PHILIP STEELE

of the ROYAL NORTHWEST MOUNTED POLICE

by JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

Author of The Danger Trail, The Flame of the Big Snows, etc.

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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.

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 unexpectedly, Jacques Pierrot. The feud between them convinces Steele they are husband and wife.

CHAPTER III—Arriving at Lac Bain, Steele finds Bucky Nome there. Nome, although in reality a desperado, has a captivating way with women. He makes love to Mrs. Becker after supper at Breed's, much to the indignation of Steele, who knows him well. When Steele and Nome return to their cabin at the post Steele angers Nome by charging him with murder, and with having designs on Mrs. Becker. Steele orders Nome to quit the service and the country, to become what he knows he will be, an outlaw. Nome leaves, with threats of ultimate vengeance. Then, later, Steele shoulders his pack and he, too, quits Lac Bain.

CHAPTER IV.—Steele visits the cabin of Jacques Pierrot, a half breed, with the idea of getting him as a companion on his patrol instead of Nome. There he is shown a silken scarf given by Mrs. Becker at Churchill to Jacque's sick wife, and the well-known odor of hyacinth clinging to it revives all his affection for Mrs. Becker.

CHAPTER V.—Inspector MacGregor summons Steele to Prince Albert and sends him on a dangerous mission to Wekusko to bring back a man named Thorpe, who had attempted to murder Chief Constructor Hodges.

For a moment the inspector stood squarely in front of Steele, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, a twinkle in the cold, almost colorless eyes which rookies dreaded even more than the fiercely turned red mustaches. Then he laughed, a rumbling, chuckling, companionable laugh, such as finds its vent in the fellowship of equals, but which is seldom indulged in by a superior before an inferior in the R. N. W. M. Police.

"Mighty good cigars, eh, Steele?" he asked, turning slowly toward the window. "The commissioner sent 'em up to me from Regina. Nothing like a good cigar on a dreary day like this. Whew, listen to the wind—straight from Medicine Hat!"

For a few moments he looked out upon the cheerless drab roofs of the barracks, and then, almost as if he were speaking to himself, he said.

"Steele, are you beauty-proof?"

There was no banter in his voice, which was filled with an intense earnestness as he repeated the question.

"I want to know, Steele. Are you beauty-proof?"

In spite of himself Philip felt the fire rising in his own face. In that moment the inspector could have hit on no words that would have thrilled him more deeply than those just spoken. Beauty-proof! Did MacGregor know? Was it possible. He laughed, softly, as the inspector had laughed a few moments before. But there was a strange tenseness in his face—something which MacGregor saw, but could not understand.

"Beauty-proof?" He repeated the words, looking keenly at the other. "Yes, I think I am, sir."

"You think you are?"

"I am quite sure that I am, Inspector. That is as far as I can go."

The inspector seated himself at his desk and opened a drawer. From it he took a photograph. For some time he gazed at it in silence, puffing clouds of smoke from his cigar. Then, without lifting his eyes from the picture, he said:

"I am going to put you up against a queer case, Steele, and the strangest thing about it is its very simplicity. It's a job for the greenest rookie in the service, and yet I swear that there isn't another man in Saskatchewan to whom I would talk as I am about to talk to you. Rather paradoxical, isn't it?"

"Rather," agreed Philip.

"And yet not when you come to understand the circumstances," continued the inspector, placing the photograph face down on the table. "You see, Steele, I know who you are. I know that your father is Philip Steele, the big Chicago banker. I know that you are up here for romance and adventure rather than for any other thing there is in the service. I know, too, that you are no prairie chicken, and that most of your life has been spent where you see beautiful women every hour of the day, and where soft voices and tender smiles aren't the most wonderful things in the world, as they sometimes are up here. Fact is, we have a way of our own of running down records—"

"And a confounded clever one it must be," interrupted Philip irreverently. "Had you any—any particular reason for supposing me to be 'beauty-proof,' as your call it?" he added coldly.

"I've told you my only reason," said the inspector, leaning over his desk. "You've seen so many pretty faces, Steele, and you've associated with them so long that one up here isn't going to turn your head. Now—"

MacGregor hesitated, and laughed. The flush grew deeper in his cheeks, and he looked again at the photograph.

"I'm going to be frank with you," he went on. "This young woman called on me yesterday, and within a quarter of an hour she had me going like a fool! Understand? I'm not proof—against her—and yet I'm growing old in the service and haven't had a love affair since—a long time ago. I'm going to send you up to the Wekusko camp, above Le Pas, to bring down a prisoner. The man is her husband, and he almost killed Hodges, who is chief of construction up there. The minimum he'll get is ten years, and this woman is moving heaven and earth to save him. So help me God, Steele, if I was one of the youngsters, and she came to me as she did yesterday, I believe I'd let him give me the slip! But it mustn't happen. Understand? It mustn't happen. We've got to bring that man down, and we've got to give him the law. Simple thing, isn't it—this bringing a prisoner down from Wekusko! Any rookie could do it, couldn't he? And yet—"

The inspector paused to light his cigar, which had gone out. Then he added: "If you'll do this, Steele—and care for it—I'll see that you get your promotion."

As he finished, he tossed the photograph across the desk. "That's she. Don't ask me how I got the picture."

A curious thrill shot through Philip as he picked up the bit of cardboard. It was a wondrously sweet face that looked squarely out of it into his eyes, a face so youthful, so filled with childish prettiness that an exclamation of surprise rose to his lips. Under other circumstances he would have sworn that it was the picture of a school-girl. He looked up, about to speak, but MacGregor had turned again to the window, clouds of smoke about his head. He spoke without turning his head.

"That was taken nearly ten years ago," he said, and Philip knew that he was making an effort to keep an unnatural break out of his voice. "But there has been little change—almost none. His name is Thorpe. I will send you a written order this afternoon and you can start tonight."

Philip rose, and waited.

"Is there nothing more?" he asked, after a moment. "This woman—"

"There is nothing more," interrupted the inspector, still looking out through the window. "Only this, Steele—you must bring him back. Whatever happens, bring back your prisoner."

As he turned to leave, Philip fancied that he caught something else—a stifled, choking breath, a sound that made him turn his head again as he went through the door. The inspector had not moved.

"Now what the deuce does this mean?" he asked himself, closing the door softly behind him. "You're up against something queer this time, Philip Steele, I'll wager dollars to doughnuts. Promotion for bringing in a prisoner! What in thunder—"

He wondered just how much MacGregor knew, and he sat down to bring up before him for the thousandth time a vision of the two faces, that had played their part in his life—the face of the girl at home, as beautiful as a Diane de Poitiers, as soulless as a sphinx, who had offered herself to him in return for his name and millions, and of that other which he had met away up in the frozen barrens of Lac Bain. Beauty-proof! He laughed and loaded his pipe. MacGregor had made a good guess, even though he did not know what had passed that winter before he came north to seek adventure, or of the fight he had made for another woman, with Mr. Bucky Nome—deserter!

CHAPTER VI.

Philip Follows a Pretty Face.

IT was late in the afternoon when Philip's instructions came from the inspector. They were official in form, gave him all necessary authority, and ordered him to leave for Le Pas that night. Pinned to the order was a small slip of paper, and on this MacGregor had repeated in writing his words of a few hours before:

"Whatever happens, bring back your prisoner."

There was no signature to this slip, and the first two words were heavily underscored. What did this double caution mean? Coming from a man like MacGregor, who was as choice as a king of his advice, Philip knew that it was of unusual significance. If it was intended as a warning, why had not the inspector given him more detail? During the hour in which he was preparing for his journey he racked his brain for some clew to the situation. The task which he was about to perform seemed simple enough. A man named Thorpe had attempted murder at Wekusko. He was already a prisoner, and he was to bring him down. The biggest coward in Saskatchewan, or a man from a hospital bed, could do this much, and yet—

He read the inspector's words over and over again. "Whatever happens!" In spite of himself a little stir of excitement crept into his blood. Since that thrilling hour in which he had seen Bucky Nome desert from the service he had not felt himself moved as now, and in a moment of mental excitement he found himself asking a question which a few minutes before he would have regarded as a mark of insanity. Was it possible that in the whole of the Northland there could be another woman as beautiful as Colonel Becker's wife—a woman so beautiful that she had turned even Inspector MacGregor's head, as Mrs. Becker had turned Bucky Nome's—and his? Was it possible that between these two women—between this wife of an attempted murderer and Mrs. Becker there was some connecting link—some association—

He cut his thoughts short with a low exclamation of disgust. The absurdity of the questions he had asked himself brought a flush into his face. But he could not destroy the undercurrent of emotions they had aroused. Anyway, something was going to happen. He was sure of that. With these thoughts there came another sensation, one that surprised and disquieted him. A few days before his one desire had been to get out of the north country, to place as much distance as possible between himself and Lac Bain. And now he found himself visibly affected by the thought that his duty was to take him once more in the direction of the woman whose sweet face had become an indissoluble part of his existence. He would not see her. Even at Wekusko he would be many days' journey from Lac Bain. But she would be nearer to him, and it was this that quickened his pulse.

He was ten minutes early for his train, and employed that interval in mingling among the people at the station. MacGregor had as much as told him that whatever unusual thing might develop depended entirely upon the appearance of the woman, so he began to look for her. She was not at the station. Twice he walked through the coaches of his train without discovering a face that resembled that in the photograph.

It was late when he arrived at Etomami, where the sixty mile line of the Hudson's Bay Railroad branches off to the north. At dawn he entered the caboose of the work train, which was to take him up through the wilderness to Le Pas. He was the only passenger.

"There ain't even a hand-car gone up ahead of us," informed the brakeman in response to his inquiry. "This is the only train in five days."

After all, it was to be a tame affair, in spite of the inspector's uneasiness and warnings, thought Philip. The woman was not ahead of him. Two days before she had been in MacGregor's office, and under the circumstances it was impossible for her to be at Le Pas or at Wekusko, unless she had traveled steadily on dog sledge. Philip swore softly to himself in his disappointment, ate breakfast with the train gang, went to sleep, and awoke when they plowed their way into the snow-smothered outpost on the Saskatchewan.

The brakeman handed him a letter.

"This came on the Le Pas mail," he explained. "I kept it out for you instead of sending it to the office."

"Thank you," said Philip. "A special—from headquarters. Why in thunder didn't they send me a messenger instead of a letter, Bruky? They could have caught me on the train."

He tore open the departmental envelope as he spoke and drew forth a bit of folded paper. It was not the official letter-head, but at a glance Philip recognized the inspector's scrawling writing and his signature. It was one of MacGregor's boasts that the man did not live who could forge his name.

An astonished whistle broke from his lips as he read these few lines:

"Follow your conscience, whatever you do. Both God and man will reward you in the end.

"Felix MacGregor."

And this was all. There was no date, no word of explanation; even his own name had been omitted from this second order. He picked up the envelope which had fallen to the floor and looked at the postmark. It had been stamped four-thirty. It was after five; an hour later, that he had received his verbal instructions from MacGregor! The inspector must have written the note before their interview of the preceding afternoon—before his repeated injunction of "Whatever happens, bring back your prisoner!" But this letter was evidently intended as final instructions since it had been sent so as to reach him at this time. What did it mean? The question buzzed in Philip's brain, repeated itself twenty times, fifty times, as he hurried through the gathering darkness of the semi-polar night toward the log hotel of the place. He was convinced there was some hidden motive in the inspector's actions. What was he to understand?

"They lifted him bodily into it."

Suddenly he stopped, a hundred yards from the glimmering lights of the Little Saskatchewan hotel, and chuckled audibly as he stuffed his pipe. It flashed upon him now why MacGregor had chosen him instead of an ordinary service man to bring down the prisoner from Wekusko. MacGregor knew that he, Philip Steele, college man and man of the world, would reason out the key to this little puzzle, whereas Sergeant Moody and others of his type would turn back for explanations. And Inspector MacGregor, twenty years in the service, and recognized as the shrewdest man-hunter between the coasts, wished to give no explanation. Philip's blood tingled with fresh excitement as the tremendous risk which the inspector himself was running, dawned upon him. Publicity of the note which he held in his hand would mean the disgrace and retirement even of Felix MacGregor.

He thrust the letter into his pocket and hurried on. The lights of the settlement were already agleam. From the edge of the frozen river there came the sound of a wheezy accordion in a Chinese cafe, and the howling of a dog, either struck by man or worsted in a fight. Where the more numerous lights of the one street shone red against the black background of forest, a drunken half-breed was chanting in half-Cree, half-French, the chorus of the caribou song. He heard the distant snapping of a whip, the yelping response of huskies, and a moment later a sledge and six dogs passed him so close that he was compelled to leap from their path.

This was Le Pas—the wilderness! Beyond it, just over the frozen river which lay white and silent before him, stretched that endless creation of romance and mystery which he had grown to love, a world of deep snows, of silent-tongued men, of hardship and battle for life where the law of nature was the survival of the fittest, and that of man. "Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you." Never did Philip Steele's heart throb with the wild, free pulse of life and joy as in such moments as these, when his fortune, his clubs, and his friends were a thousand miles away, and he stood on the edge of the big northern Unknown.

As he had slept through the trainmen's dinner hour, he was hungry as a wolf, and lost no time seating himself in a warm corner of the low, log-ceilinged dining-room of the Little Saskatchewawn. Although a quarter of an hour early, he had hardly placed himself at his table when another person entered the room. Casually he glanced up from the two letters which he had spread out before him. The one who had followed him was a woman. She had turned sharply upon seeing him and seated herself at the next table, her back so toward him that he caught only her half profile.

It was enough to assure him that she was young and pretty. On her head she wore a turban of silver lynx fur, and about this she had drawn her glossy brown hair, which shone like burnished copper in the lamp-glow, and had gathered it in a bewitchingly coquettish knot low on her neck, where it shone with a new richness and a new warmth with every turn of her head. But not once did she turn so that Philip could see more than the tantalizing pink of her cheek and the prettiness of her chin, which at times was partly concealed in a collarette of the same silver gray lynx fur.

He ate his supper almost mechanically, in spite of his hunger, for his mind was deep in the mysterious problem which confronted him. Half a dozen times he broke in upon his thoughts to glance at the girl at the opposite table. Once he was sure that she had been looking at him and that she had turned just in time to keep her face from him. He had almost finished his supper when a movement at the other table drew his eyes up squarely, and his heart gave a sudden jump. The girl had risen. She was facing him, and as for an instant their eyes met she hesitated, as if she were on the point of speaking. In that moment he recognized her.

It was the girl in the photograph, older, more beautiful—the same soft, sweet contour of face, the same dark eyes that had looked at him in MacGregor's office, filled with an indescribable sadness now, instead of the laughing joy of girlhood. In another moment he would have responded to her hesitation, to the pathetic tremble of her lips, but before words could form themselves she had turned and was gone. And yet at the door, even as she disappeared, he saw her face turned to him again, pleadingly, entreatingly, as if she knew his mission and sent to him a silent prayer for mercy.

Thrusting back his chair, he caught up his hat from a rack and followed. He was in time to see her pass through the low door out into the night. Without hesitation his mind had leaped to a definite purpose. He would overtake her outside, introduce himself, and then perhaps he would understand the conflicting orders of Inspector MacGregor.

The girl was passing swiftly down the main street when he took up the pursuit. Suddenly she turned into a path dug through the snow that led riverward. Ahead of her there was only the starlit gloom of night and the distant blackness of the wilderness edge. Philip's blood ran a little faster. She had expected that he would follow, knew that he was close behind her, and had turned down into this deserted place that they might not be observed! He made no effort now to overtake her, but kept the same distance between them, whistling carelessly and knowing that she would stop to wait for him. Ahead of them there loomed up out of the darkness a clump of sapling spruce, and into their shadows the girl disappeared.

A dozen paces more and Philip himself was buried in the thick gloom. He heard quick, light footsteps in the snow-crust ahead of him. Then there came another sound—a step close behind him, a noise of disturbed brush, a low voice which was not that of a woman, and before his hand could slip to the holster at his belt a human form launched itself upon him from the side, and a second form from behind, and under their weight he felt a helpless heap into the snow. Powerful hands wrenched his arms behind his back and other hands drew a cloth about his mouth. A stout cord was twisted around his wrists, his legs were tied, and then his captors relieved him of their weight.

Not a word had been spoken during the brief struggle. Not a word was spoken now as his mysterious assailants hoisted him between them and followed in the footsteps of the woman. Scarcely a hundred paces beyond the spruce the dark shadow of a cabin came into view. Into this he was carried and placed on something which he took to be a box. Then a light was struck.

For the first time Philip's astonished eyes had a view of his captors. One of them was an old man, a giant in physique, with a long gray beard and grayish yellow hair that fell to his shoulders. His companion was scarcely more than a boy, yet in his supple body as he moved about Philip recognized the animal-like strength of the forest breed. A word spoken in a whisper by the boy revealed the fact that the two were father and son. From that side of the room which was at Philip's back they dragged forth a long pine box, and were engaged in this occupation when the door opened and a third man entered. Never had Philip looked on a more unprepossessing face than that of the newcomer, in whose little black eyes there seemed to be a gloating triumph as he leered at the prisoner. He was short, with a huge breadth of shoulders. His eyes and mouth and nose were all but engulfed in superfluous flesh, and as he turned from Philip to the man and boy over the box he snapped the joints of his fingers in a startling manner.

"Howdy, howdy!" he wheezed, like one afflicted with asthma. "Good! good!"

With these four words he lapsed into the silence of the older man and the boy.

As the box was dragged full into the light, a look of horror shot into Philip's eyes. It was the rough-box of a coffin! Without a word, and apparently without a signal, the three surrounded him and lifted him bodily into it. To his surprise he found himself lying upon something soft, as if the interior of this strange prison had been padded with cushions. Then, with extreme caution, his arms were freed from under his back and strapped to his side, and other straps, broad and firm, were fastened from side to side of the box across his limbs and body, as if there were danger of his flying up and out through the top. Another moment and a shadow fell above him, pitch gloom engulfed him.

They were dragging on the cover to the box! He heard the rapid beating of a hammer, the biting of nails into wood, and he writhed and struggled to free his hands, to cry out, to gain the use of his legs, but not the fraction of an inch could he relieve himself of his fetters. After a time his straining muscles relaxed, and he stopped to get his breath and listen. Faintly there came to him the sound of subdued voices, and he caught a glimmer of light, then another, and still a third. He saw now that half a dozen holes had been bored into the cover and sides of the box. The discovery brought with it a sense of relief. At least he was not to be suffocated. He found, after an interval, that he was even comfortable, and that his captors had not only given him a bed to lie upon, but had placed a pillow under his head.

CHAPTER VII.

The Tragedy in the Cabin.

A FEW moments later Philip heard the movement of heavy feet, the opening and closing of a door, and for a time after that there was silence. Had MacGregor anticipated this, he wondered? Was this a part of the program which the inspector had foreseen that he would play? His blood warmed at the thought and he clenched his fists. Then he began to think more calmly. His captors had not relieved him of his weapons. They had placed his service cap in the box with him and had unbuckled his cartridge belt so that he would rest more comfortably. What did all this mean? For the hundredth time he asked himself the question.

Returning footsteps interrupted his thoughts. The cabin door opened, people entered, again he heard whispering voices.

He strained his ears. At first he could have sworn that he heard the soft, low tones of a woman's voice, but they were not repeated. Hands caught hold of the box, dragged it across the floor, and then he felt himself lifted bodily, and, after a dozen steps, placed carefully upon some object in the snow. His amazement increased when he understood what was occurring.

He was on a sledge. Through the air-holes in his prison he heard the scraping of strap-thongs as they were laced through the runnersiits and over the box, the restless movement of dogs, a gaping whine, the angry snap of a pair of jaws. Then, slowly, the sledge began to move. A whip cracked loudly above him, a voice rose in a loud shout, and the dogs were urged to a trot. Again there came to Philip's ears the wheezing notes of the accordion. By a slight effort he found that he could turn his head sufficiently to look through a hole on a level with his eyes in the side of the box. The sledge had turned from the dark trail into the lighted street, and stopped at last before a brilliantly lighted front from which there issued the sound of coarse voices, of laughter and half-drunken song.

One of his captors went into the bar while the other seated himself on the box, with one leg shutting out Philip's vision by dangling it over the hole through which he was looking.

"What's up, Fingy?" inquired a voice.

"Wekusko," replied the man on the box, in the husky, flesh-smothered tones of the person who had entered last into the cabin.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A German physician's new electrical treatment for obesity compels patients to perform muscular work automatically and independently of their will by stimulating their muscles.

Cimarron is the latest town to contract the slogan habit. The one chosen is: "Simmer on, Cimarron."