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police experience Alan found himself ill at ease and uncertain of what he was running into. Though he could understand, on the assumption of Dave MacMillan's guilt, how the bandits knew just the right moves to make in this dimly known country, still he was utterly unable to explain how six absolute strangers could get into this country unseen. Who they were, where they had come from, how they had got in here unknown to everybody—the whole thing was uncanny. He hardly knew what to expect of them next.

Splashing back upon the launch, he told his men tersely: "They're not in sight yet, and I could see for twenty miles. We've got to meet up with them before they reach the Forks. They're making tracks, Ped, you've light to drive by now. We'll take our chances."

Twice more that morning, between Pedneault's reckless dashes, he hurried ashore and futilely searched ahead. Something had gone wrong. The patrol should be within sight of them. Estimating their speed and the speed of the pursuing launch, he knew the police craft should have overhauled them about eighty miles above the MacMillan trading post. He had come a hundred and twenty, and no sight of them yet. They had either dodged aside, or had done something to give them a big edge over what he thought possible.

It was afterward, when the waters of the Aloooska had given up their ghastly secret, that Joyce MacMillan listened to the accounts of several Yellowknife men and gazed upon certain grim evidence and pieced together the story of how those bandits were able to keep in the lead. But Alan knew nothing of that harrowing story now; he knew only that something had upset all his calculations.

Fifteen miles from the Aloooska Forks he went ashore a last time and climbed a squat tree. He had a clear view to the Forks. The glasses picked up a sight that set his heart pounding madly against his ribs.

Far ahead, three short miles from the Forks of the Aloooska, a pair of tiny black objects, like bugs crawling along a silver ribbon.

He jumped out of the tree, leaped down the slope.

Splashing aboard, he flung all caution to the winds. "Throw into it, Pedneault! We've got to beat them to the Forks. We'll close in on them in the launch. Got to! They'll hear us but they won't stop, won't fight, if they can make it there. Open her up! To h—l with rocks and mud bars now!"

His last words were drowned in the engine roar as Pedneault opened the launch. With the wind stinging his eyes and the spray lashing him, Alan clutched the painter to keep from being flung bodily overboard, and gave Pedneault what help he could.

The craft careened around the last Y of the Aloooska. A clear open stretch lay in front. Dashing the blinding spray from his eyes, Alan rose precariously to his feet, looked ahead; and his heart sank as the truth was borne in upon him.

Those canoes had beaten him to the Forks.

It was maddening, his defeat—doubly maddening for its close-

ness to a smashing triumph. He had come within five minutes of overhauling them in the launch, and then had missed, had missed by a mile that loomed gigantic as two hundred. They had beaten him. They had heard the thundering boat, had flung their whole strength into the race; and now were whipping on eastward along one or other of the Aloooska branches.

The launch would have to be abandoned at the Forks. He knew the police boat would be stranded or wrecked within half a mile if it attempted to go up either of those shallow streams. He would have to take to paddle canoes and split his party.

Unbeaten, he planned swiftly. The chances were ten to one that the bandits had darted up the left branch leading northeast into the Thal-Azzah. He decided quickly: "I'll follow that left branch. I'll take one canoe and two men. I'll take Bill with me; he's a red-haired devil in a fight, he's our best shot, he'll be dependable in whatever comes. But the third man—Ped or Larry?" Both splendid men, both experienced veterans of many a patrol.

He made up his mind: "I'll send Ped up the right branch with Burgoon and Whipple. Bill and Larry and I'll shoot up the left. We'll be the ones to do the business."

As the great Y of the Aloooska loomed up, he turned and gestured to Hardsock and Larry. Silently understanding, they crept back to the stern deck, unslashed the canoes and had them ready by the time that Pedneault, slowing down the launch, steered it in between two little willow islands at the Forks and stopped.

Alan ordered him: "Ped, take these two men and whip up the south branch. Larry and Bill and I'll cover the north. If you sight them, don't pitch into that pack. You'd be fighting six men single-handed. If they did happen to go that way, you drop back here to the Forks and wait for us. We'll be able to track them in that timber country. Let's pile out. They can't be over a mile and a half away."

Bill snarled: "H—l's blue blazes, Alan!—let's stick together. Us splitting this up like this, it's the d—dest fool-trick I ever heard of!"

"Shut up!" Alan snapped. "General's orders, not mine. Every d—d thing you say or do will be tattled to him." He tossed the launch anchor into the mud. "I said pile out. Let's be moving. He stepped down into a canoe, stood rifle between his knees, caught up a paddle.

Cursing beneath their breath, Bill and Larry clambered in with him.

The two canoes separated.

Alan's estimate that his quarry could not be more than a mile and a half in the lead, was true enough; but a stern chase is a long chase, and if those bandits were aching from exhaustion, they had the fear of death in their hearts to goad them on.

A whole hour, an hour of terrible labor, went by, and still no sight or sound of the bandits. With the responsibility of this patrol on him, with human lives, the lives of comrades, at stake, a fear gripped Alan that those bandits had taken the south branch of the Aloooska. If they

had, Frank Pedneault and those two raw recruits might run into an ambush; or Ped might attack them, reckless fellow that he was, practically lone-handed, and get killed.

The chase was entering the Thal-Azzah itself, that watery wilderness of lakes and labyrinthine channels and muskeg thousands of square miles in extent. Not far ahead the branch split into a dozen channels leading in every direction. Pursuit would end there. A few miles more, and those canoes would be swallowed up in the watery oblivion of the Thal-Azzah.

But then, as he skirled around a headland, his prophecy yesterday to Haskell, and his conviction, founded on long man-hunting experience, that those bandits would surely follow this left branch, were suddenly proved true to the letter. On ahead, a scant thousand yards, he caught one fleeting glimpse of two heavily laden canoes that carried six men.

Dipping faster, deeper, he and Bill and Larry paddled at a furious pace to come up within rifle range. The river was so winding that they could see only a few hundred yards in front. There was danger, a terrible danger, of running headlong into a blind ambush where all three of them would be killed outright and their canoes sunk before they even start to shoot back. Every stroke, every curve, every clump of flags they skimmed close past, was a deadly peril. They knew it, but they dared not slow up. They were taking their chances.

As they skirled out upon a shallow little lake fringed about with tall flags, Larry suddenly heaved back on his paddle.

"Lift out! Look! Alan, look over there!"

Alan looked where he pointed, at the north shore, at the wall of dense reeds. A path had been broken through the flags there; the reeds were parted, some of them trampled, their tops bent to either side.

It told the story to him. Hard-pressed, those men had whipped ashore to shake off pursuit; had lifted canoes to shoulder, and were trying to cut north and hit another channel.

Oblivious to ambush danger, they skimmed over to the tell-tale break in the flags and drove out upon the mud. Alan and Bill slung the canoe upon their shoulders; and with Larry in the lead, following the signs, they started at a lope back through the flags.

Within a few hundred yards they came to a little creek, a sluggish muskrat highway that led north. The bandits had taken to it. Too shallow for a canoe, they had had to wade. So recently had they passed, the water was still roiled from their boots.

The little creek took Alan's party a thousand yards north to a lake, a deep blue lake covering several acres; and there, within the Thal-Azzah itself, late in the afternoon, the long relentless chase came to its end.

Larry, a dozen steps in the lead, glimpsed the silvery sheen of water ahead; and stopping dead-short, motioned Bill and Alan to be cautious. They belied forward toward the lake edge where the flags were thin and they had clear view.

After several minutes of waiting, Larry pointed across the lake and stated quietly:

"You see that big patch of brownish flags over there, about thirty or forty yards back from the water? See that little run leading back into them? That's where our men are hiding. They're laying low along that little run. I just noticed a rat start up that run. He come back in a hurry. Then, there's a silent spot over there where I don't hear any bird or animal calls. And then some other signs. . . . He was silent for half a minute. Finally he whispered: 'I'll show you a sign. You see that pair of canvas-backs a-coming this way? They're flying low, making for this lake. Canvas-backs like blue water. Watch 'em close.'"

Skimming just over the flags, the pair of graceful ducks came

on; but just as they stopped beating and started the glide down upon the lake, they suddenly breasted high up in the air, exactly over the spot Larry had indicated. Veering away, they winged swiftly out of sight into the west.

Lying there in the reeds and bog, Alan studied the bandit covert and tried to plan. If all five of his men had been along with him, the outcome would have been swift and certain. He could have come at the bandits from either side, cut off any chance of escape, boxed them between two fires and deliberately shot them down. But he had split his party at the Aloooska Forks, as Haskell ordered. Now at the crucial hour here in the Thal-Azzah, Pedneault and those other two men, uselessly following that south branch, were a hundred and forty miles away.

He planned, rejected and planned again, and finally came to a decision.

"We've got to carry the fight to them, and we've got to keep them from getting away by that creek yonder. There's only one way we can do both those things. Bill and I are going to circle around them on foot and come at them from the other side. We'll get there somehow, even if we have to swim part way. With any luck at all we ought to get into a position where we can put two or three of them out of business at the very beginning, before they wake up to us. They won't fight if they can help it. Why should they take chances on some of them getting wounded or killed, if they don't have to? They'll try to whip back across this lake and dodge into that channel yonder. Now, Larry, you'll stay here to head that off. Keep out of sight yourself; have a couple or three extra magazines handy and wait till they get into the middle. When they get in good range, open up on them. Sink those canoes. We don't care about those men. Let them swim ashore and hide if they want to. On foot a man can't make ten miles a week in this muskrat country. With no tent, no shelter, the mosquitoes and flies would drive them crazy in less than a day, and they'd fall into our hands. If you understand now what's cut out for us, we'll be starting."

Both men nodded. Bill and Alan backed away with infinite caution, for one flushing waterfowl would raise all the others. Yard by cautious yard the two men slipped back into the rushes till they were a safe distance from the lake.

Then they began the long hard job of circling around the bandits.

Wet, muddy, tortured by insect pests, they pushed steadily on, mindful of coming twilight.

It took an hour and a half to make the wide careful circle and start coming in toward the bandits from the north. With the sun cut in two by the western horizon and the chill of twilight in the air, those six men would shortly be on the move. But Alan's hopes had risen again; it seemed that he indeed "had taken his luck along." The bandits did not know they were being stalked. In half an hour more, if luck held, he and Bill would be in position to open on them all unawares.

Dropping at last to hands and knees, the two of them crawled along through muck and water, keeping only their guns dry. They came up within a hundred yards of their quarry.

As he parted the reeds in front of his face Alan saw the tops of a clump sway suspiciously. A moment later he glimpsed the dim outline of a man standing up, stretching himself, sitting down again.

In actual sight now, those men who had killed Jimmy Montgomery! And only a pistol shot away! But to take them, . . . Alan cursed savagely at the thought of Pedneault and those two men a hundred and forty miles distant. As he remembered what Haskell said about the Law being behind his patrol, his lips curled in scorn at the scant expression. . . . "The

Law that's supposed to be back of us, I wonder where in h—l it is now! What does it mean to Bill and me now?" Here in this watery wilderness in the creeping twilight, he and Bill were going up against six men who had stood off fifty and who had murder charges hanging over their heads. And if they broke away, Larry single-handed would have to stand the whole brunt of stopping them.

At his gesture Bill slid cautiously up beside him. In whispers, Alan said to him: "Bill, we've got to get closer. We've got to get across this pond. Those muskrat houses out there are particularly good luck for us. By keeping down in the water, with these little reeds to help us, we can sneak from one house to the next. The last one isn't a dozen yards from those men. If we make it we'll have point-blank range and the best kind of cover to shoot from."

Taking off their hats and jackets, they wriggled carefully out of the tall flags, eased into the water and squirmed toward the first muskrat house, which stood up four feet above the surface and entirely hid their approach. Behind it they stopped a moment, chose their next one, and sank back into the water.

As they crouched down behind the third little dome of mud and reeds, a towering red-bearded man parted the flags they were staring at, bent and scooped up a hatful of water, took a swallow, threw the rest down with an oath at its vile taste; and then, shaking the water out of his hat, he disappeared again.

Alan's last secret doubt about these bandits being utter strangers in the country was dispelled now. He had had a clear view of this huge red-bearded leader; he could say positively, as Ashmun and all the passengers had sworn, that he had never laid eyes on the man before.

To Bill he whispered: "When we reach that last house, I'll splash or do something to draw their attention. They'll come out to the flags edge again to see what it is. Don't shoot when just one man shows up. We'll wait till we have three of them in plain sight. If we get three of them at the first crack, we'll be fighting the other three on even terms. Now, Bill, when you're looking down a rifle barrel at those men, don't hesitate. Aim straight. We can't make prisoners of that outfit. This is a finish fight. One or the other party is going to get wiped out."

They started for the fourth muskrat house.

Halfway there, disaster overwhelmed them, sudden and stunning.

It came from the air, in the shape of a pair of red-throated loons. Flapping heavily out of the west, the birds dropped with a loud splash not ten feet away from the two men.

At the splash Alan heard a muffled oath over in the flags; then a rustling movement, as though the bandits had nervously jumped for their guns; then silence. And then a voice from the twilight among the reeds:

"Nothin'. Jus' a pair of divers plumped down."

The alarm would have blown over if the loons had swum off. But the birds, crop-heavy and indolent, stayed where they were, showing no intention of moving away. As the female started preening herself, the mate turned its eye suspiciously at the two strange objects sticking above the water.

What startled it Alan never knew. Bill did not move; he himself did not bat an eyelash. But in that jumpy taut silence the male suddenly three open its beak and sent up a raucous maniacal shriek, as though some animal had seized it by the neck.

Instantly its mate joined in. The jarring, ear-splitting discord set muskrats diving off their houses and flushed every waterfowl in the lake a hundred yards distant. With a last frantic peal the loons taxied over the water, finally managed to take wing, and flapped heavily away.

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