Roberts Charles G. D. Sir

Jim: The Story of a Backwoods Police Dog

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Содержание

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I. HOW WOOLLY BILLY CAME TO BRINE'S RIP

I

Jim's mother was a big cross-bred bitch, half Newfoundland and half bloodhound, belonging to Black Saunders, one of the hands at the Brine's Rip Mills. As the mills were always busy, Saunders was always busy, and it was no place for a dog to be around, among the screeching saws, the thumping, wet logs, and the spurting sawdust. So the big bitch, with fiery energy thrilling her veins and sinews and the restraint of a master's hand seldom exercised upon her, practically ran wild.

Hunting on her own account in the deep wilderness which surrounded Brine's Rip Settlement, she became a deadly menace to every wild thing less formidable than a bear or a bull moose, till at last, in the early prime of her adventurous career, she was shot by an angry game warden for her depredations among the deer and the young caribou.

Jim's father was a splendid and pedigreed specimen of the old English sheep-dog. From a litter of puppies of this uncommon parentage, Tug Blackstock, the Deputy Sheriff of Nipsiwaska County, chose out the one that seemed to him the likeliest, paid Black Saunders a sovereign for him, and named him Jim. To Tug Blackstock, for some unfathomed reason, the name of "Jim" stood for self-contained efficiency.

It was efficiency, in chief, that Tug Blackstock, as Deputy Sheriff, was after. He had been reading, in a stray magazine with torn cover and much-thumbed pages, an account of the wonderful doings of the trained police dogs of Paris. The story had fired his imagination and excited his envy.

There was a lawless element in some of the outlying corners of Nipsiwaska County, with a larger element of yet more audacious lawlessness beyond the county line from which to recruit. Throughout the wide and mostly wilderness expanse of Nipsiwaska County the responsibility for law and order rested almost solely upon the shoulders of Tug Blackstock. His chief, the Sheriff, a prosperous shopkeeper who owed his appointment to his political pull, knew little and thought less of the duties of his office.

As soon as Jim was old enough to have an interest beyond his breakfast and the worrying of his rag ball, Tug Blackstock set about his training. It was a matter that could not be hurried. Tug had much work to do and Jim, as behoved a growing puppy, had a deal of play to get through in the course of each twenty-four hours. Then so hard was the learning, so easy, alas! the forgetting. Tug Blackstock was kind to all creatures but timber thieves and other evil-doers of like kidney. He was patient, with the long patience of the forest. But he had a will like the granite of old Bald Face.

Jim was quick of wit, willing to learn, intent to please his master. But it was hard for him to concentrate. It was hard to keep his mind off cats, and squirrels, the worrying of old boots, and other doggish frivolities. Hence, at times, some painful misunderstandings between teacher and pupil. In the main, however, the education of Jim progressed to a marvel.

They were a pair, indeed, to strike the most stolid imagination, let alone the sensitive, brooding, watchful imagination of the backwoods. Tug Blackstock was a tall, spare figure of a man, narrow of hip, deep of chest, with something of a stoop to his mighty shoulders, and his head thrust forward as if in ceaseless scrutiny of the unseen. His hair, worn somewhat short and pushed straight

back, was faintly grizzled. His face, tanned and lean, was markedly wide at the eyes, with a big, well-modelled nose, a long, obstinate jaw, and a wide mouth whimsically uptwisted at one corner.

Except on the trail – and even then he usually carried a razor in his pack – he was always clean-shaven, just because he didn't like the curl of his beard. His jacket, shirt, and trousers were of browny-grey homespun, of much the same hue as his soft slouch hat, all as inconspicuous as possible. But at his throat, loosely knotted under his wide-rolling shirt collar, he wore usually an ample silk handkerchief of vivid green spattered with big yellow spots, like dandelions in a young June meadow.

As for Jim, at first glance he might almost have been taken for a slim, young black bear rather than a dog. The shaggy coat bequeathed to him by his sheep-dog sire gave to his legs and to his hindquarters an appearance of massiveness that was almost clumsy. But under this dense black fleece his lines were fine and clean-drawn as a bull-terrier's.

The hair about his eyes grew so long and thick that, if left to itself, it would have seriously interfered with his vision. This his master could not think of permitting, so the riotous hair was trimmed down severely, till Jim's large, sagacious eyes gazed out unimpeded from ferocious, brush-like rims of stubby fur about half an inch in length.

II

For some ten miles above the long, white, furrowed face of Brine's Rip, where Blue Forks Brook flows in, the main stream of the Ottanoonsis is a succession of mad rapids and toothed ledges and treacherous, channel-splitting shoals. These ten miles are a trial of nerve and water-craft for the best canoeists on the river. In the spring, when the river was in freshet and the freed logs were racing, battering, and jamming, the whole reach was such a death-trap for the stream-drivers that it had come to be known as Dead Man's Run.

Now, in high summer, when the stream was shrunken in its channel and the sunshine lay golden over the roaring, creamy chutes and the dancing shallows, the place looked less perilous. But it was full of snares and hidden teeth. It was no place for the canoeist, however expert with pole and paddle, unless he knew how to read the water unerringly for many yards ahead. It is this reading of the water, this instantaneous solving of the hieroglyphics of foam and surge and swirl and glassy lunge, that makes the skilled runner of the rapids.

A light birch-bark canoe, with a man in the stern and a small child in the bow, was approaching the head of the rapids, which were hidden from the paddler's view by a high, densely-wooded bend of the shore. The canoe leapt forward swiftly on the smooth, quiet current, under the strong drive of the paddle.

The paddler was a tall, big-limbed man, with fair hair fringing out under his tweed cap, and a face burnt red rather than tanned by the weather. He was dressed roughly but well, and not as a woodsman, and he had a subtle air of being foreign to the backwoods. He knew how to handle his paddle, however, the prow of his craft keeping true though his strokes were slow and powerful.

The child who sat facing him on a cushion in the bow was a little boy of four or five years, in a short scarlet jacket and blue knickers. His fat, bare legs were covered with fly-bites and scratches, his baby face of the tenderest cream and pink, his round, interested eyes as blue as periwinkle blossoms. But the most conspicuous thing about him was his hair. He was bareheaded – his little cap lying in the bottom of the canoe among the luggage – and the hair, as white as tow, stood out like a fleece all over his head, enmeshing the sunlight in its silken tangle.

When the canoe shot round the bend, the roar of the rapids smote suddenly upon the voyagers' ears. The child turned his bright head inquiringly, but from his low place could see nothing to explain the noise. His father, however, sitting up on the hinder bar of the canoe, could see a menacing white line of tossing crests, aflash in the sunlight, stretching from shore to shore. Backing

water vigorously to check his headway, he stood up to get a better view and choose his way through the surge.

The stranger was master of his paddle, but he had had no adequate experience in running rapids. Such light and unobstructed rips as he had gone through had merely sufficed to make him regard lightly the menace confronting him. He had heard of the perils of Dead Man's Run, but that, of course, meant in time of freshet, when even the mildest streams are liable to go mad and run amuck. This was the season of dead low water, and it was hard for him to imagine there could be anything really to fear from this lively but shrunken stream. He was strong, clear-eyed, steady of nerve, and he anticipated no great trouble in getting through.

As the light craft dipped into the turmoil, jumping as if buffeted from below, and the wave-tops slapped in on either side of the bow, the little lad gave a cry of fear.

"Sit tight, boy. Don't be afraid," said the father, peering ahead with intent, narrowed eyes and surging fiercely on his blade to avoid a boiling rock just below the first chute. As he swept past in safety he laughed in triumph, for the passage had been close and exciting, and the conquest of a mad rapid is one of the thrilling things in life, and worth going far for. His laugh reassured the child, who laughed also, but cowered low in the canoe and stared over the gunwale with wide eyes of awe.

But already the canoe was darting down toward a line of black rocks smothered in foam. The man paddled desperately to gain the other shore, where there seemed to be a clear passage. Slanting sharply across the great current, surging with short, terrific strokes upon his sturdy maple blade, his teeth set and his breath coming in grunts, he was swept on downward, sideways toward the rocks, with appalling speed. But he made the passage, swept the bow around, and raced through, shaving the rock so narrowly that his heart paused and the sweat jumped out suddenly cold on his forehead.

Immediately afterwards the current swept him to mid-stream. Just here the channel was straight and clear of rocks, and though the rips were heavy the man had a few minutes' respite, with little to do but hold his course.

With a stab at the heart he realized now into what peril he had brought his baby. Eagerly he looked for a chance to land, but on neither side could he make shore with any chance of escaping shipwreck. A woodsman, expert with the canoe-pole, might have managed it, but the stranger had neither pole nor skill to handle one. He was in the grip of the wild current and could only race on, trusting to master each new emergency as it should hurl itself upon him.

Presently the little one took alarm again at his father's stern-set mouth and preoccupied eyes. The man had just time to shout once more, "Don't be afraid, son. Dad'll take care of you," when the canoe was once more in a yelling chaos of chutes and ledges. And now there was no respite. Unable to read the signs of the water, he was full upon each new peril before he recognized it, and only his great muscular strength and instant decision saved them.

Again and again they barely by a hair's-breadth, slipped through the jaws of death, and it seemed to the man that the gnashing ledges raved and yelled behind him at each miracle of escape. Then hissing wave-crests cut themselves off and leapt over the racing gunwale, till he feared the canoe would be swamped. Once they scraped so savagely that he thought the bottom was surely ripped from the canoe. But still he won onward, mile after roaring mile, his will fighting doggedly to keep his eyesight from growing hopelessly confused with the hellish, sliding dazzle and riot of waters.

But at last the fiend of the flood, having played with its prey long enough, laid bare its claws and struck. The bow of the canoe, in swerving from one foam-curtained rock, grounded heavily upon another. In an instant the little craft was swung broadside on, and hung there. The waves piled upon her in a yelling pack. She was smothered down, and rolled over helplessly.

As they shot out into the torrent the man, with a terrible cry, sprang toward the bow, striving to reach his son. He succeeded in catching the little one, with one hand, by the back of the scarlet jacket. The next moment he went under and the jacket came off over the child's head. A whimsical

cross-current dragged the little boy twenty feet off to one side, and shot him into a shallow side channel.

When the man came to the surface again his eyes were shut, his face stark white, his legs and arms flung about aimlessly as weeds; but fast in his unconscious grip he held the little red jacket. The canoe, its side stove in, and full of water, was hurrying off down the rapid amid a fleet of paddles, cushions, blankets, boxes, and bundles. The body of the man, heavy and inert and sprawling, followed more slowly. The waves rolled it over and trampled it down, shouldered it up again, and snatched it away viciously whenever it showed an inclination to hang itself up on some projecting ledge. It was long since they had had such a victim on whom to glut their rancour.

The child, meanwhile, after being rolled through the laughing shallows of the side channel and playfully buffeted into a half-drowned unconsciousness, was stranded on a sand spit some eight or ten yards from the right-hand shore. There he lay, half in the water, half out of it, the silken white floss of his hair all plastered down to his head, the rippled current tugging at his scratched and bitten legs.

The unclouded sun shone down warmly upon his face, slowly bringing back the rose to his baby lips, and a small, paper-blue butterfly hovered over his head for a few seconds, as if puzzled to make out what kind of being he was.

The sand spit which had given the helpless little one refuge was close to the shore, but separated from it by a deep and turbulent current. A few minutes after the blue butterfly had flickered away across the foam, a large black bear came noiselessly forth from the fir woods and down to the water's edge. He gazed searchingly up and down the river to see if there were any other human creatures in sight, then stretched his savage black muzzle out over the water toward the sand spit, eyeing and sniffing at the little unconscious figure there in the sun. He could not make out whether it was dead or only asleep. In either case he wanted it. He stepped into the foaming edge of the sluice, and stood there whimpering with disappointed appetite, daunted by the snaky vehemence of the current.

Presently, as the warmth of the flooding sun crept into his veins, the child stirred, and opened his blue eyes. He sat up, noticed he was sitting in the water, crawled to a dry spot, and snuggled down into the hot sand. For the moment he was too dazed to realize where he was. Then, as the life pulsed back into his veins, he remembered how his father's hand had caught him by the jacket just as he went plunging into the awful waves. Now, the jacket was gone. His father was gone, too.

"Daddy! Daddee-ee!" he wailed. And at the sound of that wailing cry, so unmistakably the cry of a youngling for its parent, the bear drew back discreetly behind a bush, and glanced uneasily up and down the stream to see if the parent would come in answer to the appeal. He had a wholesome respect for the grown-up man creature of either sex, and was ready to retire on the approach of one.

But no one came. The child began to sob softly, in a lonesome, frightened, suppressed way. In a minute or two, however, he stopped this, and rose to his feet, and began repeating over and over the shrill wail of "Daddy, Dad-dee-ee, Daddee-ee!" At the same time he peered about him in every direction, almost hopefully, as if he thought his father must be hiding somewhere near, to jump out presently for a game of bo-peep with him.

His baby eyes were keen. They did not find his father, but they found the bear, its great black head staring at him from behind a bush.

His cries stopped on the instant, in the middle of a syllable, frozen in his throat with terror. He cowered down again upon the sand, and stared, speechless, at the awful apparition. The bear, realizing that the little one's cries had brought no succour, came out from its hiding confidently, and down to the shore, and straight out into the water till the current began to drag too savagely at its legs. Here it stopped, grumbling and baffled.

The little one, unable any longer to endure the dreadful sight, backed to the extreme edge of the sand, covered his face with his hands, and fell to whimpering piteously, an unceasing, hopeless, monotonous little cry, as vague and inarticulate as the wind.

The bear, convinced at length that the sluice just here was too strong for him to cross, drew back to the shore reluctantly. It moved slowly up-stream some forty or fifty yards, looking for a feasible crossing. Disappointed in this direction, it then explored the water's edge for a little distance down-stream, but with a like result. But it would not give up. Up and down, up and down, it continued to patrol the shore with hungry obstinacy. And the piteous whimpering of the little figure that cowered, with hidden face upon the sand spit, gradually died away. That white fleece of silken locks, dried in the sun and blown by the warm breeze, stood out once more in its radiance on the lonely little slumbering head.

III

Tug Blackstock sat on a log, smoking and musing, on the shore of that wide, eddying pool, full of slow swirls and spent foam clusters, in which the tumbling riot of Brine's Rip came to a rest. From the mills behind him screeched the untiring saws. Outstretched at his feet lay Jim, indolently snapping at flies. The men of the village were busy in the mills, the women in their cottages, the children in their schools; and the stretch of rough shore gave Tug Blackstock the solitude which he loved.

Down through the last race of the rapids came a canoe paddle, and began revolving slowly in the eddies. Blackstock pointed it out to Jim, and sent him in after it. The dog swam for it gaily, grabbed it by the top so that it could trail at his side, and brought it to his master's feet. It was a good paddle, of clean bird's-eye maple and Melicite pattern, and Tug Blackstock wondered who could have been so careless as to lose it. Carelessness is a vice regarded with small leniency in the backwoods.

A few minutes later down the rapids came wallowing a water-logged birch-canoe. The other things which had started out with it, the cushions and blankets and bundles, had got themselves tangled in the rocks and left behind.

At sight of the wrecked canoe, Tug Blackstock rose to his feet. He began to suspect another of the tragedies of Dead Man's Run. But what river-man would come to grief in the Run at this stage of the water? Blackstock turned to an old dug-out which lay hauled up on the shore, ran it down into the water and paddled out to salvage the wrecked canoe. He towed it to shore, emptied it, and scrutinized it. He thought he knew every canoe on the river, but this one was a stranger to him. It had evidently been brought across the Portage from the east coast. Then he found, burnt into the inside of the gunwale near the bow, the letters J. C. M. W.

"The Englishman," he muttered. "He's let the canoe git away from him at the head of the Run, likely, when he's gone ashore. He'd never have tried to shoot the Run alone, an' him with no experience of rapids."

But he was uneasy. He decided that he would get his own canoe and pole up through the rapids, just to satisfy himself.

Tug Blackstock's canoe, a strong and swift "Fredericton" of polished canvas, built on the lines of a racing birch, was kept under cover in his wood shed at the end of the village street. He shouldered it, carrying it over his head with the mid bar across his shoulders, and bore it down to the water's edge. Then he went back and fetched his two canoe poles and his paddles.

Waving Jim into the bow, he was just about to push off when his narrowed eyes caught sight of something else rolling and threshing helplessly down the rapid. Only too well he saw what it was. His face pale with concern, he thrust the canoe violently up into the tail of the rapid, just in

time to catch the blindly sprawling shape before it could sink to the depths of the pool. Tenderly he lifted it out upon the shore. It was battered almost out of recognition, but he knew it.

"Poor devil! Poor devil!" he muttered sorrowfully. "He was a man all right, but he didn't understand rapids for shucks!"

Then he noticed that in the dead man's right hand was clutched a tiny child's jacket. He understood – he saw the whole scene, and he swore compassionately under his breath, as he unloosed the rigid fingers. Alive or dead, the little one must be found at once.

He called Jim sharply, and showed him the soaked red jacket. Jim sniffed at it, but the wearer's scent was long ago soaked out of it. He looked it over, and pawed it, wagging his tail doubtfully. He could see it was a small child's jacket, but what was he expected to do with it?

After a few moments, Tug Blackstock patted the jacket vigorously, and then waved his arm up-stream.

"Go, find him, Jim!" he ordered. Jim, hanging upon each word and gesture, comprehended instantly. He was to find the owner of the little jacket – a child – somewhere up the river. With a series of eager yelps – which meant that he would do all that living dog could do – he started up the shore, on the full run.

By this time the mill whistles had blown, the screaming of the saws had stopped, the men, powdered with yellow sawdust, were streaming out from the wide doors. They flocked down to the water.

In hurried words Blackstock explained the situation. Then he stepped once more into his canoe, snatched his long, steel-shod pole, and thrust his prow up into the wild current, leaving the dead man to the care of the coroner and the village authorities. Before he had battled his way more than a few hundred yards upwards through the raging smother, two more canoes, with expert polers standing poised in them like statues, had pushed out to follow him in his search.

The rest of the crowd picked up the body and bore it away reverently to the court-room, with sympathetic women weeping beside it.

Racing along the open edge of the river where it was possible, tearing fiercely through thicket and underbrush where rapids or rocks made the river's edge impassable, the great black dog panted onwards with the sweat dripping from jaws and tongue. Whenever he was forced away from the river, he would return to it at every fifty yards or so, and scan each rock, shoal or sand spit with keen, sagacious eyes. He had been told to search the river – that was the plain interpretation of the wet jacket and of Tug Blackstock's gesture – so he wasted no time upon the woods and the undergrowth.

At last he caught sight of the little fluffy-headed figure huddled upon the sand spit far across the river. He stopped, stared intently, and then burst into loud, ecstatic barkings as an announcement that his search had been successful. But the noise did not carry across the tumult of the ledge, and the little one slept on, exhausted by his terror and his grief.

It was not only the sleeping child that Jim saw. He saw the bear, and his barking broke into shrill yelps of alarm and appeal. He could not see that the sluice between the sand spit and the bank was an effective barrier, and he was frantic with anxiety lest the bear should attack the little one before he could come to the rescue.

His experienced eye told him in a moment that the river was impassable for him at this point. He dashed on up-stream for another couple of hundred yards, and then, where a breadth of comparatively slack water beneath a long ledge extended more than half-way across, he plunged in, undaunted by the clamour and the jumping, boiling foam.

Swimming mightily, he gained a point directly above the sand spit. Then, fighting every inch of the way to get across the terrific draft of the main current, he was swept downward at a tremendous speed. But he had carried out his plan. He gained the shallow side channel, splashed down it, and darted up the sand spit with a menacing growl at the bear across the sluice.

At the sound of that harsh growl close to his ears the little one woke up and raised his head. Seeing Jim, big and black and dripping, he thought it was the bear. With a piercing scream he once more hid his face in his hands, rigid with horror. Puzzled at this reception, Jim fell to licking his hands and his ears extravagantly, and whining and thrusting a coaxing wet nose under his arms.

At last the little fellow began to realize that these were not the actions of a foe. Timidly he lowered his hands from his face, and looked around. Why, there was the bear, on the other side of the water, tremendous and terrible, but just where he had been this ever so long. This creature that was making such a fuss over him was plainly a dog – a kind, good dog, who was fond of little boys.

With a sigh of inexpressible relief his terror slipped from him. He flung his arms about Jim's shaggy neck and buried his face in the wet fur. And Jim, his heart swelling with pride, stood up and barked furiously across at the bear.

Tug Blackstock, standing in the stern of his canoe, plied his pole with renewed effort. Reaching the spit he strode forward, snatched the child up in his arms, and passed his great hand tenderly through that wonderful shock of whitey-gold silken curls. His eyes were moist, but his voice was hearty and gay, as if this meeting were the most ordinary thing in the world.

"Hullo, Woolly Billy!" he cried. "What are you doin' here?"

"Daddy left me here," answered the child, his lip beginning to quiver. "Where's he gone to?"

"Oh," replied Tug Blackstock hurriedly, "yer dad was called away rather sudden, an' he sent me an' Jim, here, to look after you till he gits back. An' we'll do it, too, Woolly Billy; don't you fret."

"My name's George Harold Manners Watson," explained the child politely.

"But we'll just call you Woolly Billy for short," said Tug Blackstock.

II. THE BOOK AGENT AND THE BUCKSKIN BELT

I

A big-framed, jaunty man with black side-whiskers, a long black frock coat, and a square, flat case of shiny black leather strapped upon his back, stepped into the Corner Store at Brine's Rip Mills.

He said: "Hullo, boys! Hot day!" in a big voice that was intentionally hearty, ran his bulging eyes appraisingly over every one present, then took off his wide-brimmed felt hat and mopped his glistening forehead with a big red and white handkerchief. Receiving a more or less hospitable chorus of grunts and "hullos" in response, he seated himself on a keg of nails, removed the leather case from his back, and asked for ginger beer, which he drank noisily from the bottle.

"Name of Byles," said he at length, introducing himself with a sweeping nod. "Hot tramp in from Cribb's Ridge. Thirsty, you bet. Never drink nothing stronger'n ginger pop or soft cider. Have a round o' pop on me, boys. A1 pop this o' yours, mister. A dozen more bottles, please, for these gentlemen."

He looked around the circle with an air at once assured and persuasive. And the taciturn woodsmen, not wholly at ease under such sudden cordiality from a stranger, but too polite to rebuff him, muttered "Thank ye, kindly," or "Here's how," as they threw back their heads and poured the weak stuff down their gaunt and hairy throats.

It was a slack time at Brine's Rip, the mills having shut down that morning because the river was so low that there were no more logs running. The shrieking saws being silent for a little, there was nothing for the mill hands to do but loaf and smoke. The hot air was heavily scented with the smell of fresh sawdust mixed with the strong honey-perfume of the flowering buckwheat fields beyond the village. The buzzing of flies in the windows of the store was like a fine arabesque of sound against the ceaseless, muffled thunder of the rapids.

The dozen men gathered here at Zeb Smith's store – which was, in effect, the village club – found it hard to rouse themselves to a conversational effort in any way worthy the advances of the confident stranger. They all smoked a little harder than usual, and looked on with courteous but noncommittal interest while he proceeded to unstrap his shiny black leather case.

In his stiff and sombre garb, so unsuited to the backwoods trails, the stranger had much the look of one of those itinerant preachers who sometimes busy themselves with the cure of souls in the remoter backwoods settlements. But his eye and his address were rather those of a shrewd and pushing commercial traveller.

Tug Blackstock, the Deputy Sheriff of Nipsiwaska County, felt a vague antagonism toward him, chiefly on the ground that his speech and bearing did not seem to consort with his habiliments. He rather liked a man to look what he was or be what he looked, and he did not like black side whiskers and long hair. This antagonism, however, he felt to be unreasonable. The man had evidently had a long and tiring tramp, and was entitled to a somewhat friendlier reception than he was getting.

Swinging his long legs against the counter, on which he sat between a pile of printed calicoes and a box of bright pink fancy soap, Tug Blackstock reached behind him and possessed himself of a box of long, black cigars. Having selected one critically for himself, he proffered the box to the stranger.

"Have a weed?" said he cordially. "They ain't half bad."

But the stranger waved the box aside with an air at once grand and gracious.

"I never touch the weed, thank you kindly just the same," said he. "But I've nothing agin it. It goes agin my system, that's all. If it's all the same to you, I'll take a bite o' cheese an' a cracker 'stead o' the cigar."

"Sartain," agreed Blackstock, jumping down to fetch the edibles from behind the counter. Like most of the regular customers, he knew the store and its contents almost as well as Zeb Smith himself.

During the last few minutes an immense, rough-haired black dog had been sniffing the stranger over with suspicious minuteness. The stranger at first paid no attention whatever, though it was an ordeal that many might have shrunk from. At last, seeming to notice the animal for the first time, he recognized his presence by indifferently laying his hand upon his neck. Instead of instantly drawing off with a resentful growl, after his manner with strangers, the dog acknowledged the casual caress by a slight wag of the tail, and then, after a few moments, turned away amicably and lay down.

"If Jim finds him all right," thought Blackstock to himself, "ther' can't be *much* wrong with him, though I can't say I take to him myself." And he weighed off a much bigger piece of cheese than he had at first intended to offer, marking down his indebtedness on a slate which served the proprietor as a sort of day-book. The stranger fell to devouring it with an eagerness which showed that his lunch must have been of the lightest.

"Ye was sayin' as how ye'd jest come up from Cribb's Ridge?" put in a long-legged, heavy-shouldered man who was sprawling on a cracker box behind the door. He had short sandy hair, rapidly thinning, eyes of a cold grey, set rather close together, and a face that suggested a cross between a fox and a fish-hawk. He was somewhat conspicuous among his fellows by the trimness of his dress, his shirt being of dark blue flannel with a rolled-up collar and a scarlet knotted kerchief, while the rest of the mill hands wore collarless shirts of grey homespun, with no thought of neckerchiefs.

His trousers were of brown corduroy, and were held up by a broad belt of white dressed buckskin, elaborately decorated with Navajo designs in black and red. He stuck to this adornment tenaciously as a sort of inoffensive proclamation of the fact that he was not an ordinary backwoods mill hand, but a wanderer, one who had travelled far, and tried his wits at many ventures in the wilder West.

"Right you are," assented the stranger, brushing some white cracker crumbs out of his black whiskers.

"I was jest a-wonderin'," went on Hawker, giving a hitch to the elaborate belt and leaning forward a little to spit out through the doorway, "if ye've seed anything o' Jake Sanderson on the road."

The stranger, having his mouth full of cheese, did not answer for a moment.

"The boys are lookin' for him rather anxious," explained Blackstock with a grin. "He brings the leetle fat roll that pays their wages here at the mill, an' he's due sometime to-day."

"I seen him at Cribb's Ridge this morning," answered the stranger at last. "Said he'd hurt his foot, or strained his knee, or something, an' would have to come on a bit slow. He'll be along sometime to-night, I guess. Didn't seem to me to have much wrong with him. No, ye can't have none o' that cheese. Go 'way an' lay down," he added suddenly to the great black dog, who had returned to his side and laid his head on the stranger's knee.

With a disappointed air the dog obeyed.

"'Tain't often Jim's so civil to a stranger," muttered Blackstock to himself.

A little boy in a scarlet jacket, with round eyes of china blue, and an immense mop of curly, fluffy, silky hair so palely flaxen as to be almost white, came hopping and skipping into the store. He was greeted with friendly grins, while several voices drawled, "Hullo, Woolly Billy!" He beamed cheerfully upon the whole company, with a special gleam of intimate confidence for Tug

Blackstock and the big black dog. Then he stepped up to the stranger's knee, and stood staring with respectful admiration at those flowing jet-black side-whiskers.

The stranger in return looked with a cold curiosity at the child's singular hair. Neither children nor dogs had any particular appeal for him, but that hair was certainly queer.

"Most an albino, ain't he?" he suggested.

"No, he ain't," replied Tug Blackstock, curtly. The dog, detecting a note of resentment in his master's voice, got up and stood beside the child, and gazed about the circle with an air of anxious interrogation. Had any one been disagreeable to Woolly Billy? And if so, who?

But the little one was not in the least rebuffed by the stranger's unresponsiveness.

"What's that?" he inquired, patting admiringly the stranger's shiny leather case.

The stranger grew cordial to him at once.

"Ah, now ye're talkin'," said he enthusiastically, undoing the flap of the case. "It's a book, sonny. The greatest book, the most *interestin'* book, the most useful book – and next to the Bible the most high-toned, uplifting book that was ever written. Ye can't read yet, sonny, but this book has the loveliest pictures ye ever seen, and the greatest lot of 'em for the money."

He drew reverently forth from the case a large, fat volume, bound sumptuously in embossed sky-blue imitation leather, lavishly gilt, and opened it upon his knees with a spacious gesture.

"There," he continued proudly. "It's called 'Mother, Home, and Heaven!' Ain't that a title for ye? Don't it show ye right off the kind of book it is? With this book by ye, ye don't need any other book in the house at all, except maybe the almanack an' the Bible – an' this book has lots o' the best bits out of the Bible in it, scattered through among the receipts an' things to keep it all wholesome an' upliftin'.

"It'll tell ye such useful things as how to get a cork out of a bottle without breakin' the bottle, when ye haven't got a corkscrew, or what to do when the baby's got croup, and there ain't a doctor this side of Tourdulac. An' it'll tell ye how to live, so as when things happen that no medicines an' no doctors and no receipts – not even such great receipts as these here ones" (and he slapped his hand on the counter) "can help ye through – such as when a tree falls on to ye, or you trip and stumble on to the saws, or git drawn down under half-a-mile o' raft – then ye'll be ready to go right up aloft, an' no questions asked ye at the Great White Gate.

"An' it has po'try in it, too, reel *heart* po'try, such as'll take ye back to the time when ye was all white an' innocent o' sin at yer mother's knee, an' make ye wish ye was like that now. In fact, boys, this book I'm goin' to show ye, with your kind permission, is handier than a pocket in a shirt, an' at the same time the blessed fragrance of it is like a rose o' Sharon in the household. It's in three styles o' bindin', all *reel* handsome, but – "

"I want to look at another picture now," protested Woolly Billy. "I'm tired of this one of the angels sayin' their prayers."

His amazing shock of silver-gold curls was bent intently over the book in the stranger's lap. The woodsmen, on the other hand, kept on smoking with a far-off look, as if they heard not a word of the fluent harangue. They had a deep distrust and dread of this black-whiskered stranger, now that he stood revealed as the Man-Wanting-to-Sell-Something. The majority of them would not even glance in the direction of the gaudy book, lest by doing so they should find themselves involved in some expensive and complicated obligation.

The stranger responded to Woolly Billy's appeal by shutting the book firmly. "There's lots more pictures purtier than that one, sonny," said he. "But ye must ask yer dad to buy it fer ye. He won't regret it." And he passed the volume on to Hawker, who, having no dread of book-agents, began to turn over the leaves with a superior smile.

"Dad's gone away ever so far," answered Woolly Billy sadly. "It's an awfully pretty book." And he looked at Tug Blackstock appealingly.

"Look here, mister," drawled Blackstock. "I don't take much stock myself in those kind of books, an' moreover (not meanin' no offence to you), any man that's sellin' 'em has got to larn to do a sight o' lyin'. But as Woolly Billy here wants it so bad I'll take a copy, if 'tain't too dear. All the same, it's only fair to warn ye that ye'll not do much business in Brine's Rip, for there was a book agent here last year as got about ha'f the folks in the village to sign a crooked contract, and we was all stung bad. I'd advise ye to move on, an' not really tackle Brine's Rip fer another year or so. Now, what's the price?"

The stranger's face had fallen during this speech, but it brightened at the concluding question.

"Six dollars, four dollars, an' two dollars an' a half, accordin' to style of bindin'," he answered, bringing out a handful of leaflets and order forms and passing them round briskly. "An' ye don't need to pay more'n fifty cents down, an' sign this order, an' ye pay the balance in a month's time, when the books are delivered. I'll give ye my receipt for the fifty cents, an' ye jest fill in this order accordin' to the bindin' ye choose. Let me advise ye, as a friend, to take the six dollar one. It's the best value."

"Thanks jest the same," said Blackstock drily, pulling out his wallet, "but I guess Woolly Billy'd jest as soon have the two-fifty one. An' I'll pay ye the cash right now. No signin' orders fer me. Here's my name an' address."

"Right ye are," agreed the stranger cordially, pocketing the money and signing the receipt. "Cash payments for me every time, if I could have *my* way. Now, if some o' you other gentlemen will follow Mr. Blackstock's fine example, ye'll never regret it – an' neither will I."

"Come on, Woolly Billy. Come on, Jim," said Blackstock, stepping out into the street with the child and the dog at his heels. "We'll be gittin' along home, an' leave this gentleman to argy with the boys."

II

Jake Sanderson, with the pay for the mill-hands, did not arrive that night, nor yet the following morning. Along toward noon, however, there arrived a breathless stripling, white-faced and wild-eyed, with news of him. The boy was young Stephens, son of Andy Stephens, the game-warden. He and his father, coming up from Cribb's Ridge, had found the body of Sanderson lying half in a pool beside the road, covered with blood. Near at hand lay the bag, empty, slashed open with a bloody knife. Stephens had sent his boy on into the Settlement for help, while he himself had remained by the body, guarding it lest some possible clue should be interfered with.

Swift as a grass fire, the shocking news spread through the village. An excited crowd gathered in front of the store, every one talking at once, trying to question young Stephens. The Sheriff was away, down at Fredericton for a holiday from his arduous duties. But nobody lamented his absence. It was his deputy they all turned to in such an emergency.

"Where's Tug Blackstock?" demanded half a dozen awed voices. And, as if in answer, the tall, lean figure of the Deputy Sheriff of Nipsiwaska County came striding in haste up the sawdusty road, with the big, black dog crowding eagerly upon his heels.

The clamour of the crowd was hushed as Blackstock put a few questions, terse and pertinent, to the excited boy. The people of Nipsiwaska County in general had the profoundest confidence in their Deputy Sheriff. They believed that his shrewd brain and keen eye could find a clue to the most baffling of mysteries. Just now, however, his face was like a mask of marble, and his eyes, sunk back into his head, were like points of steel. The murdered man had been one of his best friends, a comrade and helper in many a hard enterprise.

"Come," said he to the lad, "we'll go an' see." And he started off down the road at that long loose stride of his, which was swifter than a trot and much less tiring.

"Hold on a minute, Tug," drawled a rasping nasal voice.

"What is it, Hawker?" demanded Blackstock, turning impatiently on his heel.

"Ye hain't asked nothin' yet about the Book Agent, Mister Byles, him as sold ye 'Mother, Home, an' Heaven.' Maybe *he* could give us some information. He *said* as how he'd had some talk with poor old Jake."

Blackstock's lips curled slightly. He had not read the voluble stranger as a likely highwayman in any circumstances, still less as one to try issues with a man like Jake Sanderson. But the crowd, eager to give tongue on any kind of a scent, and instinctively hostile to a book agent, seized greedily upon the suggestion.

"Where is he?" "Send for him." "Did anybody see him this mornin'?" "Rout him out!" "Fetch him along!" The babel of voices started afresh.

"He's cleared out," cried a woman's shrill voice. It was the voice of Mrs. Stukeley, who kept the boarding-house. Every one else was silent to hear what she had to say.

"He quit my place jest about daylight this morning," continued the woman virulently. She had not liked the stranger's black whiskers, nor his ministerial garb, nor his efforts to get a subscription out of her, and she was therefore ready to believe him guilty without further proof. "He seemed in a powerful hurry to git away, sayin' as how the Archangel Gabriel himself couldn't do business in this town."

Seeing the effect her words produced, and that even the usually imperturbable and disdainful Deputy Sheriff was impressed by them, she could not refrain from embroidering her statement a little.

"Now ez I come to think of it," she went on, "I did notice as how he seemed kind of excited an' nervous like, so's he could hardly stop to finish his breakfus'. But he took time to make me knock half-a-dollar off his bill."

"Mac," said Blackstock sharply, turning to Red Angus MacDonald, the village constable, "you take two of the boys an' go after the Book Agent. Find him, an' fetch him back. But no funny business with him, mind you. We hain't got a spark of evidence agin him. We jest want him as a witness, mind."

The crowd's excitement was somewhat damped by this pronouncement, and Hawker's exasperating voice was heard to drawl:

"No *evidence*, hey? Ef that ain't *evidence*, him skinnin' out that way afore sun-up, I'd like to know what is!"

But to this and similar comments Tug Blackstock paid no heed whatever. He hurried on down the road toward the scene of the tragedy, his lean jaws working grimly upon a huge chew of tobacco, the big, black dog not now at his heels but trotting a little way ahead and casting from one side of the road to the other, nose to earth. The crowd came on behind, but Blackstock waved them back.

"I don't want none o' ye to come within fifty paces of me, afore I tell ye to," he announced with decision. "Keep well back, all of ye, or ye'll mess up the tracks."

But this proved a decree too hard to be enforced for any length of time.

When he arrived at the place where the game-warden kept watch beside the murdered man, Blackstock stood for a few moments in silence, looking down upon the body of his friend with stony face and brooding eyes. In spite of his grief, his practised observation took in the whole scene to the minutest detail, and photographed it upon his memory for reference.

The body lay with face and shoulder and one leg and arm in a deep, stagnant pool by the roadside. The head was covered with black, clotted blood from a knife-wound in the neck. Close by, in the middle of the road, lay a stout leather satchel, gaping open, and quite empty. Two small memorandum books, one shut and the other with white leaves fluttering, lay near the bag. Though the roadway at this point was dry and hard, it bore some signs of a struggle, and toward the edge of the water there were several little, dark, caked lumps of puddled dust.

Blackstock first examined the road minutely, all about the body, but the examination, even to such a practised eye as his, yielded little result. The ground was too hard and dusty to receive any legible trail, and, moreover, it had been carelessly over-trodden by the game-warden and his son. But whether he found anything of interest or not, Blackstock's grim, impassive face gave no sign.

At length he went over to the body, and lifted it gently. The coat and shirt were soaked with blood, and showed marks of a fierce struggle. Blackstock opened the shirt, and found the fatal wound, a knife-thrust which had been driven upwards between the ribs. He laid the body down again, and at the same time picked up a piece of paper, crumpled and blood-stained, which had lain beneath it. He spread it open, and for a moment his brows contracted as if in surprise and doubt. It was one of the order forms for "Mother, Home, and Heaven."

He folded it up and put it carefully between the leaves of the note-book which he always carried in his pocket.

Stephens, who was close beside him, had caught a glimpse of the paper, and recognized it.

"Say!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "I never thought o' *him*!"

But Blackstock only shook his head slowly, and called the big black dog, which had been waiting all this time in an attitude of keen expectancy, with mouth open and tail gently wagging.

"Take a good look at him, Jim," said Blackstock.

The dog sniffed the body all over, and then looked up at his master as if for further directions.

"An' now take a sniff at this." And he pointed to the rifled bag.

"What do you make of it?" he inquired when the dog had smelt it all over minutely.

Jim stood motionless, with ears and tail drooping, the picture of irresolution and bewilderment.

Blackstock took out again the paper which he had just put away, and offered it to the dog, who nosed it carefully, then looked at the dead body beside the pool, and growled softly.

"Seek him, Jim," said Blackstock.

At once the dog ran up again to the body, and back to the open book. Then he fell to circling about the bag, nose to earth, seeking to pick up the elusive trail.

At this point the crowd from the village, unable longer to restrain their eagerness, surged forward, led by Hawker, and closed in, effectually obliterating all trails. Jim growled angrily, showing his long white teeth, and drew back beside the body as if to guard it. Blackstock stood watching his action with a brooding scrutiny.

"What's that bit o' paper ye found under him, Tug?" demanded Hawker vehemently.

"None o' yer business, Sam," replied the deputy, putting the blood-stained paper back into his pocket.

"I seen what it was," shouted Hawker to the rest of the crowd. "It was one o' them there dokyments that the book agent had, up to the store. I always *said* as how 'twas him."

"We'll ketch him!" "We'll string him up!" yelled the crowd, starting back along the road at a run.

"Don't be sech fools!" shouted Blackstock. "Hold on! Come back I tell ye!"

But he might as well have shouted to a flock of wild geese on their clamorous voyage through the sky. Fired by Sam Hawker's exhortations, they were ready to lynch the black-whiskered stranger on sight.

Blackstock cursed them in a cold fury.

"I'll *hev* to go after them, Andy," said he, "or there'll be trouble when they find that there book agent."

"Better give 'em their head, Tug," protested the warden. "Guess he done it all right. He'll git no more'n's good for him."

"*Maybe* he did it, an' then agin, maybe he didn't," retorted the Deputy, "an' anyways, they're just plumb looney now. You stay here, an' I'll follow them up. Send Bob back to the Ridge to fetch the coroner."

He turned and started on the run in pursuit of the shouting crowd, whistling at the same time for the dog to follow him. But to his surprise Jim did not obey instantly. He was very busy digging under a big whitish stone at the other side of the pool. Blackstock halted.

"Jim," he commanded angrily, "git out o' that! What d'ye mean by foolin' about after woodchucks a time like this? Come here!"

Jim lifted his head, his muzzle and paws loaded with fresh earth, and gazed at his master for a moment. Then, with evident reluctance, he obeyed. But he kept looking back over his shoulder at the big white stone, as if he hated to leave it.

"There's a lot o' ordinary pup left in that there dawg yet," explained Blackstock apologetically to the game-warden.

"There ain't a dawg ever lived that wouldn't want to dig out a woodchuck," answered Stephens.

III

The black-whiskered stranger had been overtaken by his pursuers about ten miles beyond Brine's Rip, sleeping away the heat of the day under a spreading birch tree a few paces off the road. He was sleeping soundly – too soundly indeed, as thought the experienced constable, for a man with murder on his soul.

But when he was roughly aroused and seized, he seemed so terrified that his captors were all the more convinced of his guilt. He made no resistance as he was being hurried along the road, only clinging firmly to his black leather case, and glancing with wild eyes from side to side as if nerving himself to a desperate dash for liberty.

When he had gathered, however, a notion of what he was wanted for, to the astonishment of his captors, his terror seemed to subside – a fact which the constable noted narrowly. He steadied his voice enough to ask several questions about the murder – questions to which reply was curtly refused. Then he walked on in a stolid silence, the ruddy colour gradually returning to his face.

A couple of miles before reaching Brine's Rip, the second search party came in sight, the Deputy Sheriff at the head of it and the shaggy black form of Jim close at his heels. With a savage curse Hawker sprang forward, and about half the party with him, as if to snatch the prisoner from his captors and take instant vengeance upon him.

But Blackstock was too quick for them. The swiftest sprinter in the county, he got to the other party ahead of the mob and whipped around to face them, with one hand on the big revolver at his hip and Jim showing his teeth beside him. The constable and his party, hugely astonished, but confident that Blackstock's side was the right one to be on, closed protectingly around the prisoner, whose eyes now almost bulged from his head.

"You keep right back, boys," commanded the Deputy in a voice of steel. "The law will look after this here prisoner, if he's the guilty one."

"Fur as we kin see, there ain't no 'if' about it," shouted Hawker, almost frothing at the mouth. "That's the man as done it, an' we're agoin' to string 'im up fer it right now, for fear he might git off some way atween the jedges an' the lawyers. You keep out of it now, Tug."

About half the crowd surged forward with Hawker in front. Up came Blackstock's gun.

"Ye know me, boys," said he. "Keep back."

They kept back. They all *fell* back, indeed, some paces, except Hawker, who held his ground, half crouching, his lips distorted in a snarl of rage.

"Aw now, quit it, Sam," urged one of his followers. "'Tain't worth it. An' Tug's right, anyways. The law's good enough, with Tug to the back of it." And putting forth a long arm he dragged Hawker back into the crowd.

"Put away yer gun, Tug," expostulated another. "Seein's ye feel that way about it, we won't interfere."

Blackstock stuck the revolver back into his belt with a grin.

"Glad ye've come back to yer senses, boys," said he, perceiving that the crisis was over. "But keep an eye on Hawker for a bit yet. Seems to 'ave gone clean off his head."

"Don't fret, Tug. We'll look after him," agreed several of his comrades from the mill, laying firmly persuasive hands upon the excited man, who cursed them for cowards till they began to chaff him roughly.

"What's makin' you so sore, Sam?" demanded one. "Did the book agent try to make up to Sis Hopkins?"

"No, it's Tug that Sis is making eyes at now," suggested another. "That's what's puttin' Sam so off his nut."

"Leave the lady's name out of it, boys," interrupted Blackstock, in a tone that carried conviction.

"Quit that jaw now, Sam," interposed another, changing the subject, "an' tell us what ye've done with that fancy belt o' yourn 'at ye're so proud of. We hain't never seen ye without it afore."

"That's so," chimed in the constable. "That accounts for his foolishness. Sam *ain't* himself without that fancy belt."

Hawker stopped his cursing and pulled himself together with an effort, as if only now realizing that his followers had gone over completely to the side of the law and Tug Blackstock.

"Busted the buckle," he explained quickly. "Mend it when I git time."

"Now, boys," said Blackstock presently, "we'll git right back along to where poor Jake's still layin', and there we'll ask this here stranger what *he* knows about it. It's there, if anywheres, where we're most likely to git some light on the subject. I've sent over to the Ridge fer the coroner, an' poor Jake can't be moved till he comes."

The book agent, his confidence apparently restored by the attitude of Blackstock, now let loose a torrent of eloquence to explain how glad he would be to tell all he knew, and how sorry he was that he knew nothing, having merely had a brief conversation with poor Mr. Sanderson on the morning of the previous day.

"Ye'll hev lots o' time to tell us all that when we're askin' ye," answered Blackstock. "Now, take my advice an' keep yer mouth shet."

As Blackstock was speaking, Jim slipped in alongside the prisoner and rubbed against him with a friendly wag of the tail as if to say:

"Sorry to see you in such a hole, old chap."

Some of the men laughed, and one who was more or less a friend of Hawker's, remarked sarcastically:

"Jim don't seem quite so discriminatin' as usual, Tug."

"Oh, I don't know," replied the Deputy drily, noting the dog's attitude with evident interest. "Time will show. Ye must remember a man ain't *necessarily* a murderer jest because he wears black side-lights an' tries to sell ye a book that ain't no good."

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