

CHANCE

by Rex Beach

Published by Arrangement with First National Pictures, Inc., and Frank Lloyd Productions, Inc.

CHAPTER XXVII. (Continued)

He pushed open the door, and a moment later there came the sound of rattling wood as he shouldered his way into the dark cabin, regardless of lock and bar. Rouletta was close behind him when he struck a match and held it to a candle which he discovered fixed in its own wall beside the window.

Curiously the interlopers surveyed the unfamiliar premises. Rouletta spoke first, with suppressed excitement:

"You were right. And they left in a hurry, too."

"Sure, Heddin' gone, an'—doy got plenty heddin' on Hunker. Here dey mak' grub-pack, see?" "Pol-ton ran his finger through white dust of flour which lay thick upon the table. Striding to the stove, he laid his hand upon it, he lifted the lid and felt of the ashes within. "Dey left 'bout five hour ago. Wal, dat's long start. I guess melle dey safe enough."

"Don't say that," Rouletta implored. "Hunk can overtake them. He's a famous traveler."

"I dunno. Dey got good team."

"He must catch them! Why, he has ninety miles to do it in! He must, 'Pol-ton, he must! Of course this is evidence, but it isn't proof. Remember, 'Pierce' talked wildly. People are prejudiced against him and—you know the police. They get an suspicion, and circumstances are certainly strong. Poor boy! If these men get away—who knows what may happen to him? I tell you his very life may be in danger, for the law is an awful thing!—I've always been afraid of it. So was father, to his dying day. We must send Rock flying. Yes, and without a moment's delay."

"You still got deep feelin' for dat feller?" "Pol-ton inquired, gravely. The quick look of anguish, the frank nod of assent that he received, were enough. "Blen!" he said slowly. "I mak' satisfy, dat's all. I never see you so scare' as dis."

"You know how I feel," Rouletta said; then, more earnestly: "Why do you need to make sure? Do you think I've changed?" She hesitated for an instant; then came a faint pucker of apprehension between her brows; into her eyes crept a look of wonder which changed to astonishment, then to incredulous fright. "Oh—!" she exclaimed. She raised a faltering hand to her lips as if to stay a further betrayal of the knowledge that had suddenly come to her. "Oh, 'Pol-ton, my dear! My brother!"

The man smiled painfully as he met her shocked gaze. "I'm comin' feller, ma' sœur; always dreamin' de mos' foolish thing—doy pay no 'tention."

"I am—I always will be that—your sister. Have I made you unhappy?"

Vigorously he shook his head; his face slowly cleared. "No, no, in de life one thing is give me happiness—one thing alone—an' hat be bring you joy. Now come. De grose growin' on one foot."

"Together and in silence they hurried back as they had come; then, on the plea that he could make better time alone, 'Pol-ton left his companion and headed for the Barracks."

Rouletta let him go without protest; her heart was heavier than lead; she could find no words what ever. A new tragedy, it seemed, had risen to face her, for she realized now that she had hurt the man who loved her best of all. That certainty filled her with such regret, such a feeling of guilt, that she could not bear to think of it. A very poignant sense of pain troubled her as she turned into the Hlatto, and as a consequence the chatter of the place grated upon her sensibilities; she felt a miserable, sick desire to shut her ears to this sound of laughter which was like a sharp application for the death-blow she had dealt. Yes, she had dealt a death-blow, and to one most dear. But how could she have known? How could she have foreseen such a wretched complication as this? Who would have dreamed that gay, careless laughing 'Pol-ton had been like other men? Rouletta felt the desire to bend her head and release those scalding tears that trembled on her lashes.

Lieutenant Rock was preparing for bed when 'Pol-ton, after some little difficulty, forced his way in upon him. The officer listened to his caller's recital, and even before it was finished he had begun to dress himself in his trail clothes. "Courteau confused, eh? And the McCaskeys have disappeared—taken French leave, say? That changes de look of things, for a fact. Of course they may have merely gone back to Hunker."

"In de middle of snow-storm? De tam de night? No. Dey mak' 'em run for de line an' it's goin' tak' fas' team for pull 'em down."

"Well, I've got the best dogs in town."

Rock's caller smiled. "M'sing, doy goin' travel some it dey keep in sight of me?"

"You?" Rock straightened himself. "Will you go alone? Jove! I'd like that!" he cried, heartily. "I've heard you own a lively bunch of mutts."

"I give you two of 'em on travel. Better you dress light an' burkle up dat belt, for I got reason to tin' out who keel Courteau. I ain't goin' sleep no more till I know."

The officer smiled as he declared: "That suits me exactly. We may not catch them, but—hey! I know they've been in a race before they thump their noses at us from across de boundary. Now see how fast you can harness up."

It was considerably after midnight when 'Pol-ton swung his long-team into the lighted space in front of the Hlatto. Nevertheless, many people were about, for Dawson was a city of sleep-walkers. The sight of a racing team equipped for

ing at one another's throats. Meanwhile, caution doors were opening; the street was filling; dance-hall girls, while aproned bartenders, bicycled pedestrians, night-owls—all the queerly assorted devotees of Dawson's vivid and rollicking nocturnal life hastened thither; even the second-story windows framed heads, for this clamor put stimulus to flight without delay.

The wind was no longer strong, and already a clearing sky was evidenced by an occasional twinkling star; nevertheless, it was bitterly cold and those who were not heavily clad were forced to stamp their feet and to whip their arms in order to keep their blood in motion.

Nothing is more exciting, more ominous, than a man-hunt; doubly so when the hunt is for a man whose preparations for which went forward in the dead of night. Dawson had seen the start of more than one race for the boundary and had awaited the outcome with breathless interest. Most of the fugitives overtaken had walked back to town, spent, fagged, frost-bitten, but there were some who had returned on their backs, wrapped in robes or canvas and offering no testimony to the speed and relentless efficiency of the men from the Barracks. Of that small blacked corps Lieutenant Rock was by long odds the favorite. Now, therefore, he was the center of attention, and wagers were laid that he would catch the men, however rapidly they traveled, however great their start. Only a few old-timers—"sour doughs"—from the distant reaches of the Yukon—"Pol-ton" foret, but those few drew close to him and gave the lieutenant

ant little notice. This French Canadian they regarded as the most tireless traveler in all the North; about him, therefore, they assembled, and to him they addressed their questions and offered their advice.

Rouletta was slow in leaving; for some time she stood harkening to the swift dimmings of those tinkling sleigh-bells, staring into the night as if to fix in her mind's eye the picture of what she had just seen, the picture of a mighty man riding the rail of a plunging basket sled. In spite of the biting cold he was stripped down; a thin drill parka sufficed to break the temper of the wind, light fur boots were upon his feet, the check pieces of his outer cap were tied above his crown. He had turned to wave at her and to shout a word of encouragement just before he vanished. That was like him, she told herself—eager to spare her even the pain of undue apprehension. The shock of her discovery of a hour ago was still too fresh in Rouletta's memory; it was still too new and too updating to proceed of orderly thought, yet there it stood, stark and dispiriting. This woodsman loved her, no longer as a sister, but as the one woman of his choice. As yet she could not reconcile herself to such a state of affairs; her attempts to do so filled her with mixed emotions. Poor 'Pol-ton! Why had this come to him? Rouletta's throat swelled; tears not of the wind or the cold stood in her eyes once again, and aching tenderness and pity welled up from her heart.

She became conscious finally that her body was growing numb, so she thrust herself. She had taken

but a step or two, however, when some movement in the shadows close at hand arrested her. Peering into the gloom, she discovered a figure. It was Laure.

The girl wore some sort of wrap, evidently snatched at random, but under it she was clad in her dance-hall finery, and she, too, was all but frozen.

Rouletta was about to move on when the other addressed her through teeth that clicked like castanets.

"I got here—late. It is true? Have they—gone after Joe and Frank?"

"Yes."

"What happened? I—I haven't heard. Don't they think—Pierce did it?"

"You know he didn't do it," Rouletta cried. "Neither did he steal Courteau's money."

"What do you mean, I know?"

"I know! Laure's voice was harsh, imperative. She clutched at the other girl; then, as Rouletta hesitated, she regained control of herself and ran on, in a tone bitterly resentful: "Oh, you'd like to get him out of it—save him for yourself—wouldn't you? But you can't. You can't have him. I won't let you. My God! Letty, he's the only thing I ever cared for! I never had even a dog or a cat or a canary of my own. Think a little bit of me."

Almost dazed by this impulsive accusation and appeal, Rouletta at length responded by a question, "Then who haven't you done something to clear him?"

Laure drew her flimsy wrap closer; she was shivering wretchedly. When she spoke her words were spilt from her lips as if by the tremors of her body. "I could

help. I would, but—you shan't have him. Nobody shall! I'd rather see him dead. I'd—No, no! I don't know what I'm saying. I'd sooner die than hurt him. I'd do my bit, only—McCaskey'd kill me. Say, will Rock get him, d'you think? I hear he gets his men every time. But Joe's different; he's not the ordinary kind; he's got the devil in him. Frank—he's a dog, but Joe'll fight. He'll kill—at the drop of the hat. So will Rock, I suppose. Maybe he'll kill them both, eh? Or maybe they'll kill him and get away. I don't care which way it goes—"

"Don't talk like that!" Rouletta exclaimed.

"I mean it," Laure ran on, crazily. "Yes, Joe'd kill anybody that stood in his way or double-crossed him. I guess I know. Why, he told me so himself! And Courteau knew it, perfectly well—the poor fool—but look at him now. He got his, didn't he?"

Rouletta laid a cold hand upon the shivering, distracted creature before her. Sternly she said: "I believe you know who committed that murder. You act as if you did."

"I'm a good guesser, but—I can keep my mouth shut. I know when I'm well off. That's more than the 'Count' knew."

"And you probably know something about his robbery, too. I mean that gold-sack—"

Laure cast off the hand that rested upon her; she looked up quickly. "If I did, d'you think I'd tell you? Well, hardly. But I don't. I don't know anything, except that—Pierce is a thief. He stole and gave me the money. He did that regularly, and that's more

than he'd do for you. You may as well know the truth. Caven-dish knows it. You think he's too good for me, don't you? Well, he isn't. And you're no better than I am, either, for that matter. You've got a nerve to put on airs. God! How I hate you and your superior ways."

"Never mind me. I want to know who killed Count Courteau."

"All right. Wait till Rock comes back and ask him."

(To be continued.)

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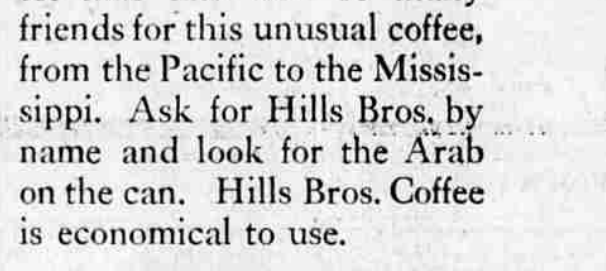
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