

SYNOPSIS
PHILIP STEELE
of the ROYAL NORTHWEST MOUNTED POLICE
by JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD
Author of The Danger Trail, The Honor of the Big Snows, etc.

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"Dress and we'll, and out," he advised.

Together they went to the door, opened it, and stepped outside. The sky was thick and heavy, and only a white blur beyond the moon was smothered. Fifty yards away the gray glow became opaque. From somewhere out of the night, and yet from nowhere that they could point, there came a human voice.

"Thoreau—Thoreau—Pier—Thoreau—Ho, Pierre Thoreau—"

"Off there!" shivered the doctor. "No—out there!" said Philip.

He raised his own voice in an answering shout, and in response there came again the cry for Pierre Thoreau.

"I'm right!" cried the doctor. "Come!"

He darted away, his great coat making a dark blur in the night ahead of him, who paused a moment to look through the meshing of his hands. There came no reply. A second and a third time he shouted, and still there was no response.

"Queer," he thought. "What the devil can it mean?"

The doctor, who had disappeared, and he followed in the direction he had gone. A hundred yards more and he saw the dark blur again, close to the ground. The doctor was bending over a human form stretched out in the snow.

"Just in time," he said to Philip as he came up. Excitement had gone from his voice now. It was cool and professional, and he spoke in a commanding way to his companion. "You're heavier than I, so there him by the shoulders and hold his head well up. I don't believe it's the cold, for his body is warm and comfortable. I feel something wet and thick on his shirt, and it may be blood. So hold his head well up."

Between them they carried him back to the cabin, and with the quick alertness of a man accustomed to every emergency of his profession the doctor stripped off the two coats while Philip looked at the face of the man whom they had placed in his bunk. His own experience had acquainted him with violence and bloodshed, but in spite of that fact he shuddered slightly as he gazed on the unconscious form. It was that of a young man of splendid physique, with a closely shaven face, short blond hair, and a magnificent pair of shoulders. Beyond the fact that he knew the face wore no beard he could scarce have told. His eyes were white or black. From chin to hair it was covered with stiffened blood.

The doctor came to his side.

"Looks bad, doesn't he?" he said cheerfully. "Thought it wasn't cold. Heart beating too fast, pulse too active. Ah—hot water if you please, Philip!"

He loosened the man's coat and shirt, and a few moments later, when Philip brought a towel and a basin of water, he rose from his examination.

"Just in time—as I said before," he exclaimed with satisfaction. "You'd never have heard another 'Pierre Thoreau' out of him, Philip. He went on, speaking the young man's name as if he had been accustomed to do so for a long time. "Wound on the head—sudden loss of blood from over-exertion. We'll have him drinking coffee with in an hour if you'll make some." The doctor pulled up his shirt sleeves and began to wash away the blood.

"A good-looking chap," he said over his shoulder. "Face clean cut, fine mouth, a frontal bone that must have been behind it, square chin." He broke off to ask: "What do you suppose happened to him?"

"Haven't got the slightest idea," said Philip, putting the coffee pot on the stove. "A blow, isn't it?"

Philip was turning up the wick of the lamp when a sudden shriek came from the bedside. Something in it, low and suppressed, made him turn so quickly that by a clumsy twist of his fingers the lamp was extinguished. He looked at the man who faced the doctor. McGill was upon his knees, terribly pale.

"Good Heaven!" he gasped. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing, Phil—he's here! He's here! Out of him so unexpectedly that I started!"

"I thought I saw your voice," said Philip.

"No, no, it was his. See, he is returning to consciousness."

The wounded man's eyes opened slowly, and closed again. He heaved a great sigh and stretched out his arms as if about to waken from a deep slumber. The doctor sprang to his feet.

"We must have ice," Philip flinched, chopping the ice from the creek down there. Will you take the ax and chop two pills and bring back both pills fast? No hurry, but we'll need it within an hour."

Philip banded himself in his coat, and went out with the ax and pills.

"Ice!" he muttered to himself. "Now what can he want of ice?"

He dug down through three feet of snow and chopped for half an hour. When he returned to the cabin the wounded man was bolted up in bed, and the doctor was lying back and forth across the room, evidently worked to a high pitch of excitement.

"Furrier—robbery—outcry! Right under our noses, that's what it was!" he cried. "Pierre Thoreau is dead—killed by the scoundrels who left this man for dead beside him! They set upon them late yesterday afternoon as Pierre and his partner were passing through the woods for their outfit. The murderers, who are a breed and a white trapper, have probably gone to their shack half a dozen miles up the creek. Now, Mr. Philip Steele, here's a little work for you to do."

MacGregor himself had never stirred Philip Steele's blood as did the doctor's unexpected words, but the two men watching him saw nothing unusual in their effect. He set down his ice and coolly took off his coat, then stepped to the side of the wounded man.

"I'm glad you're better," he said, looking down into the other's strong pale face. "It was a pretty close shave. Guess you were a little out of your head, weren't you?"

For an instant the man's eyes shifted past Philip to where the doctor was standing.

"Yes—I must have been. He says I was calling for Pierre, and Pierre was dead. I left him ten miles back there in the snow."

"He closed his eyes with a groan of pain and continued, after a moment:

"Pierre and I have been trapping foxes. We were coming back with supplies to last us until spring when it happened. The white man's name is Dobson, and there's a breed with him. Their shack is six or seven miles up the creek."

Philip saw the doctor taking from the pocket of his big coat. He came over to the bunkside with it in his hand.

"That's enough, Phil," he said softly. "He must not talk any more for an hour or two or we'll have him in it as was that of a young man of splendid physique, with a closely shaven face, short blond hair, and a magnificent pair of shoulders. Beyond the fact that he knew the face wore no beard he could scarce have told. His eyes were white or black. From chin to hair it was covered with stiffened blood."

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"Two shining muzzles were leveled at his breast."

"Easy, easy," soothed the doctor. "I appreciate the fact that it's pretty tough luck, Dobson, but you'll have to take your medicine. Failing me, if you'll lend a hand in getting me off I won't mind the much time in starting for Fort Smith."

It was a strange-looking outfit that set out from Pierre Thoreau's cabin half an hour later. Ahead of the team which had come that morning walked the breed, his left arm bound to his side with a babble thing, on the sleds behind him lay an innanimate and blanket-wrapped bundle, which was Dobson; and close at the rear of the sleds, stripped of his great-coat and more than ever like a diminutive dreamer, followed Dudley McGill, professor of neurology and diseases of the brain, with a bulldog-revolver in his mitted hand.

From the door Falkner watched them go.

Six hours later Philip returned from the east. Falkner saw him coming up from the creek and went to meet him.

"I found the cabin, but no one was there," said Philip. "It has been deserted for a long time. In the snow, everything in the cabin was frozen stiff, and what signs I did find were of a woman!"

The muscles of Falkner's face gave a sudden twitch. "A woman?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, a woman," repeated Philip, "and there was a photograph of her on a table in the bedroom. Did this Dobson have a wife?"

Falkner had fallen a step behind him as they entered the cabin.

"A long time ago—a woman was there," he said. "She was a young woman, and—almost beautiful. She was pretty," replied Philip. "So pretty that I brought her picture along for my collection at home. He looked about for McGill. Where's the doctor?"

Falkner's face was very white as he explained what had happened during the other's absence.

"It's said that the woman would early this afternoon so that you could overtake them," he finished after he had described the capture and the doctor's departure. "The doctor thought you would want to lose no time in getting the prisoner to Fort Smith, and that he could get a good start before night. Tomorrow or the next day I am going to follow with the other team. I'd go with you if he hadn't commanded me to remain here and nurse my head for another twenty-four hours."

Philip shrugged his shoulders, and the two had little to say as they ate their dinner. After an hour's rest he prepared a light pack and took up the doctor's trail. Inwardly he rankled at the unusual hand which the little professor was playing in leaving Pierre's cabin with the prisoner, and yet he was confident that McGill would wait for him. While after while he traveled down the creek. At dusk there was no sign of his new friend. Just before dark he climbed a dead stub at the summit of a high ridge and half a dozen miles of the unbroken, barren stretch of the creek. At six o'clock he stopped to cook some tea and warm his meat and bannock. After that he traveled until ten, then built a big fire and gave up the pursuit until morning. At dawn he started again, and went until the forenoon was half gone did he find where the doctor had stopped to camp.

The ashes of his fire were still warm beneath and the snow was trampled hard around them. In the north the clouds were piling up, bokening a storm such as it was

next morning he hunted Philip up and took him to a cabin half a mile down the creek. A team of powerful dogs, an unusually large sled, and two Indians were at the door.

"I bought 'em last night," explained the doctor, "and we're going to leave the south to-day."

"Giving up your hunt?" asked Philip.

"No, it's ended," replied McGill in a matter-of-fact way. "It ended at Pierre Thoreau's cabin. Falkner was the third man to work out my experiment."

Philip hopped in his tracks, and the doctor stopped, and turned toward him.

"But the third—" Philip began. The little doctor continued to smile.

"There are more things in Heaven and earth, Philip," he quoted, "than are dreamed of in your philosophy. This love experiment has turned out wrongly, as far as preconceived theories are concerned. As a first experiment, I was disappointed. It was all I am—pleased is not the word."

"What I can't see—" Philip was stopped by the doctor's lifted hand.

"You see, I am relying on your word of honor, Phil," he explained, "and the doctor's word is not the word of a man. I want to see if Falkner who cried out just before you turned the lamp-wick down. A letter had fallen from his coat pocket, and it was one of my letters—sent through my agent."

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