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BLUE PETE
Half-Breed

BY LUKE ALLAN

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BLUE PETE

HALF BREED

By

LUKE ALLAN

L C.

THE JAMES A. McCANN COMPANY

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BLUE PETER: HALF BREED

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF BLUE PETE

SUNSHINE everywhere, brittle, unclouded, relentless — a glare that, to the very horizon, saturated and palled and blinded. Heat that withered what it touched streamed upward like a wave from the prairie, as well as downward from the dazzling canopy overhead. Not a breath stirred dead yellow grass or sage bush; and the half hidden carpet of prairie flowers — even the softer saffron of the cactus bloom — only reflected the blinding flame of sunlight.

One spot only of moving life was visible: a man, tall and straight, astride a black horse, both fighting grimly the pervading limpness, both preserving something of the air of authority and vigilance that never quite deserts the Mounted Police.

Constable Mahon sat loosely in the saddle, staring vacantly before him, but now and then his head raised, with the untiring instinct of the Force, to search the stretches about, and a tiny furrow

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came and went between his eyes. After a time the uncanny silence beat in on him, accustomed though he was to every phase of prairie life, and rising in his saddle he peered off to the west where he knew large herds fed, his quick eye picking out on the slope of a depression the small dark objects that told of cattle too languid even to follow into the cooler depths of the coulees their thousands of companions now sleeping through the mid-day heat. Smiling with the frankness of expression that comes to men who live much alone, he chirruped to his horse and struck off more briskly toward the south.

With an unconscious movement of the hand that guided without pulling the rein he slanted off toward a long deep-green line that tempered the sky to the south-east, and half an hour later the Cypress Hills towered over him, a range of verdant heights that stood incongruous in the surrounding levels, their western end falling away before him in a sudden sweep of half-clad hillside — as indeed the borders of the Hills everywhere dropped strangely into the prairie.

As he pulled up before a long coulee that dived into the trees, he forgot the blazing heat. For several minutes he sat, his hands resting on the pommel, gazing keenly along the edges of the Hills, searching out every shadow and nook. But the Cypress Hills were as dead to the eye

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as the trail behind him, and Mars, his horse, turned at last to whinny softly its impatience.

"If we only knew half your secrets!" the Policeman exclaimed aloud into the black shadows, and gathering up the reins loped westward to skirt the incline.

From one of the rolling ridges a straggling herd of long horned cattle on the slopes of a watered valley came into view. Years ago their ancestors had been trailed north from Texas, and the beautiful horns were handed down to a vast progeny that gave one of the fanciful touches to the prairie life with which Mahon was in daily contact, adding a little of the variety of outside world for which something within him seemed always to be craving.

A quartet of drowsy cowboys, two of them playing cards, lolled in the grass, their ponies drooping with loose rein in the thin shadow of nearby bushes. One looked lazily up and waved his hand, and Mahon responded, noticing with deepening frown that they ceased their game to watch him. And when, moved by a sudden impulse, he jerked his reins as if to join them, the two who were not playing rose and slouched to their ponies.

With an impatient twist of his arm he turned away. "I don't believe it," he muttered.

Mile after mile of the dead grass of years sped

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out behind him. He scarcely knew where he was riding — it was all in his beat. The Hills crept to his back. Less than a half hour ahead his way would be barred by the iron posts that marked the Montana boundary — the invisible line dividing two countries of common interests, two districts of common pursuits, putting a sudden and definite end to the jurisdiction of the Mounted Police. On this side eight of them — they were woefully short-staffed — policed a district fifty miles from east to west, a territory with a distinct enough southern border but which to the north stretched into untracked wilds where neither rancher nor farmer lived, and where, therefore, rustlers had no reason to be. And four of the eight were expected to cope with the temptations of the Cypress Hills section, where the best herds in Canada roamed. South of that scattered line of posts ranged the bad men of the Badlands, a sure retreat from the pursuing punishment of the Mounted Police. Nothing twisted Inspector Parker's face into such fury as his impotence before those iron posts, for the unorganized officialdom of Montana gave him little support.

Thinking of these things as he loped along, resentment akin to anger lined his forehead.

Suddenly a rifle shot, far to the south, quickly followed by a second, brought him stiffly upright in his saddle, his rein-hand clutching to his breast.

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And as he sat, motionless as the cactus at his feet, two more shots galvanized him and his horse into action. Sweeping into a coulee, Mahon followed it to its end, emerging on the level with foam lathering his horse's sides about the cinch and blowing back to him from panting mouth and nostrils.

Within a stone's throw, peering to the south over a ridge, a man lay loosely on his side, holding a ragged Stetson above his head on a sprig of cactus. Two shots, that whistled over Mahon's head, answered the challenge almost as one. But the stranger only laughed — a jeering laugh — and tossed his Stetson into the air. Mahon jammed spurs into Mars and plunged up the slope, catching from the corner of his eye the stranger's languid, unsurprised turn that mocked his own excitement. In a glance he swept the prairie to the south, where the small bluffs and wooded hills of Montana seemed to justify the dividing line he had for the moment forgotten. It was the stranger reminded him.

"That's Montany, Mountie."

At the unconcealed chuckle in the voice he faced angrily about.

At first glance he thought he had never seen a more ill-favored face. The man was sitting cross-legged, a pair of immense, coarse brown hands hanging limply over his leather-chapped

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knees. A square, heavy frame, whose looseness failed to belie its strength and agility, was covered by a dirty vest, open save for one button, revealing an equally dirty shirt once khaki in color. A huge-dotted neckerchief was double knotted under one ear, and from beneath his hips as he sat showed a pair of extravagant spurs large enough to impale a horse. Mahon recalled a score of cowboys, most of them novices, who flaunted one or more of these spectacular evidences of the profession, but never off the London stage in the old days back home had he seen a cow-puncher who incorporated so many in one person.

Yet it was the face that interested him most. At a glance he read the Indian strain — the high cheek bones and swarthy color, the latter of a strangely bluish tint. The ancient Stetson was thrust back on tousled hair that had been left to itself for many a day, and underneath there wavered erratically, as if independent of each other, a pair of twinkling eyes which, half closed as they were, missed nothing. And when the mirth of the eyes was continued in an extravagant expanse of mouth that did not open but twisted ridiculously upward at the corners, Mahon felt such an impulse to smile in response that he was forced to take himself in hand. It only increased his anger.

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"Who are you?" he demanded.

The half-breed's grin continued undisturbed. He was frankly taking in every detail of Policeman and horse; and Mahon saw, but with no satisfaction, a tilt of surprised admiration to his eyebrows.

"S'pose they'd kep' on shootin'?" The voice was as big and coarse as the stranger's body, but with a peculiarly ingratiating flexibility. "Gorswizzled, ef I think it 'ud made a bit o' diff'runce! . . . Never seen a Mountie before. The jiggers over thar — we know each other mighty well — ain't half the lookers you are. . . . Took hefty chances boltin' up thar like that. They might 'a' fired again — jes' fer luck."

"I'm doing the talking just now." The reminder was as peremptory as authority on the prairie is accustomed to speak in its official moments. "What's your name, and who were they, and what are you doing here?"

The half-breed laughed in the soundless manner of one who has laughed much alone.

"W'ich d'yuh want fust, Gineral?" He seemed to read the Policeman's anger at the veiled irony, for he went on hastily. "Seein' how sweet yuh ast, call me Pete. W'en yuh git to love me, Blue Pete. . . . Nobody ever got furder'n that."

Mahon was mildly interested. He had heard of Blue Pete from visiting cowboys as a vague,

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half-mythical cow-puncher of the Badlands, who had never before come within range of the Mounted Police.

"What are you doing here?"

The half-breed chuckled. "Heerd o' me, eh? Not the hull truth, I hope. Well, I'm hevin' my fus' conversation with a Mountie — an' savin' my friend's back thar the trouble o' buryin' me — er some o' themselves. . . . Never did take t' the killin' game — that is, not in big doses. . . . Canady — mebbe Canady now"— he dropped back on his heels and passed a coarse hand across his chin —" mebbe thar's room here fer me. I'm too gor-swizzled chicken-hearted fer Montany — an' dead-sick o' th' everlastin' game. They tell me yer real sassy over here with gunmen. Yer startin' fine, boy."

Mahon, uncomfortably conscious of a strange mingling of irritation and interest, rode nearer. "Who were they, and why were they after you?"

Blue Pete pursed his lips. "U-um! Wot's yer fav-or-ite porridge, so to speak, an' the size o' yer hat, an' who's yer bes' girl?"

The Policeman shut his teeth. "Where's your horse? You're coming with me." The Inspector might try his hand at further questioning.

"An' t' think my fus' friend in Canady's a Mountie! Wudn't my frien's over thar jes' nat-

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cherly laugh! Gor-swizzled ef I ain't glad I come!"

He whistled twice, and from the grass a few yards away a pinto clambered to its feet, shook itself on braced legs, and ambled to its master. Mahon watched, fascinated. He must have ridden almost over the ugly little beast. Its blotched sides of dirty yellow, its ragged tail that looked as if something had left off chewing it just before the end, the inquiring tilt to the upper third of one ear, catalogued it in horsedom in the same class as its master among men. And in every movement was the same lazy play of muscles of steel. It bent its head, and the half-breed's hand went up to fondle its ears.

"Whiskers, ole gal, don' get stuck up 'cause I am. But here's one o' them Mounties we've heerd of. Wot yuh think o' that black o' his? Nifty bit o' horseflesh, eh? Give yuh a run in a mile, wudn't he? But in ten —" He broke off with a chuckle and slouched up from the grass. But the movement that landed him in the saddle was like the spring of a trap.

"Now, Gineral, git goin'. An' ef thar's somethin' t' eat at th' end of it, make it hasty. Whiskers 'n' me's did 'bout a hundred miles too much since this time yesterday. Cudn't wait t' 'ave my steaks done as I like 'em."

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Mahon untied the extra lunch he always carried, handed it to the half-breed, and pointed northward. Blue Pete, after the first glance of surprised gratitude, hesitated. Then he grinned and led away.

"I'd ride to blazes with a sangwich in my hand jes' now. . . . Yer uncommon decent, boy. Yuh don't happen t'ave a quarter o' beef in yer ves' pocket — er a keg o' Sanson's? Cud take a bite o' my arm, I'm that hungry."

He munched in silence for a time.

"Say, boy," he said over his shoulder, "yuh know I'm goin' 'cause I want tuh, don't yuh? Don't 'member o' goin' anywhar fer any other reason. Ef yuh think I'm tryin' t' escape —"

Mahon pulled his horse alongside, Mars and Whiskers exchanged compliments of a friendly nature. Blue Pete grinned.

"That's better. . . . Yer white. . . . Allus makes me narvus with any one behind me. That ain't the way I ride usually. Guess it's conscience."

The half-breed's eyes roamed in admiration over the country as they passed along.

"Mighty fine ranchin' country?" he volunteered presently, "ef thar's water. Many cattle?"

Mahon found himself absorbed in the turns of the half-breed's mind, in the subtlety with

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which he conveyed his meaning. Almost involuntarily he shifted their course to the west until they overlooked the herd of Texan steers. A pair of cowboys were dashing down the opposite slope, a mile away, driving before them two half-grown calves. An involuntary movement of the half-breed's hand brought the pinto to a stop, and Mars pulled up in sympathy. Faintly across the ravine came the protests of the unwilling calves. Blue Pete's head moved slowly until he could see the Policeman's face, but Mahon caught it in time and presented the impassive mask of the official.

"Bad day fer ridin'," commented the half-breed. "But any day does — fer that," he added.

"Any day has to." Mahon turned quickly away to hide the worry in his face. And both noted in silence the sudden movement among the cowboys at sight of them.

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CHAPTER II

A GLIMPSE OF MIRA STANTON

IN silence they rode, Mars, under the spur of a new companionship, cavorting a little and prancing; but the steady, awkward pace of the half-breed's mount was as regular as a machine. The heat was moderating with the setting of the sun, but the air continued dry and harsh and withering, and Mahon's eyelids, heavy as if he had passed through a great fire, for minutes at a time were closed.

"Much rustlin' in these parts?"

The question fitted so completely into the Policeman's troubled thoughts that he scarcely repressed a start.

"Why do you ask?"

"Jes' askin'. Seems t' 'urt."

Mahon felt the searching of the half-breed's eyes and yielded to impulse.

"Rustling? The worst we ever experienced is on right now. . . . But we're going to stop it."

He jammed his spurs into Mars' tender sides, for there came to him again the memory of the scene that had oppressed him all afternoon. Only a

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few hours ago he had come from a conference at Medicine Lodge with Inspector Parker, whose unusual bluntness had sent him and his comrades out with a relentless determination to rebuild the reputation of the Force.

"Better save that fer the rustlers," Blue Pete suggested, looking down on Mars' quivering sides as the surprised horse came under control. Mahon flushed and apologized to Mars by patting its wet neck. "Looks 's if yuh'll need it. . . . Great game yer mixed up in. Need to keep yer eyes peeled for the li'l things. Like —"

Mahon turned fiercely and pointed to the Hills. "There's where the trouble is. Only the rustlers know that tangle. We haven't time to explore — and there's not a ghost of a show for us in there until we do. They can hide a hundred herds where we can't hope to find them."

He stopped abruptly, self-conscious, unable to explain his outburst before a stranger.

The half-breed spoke very quietly. "Cattle don' wander into the Hills. They're took thar. Out here on the prairie's whar the rustlin's done."

"Out here on the prairie we have a chance. You couldn't hide a rabbit here — except in the coulees."

"Huh!" The exclamation, part question, was a blunt sneer. "Wot kin' o' rustlers hev yuh here anyhow?"

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Mahon could follow every twist of the half-breed's mind, but he only lost dignity by exposing the irritation he felt. The effect of the stranger on him was confusing — and so he relapsed into silence, closing his eyes wearily.

He opened them with a sudden sense of alarm and swung about. Mars and he seemed the only living things on the prairie. At a pressure of his knees the horse raced to the nearest rise, but nothing was to be seen. A few hundred yards away was a knoll he knew as the highest point this side of the Hills, and there he stood in his saddle, cursing his carelessness and over-confidence. Then under a hot spur he drove his horse into widening circles, keeping to the ridges, swiftly searching every coulee. He knew he had cut off retreat to the Hills by any coulee the half-breed could have reached in the minute or two of his inattention. And when, prepared for the only means of hiding in that shrubless waste, he sensed an unfamiliar shade in the gray-yellow grass into the eye of the sun, he galloped toward it.

The ungainly figure of the half-breed rose before him, grinning a bit sheepishly.

"Yuh ain't half bad, boy. But I ain't a rabbit, mind. An' ef I'd knowed the lay o' the land I could 'a' did it — ef I'd wanted tuh."

At a double whistle the pinto rose from be-

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hind a small sage bush, the yellow blotches on its sides now seeming to defy concealment.

"Right here, right out here on the prairie, boy, thar's whar things is happenin', right under yer eyes. Mebbe I'll larn yuh a thing er two — some day — mebbe. . . . Whose bunch?" he inquired, tossing his thumb over his shoulder.

"Stantons'. Joe and Jim. Biggest ranchers about here."

"Sure thing!"

"You know them?" Mahon exclaimed suspiciously.

"Sence half 'n hour. Seem to knowed 'em years. Seed thar kind —"

The sudden appearance of a girl on horseback from the draw of a coulee stopped him. The effect on the two men was startling. Involuntarily the half-breed pulled up, and his eyes narrowed; but the transformation in Mahon was more leisurely, though also more marked. It was as if he took a new grip on himself — only that. He did not stop — there was no great movement of any part of him — but his shoulders straightened and tightened, and his rein-hand raised a little. The other hand lifted to sweep off his Stetson as he bowed, a gentle smile transfiguring his face. The half-breed looked from one to the other, wide-eyed, and then his own Stetson came off.

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A wild flower the girl was, a prairie-bred maiden with the mind and powers of a man. From her dress one might have inferred objection to her sex, resisted by a nature that would not be silenced. Her blouse was nothing but a man's shirt, but it was open a little at the neck, revealing a skin no man ever possessed, and topped by a handkerchief of an aggressive green. Her skirt was a frank concession to sex — but the green of it shrieked at the green of the neckerchief. Short and full it lay across the horse's back, exposing an exquisitely molded foot and leg which the high tan riding boot failed to conceal. The only other touch of femininity was a red belt, but in every line was grace and suppleness, and shapeliness of bust and limb. From under the edge of her Stetson peeped a wave of ruddy hair whose exposure was sheer rebellion, framing a complexion that had yielded not at all to the dry, parching winds and heat of the prairie summer or the biting storms of winter. Dark it was, but soft as velvet and tender as a rose.

"Gor-swizzle!" breathed the half-breed. And when the girl disappeared again into a coulee at a fast gallop Whiskers had not moved. "Gor-swizzle!" he ejaculated again, galloping to overtake his companion. A nod of his head asked the question in his mind.

"Miss Stanton — Mira Stanton," Mahon told

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him, and there was something of caress in his tone. "Sister of Joe and Jim."

The half-breed whistled through his teeth. "I wonder whar she comes in. . . . Many like her in these parts?"

"Few like her anywhere."

The other's face wrinkled. "Say, does she know yuh feel that way? Was them love glances she sent yuh?"

"Don't talk rot!"

"They don' grow 'em like that whar I come from," went on the half-breed, undisturbed by the rebuke. "Not in dress, anyway."

Mahon shook his head sadly. "Why on earth she wears those greens —" he began, and stopped.

The half-breed stared at him with a new interest. "Must be awful t'ev 'n eye like that. Whiskers 'n' me'll hev to buck up. We ain't no prize babies, are we, ole gal?" The pinto whinnied agreement.

"Ah!"

The exclamation broke at a scene that opened suddenly before them. The sun was sinking fast, and the air was snapping with the coming prairie evening that sometimes passes into frost in the hollows after an uncomfortably warm day. A herd of browsing cattle was wandering up from their mid-day retreat on the way to new pastures for the night, from their midst arising cries of

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animal distress. Blue Pete's head went forward.

"Cows!" he jerked.

Two riders were darting about the herd, trying to keep it bunched, while further back another pair were scouting swiftly about.

"Calves gone," explained the half-breed, his words chipping off. "How far hev we come?"

"Where from?"

"From the las' bunch — Stantons'?"

"About ten miles — perhaps more." Mahon was watching him from beneath his brows.

"Hm-m! Stiff work fer a hot day!"

The Policeman made no reply. He had shifted his eyes to the bawling cows, but after a moment or two heard the half-breed muttering.

"It's the li'l things, boy — the calves — and the cows. It's right out here —"

Mahon turned on him fiercely.

"You're a stranger here. That herd back there's the Stantons', the 3-bar-Y herd, I tell you. That's enough."

But Blue Pete had the last word.

"An' Miss Stanton's," he grinned, "— Mira's."

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CHAPTER III

DUTCH HENRY SHOOTS

IN the tang of approaching night they rode into the Police Post at Medicine Lodge. Mahon leaped to the ground, throwing his rein loose, and spoke a few whispered words to a uniformed figure watching from the doorway. Then he motioned to the half-breed and the three entered the one large room.

Sergeant Denton, tall and wiry, seemingly little older than Mahon but wearing his stripes with quiet dignity, turned to his comrade with a satisfied smile.

"Well, I hope the Inspector will be satisfied."

Mahon's eyes gleamed. "Got the rustlers?" The sting of jealousy brought a slight flush to his cheek.

"Dutch Henry!" Denton explained proudly.

Blue Pete's chair creaked.

"You knew him?" Denton's question was a command.

"Too damn well. Wasn't wot yuh'd call a puss'nal friend — not at the last. Knew him better once — worked with 'im. . . . Th' only man

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I ever hed a sneakin' fear of. Ef yuh've got him — but gor-swizzle! I don' believe it."

Denton only smiled.

"Blakey's luck," he told Mahon. "The cuss was unloading two cars of stolen horses at Dunmore to feed them — on their way to Winnipeg — under our very noses. Blakey recognized him and got the drop through his pocket. Dutch threw up his hands quick enough — he knew we had orders to shoot."

"Do' know that I blame 'im," smiled the half-breed. "Funny feelin' them clothes give a fel-luh. . . . But yer not through with Dutch Henry yet — not ef I know 'im — an' I jes' about ought tuh."

They spent the night in the solitary room together, and not as Police and prisoner. Mahon felt certain the half-breed would not try to escape. "I believe," he said to Denton, "that short of putting him in irons he could get away nearly any time he wanted to. And we've no excuse for arresting him." Denton listened — and locked the three horses in the corral.

Very early next morning they were saddling up for Medicine Hat when the telephone rang and Denton went to answer it. Mahon could hear his voice, excited and abrupt. "Yes, sir," he was saying; and Mahon knew the Inspector was on the other end.

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The Sergeant, with one arm thrust into his tunic, threw open the door.

"He's escaped!" he shouted. "Broke out the bars in that rotten cell. He'll sure make for the Hills. Blakey's out already. Thornton and Priest are coming. There's just a chance we can head him off."

Mahon looked at Blue Pete. The half-breed was lolling on his pinto, cowboy fashion.

"Oh, do' min' me," he urged. "Go right along with yer killin'. I'll come along an' see the fun."

Denton caught the sound of a chuckle and looked up from tightening his spurs. "You did know Dutch Henry too damn well — how well we'll find out when we get through this. . . . We're too busy now to bother with you." He disappeared and returned with his rifle, working the mechanism as he ran to the corral. "Take the west," he ordered Mahon. "Make for the end of the Hills until Corporal Blakey comes. Tell him to ride round to the south and you keep close to the northern edge eastward until you see me. I'm going east. Two shots — you're wanted."

He was off in the early light, straight into the sun, and Mahon turned his back on the half-breed and tore to the southwest. Five minutes later he glanced back — to find Blue Pete riding easily

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a hundred yards behind. The half-breed waved, and something about it pleased the Policeman.

He was not urging Mars. There might be much riding yet before rest, but it surprised him as he looked back now and then how easily the pinto maintained its position. It even came alongside, and together they let the eager horses cut down the miles toward the ever-growing line that marked the Hills.

Suddenly Blue Pete's head went up and the pinto wheeled on its hind legs before Mahon could stop.

"Yer wanted!" shouted the half-breed.

The pinto, lying so low in its stride that its rider seemed to be running on the ground, was already away to the east, and Mahon, though he had not heard the signal, trusted the half-breed's ears and followed. There was no need for spurs, for Mars' ears were back, but when Mahon saw with irritation how slowly he cut down the pinto's lead he applied them once mercilessly. Mars quivered, stretched out his head, and desperately running was presently head to head with his new friend. But he could get no further, and Blue Pete glanced from horse to horse with a grin.

The next rifle shots Mahon heard distinctly, aware on the instant where they came from. Not far ahead, in a deep coulee with a draw running up to the prairie, was the remains of an old shack

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probably erected years ago as a center for round-ups; now it was used only by belated travelers caught on the prairie by sudden nightfall or winter storms. He had frequently slept there himself.

In an angle of the hollow out of sight of the shack they came on Sergeant Denton.

"He's in there!" The Sergeant was changing his revolver from holster to belt. "I wondered if you'd hear." Then with a jerk of his tunic — the official touch — he started forward.

Mahon followed, but Denton waved him back. "I'll go alone. He's shooting."

The other bit his lip. Ever since he had been on the Force he had longed to be in on some big capture like this. But he had no thought of disobeying.

The Sergeant moved out into the draw. A rifle shot split the silence, and Mahon heard the whistle of the bullet. Blue Pete hissed through his teeth and unfastened his rifle from the saddle.

Denton did not hesitate.

A furious voice challenged him. "I won't shoot to miss a second time."

"Don't be a fool, Dutch Henry. You'll only make it worse for yourself." And the Sergeant walked on.

"I won't be taken, I tell you," snarled the outlaw.

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"You'll be taken all the more certainly if you shoot — only for worse than rustling. Nobody ever escaped us long for that, you know."

Mahon knew Denton was talking against time. Another bullet whistled past, and a third.

Blue Pete was watching the Sergeant with staring eyes. "Gor-swizzle!" he whispered. "He sure do' know Dutchy — an' after them three shots I ain't sure I know 'im myself."

Denton was within fifteen yards of the shack when a fiercely ominous oath came from it. Too late the half-breed shouted a warning. With the report of Dutch Henry's rifle Denton straightened, leaped ahead, halted totteringly, placed both hands to his hip, and with a stifled groan fell.

Mahon, his eyes blazing, was striding forward when bands of steel settled on him from behind and he felt himself lifted from his feet. With a furious movement he twisted — and looked into a pair of crooked eyes in a brown face. Striking out madly, the two men rolled over and over. At last the half-breed managed to speak through panting lips.

"Yuh'd make a fine corpse, you wud. D'yuh think Dutchy wouldn't do the same to you?"

Though he knew the warning was justified, Mahon continued to struggle for several seconds. "But — but · the Sergeant's wounded — and Dutchy'll escape."

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"He'll escape a damn sight easier when he's put a bullet in you. I'll get him — the Sergeant."

"This is my job." The Policeman threw off the restraining hands. "We don't let strangers risk their lives when there's work like this."

"I've some chance. I don't believe Dutchy'll shoot me. It jes' seems to me your work is Dutchy, not the Sergeant."

Blue Pete walked to the pinto and patted its nose, while Mahon leaned forward where he could see the wounded Sergeant. Denton was on his knees, tremblingly struggling to advance. His left leg moved, but the right hung limp and a trickle of blood was dripping from the stained breeches. With a groan he sank on his face, still clawing forward by the grass.

In the shack all was silence. Great tears flooded Mahon's eyes. Oh, for one of his comrades to keep watch on Dutch Henry that he might attend to the Sergeant! But the half-breed was right: Dutch Henry was his duty.

Denton raised his head and saw him. "Don't come in here. Never — mind me. But don't let him — escape."

Mahon crept up to the level where he could watch the shack and waited, rifle ready, while he made his plans. And Blue Pete, lingering long enough to whisper to the pinto, struck into the draw without his rifle.

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"Dutchy!"

A voice tense with surprise replied from the shack.

"Blue Pete! You—! Don't you butt into this or there's sure one for you."

The half-breed laughed. "I ain't takin' no chances with you, Dutchy. I ain't no crazy jigger. We know each other too well to think either of us is fools. All I want is the Mountie. Yuh missed wuss that time than th' others, Dutchy. 'N inch makes a hell of a diff'runce in the hip. It's a dirty murder t'ave on yer hands."

He moved forward.

"Drop that pistol," came the order from the shack. "I know your shot too well to risk it, Pete."

The half-breed, scoffing, took his revolver from his pocket and placed it on the ground. "Guilty conscience, Dutchy. Even a window's safe at eighty yards."

The wounded Sergeant raised his head. "Send the half-breed for help, Mahon," he ordered. . . . "And don't let the devil get away. He's—got me—I guess." With a groan he dropped and lay motionless.

Blue Pete hurried to him.

"Hell, Dutchy!" he stormed. "W'y didn't yuh plug 'im in the heart, 'stead o' murderin' 'im this way?"

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"I had to stop him, Pete." There was apology and fear in Dutch Henry's voice. "I know these fellows. I guess I got him higher than I intended, but I can't take chances. That's straight." His voice hardened. "And I've got a bead on you, Pete. You aren't going for that help, are you?"

"This ain't my row," growled the half-breed. "But ef yuh've did for him, look out fer me, Dutchy. Thar wasn't no need fer it. But I'm not goin' to stop you till then."

"I'll take your word."

"Yuh've had tuh manys a time — though we never was over-sweet on each other —" He raised his head, listening.

Dutch Henry, too, heard. From the prairie above came the sound of furious riding. "I'll shoot to kill every Mountie I see now," he snarled. "Let 'em all come!"

Mahon, lying flat on the prairie, turned to the approaching rider hopefully. Then he exclaimed under his breath and slid back into the coulee.

Down the slope a girl careered madly, her dark hair, broken loose in the wind, hanging in one long curl on her neck. One foot had lost the stirrup but she clung with hands and knees. Through her tender skin spots of vivid red showed in her cheeks, and a fearful anxiety — almost horror — stared from her eyes.

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As she pulled up, the Policeman seized her in his arms and forcibly lifted her from the saddle. "For God's sake keep down, Miss Parsons. The Sergeant's in there terribly wounded. Dutch Henry did it."

She tore herself from him and pushed the curl under her Stetson. "And you stay out here!"

"That's not fair, Miss Parsons." His cheeks were red as hers. "This is not the man — only the Policeman. My duty is to get Dutch Henry. I'm forced to choose the harder thing. The Sergeant —"

"I know — yes, I know," she interrupted. "It's the soulless Force that must get the criminal whatever happens the Policeman. I'm sorry I hinted at — at other things; I should know you better. I — I do know how it must hurt you to have to leave him there. . . . And he would have shot you too!"

Before he could interpose she had stepped out into the draw toward the shack, half running. He rushed after her.

"Miss Parsons — Helen!"

She turned at the last word, full in view of the shack, and stopped him in mid rush.

"Constable Mahon," she reminded him, "you have a duty elsewhere. Would you dishonor the Force? . . . For a woman?" she added as he came on.

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Mahon retired abashed. Not for his wounded comrade but for a woman he had almost broken the rule of the Force. That he had for seconds been in deadly peril and that she had deliberately kept her body between him and the shack did not occur to him. But this time he chose a spot where he could watch both the shack and the unconscious Sergeant.

The girl approached the half-breed where he sat nursing Denton's head, Blue Pete staring at her. Then he glared at the shack.

"Dutchy," he sneered, "here's yer chance fer glory. Shoot now, yuh c'yute!"

But Dutchy did not shoot. The girl swiftly took in the extent of the wound. "Your knife!" Blue Pete drew it and opened the blade; and in two steady, strong-wristed sweeps she cut away the breeches. "Your handkerchief — all you have!"

Blue Pete, confused, saw her draw two from her own pockets. "Ain't got none —'cept this." He pointed to the dirty neckerchief.

With flaming face she ran to a cluster of choke cherries, the half-breed instinctively looking away, and in a moment she was beside him, still flushing, a bundle of white in her hand.

"We'd better carry him back where Constable Mahon can help," she ordered.

With infinite care, with a tenderness incredible

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in one so rough, the half-breed raised the Sergeant's shoulders while she lifted his feet. Denton, roused by the movement, made not a sound, but his lips were drawn between his teeth in a blue line.

Mahon joined them and together they bound up the wound as best they could, the outlaw for the moment forgotten. Blue Pete left them once and crept up to look out over the prairie, returning without a word. The Sergeant opened his eyes.

"Perhaps it's not so bad as it looks," he whispered through clenched teeth, as he saw the pity in Mahon's face. "Send the half-breed for help. Telephone from the Lodge. Doctor Smith will come in his car. But don't — let that hound escape. . . . I'll be all right till the doctor comes."

"You'll have to stay," the half-breed whispered. "I won't get the Police — but I can the doctor. Len' me yer horse. Mine's had three days of it."

As the thunder of hoofs dimmed away, Mahon turned to the girl, who held her face low over the Sergeant.

"Tell me, He — Miss Parsons, what —"

Denton's face twisted in a spasm of pain.

"Don't mind me," he whispered. "I'm all right. Keep an eye on Dutch Henry."

Mahon's wits returned. He crept out to the draw and carefully looked over until he could see

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