his bunk, filled his pipe and sat down in the darkness beside the stove. The storm had increased to a gale, wailing and moaning over the cabin outside, and the sound carried him back to the last night in the cabin far to the south, when he had destroyed the hyacinth-scented letter. The thought of the letter moved him restlessly. He listened to Pierrot's breathing, and knew that the half-breed was asleep. Then he rose to his feet and laid his pipe on the table. A curious feeling of guilt came over him as he moved toward the box in which Jacques had placed the silken scarf. His breath came quickly; in the dark his eyes shone; a tingling thrill of strange pleasure shot through him as his fingers touched the thing for which they were searching. He drew the scarf out, and returned to the stove with it, crushing it in both his hands. The sweetness of it came to him again like the woman's breath. It was the sweetness of her hair, of the golden coils massed in the firelight; a part of the woman herself, of her glorious eyes, her lips, her face. His heart seemed bursting with a new and terrible pain, and the truth at last seemed to rise and choke him. He loved her. He loved her as he had never dreamed that he could love a woman, and with the scarf still smothering his lips and face he stood for many minutes, silent and motionless, gathering himself slowly from out of the appalling depths into which he had allowed himself to plunge.

Then he folded the scarf, and instead of returning it to the box, put it in one of the pockets of his coat.

"Pierrot won't care," he excused himself. "And it's the only thing, little girl—the only thing—I'll ever have—of you."

CHAPTER V.

Beauty-Proof.

IT was Pierrot who aroused Philip in the morning. "Mon Dieu, but you have slept like a bear." he exclaimed. "The storm has cleared and it will be fine traveling. Eh—you have not heard? I wonder why they are firing guns off toward Lac Bain!"

Philip jumped from his bed, and his first look was in the direction of the box. He was criticinal enough to hope that Jacques would not discover that the scarf was missing.

"A moose—probably," he said. "There were tracks close up to the post a day or two ago."

He was anxious to begin their journey, and assisted Pierrot in preparing breakfast. The sound of guns impressed upon him the possibility of some one from Lac Bain calling at the half-breed's cabin, and he wished to avoid further association with people from the post—at least for a time. At nine o'clock Pierrot bolted the door and the two set off into the south and west. On the third day they swung to the eastward to strike the Indians living along Reindeer Lake, and on the sixth cut a trail by compass straight for Nelson House. A week later they arrived at the post, and Philip found a letter awaiting him calling him to Prince Albert. In a way the summons was a relief to him. He bade Pierrot good-by, and set out for Le Pas in company with two Indians. From that point he took the work train to Etomami and three hours later was in Prince Albert.

"Rest up for a time, Steele," Inspector MacGregor told him, after he had made a personal report on Bucky Nome.

During the week that followed Philip had plenty of leisure in which to tell himself that he was a fool, and that he was deliberately throwing away what a munificent fortune had placed in his hands. MacGregor's announcement that he was in line for promotion in the near future did not stir him as it would have done a few weeks before. In his little barracks room he laughed ironically as he recalled MacGregor's words:

"We're going to make a corporal or a sergeant of you."

He—Philip Steele—millionaire, club man, son of a western king of finance —a corporal or a sergeant! For the first time the thought amused him, and then it maddened him. He had played the part of an idiot, and all because there had been born within him a love of adventure and the big, free life of the open. No wonder some of his old club friends regarded him as a scapegrace and a ne'er-do-well. He was glad when word was sent to him that Inspector MacGregor wished to see him in his office. The big inspector was pacing back and forth when Philip entered:

"Sit down, Steele, sit down," he said. Have a cigar."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)