

North to Adventure

**by
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Chapter Two - The Victim of A Joke

Early in my career as a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police I had found a friend. He was Corporal Henry George Nichols, one of those buddies who come to a man once in a life-time. Corporal Nichols, commonly known as Nick, ex-Territorial of Kitchener's famous "Saturday Night Soldiers"; veteran of the Northwest Frontier of India; veteran of the relief of Allenby at Bagdad; who carried scars of Turkish shrapnel, medals from King George the Fifth, a pair of terrible fists and a keen nose for what he thought was a good practical joke. In short, he was my pal in the Mounties.

I was stationed at Edmonton after the Mackenzie River stretch, and had been away to visit friends in Saskatchewan while on short furlough. The day I hit Edmonton on my return was Dominion Election Day. Of course, semimilitary as we Police are in character, we are not biased in politics, nevertheless we take a lively interest in what goes on in the world around us, and enjoy and exercise our voting power as citizens. I stepped off the car at First and Jasper Avenues and walked over to pass the time of day with Mike at his newstand and at the same time purchase a paper to see the election results I had still an hour or two before I must report in at the Police headquarters across the river.

"I see you're slated for the North," said Mike, who always knew everything ahead of anyone else.

"I'm what?" I asked a bit astonished.

"The northeastern draft," said Mike. "It's in the paper, on the front page. I wonder what they're sending men in there for..."

But I never did reply to Mike, and I never did see the election headline of that newspaper, nor did I read the returns. Mike was right; I caught my own name in a paragraph that lay away down low on the front page, second column left - I shall never forget it. The headline read: "Police Draft for the Arctic; Two Men Go From Here."

I'm not easily rattled, but it was sort of like reading one's own premature death notice. I practically spelled out the whole story to myself. There was no mistake. I was about to go to the northern regions all right, according to this order now made public officially through the Canadian press. I had thought I might be sent up Mackenzie River way again, for I'd really liked it there, and the Superintendent had given me some commendation when I got south again. But the Mackenzie lay northwest and was comparatively civilized. The Arctic of the newspaper story was lying northeast, and was something else altogether. In the first place, service in the Northeast above the Arctic Circle is entirely voluntary, and a special type of man is chosen. It is rigorous service. How had my name been chosen at headquarters in Ottawa?

I studied the newspaper story further and in the last lines I found the "nigger". Corporal Henry George Nichols, RCMP was the second man from Edmonton headquarters who was ordered to the Barren Lands, and he with Constable Montague would travel to join the northern draft shortly: Corporal Nichols and Constable SR Montague - who was ME.

This was a jolt. I began to figure out how the thing had happened, and I guessed right the first time. I had been away on furlough; Nick had been at a loose end. The devil of nothing to do in free time caught him one evening; someone supplied him with the news that an Arctic draft was forming; someone else left a filled fountain pen and paper within his hand's reach. That was enough. Nick wrote two applications for Arctic service to Ottawa headquarters. He signed one Henry George Nichols, by the grace of God; he signed the other Sydney R Montague. Nick was thorough.

My deductions were right. Nick confessed the whole thing when he intercepted me as I turned into the barracks yard thirty minutes later.

"Hell, man!" he said. "You told me once that when you were a little tyke you told your Dad you wanted to go north to see Santa Claus, so I thought I'd take you to see him myself; funny old geezer, what? Nothing like making personal acquaintance with dear old Santa, it gets you in on the ground floor of the reindeer and chimney business. You start next week for Ottawa, but I'm going out on tonight's mail train; I've got a spot of leave coming first."

Nick left me and I went on to report my return to barracks to Superintendent Ritchie.

"See you in Baffin Land," yelled Nick, as he strode across the parade ground.

"See you in hell," said I, but didn't really mean it. Nick was a grand chap, even if he did have a twisted sense of humour at times.

I reported to Superintendent Ritchie as being back from leave. The Superintendent, an austere and thoughtful man, eyed me carefully. Then he turned to his desk and brought out a telegram. It was signed in the name of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Commissioner: Starnes, Ottawa, General Headquarters of the Force. The wire informed the Superintendent that "my" application for transfer had been approved, subject, of course, to my being able to pass through the required and intensive training which is always given for this special type of service. I was to proceed to Ottawa for further orders within the week.

No wonder Corporal Nichols had known all about it. I wondered how much the Superintendent knew or suspected, and I tried to keep my face expressionless as he talked to me, but my heart was thumping a bit. I didn't know whether I wanted this chance or not.

"Yes, sir."

The Superintendent folded the wire, but as he did so he spoke, and my heart leaped again:

"Montague, how would you like to reapply for service in the Mackenzie district? I need a man like you up there, and since you know the country already..."

There was something more than just a mere questioning look in Superintendent Ritchie's eyes. I know now that he had heard something of the joke being played upon me. After all, a man, even one who loved and lived his job as I did mine, does not drag thoughts of transfers and Arctic service along on a vacation. The Superintendent must have wondered how I could even have heard about an Arctic draft. There had been no whisper of the proposed development of this particular section of Baffin Land in the newspapers as far as I knew.

Who can tell what comes over a fellow when he gets into a tight place and there opens up a loophole of escape, yet he deliberately passes it by? I don't know.

I said: "If the Superintendent doesn't mind, I'll abide by the Commissioner's order."

The die was cast. I saluted and turned to the door, but the Superintendent put out his hand and shook mine. "Best of luck, lad," he said, and somehow-oh, well, I

was on my way to Baffin Land, or as good as on it; I was headed straight for that bellyful of cold Jim Garside had prophesied, and Jim didn't know the half of it. I'd heard plenty about service in the sub-Arctic. Only in 1920 there had been ten picked Mounties sent up to patrol in another section of the Barrens. Now of the ten there were four alive, and they were no longer Mounties; they had become physical wrecks. I knew a couple of them. They had told us boys of the bitter rigor of the country, the soul-killing loneliness that stunned a man into suicidal mania. They had experienced freezing, snow blindness and being lost on ice.

Yet those things always happen to other people. "It can't happen to me," is one of the slogans for carrying on in the face of all odds. I was really eager for more adventure, and, if the truth is to be told, a touch of glory. The first men going up there to the crest of the world take part in the making of history; we are making a new land, just the way those who followed the wheel tracks of the pioneers across the American prairie made a new land. We are developing and building, we are probing and delving into secrets of Nature which may become among the common things of daily life for our children's children's children.

In barracks and away from it I stepped around briskly those last few days of March that I was in Edmonton, watching its snows of winter breaking down into slush. It was warm for Edmonton at that time of year, where one can experience a tolerable forty or fifty below zero along in January of any year; not that it lasts many days at that, and besides, "You don't really feel it, the air's so still and clear." That's what the residents will tell you. That's the story about the weather of anyone's hometown anywhere, but I'll offer no alibis in weather for Baffin Land.

I looked at Edmonton with new eyes those few days too. It's a nice place; there are few nicer. From the Mounted Police barracks away on a bluff on the south side of the Saskatchewan River, I could look out on that winding stream which freezes over in winter. Then one can watch the men cutting ice chunks, big as small shacks, to be kept in the refrigerators for summer use. In summer time that river dances and sparkles and chuckles; in fall it goes a bit sullen and sluggish, and in late spring when the snows and ice melt it races in a tawny flood that stirs the blood of the spectator. One afternoon I rode the street car out to its limit on Jasper Avenue, that fabulous main street that is said to be forty miles long, with the steel rails laid on it part way, the closest ones there are to the north pole. And one day I watched an airplane loading to the gunnels with supplies for the Mackenzie. It was a novelty then, that plane, but even then it was taking the place of the sleds and dog teams that men in 'coon and bearskin coats used to be seen loading across the street from the big gray stone MacDonald Hotel.

Today the planes from Edmonton to the hinterland of the Northwest are common daily transportation. They fly out the little woman to have her baby in a modern scientifically equipped hospital instead of risking her life and that of the child in a drafty shack; and they fly the parson in to perform the Sunday service at the community church, to hear marriage oaths of young couples who will fly out for the honeymoon; or to say prayers over some old sourdough who has gone so modern and dad-burned civilized he dies without his boots on.

And now I was slated to go to a land where all of these things had yet to come; I was to see the other side of a continent. Maybe if I guessed what was to come I should not have been so light of heart. I thought I knew it all. One always does in the twenties. Yet I was not entirely ignorant of the North, at that. It was only a matter of months since I'd plowed my way over many a drift of snow on snowshoes, and I'd ridden icy foothills on the back of Guts. I knew the Athabasca patrol. What a river the Athabasca is, too, tumbling, tossing, shaking ice blocks between its banks like dice when the break-up comes in spring; dashing around bends and surging up against the ten-foot banks where stark silver trunks of trees stand like ghosts. They are dead trees left from the forest fires that have raged over the terrain, starting God alone knows how, and stopped - God alone knows how.

As I made my preparations for leaving Edmonton I thought of my experiences up at Fort Chippewyan, around the Coppermine region, and a Carajou and along the Frog, and the time I'd been with the Cold Lake patrols. I'd seen and talked with Eskimos, but they were northwestern natives and understood some English; besides they were different as chalk from cheese to the Baffin Land folk I was to come to know, to like and even to admire, for theirs is a wonderful and fantastic existence. Little did I dream that one day I should be a full member of an Eskimo tribe of the Baffin Land Barrens, and that I should wear the coat markings which among the Inuit mean "the man who is almost an Eskimo, a mighty hunter"; or those other decorations of my keeool-ee-tuk and muliks which mean "he who was lost on the drifting ice and returned again after many days."