

WINDS OF CHANCE

By Rex Beach

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THE STORY THUS FAR

Pierre Phillips, at Sheep Camp in the Yukon country, where he had come to join the mad rush of miners in quest of gold, had been wrongly accused of stealing provisions. At a mob meeting of miners he is brought to trial along with Jim and Joe McCaskey. The McCaskey brothers shift the guilt to him and despite all that he had done to clear himself, the friends, Tolson Doret and Countess Couffaine, cannot do the mob in bent on hanging him.

In a fight with Jim McCaskey, who has insulted the Countess with whom Phillips has become a fond attachment, it is discovered that the McCaskeys are the guilty ones. At the pitch of excitement Jim McCaskey escapes and someone in the mob shoots him dead.

CHAPTER V. (Continued)

At the first stroke of the descending whip a howl went up—a merciless howl, a howl of fierce exultation. Joe McCaskey rocked forward upon the balls of his feet; his frame was racked by a spasm of agony; he strained at his thighs until his shoulder muscles swelled. The flesh of his back knotted and withered; livid streaks leaped out upon it, then turned crimson and began to trickle blood.

"One!" roared the mob.

The wielder of the scourge swung his weapon again; again the leather strips wrapped around the victim's ribs and laid open their defenseless covering.

"Two!"

McCaskey lunged forward, then strained backward; the test-frame cracked as he pulled at it. His head was drawn far back between his shoulders his face was convulsed, and his gums were bared in a skyward grin. If he uttered any sound it was in the uproar.

"Three!"

It was a frightful punishment. The man's flesh was being stripped from his bones.

"Four!"

"Five!"

The count went on monotonously, for the fellow with the whip swung slowly, getting his whole strength behind every blow. When it had climbed to eight the prisoner's body was dripping blood, his trousers-band was sodden with it. When it had reached ten he hung suspended by his wrists and only a fierce involuntary muscular reaction answered the excess of the nine lashes.

Forty stripes had been voted in the penalty, but Tolson Doret vaulted to the platform, seized the upraised whip, and tore it from the executioner's hand. He turned upon the crowd a countenance white with fury and disgust.

"Enough!" he shouted. "By God, you keep him next! If you hurt 'em somebody, 'em me; dish feller is mo' dead!" He strode to the post and with a slash of his hunting-knife cut McCaskey down.

This action was greeted with a angry yell of protest; there was a

rush toward the platform, but Phillips was joined by the leader of the posse, who scrambled through the press and raised himself in opposition to the addresses. The old man was likewise satiated with this torture; his face was wet with sweat; beneath his drooping gray mustache his teeth were set.

"Back up, you hyenas!" he cried shrilly. "The show is over. The man took his medicine and he took it like a man. He's had enough."

"Gimme the whip. I'll finish the job," some one shouted.

The former speaker bent forward alacritous with defiance.

"You try it?" he spat out. "You touch that whip, and by God, I'll kill you!" He bent point to this threat by drawing and cocking his six-shooter. "If you men ain't had enough blood for one day, I'll let a little more for you!" His words ended in a torrent of profanity, "climb aboard!" he shrieked shrilly.

Doret spoke to him shortly. "Dese men ain't gain' nosh no trouble, nosh." With that he turned his back and, heedless of the clamor, began to minister to the bleeding man. He had provided with a bottle of lotion, doubtless some antiseptic, snatched from the canvas drug-store down the street, and with this he wet a handkerchief; then he washed McCaskey's lacerated back. A member of the committee joined him in his work of mercy; soon others came to their assistance, and gradually the crowd began breaking up. Some one handed the sufferer a drink of whiskey, which revived him considerably, and by the time he was ready to receive his upper garments he was to some extent master of himself.

Joe McCaskey accepted these attentions without a word of thanks without a sign of gratitude. He appeared to be numbed, paralyzed by the nervous shock he had undergone, and yet he was not paralyzed, for his eyes were intensely alive. They were wild, baleful; his roving glance was like poison to the men it fell upon.

"You're due to leave camp," he was told, "and you're going to take the first boat from Dyea. Is there anything you want to say, anything you want to do?"

"I want something to eat," Joe answered hoarsely. "I'm hungry." These were the first words he had uttered; they met with astonishment; nevertheless he was led to the nearest restaurant. Surrounded by a silent, curious group, he crowded over the board counter and wolfed a ravenous meal.

When he had finished he rose, turned and stared questioningly at the crowd of hotel guests; his eyes still glittering with that basilisk glare of hatred and defiance. There was something huge, disconcerting, about the man. Not once had he appealed for mercy; not once had he complained; not once had he asked about his brother; he showed neither curiosity nor concern over Jim's fate, and now he betrayed the utmost indifference to his own. He merely shifted that venomous stare from one face to another as if indelibly to photograph each and every one of them upon his mind.

But he citizens of Sheep Camp were not done with him yet. His hands were again bound, this time behind him; a blanket roll was roped upon his shoulders, upon his breast was hung a stinging placard which read:

"I am a thief! Sit on me and send me along."

Thus decorated, he met his crawling in dignity. Extending from the steps of the restaurant far down the street twin rows of men had formed, and this gauntlet Joe McCaskey was forced to run. He bore his ordeal as he had borne the other. Men jeered at him, they flung handfuls of wet moss at him, they spat upon him, some even struck him, bound as he was. Sickened at the sight, Pierre Phillips witnessed the final chapter of this tragedy into which the winds of chance had blown him. For one instant only did his eyes meet those of his former tenant, but during that brief glance the latter made plain his unshy hatred. McCaskey's gaze intensified, his upper lip drew back in a grimace similar to that which he had lifted to the sky when agony ran through his veins like fire; he seemed to concentrate the last ounce of his soul's energy in the meeting of some wordless message. Hellish fury, a threat too baneful, too ominous for expression dwelt in that stare; then a splutter of mire struck him in the face and blotted it out.

When the last jeer had died away, when the figure of Joe McCaskey had disappeared into the twilight, Phillips drew a deep breath.

What a day this has been, what a tumult he had lived through, what an experience he had undergone!

This was an adventure! He had lived, he had made an enemy. Life had come his way, and the consciousness of that fact caused him to tangle. This would be something to talk about; what would the folks back home say to this? And the Countess—that wonderful woman of ice and fire! That super-woman, whose wit swayed the minds of men, whose will was quicker than light. Well, she had saved him, saved his good name, if not his neck, and his life was hers. Who was she? What mission brought her here? What hurry crowded on her heels? What idle chance had flung them into each other's arms? Or was it idle chance? Was there such a thing as chance, after all? Were not men's random fortunes all laid out in conformity with some intricate design? Must he wait, must he wait upon the breath of the North, as were these other human atoms which had been borne thither from the farthest quarters of the earth; but when that dust had settled would it not arrange itself into patterns mapped out long before the hour of birth or long before? Somehow he believed that such would be the case.

As for the Countess, his way was hers, her way was his; he could not bear to think of losing her. She was big, she was great, she drew him by the spell of some strange magic.

The peppery old man who, with Doret's help, had defied the mob's meeting approached him to inquire: "Say why didn't old Tom come back with you from Linderman?" "Old Tom?" "Sure! Old Tom Linton. We're partners. I'm Jerry Quirk." "He was tired out." "Tired!" Mr. Quirk snorted derisively. "What tired him? He can't tote enough grub to satisfy his own hunger. Me, I'm doubled-trippin'—relyin' our stuff to the Summit and breakin' my back at it. I can't make him understand we'd ought to keep the outfit together; he's got it scattered like a mad woman's hair. But old Tom in the sack and yellow lean; he's onery, like all old men. I try to humor him, but—there's a limit!" The speaker looked Pierre over sidelongly. "You said you was packin' for gages. Well, old Tom ain't say help to me. You look arround. Maybe I could hire you."

Phillips shook his head. "I don't want work just now." said he. "I'm going to Dyea in the morning."

Jim McCaskey was buried where he had fallen, and there beside the trail, so that all who passed might read and ponder, the men of Sheep Camp raised a board with this inscription:

"Here lies the body of a thief."
(To Be Continued)

entered into by the United States forestry service and John G. Heinrich, local capitalist and owner of the Great Southern railroad, was announced yesterday.

Heinrich recently was granted an extension of time in which to make a showing as to his financial ability to handle the sale which involves approximately 250,000,000 feet of pine timber south of Dyea.

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