

THE KILLING OF BLACK DOE

By TRENTON CLURE

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PERHAPS Dunn should never have joined the Northwestern mounted police, for of all types of men who are out of their element there, the moody, introspective, unaggressive man comes easily first. But Dunn had had a hankering after the military life when he went out to Calgary two years before.

Now he was in for several years, and cursing his luck daily. What he liked best was the lonely patrols up in the Big Lake country.

He had met Marie Dufour there, the daughter of an old trapper who had retired, like his fur-bearing beasts, before the march of civilization. He had seen her three times during the past two years, and it had been understood that when he became a corporal he was to speak to her father.

But the coveted stripes would never be his so long as Sergeant Mitchell remained in the squadron. A hard-featured, service-bitten man, Mitchell made Dunn's life wretched. He inspected his uniform with an eagle eye that discovered the smallest speck or flaw, he hauled him before his officers on trivial charges; in short, he did his best to break Dunn or force him out of the service.

It was a long time before Dunn discovered that Mitchell had met Marie in the Big Lake country the year before and coveted her beauty. When Dunn understood this he privately resolved that some day he would even up the score between them. For the present he remained quietly in barracks, doing his duty and suffering under Mitchell's ill-treatment.

The quiet life was interrupted by one of those periodical excitements that descended upon the barracks. Black Doe had shot a police officer at Neverport, and was making for the Big Lake country. Mitchell was ordered to take two troopers and get him.

It was a journey of two hundred miles, in the slushy period of spring. But the police never postpones its vengeance when it can avoid it, and never abandons it.

Dunn could not imagine what it was that impelled Mitchell to select him along with Crum. Perhaps Mitchell wished to see the man he most hated in Marie's presence, so as to be more sure of his bearings. Whatever the motive, he selected Dunn, and he gazed at him all the way.

He found fault with him during the long and painful day marches, with his equipment, his care of his horse, his manner of riding. He detailed him on one-man fatigues in the daytime, and gave him all the difficult work. Dunn's rage smoldered, but the idea in the back of his mind that he would get even with Mitchell hardly assumed any tangible form.

In due course they reached the store at Big Lake. Their visit was a complete surprise. Black Doe had been seen in the neighborhood, and evidently was off his guard. Mitchell ascertained that he had made no purchase, without which it would be impossible for him to continue on his way northward into the barrens.

"We'll spend the night at Johnny Dufour's," he said to Crum, as the three rode away toward the shack.

Dunn's heart sank when he off-saddled. Marie was directly in the doorway to greet the visitors, and her eyes wandered with wonder from Dunn's face to Mitchell's.

"Take my horse to the stables!" commanded Mitchell curtly. "And, say! Take Crum's, too. And see that they're well groomed before you come in to supper."

Dunn went away obediently, riding his horse and leading the two others. Now he began to understand, he thought, the reason why Mitchell had selected him. He wanted to humiliate him in the eyes of the girl.

At supper Mitchell kept up a cross-fire of chaff, banter and spitefulness, directed at Dunn. Dunn's acquiescence seemed to enrage him. He would have welcomed a chance either for a brawl or for punishment for indiscipline; but Dunn only sat silently, watching Marie furtively, while the sergeant's eyes were alight with triumph. He felt that he had won, had shown Marie his superiority over Dunn.

They retired to their bunks. They were to start up the trail at day-break, on the quest for Black Doe. Dunn slept fitfully; he was thinking of Marie, and his heart was full of passionate resentment.

He was the first up, and went to groom the horses. As he came back to the shack, he heard Mitchell's voice and the girl's behind the open door. Mitchell had his arm round her waist and was drawing her toward him. Crum was nowhere in sight.

Then Dunn knew what he meant to do. He crept back very softly to the stable and loaded his rifle. He took it in his arms, carrying it as a mother might her first born, and approached the door again.

Mitchell held the girl in his arms now, and she was struggling as he tried to kiss her. Dunn, aiming deliberately, was conscious of the open door at the back of the shack, and a clump of dwarf fir about a hundred yards distant. Then he concentrated his attention upon Mitchell. Carefully

he drew a bead on him so as to avoid hitting the girl.

"Bang!" Mitchell leaped into the air, flung out his arms, and pitched head foremost. Dunn stepped into the shack. There was no need to look more than once at the dead face, or the blood oozing from the heart.

Marie ran to Dunn, sobbing wildly. "You did right, the beast!" she cried. "Come with me," said Dunn.

"They raced to the stables, and in a moment he had freed the horses, saddled them, and placed her on the sergeant's. In another moment they were galloping across the barrens. At the time Dunn was conscious of wondering where old Dufour and Crum were. But a moment later they heard shouts behind them. They galloped frantically forward, anywhere, so long as they could win free.

Crum was a man of resolution, and Dunn knew that he would take up the chase and never leave it. He reckoned on the fact that Crum's horse was the slowest of the three. The freshly falling snow would hide their tracks if they could win the country across the river bed, where a series of hummocks swelled into the Big Lake mountains.

Far behind him Dunn heard a shout. He turned and looked back as he rode. Crum was standing at the door of the stable, waving his arms to him.

A few minutes later Dunn, looking back, saw Crum mounted and in pursuit of them, a tiny figure upon a tiny horse. They rode madly for the dip toward the river.

"We must be careful," said Marie as they began the descent. "The rocks are dangerous."

Even as she spoke her horse tripped on a projecting bowlder, stumbled, and flung her face downward upon the hard bed of the frozen stream. Dunn leaped from his horse and knelt beside her. She had been stunned by the fall; she opened her eyes and looked about her half-conscious.

The horse scrambled to its feet, ran up the bank, and raced back toward the stable, followed by Dunn's horse. And Dunn, kneeling at Marie's side, knew that chance had settled his particular problem. And in the distance Crum came on inexorably.

Dunn shrugged his shoulders as one who has played his last card. He carried the girl up to the top of the bank and waited for Crum, who came galloping up on his horse. He flung himself to his feet, panting, like his steed.

"What's the matter with you to play this crazy trick after killing him?" he shouted.

Dunn smiled. "I guess you're right, Crum," he said. "Take the girl on your saddle; I'll walk. You can trust me."

Crum, staring at him in apparent perplexity, lifted Marie to the saddle before him. She had fallen into a swoon again. Then he rode slowly back toward the cabin, with Dunn walking a little distance in front of him.

He turned his horse away when near the stable, and went toward the little patch of stunted trees that had struck upon Dunn's attention at the moment when he raised his rifle. Dunn saw the motionless body of a man lying hidden among them. It was Black Doe.

"How did you get him, Dunn?" asked Crum, dismounting and turning the body over. "See! He had just fired. You were in the nick of time."

The dead man's fingers were clutched about the trigger; the rifle had been discharged; over his heart was a bullet wound.

Dunn, unable to speak, accompanied Crum back to the shack. Mitchell lay where he had fallen, and old Dufour was muttering in the corner, as if he did not understand.

"He got poor Mitchell a second before you fired," said Crum. "Over the heart, too. See!"

Dunn looked in horror now mixed with agitation. He saw that track of the bullet through the breast and out under the rib. The missile lay upon the floor beside the inert man. It was a battered .45, such as the Indians use. Dunn's bullet had been a .303. And it had been Black Doe whom he had killed, not Mitchell.

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