

North to Adventure

**by
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Chapter One - I Take a Dare

The most surprised person in the world the day I found I could become a Mounted Policeman was myself. It was this way, and I remember the whole circumstance as if it had been yesterday.

"This heat is hell," I announced to no one in particular, but Jim Garside took me up.

"The hell you say," said he, and the whole group of men around us laughed, for no good reason.

"I'm going to join the Mounties," I spoke again, again it was Jim who answered.

"Like hell you will."

And then we subsided into exhausted silence. It was midsummer, and the bunch of us lay in the poor shade of a chuck wagon that had been sent out from the ranch house with our meal. The ranch lay twenty miles outside of Saskatoon, and for a year I'd been one of the ranch hands there, and soon I'd be nineteen years of age.

There were waves of heat skimming over the wheat stubble, while I raised my head I could see the threshing outfit which had come up that morning. The threshers were stripped to the waist as we were, and the sweat was running in streams from their shoulders to soak into the belts that sagged around their middles. The black smoke was pouring from the threshing machine chimney, and the blast of the engine seemed to make hotter the hot spot on which we had lain down to rest in the noon hour.

"I'm going to join the Police," I announced again, and added: "I'll ask for a northern post and go get cool."

And again Jim Garside spoke:

"You'll get your bellyful of cold if you go up north, but first get into the Police, my fine bucko; you haven't a chance in a million. You're only five foot nine, my tow-headed, blue-eyed lad, and you only weigh a hundred and seventy-five, and you're not nineteen. Look at me, six feet two, two hundred and twenty-five in my socks, I could lay you cold with one hand tied behind me, and they've turned me down for the Police three times now. There're six hundred applications waiting and they take in thirty or forty a year."

Somehow the thing got to be an issue. My half-idle statement about joining the Mounted Police had hit Jim Garside on a raw place. He was a good fellow at heart, but that heat was bad, and I suppose I sounded cocky - me, four or five years younger than Jim, smaller and lighter, too, just as he said.

I jerked up and so did Jim. And the other men paid us more attention.

"Want me to take a dare?" I said to Jim.

"Shucks," said he, "listen to the young cock crow. Go get rid of your pinfeathers before you talk of police."

Well, that's how it was, and it made me mad. We went back to hauling that wheat under the blazing sun, and I thought how it would be to ride across the prairie astride one of those gleaming, satin-skinned, lean flanked horses, to have clean hands and a uniform on me, and a broad Stetson hat to shade the head, not a battered straw.

It wasn't that I didn't like ranch life. I had chosen it deliberately, and I'd stuck at it, off and on, for the last four years. But no man would ever dare me as to what I could do and couldn't do. That challenge that I couldn't get into the Police rankled. I made up my mind I'd show Jim Garside.

I suppose the whole thing may have harked back to childhood, more or less. First, the love of the open and ranch life came because my parents sent me, for my vacations from school in Montreal where we lived, to friends who lived on a chicken ranch in the Laurentian Mountains. Then, I didn't like school. It wasn't that I didn't like books; I loved to read, but I hated the confinement of the classroom. But I stuck that out too, and got my diploma earlier than most, and then I asked Dad to let me go to work instead of to the university. Since I was too young to enter college anyhow, Dad apprenticed me to engineering at the Montreal branch of Canadian Vickers, Ltd. I liked that, and many a time the experience gained there have stood me in good stead. But the apprenticeship came to an end. The workmen at Vickers went on strike. The apprentices, of

course, should not have been involved in such a thing, but the men demanded that we leave work too. A bunch of apprentices refused, myself among them, and there was a spot of trouble. In fact, that night when I reached my home it was easy to see I'd been roughed up quite a bit.

"No damn striker is going to tell me whether I'll work or not," I yelled at my father, the storm and temper of the recent encounter with the men still in me. "I'll work if I want to and when I want to, and nobody's going to dictate..."

I went on, but my Dad was a wise man. He let me have my say out, and then suggested that I go out West and try my hand at ranching. That's how I became a ranch hand, and that's how, wandering from Assiniboia to Saskatoon, with stops off here and there between, I was now sweltering on a wheat field in northern Saskatchewan.

If Jim Garside hadn't challenged me, I sometimes wonder whether I'd ever have applied to become a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman at all. Maybe I would have; maybe it's been fate, and maybe I had to have a bellyful of cold, and maybe I had to face starvation and death before I began to know how to live.

As it is, I went over to Regina during the next few days I had off from the farm, and I went up to the Mounted Police headquarters and filled out an application. If I put myself down as a full nineteen years, it made no difference to anyone in the end, but the officer demanded a birth certificate. I came back to the ranch, and at supper, seated across the table from Jim Garside, I said:

"Well, I did it."

"Did what?"

"Applied to get into the Police."

Jim choked on a piece of cheese he was eating with his pie, and when he had done laughing he shook his finger at me and jeered:

"Gentlemen" - he caught the attention of the other men at the table - "gentlemen, drink a toast to the Law!" He waved his cup of coffee: "Monty's applied to join the Police."

That laughter was a bit hard to take, but somehow I had a hunch and I said nothing. Let them laugh, I thought; I'll not speak of it again until I turn up here in uniform.

I said no more. Thirty days from then I'd had my summons from Police headquarters at Regina; I'd been up there, passed the medical and other examinations, and, as a duly enlisted man, was rationed out the red tunic, the blue riding breeches with their gold stripe on the side seams, the high brown leather riding boots, the Stetson hat that I wore at as jaunty an angle as regulations would let me, and I was in full training in the semi-military organization that Canada can boast about without a blush.

I never did go back to that ranch, but I did meet Jim Garside many times after. He saw me ride in the Calgary Stampede, and he saw me ride the same year in the Stampede at Saskatoon and the one at Regina, and he saw me win the push-ball trophy when I rode my horse, Jeff, which I'd trained to answer to the name of Guts, but only when I called him that; and Jim Garside was in the crowd - although I didn't see him - when, still riding Jeff, I was one of the escort detailed as guard of honour for Field Marshal Douglas Haig, Commander in Chief of the British Forces in the World War, when he made his official visit to Calgary.

I lost trace of Jim Garside when I was sent to one of the Police detachments up in the Mackenzie River district, and I confess I forgot about him as I began to realize there was more behind the Royal Mounted Police in power and plan and purpose than there seemed on the surface. But Jim was right in one thing. The Police service gave me my bellyful of cold.

I found there was a lot more to being in the Mounties than just to "get my man." As a matter of fact, I found that was not our official slogan. In the course of duty, I've never shot at anyone and nobody has ever shot at me; not that the marksmanship training is not most rigid - it is. Each Mounted Policeman must be a crack rifle shot, and he must be a crack revolver shot, equally as good with left hand as he is with the right, but the general rule is "no shooting," although we are never found on duty without our .45's. Fortunately for me, I'd never had to shoot to kill a human being.

The true and official motto of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is, "Maintiens le droit" (Maintain the Right), and that motto is stamped on the consciousness of the young enlisted man when he is in training and all through his service. Our duty lies in strange places, and a Munchausen never dreamed the half in fiction that we of the Police have lived in fact in the way of adventure and queer happenings. And yet in all my six years of service I was never to realize the true heart of real adventure until I spent thirty-six months with one comrade of the service in a new country north of the Arctic Circle on the edge of the unreckoned acreage of the island known as Baffin Land.

It may be a puzzle to many why a government should send Police to an apparently uninhabited wilderness. Admittedly, in such a land there is no crime, as we understand crime in the southern latitudes. But, heck! What duty is in the Northland is my story and in the feeble words at my command I shall try to bring you its grandeur and beauty that is beyond belief; its peace and horror, its calm and storm, its fear and near-stavation. I shall bring pictures of new frontiers for the pioneer and new stretches of territory waiting for civilized man to conquer. It's a long story of a frozen land which even now the elements are helping, for as the years advance the weather itself seems to be lessening in severity. But there is plenty of snow and wind and ice in my story, the story of this land of caribou and bear, the walrus and the seal. There are mountain and plateau, river and lake; there are rock and tundra and muskeg and primitive mankind; and there is always the Call, that something I spell with a capital C, the call to the man who has once been there, to come back. Maybe it's a magnetic pull. Maybe it's just that underneath all this thing called adventure there is that stern purpose.

Away beyond this Arctic Circle there is a vast acreage of apparently trackless desolation. Here a few intrepid traders of the Hudson's Bay Company have already penetrated far to the northward, and a few independent traders have gone that way too. Underneath that surface rock there is hidden the wealth of unimagined golconda. Our scientists know of it, the government knows of it, and so in the scheme of things the Flag goes forward, and carrying the Flag are the Mounted Police.

Up in regions that the city dweller cannot begin to understand, we Police begin to get the get untrodden places ready for the coming of the white man. We have first to learn the terrain, and that through living with and studying the ways of the natives of the region. We make friends with and of the Eskimo, that race of them which asks to be called Inuit. Then when the white man does come, by twos and threes, and later in greater numbers, we are ready to protect both white and native, but - too bad that it must be said - more often the native from the white than the other way round.

In Baffin Land of which I write the northeastern Eskimo, Enook or Inuit, is a friendly creature. Where I served, the native was entirely unspoiled by the white races. He hadn't come into contact with many of them, except a few traders and adventurous sailors, and my comrade and I were the two first Police to have lived among this particular tribe.

I found the Inuit had no word in his unwritten language with which to name policeman, but the clans and tribes with which we were associated evolved a

phonetic sound for us, which translated as nearly as possible into English means "servant of the people."

Well, this "servant of the people" and his comrade were destined to play a major part in the opening of one section of that north country, just as members of the Force were doing a like job at other detachment headquarters scattered over the Territories. In the North we were not mounted on horses, nor dressed in uniform per se, but were dressed in native furs and mounted on snowshoes; we were cracking those seventy-two foot dogwhips and driving teams of fifteen to thirty dogs to the team. We were chugging in motor boats or traveling under sail, and we found ourselves scudding before wind and tide in the native omiak, that very thing which was to bring me face to face with death by near-drowning and near-starvation. We were to slog, footsore and leg-weary, over miles of tundra and muskeg, shorn rock and spikes of ice; we were to rest in igloos and camp in skin tents, we were to be lost on ocean ice and to find a way out, and in the end we were to experience flying in planes five thousand feet above rock-capped foothills which were swept clean of snow only to have it piled high in drifts around the heights like the sand dunes of the Middle West, but packed firm and hard as the rockbed itself. I was to become known as "Kad-Lou-Nok, Ee-nook Ka-sak," or "White man who is almost an Eskimo."

There was not a minute of the time spent above the Arctic Circle which was not lived to the full, whether we were facing death, playing bridge, riding an iceberg, constructing a detachment home for ourselves, showing skill as architects, carpenters and painters, or as housekeepers in baking bread, cooking meals, darning and sewing or in setting a broken limb of a native. It all came in the day's work.

When I tell you that this experience of mine in the northeastern Arctic came to me as the result of a practical joke, I know it may be said that I am drawing altogether too long a bow; but so it is, and the telling of the joke must get a chapter to itself.