PHILIP STEELE

of the ROYAL NORTHWEST MOUNTED POLICE

by JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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MacGregor gave him a three weeks' furlough, and his first move was to go up to Etomami and Le Pas. Colonel Becker and Isobel had been at those places six weeks before. He could find no trace of their having stopped at Prince Albert. He ran down to Winnipeg and spent several days in making inquiries which proved the hopelessness of any longer expecting to find Isobel in Canada.

He assured himself that by this time they were probably in London and he made his plans accordingly. His discharge would come to him by the tenth of August, and he would immediately set off for England.

Upon his return to Prince Albert he was detailed to a big, prairie stretch of country where there was little to do but wait. On the first day of August he was at Hymers when the Limited plunged down the embankment into Blind Indian river. The first word of it came over the wire from Bleak House Station a little before midnight, while he and the agent were playing cribbage. Pink-cheeked little Gunn, agent, operator, and one-third of the total population of Hymers, had lifted a peg to make a count when his hand stopped in mid-air, and with a gasping break in his voice he sprang to his feet.

The instrument on the little table near the window was clicking frantically. It was Billinger, at Bleak House, crying out for headquarters. Clear lines, the right of way. The Transcontinental — engine, tender, baggage car, two coaches and a sleeper, had gone to the devil.

Those, in his excitement, were his first words. From fifty to a hundred were dead. Gunn almost swore Billinger's next words to the line. It was not an accident! Human hands had torn up three sections of rail. The same human hands had rolled a two-ton boulder in the right of way. He did not know whether the express car—or what little remained of it—had been robbed or not.

From midnight until two o'clock the lines were hot. A wrecking train was on its way from the east, another from division headquarters to the west. Ceaselessly headquarters demanded new information, and bit by bit the terrible tragedy was told even as, the men and women in it died and the few souls from the prairies around Bleak House Station fought to save lives.

Then a new word crept in on the wires. It called for Philip Steele at Hymers. It commanded him in the name of Inspector MacGregor, of the Royal Mounted, to reach Bleak House Station without delay. What he was to do when he arrived at the scene of the wreck was left to his own judgment.

The wire from MacGregor aroused Philip from the stupor of horror into which he had fallen. Gunn's girlish face was as white as a sheet.

"I've got a jigger," he said, "and you can take it. It's forty miles to Bleak House and you can make it in three hours. There won't be a train for six."

Philip scribbled a few words for MacGregor and shoved them into Gunn's nervous hand. While the operator was sending them off he rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and buckled on his revolver belt. Then Gunn hurried him through the door and they lifted the velocipede on the track.

"Wire Billinger I'm coming," called back Philip as Gunn started him off with a running shove.

CHAPTER XVI.

A Lock of Golden Hair.

As the sun was rising in a burning August glare over the edge of the parched prairie, Philip saw ahead of him the unpainted board shanty that was called Bleak House Station, and a few moments later he saw a man run out into the middle of the track and stare down at him from under the shade of his hands. It was Billinger, his English-red face as white as he had left Gunn's, his shirt in rags, arms bare, and his tremendous blond mustaches crisped and seared by fire. Close to the station, fastened to posts, were two saddle-horses. A mile beyond these things a thin film of smoke clouded the sky.

As the jigger stopped Philip jumped from his seat and held out a blistered hand.

"I'm Steele—Philip Steele, of the Northwest Mounted."

"And I'm Billinger—agent," said the other.

Philip noticed that the hand that gripped his own was raw and bleeding.

"I got your word, and I've received instructions from the department to place myself at your service. My wife is at the key. I've found the trail, and I've got two horses. But there isn't another man who'll leave up there for love o' God or money. It's horrible! Two hours ago you'd've heard their screams from where you're standing—the hurt, I mean. They won't leave the wreck—not a man, and I don't blame 'em."

A pretty, brown-haired young woman had come to the door and Billinger ran to meet her.

"Good-by," he cried, taking her for a moment in his big arms. "Take care of the key!"

He turned as quickly to the horses, talking as they mounted.

"It was robbery," he said—and they set off at a canter, side by side. "There was two hundred thousand in currency in the express car, and it's gone. I found their trail this morning, going into the North. They're hitting for what we call the Bad Lands over beyond the Coyote, twenty miles from here. I don't suppose there's any time to lose—"

"No," said Philip. "How many are there?"

"Four—mebby more."

Billinger started his horse into a gallop and Philip purposely held his mount behind to look at the other man. The first law of MacGregor's teaching was to study men, and to suspect. It was the first law of the splendid service of which he was a part—and so he looked hard at Billinger. The Englishman was hatless. His sandy hair was cropped short, and his mustaches floated out like flexible horns from the sides of his face. His shirt was in tatters. In one place it was ripped clean of the shoulder and Philip saw a purplish bruise where the flesh was bare. He knew these for the marks of Billinger's presence at the wreck. Now the man was equipped for other business. A huge "forty-four" hung at his waist, a short carbine swung at his saddle-bow; and there was something in the manner of his riding in the hunch of his shoulders, and in the vicious sweep of his long mustaches, that satisfied Philip he was a man who could use them. He rode up alongside of him with a new confidence. They were coming to the top of a knoll; at the summit Billinger stopped and pointed down into a hollow a quarter of a mile away.

"It will be a loss of time to go down there," he said, "and it will do no good. See that thing that looks like a big log in the river? That's the top of the day coach. It went in right side up, and the conductor—who wasn't hurt—says there were twenty people in it. We watched it settle from the shore, and we couldn't do a thing—while they were dying in there like so many caged rats! The other coach burned, and that heap of stuff you see there is what's left of the Pullman and the baggage car. There's twenty-seven dead stretched out along the track, and a good many hurt. Great Heavens, listen to that!"

He shuddered and Philip shuddered at the wailing sound of grief and pain that came up to them.

"It'll be a loss of time—to go down," agreed Philip.

His blood was burning at fever heat when he raised his eyes from the scene below to Billinger's face. Every fighting fiber in his body was tingling for action, and at the responsive glare which he met in Billinger's eyes he thrust his hand half over the space that separated them.

"We'll get 'em, Billinger," he cried. "By God, we'll get 'em!"

There was something ferocious in the crush of the other's hand. The Englishman's teeth gleamed for an instant between his seared mustaches as he heeled his mount into a canter along the back of the ridge. Five minutes later the knoll dipped again into the plain and at the foot of it Billinger stopped his horse for a second and pointed to fresh hoof-marks in the prairie sod. Philip jumped from his horse and examined the ground.

"There are five in the gang, Billinger," he said shortly. "All of them were galloping—but one."

He looked up to catch Billinger leaning over the pommel of his saddle staring at something almost directly under his horse's feet.

"What's that?" he demanded. "A handkerchief?"

Philip picked it up—a dainty bit of fine linen, crumpled and sodden by dew, and held it out between the forefinger and thumb of both hands.

"Yes, and a woman's handkerchief. Now what the devil—"

He stopped at the look in Billinger's face as he reached down for the handkerchief. The square jaws of the man were set like steel springs, but Philip noticed that his hand was trembling.

"A woman in the gang," he laughed as Philip mounted.

They started out at a canter, Billinger still holding the bit of linen close under his eyes. After a little he passed it back to Philip who was riding close beside him.

"Something happened last night," he said, looking straight ahead of him, "that I can't understand. I didn't tell my wife. I haven't told my one. But I guess you ought to know. It's interesting, anyway—and has made a wreck of my nerves."

He wiped his face with a blackened rag which he drew from his hip pocket.

"We were working hard to get out the living, leaving the dead where they were for a time, and I had crawled under the wreck of the sleeper. I was sure that I had heard a cry, and crawled in among the debris, shoving a lantern ahead of me. About where Berth Number Ten should have been, the timbers had telescoped upward, leaving an open space four or five feet high. I was on my hands and knees, bareheaded, and my lantern lighted up things as plain as day. At first I saw nothing, and was listening again for the cry when I felt something soft and light sweeping down over me, and I looked up. Heavens—"

Billinger was mopping his face again, leaving streaks of char-black where the perspiration had started.

"Pinned up there in the mass of twisted steel and broken wood was a woman," he went on. "She was the most beautiful thing I have ever looked upon. Her arms were reaching down to me; her face was turned a little to one side, but still looking at me—and all but her face and part of her arms was smothered in a mass of red-gold hair that fell down to my shoulders. I could have sworn that she was alive. Her lips were red, and I thought for a moment that she was going to speak to me. I could have sworn, too, that there was color in her face, but it must have been something

"Isobel, Isobel, Isobel," he moaned.

in the lantern light and the red-gold of her hair, for when I spoke, and then reached up, she was cold."

Billinger shivered and urged his horse into a faster gait.

"I went out and helped with the injured then. I guess it must have been two hours later, when I returned to take out her body. But the place where I had seen her was empty. She was gone. At first I thought that some of the others had carried her out, and I looked among the dead and injured. She was not among them. I searched again when day came, with the same result. No one has seen her. She has completely disappeared—and with the exception of my shanty there isn't a house within ten miles of here where she could have been taken. What do you make of it, Steele?"

Philip had listened with tense interest.

"Perhaps you didn't return to the right place," he suggested. "Her body may still be in the wreck."

Billinger glanced toward him with a nervous laugh.

"But it was the right place," he said. "She had evidently not gone to bed, and was dressed. When I returned I found a part of her skirt in the debris above. A heavy tress of her hair had caught around a steel rubbing, and it was cut off! Some one had been there during my absence and had taken the body. I—I'm almost ready to believe that I was mistaken, and that she was alive. I found nothing there, nothing—that could prove her death.

"Is it possible—" began Philip, holding out the handkerchief.

It was not necessary for him to finish. Billinger understood, and nodded his head.

"That's what I'm thinking," he said. "Is it possible? What in God's name would they want of her, unless—"

"Unless she was alive," added Philip. "Unless one or more of the scoundrels searching for valuables in there during the excitement, saw her and carried her off with their booty. It's up to us Billinger!"

Billinger had reached inside his shirt, and now he drew forth a small paper parcel.

"I don't know why—but I kept the tress of hair," he said. "See—"

From between his fingers, as he turned toward Philip, there streamed, out a long silken tress that shone a marvelous gold in the sun, and in that same instant there fell from Philip's lips a cry such as Billinger had not heard, even from the lips of the wounded; and before he could recover from his astonishment, he had leaned over and snatched the golden tress from him, and sat in his saddle staring at it like a madman.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Girl in the Wreck.

In that moment of terrible shock—in the one moment when it seemed to him as though no other woman in the world could have worn that golden tress of hair but Isobel, Philip had stopped his horse, and his face had gone as white as death. With a tremendous effort he recovered himself, and saw Billinger staring at him as though the hot sun had for an instant blinded him of reason. But the lock of hair still rippled and shone before his eyes.

"You—you have given me a shock," he said, straining to keep his voice even. "I'm glad you had foresight enough to keep the lock of hair, Billinger. At first—I jumped to a conclusion. But there's only one chance in a hundred that I'm right. If I should be right—I know the girl. Do you understand—why it startled me? Now for the chase, Billinger. Lead away!"

Leaning low over their saddles they galloped into the North. For a time the trail of the five outlaws was so distinct that they rode at a speed which lathered their horses. Then the short prairie grass, crisp and sun-dried, gave place to a broad sweep of wire grass above which the yellow backs of coyotes were visible as now and then they bobbed up in their quick, short leaps to look over the top of it. In this brown sea all trace of the trail was lost from the saddle and both men dismounted. Foot by foot they followed the faint signs ahead of them. So slow was their progress that after a time Billinger straightened himself with a nervous curse.

"Won't do," said Billinger. "It's ten miles across this wire dip, and we won't make it until night—if we make it at all. I've got an idea. You're a better trailer than I am, so you follow this through. I'll ride on and see if I can pick up the trail somewhere in the edge of the clean prairie. What do you say?"

"Good!" said Philip. "I believe you can do it."

Billinger leaped into his saddle and was off at a gallop. Philip was almost eagerly anxious for this opportunity, and scarcely had the other gone when he drew the linen handkerchief and the crumpled lock of hair from his pocket and held them in his hand as he looked after the agent.

Then, slowly, he raised the handkerchief to his face. For a full minute he stood with the dainty fabric pressed to his lips and nose. Back there—when he had first held the handkerchief—he thought that he imagined. But now he was sure. Faintly the bit of soiled fabric breathed to him the sweet scent of hyacinth. His eyes shone in an eager bloodshot glare as he watched Billinger disappear over a roll in the prairie a mile away.

In spite of his efforts to argue the absurdity of his thoughts, he could feel that he was trembling in every nerve of his body. And twice—three times—he held the handkerchief to his face before he reached the rise in the prairie over which Billinger had disappeared. The agent had been gone an hour when the trail of the outlaws brought him to the knoll. From the top of it Philip looked over the prairie to the North.

A horseman was galloping toward him. He knew that it was Billinger, and stood up in his stirrups so that the other would see him. Half a mile away the agent stopped and Philip could see him signaling frantically with both arms. Five minutes later Philip rode up to him. Billinger's horse was half-winded, and in Billinger's face there were tense lines of excitement.

"There's some one out on the prairie," he called, as Philip reined in. "I couldn't make out a horse, but there's a man in the trail beyond the second ridge. I believe they've stopped to water their horses and feed a little lake just this side of the rough country."

Billinger had loosened his carbine, and was examining the breech. He glanced anxiously at Philip's empty saddle-straps

"It'll be long-range shooting, if they've got guns," he said. "Sorry I couldn't find a gun for you."

Philip drew one of his two long-barreled service revolvers and set his lips in a grim and reassuring smile as he followed the bobbing head of a coyote some distance away.

"We're not considered proficient in the service unless we can make use of these things at two hundred yards, Billinger," he replied, replacing the weapon in its holster. "If it's a running fight I'd rather have 'em than a carbine. If it isn't a running fight we'll come in close."

Philip looked at the agent as they galloped side by side through the long grass, and Billinger looked at him. In the face of each there was something which gave the other assurance. For the first time it struck Philip that his companion was something more than an operator at Bleak House Station. He was a fighter. He was a man of the stamp needed down at Headquarters, and he was bound to tell him so before this affair was over. He was thinking of it when they came to the second ridge.

Five miles to the north and west loomed the black line of the Bad Lands. To a tenderfoot they would not have appeared to be more than a mile distant. Midway in the prairie between there toiled a human figure. Even at that distance Philip and Billinger could see that was moving, though with a slowness that puzzled them.

For several minutes they stood breathing their horses, their eyes glued on the subject ahead of them. Twice in a space of a hundred yards it seemed to stumble and fall. The second time that it rose Philip knew that it was standing motionless. Then it disappeared again. He stared until the rolling heat waves of the blistered prairie stung his eyes. The object did not rise.

Blinking, he looked at Billinger, and through the sweat and grime of the other's face he saw the question that was on his own lips. Without a word they spurred down the slope, and after a time Billinger swept to the right and Philip to the left, each with his eyes searching the low prairie grass. The agent saw the thing first, still a hundred yards to his right. He was off his horse when Philip whirled at his shout and galloped across to him.

"It's her—the girl I found in the wreck," he said.

Something seemed to be choking him. His neck muscles twitched and his long, lean fingers were digging into his own flesh.

In an instant Philip was on his feet. He saw nothing of the girl's face, hidden under a mass of hair in which the sun burned like golden fire. He saw nothing but the crumpled, lifeless form, smothered under the shining mass, and yet in this moment he knew. With a fierce cry he dropped upon his knees and drew away the girl's hair until her lovely face lay revealed to him in terrible pallor and stillness, and as Billinger stood there, tense and staring, he caught that face close to his breast, and began talking to it as though he had gone mad.

"Isobel—Isobel—Isobel—" he moaned. "My God, my Isobel—"

He had repeated the name a hundred times, when Billinger, who began to understand, put his hand on Philip's shoulder and gave him his water canteen.

"She's not dead, man," he said, as Philip's red eyes glared up at him. "Here—water."

"My God—it's strange," almost moaned Philip. "Billinger—you understand—she's going to be my wife—if she lives—"

That was all of the story he told, but Billinger knew what those few words meant.

"She's going to live," he said. "See—there's color coming back into her face—she's breathing." He bathed her face in water, and placed the canteen to her lips.

A moment later Philip bent down and kissed her. "Isobel—my sweetheart—" he whispered.

"We must hurry with her to the water hole," said Billinger, laying a sympathetic hand on Philip's shoulder. "It's the sun. Thank God, nothing has happened to her, Steele. It's the sun—this terrible heat—"

He almost pulled Philip to his feet, and when he had mounted Billinger lifted the girl very gently and gave her to him.

Then, with the agent leading in the trail of the outlaws, they set off at a walk through the sickening sunglare for the water hole in the edge of the Bad Lands.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Battle in the Canyon.

Hunched over, with Isobel's head shelter ed against his breast, Philip rode a dozen paces behind the agent. It seemed as if the sun had suddenly burst in molten fire upon the back of his neck, and for a time it made him dizzy. His bridle reins hung loosely over the pommel. He made no effort to guide his horse, which followed after Billinger's.

It was Billinger who brought him back to himself. The agent waited for them, and when he swung over in one stirrup to look at the girl it was the animal ferocity in his face, and not his words, that aroused Philip.

"She's coming to," he said, straining to keep the tremble out of his voice. "I don't believe she's much hurt. You take this canteen. I'm going ahead."

He gave Philip the water and leaned over again to gaze into the girl's face.

"I don't believe she's much hurt," he repeated in a hoarse, dry whisper. "You can leave her at the water hole just beyond that hill off there—and then you can follow me."

Philip clutched the girl tighter to him as the agent rode off. He saw the first faint flush returning into her cheeks, the reddening of her lips, the gentle tremor of her silken lashes, and forgetful of all else but her, he moaned her name, cried out his love for her, again and again, even as her eyes opened and she stared up into the face of the man who had come to her first at Lac Bain, and who had fought for her here.

For a breath or two the wonder of this thing that was happening held her speechless and still lifeless, though her senses were adjusting themselves with lightning swiftness. At first Philip had not seen her open eyes, and he believed that she did not hear the words of love he whispered in her hair. When he raised her face a little from his breast she was looking at him with all the sweet sanity in the world.

A moment there was silence—a silence of even the breath in Philip's body, the beating of his heart. His arms loosened a little. He drew himself up rigid, and the girl lifted her head a trifle, so that their eyes met squarely, and a world of question and understanding passed between them in an instant.

As swift as morning glow a flush mounted into Isobel's face, then ebbed as swiftly, and Philip cried:

"You were hurt—hurt back there in the wreck. But you're safe now. The train was wrecked by outlaws. We came out after them, and I—I found you—back there on the prairie. You're safe now."

His arms tightened about her again.

"You're all right now," he repeated gently.

He was not conscious of the sobbing break in his voice, or of the great, throbbing love that it breathed to her. He tried to speak calmly. "There's nothing wrong—nothing. The heat made you sick. But you're all right now—"

From beyond the hill there came a sound that made him break off with a sudden, quick breath. It was the sharp, stinging report of Billinger's carbine! Once, twice, three times—and then there followed more distant shots!

"He's come up with them!" he cried.

The fury of fight, of desire for vengeance, blazed anew in his face. There was pain in the grip of his arm about the girl.

"Do you feel strong—strong enough to ride fast?" he asked. "There's only one man with me, and there are five of them. It's murder to let him fight it alone!"

"Yes—yes—" whispered the girl, her arms tightening round him. "Ride fast—or put me off. I can follow—"

It was the first time that he had heard her voice since that last evening up at Lac Bain, many months before, and the sound of it thrilled him.

"Hold tight!" he breathed.

Like the wind they swept across the prairie and up the slope of the hill. At the top Philip reined in. Three or four hundred yards distant by a thick clump of poplar trees and a thousand yards beyond that the first black escarpments of the Bad Lands. In the space between a horseman was galloping fiercely to the west. It was Billinger. With a quick movement Philip slipped the girl to the ground, and when she sprang a step back, looking up at him in white terror, he had whipped out one of his big service revolvers.

"There's a little lake over there among those trees," he said. "Wait there—until I come back!"

He raced down the slope—not to cut off the flying horseman—but toward the clump of poplars. It was Billinger he was thinking of now. The agent had fired three shots. There had followed other shots, not Billinger's and after that his carbine had remained silent. Billinger was among the poplars. He was hurt or dead.

A well-worn trail, beaten down by transient rangers, cut through the stunted growth of prairie timber, and without checking his speed Philip sped along it, only his head and shoulders and his big revolver showing over his horse's ears. A hundred paces and the timber gave place to a sandy dip, in the center of which was the water hole. The dip was not more than an acre in extent. Up to his knees in the hole was Billinger's riderless horse, and a little way up the sand was Billinger, doubled over on his hands and knees beside two black objects that Philip knew were men, stretched out like the dead back at the wreck. Billinger's yellow-mustached face, pallid and twisted with pain, looked over them as Philip galloped across the open and sprang out of his saddle. With a terrible grimace he raised himself to his knees, anticipating the question on Philip's lips.

"Nothing very bad, Steele," he said. "One of the cusses pinked me through the leg, and broke it, I guess. Painful, but not killing. Now look at that!"

He nodded to the two men lying with their faces turned up to the hot glare of the sun. One glance was enough to tell Philip that they were dead, and that it was not Billinger who had killed them. Their bearded faces had stiffened in the first agonies of death. Their breasts were soaked with blood and their arms had been drawn down close to their sides.

As he looked the gleam of a metal buckle on the belt of the dead man nearest him caught Philip's eye. He took a step nearer to examine it and then drew back. This bit of metal told the story—it bore the letters R. N. W. M. P.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

An Oklahoma inventor's corn-planter is light enough to be carried in the hand, yet will sow the grains evenly and cover each with soil.