

The Black Cat

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Holding Down a Homestead.

BY H. W. PHILLIPS.



IN the central part of what is now the State of North Dakota, then in its territorial days, lie the Lake-beds. Long years ago these grassy hollows were fresh-water seas, but as the continent arched its back, like a giant cat stretching, the water poured out, leaving a rich sediment to grow hay for countless cattle.

Here my friend William Teasdale was established as superintendent of a hay camp. He was the type of man who passes through all the Western experiences, from "skinning" mules for the government, to "coyoteing" in dry gulches in the placer district of the Black Hills.

A kindly, generous, brave man was Bill, a good friend, who had both intelligence and sympathy to offer in time of need.

At this time I was holding down a homestead about sixteen miles from the hay camp, and further still from any other neighbor. I lived up to the government's requirements religiously, and stuck it out in my little shack, "all by my lone."

For the first few months things went well with me. I enjoyed the vast solitude, and would have regretted a visitor, but at last the prairie began to be too much for me.

For three months I had not laid eyes on a human being. Prac-

tically, I was marooned in the middle of a grassy ocean. God and I seemed to occupy the country alone. I felt as if the human race had been exterminated, save myself.

Sometimes as I sat in my doorway and looked at the roll upon roll of the buttes, it seemed to me as if the resistless swing of the great waves of ground would pull my soul out of my body.

One morning I "got over the border." As I started for the potato patch, I caught myself talking to people who were not there.

For a moment I was stunned by the discovery. Then I threw down the hoe, slapped the saddle on my cayuse, and tore away as though the devil trailed me, with drops of the cold sweat of panic starting out all over me.

The day was brilliant, but horribly still. The great silence seemed to gather around me like a palpable doom. My teeth chattered. I threw quick glances to left and right behind me as I skimmed over the ground, fearing to see — I do not know what. My straining ears caught no sound but the rapid drumming of the pony's feet. I had a sense of something too dreadful to think of about to happen. Implacable eyes stared at me. A great weight pressed me down on the saddle horn.

Lord, how I rode! My little animal appeared to catch the infection of fear.

Never will I forget the gulp of joy that nearly strangled me when at last I saw Teasdale quietly standing before his tent munching a piece of bread and butter.

I threw myself from my horse and ran over to him. I clutched him with both trembling hands.

"Good Lord! what's the matter, Kid?" he said jokingly, "Injuns jump you?"

"No!" I answered. "But out there, Bill! there isn't anything! There isn't anybody! O God! what a country!" My nerves gave way and I cried like a baby.

His face changed instantly.

"Oh-ho-he!" he said softly. "A touch of the prairie, eh? We've all had it, Kid. Now go right in the tent and see if you can't lay down for awhile."

I tried to obey him, but the thing was impossible. I could not

keep still. If I closed my eyes the horror came over me with redoubled force. After a few moments I was obliged to give it up and come out again.

Bill looked at me with anxious eyes.

"No go?" said he.

I shook my head.

"Now, see here, Kid," said he, "here's where you've got to make a fight. If you let this get the best of you, your goose is cooked as far as this country's concerned. Now, let's see; I ain't got a deck of cards nor nothing to take your mind off, and you've got to put your attention on something else, so let's play a game of mumble-ty-peg."

We went at that boy's game with the utmost seriousness. Mindful of Bill's injunction, I played as though my life depended on it.

Really, it was a much better idea than it seemed, because it brought up cheery memories of school days in God's country that did much to lay my ghost, and by the time Bill had defeated me, and I had to grub for the peg, I began to feel ashamed of my emotion, and was quite becoming myself again.

Not altogether though, as an occasional shudder testified.

Bill noted my improvement with satisfaction.

"That's the stuff!" he said heartily. "Every man has his scare thrown into him at some time or other, but only the coward gives in to it. Now it sorter braces a feller up when he's down to hear of somebody that's had a worse time than he's had, and I think if I tell you about something I come across once, you'll feel more contented to go back to your own little shanty — not but what you're welcome to stay here a year if you want to, but I know you don't want to cave in — so I'll give you what I know of the history of Captain Jack.

"It came up this way. I'd been working for the 'bar 3' outfit. Got paid off. Got full and busted inside of three days. Then I slid down to the *Chanta-seché*, and struck 'em for a job. The supe said that they had all the punchers they needed, but if I wanted to hold down a mower for awhile they'd make it an object to me — twenty cases a month — and I closed with 'em. Next morning the supe started me off with my team.

“‘There’s where you’ve got to cut,’ says he, pointing to a piece of bottom land about three miles off. ‘Got a gun with you?’

“‘Lord! no!’ says I, ‘what do I want a gun to cut a little grass for’ — I just naturally hate a man that’s always packing a gun.

“‘Do you see that shack?’ says the supe. ‘Yes? Well, the old ram that lives there thinks he owns the whole durned country. He’s cut up nasty two or three times — can’t tell what he’ll do — loft full of dust from living alone or something. Better heel yourself.’

“‘But I wouldn’t listen to it. I didn’t know what I was up against.

“‘All right,’ the supe says, ‘no skin off me. Don’t stir the poor old devil up, though. I suppose he’ll die most God-awful sudden some day, but there’s no use of hurrying things. Well, get a gait on you and cut some grass for the company.’

“‘So away I went.

“‘The last thing the supe sung out after me was, ‘Keep clear of Captain Jack!’

“‘All right,’ I says, but I didn’t do it, just the same.

“‘After I first struck the bottom, I brought down the grass in good shape for awhile, sat up straight on the mower, and hollered at the horses as business-like as could be, meanwhile keeping a leery eye out for my friend.

“‘But pretty soon I got all-fired sleepy. I hadn’t had much rest during my three-day bender up in town, and the sun was as hot as Fourth o’ July in hell, and the old machine buzzed away like a swarm of bees, and altogether it wasn’t long before the sleep just came and sat right down on me.

“‘I wiggled my legs and jammed the hat on the back of my head, to pry my eyes open, but it was no use; the ground floated around in spite of me, and next news I got, I was staring straight at a little, round, red-faced old man, whose white whiskers stood out like an angry cat’s, and he was laying me out ’til further orders.

“‘Talk about being surprised! Well, I sat there with my mouth open, while he called me all the thieves and pirates and truck that he could lay his tongue to.

"It riled me to get cussed like that for nothing at all, so finally I come to enough to say, 'Perhaps you ain't feeling very well this morning, Captain?'"

"Old Jack,—for it was the captain all right enough,—wasn't in the humor to listen to any joshing, and at that, he raised the double-barreled shot gun that he'd brought with him to back his arguments, and let her flicker both barrels.

"I wasn't there, however. Guessing what was likely to happen, I swung off behind the mower; but the crack of the gun startled the horses and away they flew, leaving me squatted there, without any cover.

"I started to tackle the old gent with a monkey-wrench that dropped off the mower, but before I could get hold of it, he unlimbered the great-granddaddy of all the six-shooters that I ever saw, and opened fire.

"The debate was closed. He had the floor, and the earth, too, if he wanted it. I moved swiftly away from there, with the old man imitating me to the best of his ability.

"I headed for a big rock-pile on the other side of the valley — you know, one of them things that Foster calls 'moraines,' thinking that when I reached the top of it, if the old man didn't get me in the meantime, I could change the cut a little.

"I made it with no worse damage than a burn in the left leg, for while the captain's intentions were good enough, his shooting was of a poor quality.

"Up the side of that wall I scrambled, madder than a wet hen, and cussing like a tom-cat. When I got on top, I whirled around and let the rocks fly at the old man with both hands.

"I wondered why he didn't fire on me, as I was a good mark, standing up against the sky, and then I tumbled to the fact that his ammunition must have given out.

"'Now!' thinks I, 'you're my meat!' I grabbed a couple of rocks and charged down the wall like a landslide.

"When the old man saw me coming in all my glory, he turned tail and dusted for home again.

"I pasted after him as fast as I could swing a leg, and he stepped high, wide, and frolicsome, now, I tell you.

"We had a fast heat, but to save my life I couldn't close with

him. He was just out of rock-shot, and kept there, although I sprained my stomach trying to gain a little.

"I never saw a sixty-year-old run like he did. His long white hair snapped in the breeze, and you could have played billiards on his coattail.

"He dove into his shack like a rabbit in his burrow, to come out a second later with a Winchester in his hands.

"That brought me up short. Rocks against a rifle isn't a good game. I hustled to get out of range, wondering to myself whether the old gent and me were going to play 'tag' between his house and the moraine for the rest of the day.

"But the captain was done. He just stood in his doorway and puffed like a buffalo.

"I made my escape in good shape, took a circle around, and started after the team. As I hadn't raised the cutter-bar, they left a trail behind them that a blind man could follow, in the shape of a five-foot swath right through grass and brush and everything.

"Beyond getting touched up from a nest of yellow jackets that they'd cut in two, and the ten-mile walk, I got 'em without any trouble. They were in a *coulée*, quietly feeding, when I came up.

"Then I pulled out for the ranch, feeling like old Farmer Scrubrub's hired man, who

" 'Went out to make some hay,
He ran his scythe in a hornet's nest,
And knocked off for the day.'

"That night in the bull pen we talked of nothing else but Captain Jack. All the boys had some yarn or other about him.

"Bronch' Thompson said the old gent used to play the fiddle nights. Bronch' was a great hand for music, so he went over to call on the captain. The old man received him nicely and they had a pleasant evening, for Jack knew how to work the 'fid' to the queen's taste.

"He invited Bronch' to come over next night. Bronch' went, and when he got within a hundred yards of his cabin, the captain bored a hole through his hat.

"He didn't miss the head by over an inch, and Bronch' was red hot.

“‘What’s the matter with you, you darned old fool?’ he yelled, as he picked up his broad brim.

“‘Oh! that’s only a little way I’ve got,’ says the captain.

“‘That so?’ says Bronch’. ‘Well, I’ve got a little way myself,’ and he opened on him with his six-shooter.

“The captain slammed the door to, and that’s all there was of that. But Bronch’ thought it was the darnedest, meanest trick he’d ever heard of.

“Then the supe told of the captain’s coming over one day and telling him that the *Chanta-seché* would have to pull its freight out of the country.

“The supe humored him and asked for reasons.

“Then they saw what ailed the old boy. Says he, ‘The Angel Michael came to my shack the other night, and gave me a deed to the United States. The Lord is a man of war — I must drive you away from here.’

“Crazy, you see; crazy as a bed-bug.

“Well, I went on cutting grass after that, and gave Jack a wide berth. In fact, I forgot all about him, until one day two of the boys came up from town with their skins full of red-eye, and looking for excitement.

“Nothing would do but they must go and stir up the captain. Bronch’ and I argued with them, but it didn’t have any effect, so we went along with them to see that no serious mischief was done.

“When we got to the shack everything was still.

“‘Come out of that, Captain Jack, proprietor of the United States and some counties not heard from!’ yells one of the boys.

“No answer.

“We hollered again, but no sound came from the shack.

“‘Let’s bust the door down, and draw the old badger out,’ says somebody; so down goes the door, and in we all flew.

“Then we stopped in our tracks, for, spread on its back, looking straight up as if to find out why, lay the dead body of the captain.

“We all sure felt queer. Not but what we had seen plenty of dead men in our time, but it knocked us in a heap to go out to have a little fun with a man and find him a corpse.

“‘Is he dead?’ says the youngest feller in the crowd.

“ ‘And a hole in him that a cat could crawl through,’ answers Bronch’. ‘Well, I reckon.’

“ ‘Lord! Let’s get out of this!’ I says, and we piled out in a hurry.

“ We held a council of war, because although Jack had been a durned nuisance, this killing was dirty work, and we didn’t propose to have any such on the *Chanta-seché* while we were running it.

“ None of our boys would take a hand in a job like that, we felt sure, and as there weren’t many people in the country, we were soon able to locate on the parties that did it.

“ Everything pointed to two Swedes that lived about four miles down the creek. They had had a ‘turn-up’ with Jack, and one of our lads remembered having heard the oldest Swede say that he’d ‘fix’ the old man some day.

“ That settled it in our minds.

“ ‘Now,’ says Bronch’, ‘we’ll hunt for sign, and if we can bring it down to the Swedes, they’ll do a can-can in the air, with the full support of the company — and a lariat,’ says he.

“ We spread out to hunt. We found tracks leading to a corner of the cabin, where the chinking had been pulled from between the logs, so that a man could stick a gun through, and then deeper and wider tracks leading away, as if the murderer had run off after his job was done.

“ We followed the back trail, Bronch’ in the lead. Suddenly Bronch’ stopped so short that I smashed my nose against the back of his head.

“ ‘What the devil is the matter with you?’ says I.

“ ‘Hs-sh!’ he says. ‘Look there!’

“ I looked where he pointed, and saw the body of another man, all kinder tumbled up, with its face jammed in the mud.

“ We rushed up and turned it over. Sure enough, it was one of the Swedes — dead — deader than old Pharaoh, and not a mark on him. No, sir, not a mark. We stripped him to the buff, and searched and hunted, but there wasn’t a thing to show how he came to his end.

“ It was a mighty strange thing and we didn’t know what to make of it.

“‘Hold on!’ says one of the younger boys, ‘I’ll skin back to the ranch and get Foster.’

“Foster, you know, came out of college with honors. There were precious few things he couldn’t tell you about. Darn good feller, Foster, and a son-of-a-gun on learning.

“Pretty soon the kid came back with old Brick-top, both of ’em larruping their cayuses to beat the deck.

“‘What kind of lay-out is this?’ says Fos’. We told him what we knew, and he examined the Swede.

“‘Heart failure,’ says he. ‘I reckon this chap didn’t find murder such a funny game, after he tried it.’

“And that was a true word. I can imagine how the Swede went up to the cabin, grinding his teeth, and hugging himself as he thought of the satisfaction he was going to get.

“And then, I can fancy how he stumbled away, half running, half falling down, with his knees giving out beneath him, thinking of what was left behind, praying and cussing fast to himself and wishing that he’d died before he ever did such a piece of work.

“Probably, he had something wrong with his heart in the first place, and the excitement he’d been under for weeks while he was heating himself up to the shooting-point hadn’t done him a bit of good.

“Then, after he pulled the trigger, the murderer’s sickness came down on him—sick of himself—sick of life—sick of everything—and gave his heart an extra twist. Snap! she goes, and down comes his shanty.

“I tell you, slaughtering people ain’t what it is cracked up to be. The kind of feller that can kill his man before breakfast, stroke his silky moustache, and go about his business the same as if nothing had happened, only lives in dime novels; at least, I never ran up against his kind on the prairie.

“I’ve had nine gun fights all told, so I reckon I know what I’m talking about.

“I thank God that none of my men died, although it was a near thing with one of ’em, but he nearly blew my light out for the matter of that—bored me right through the chest, and I was in bed for a month.

“The man that kills another man ain’t ever going to get over it. The finish of old Jack’s story will throw some light on that.

“Well, after we finished the Swede’s autopsy, we searched the cabin to see if we could get any clue to who and what the captain was.

“We found something that I’ll get out of my dunnage-box in a minute and show you. You’ll see then what that poor old devil went through.

“Everything in the cabin was as neat and shining as though a woman lived there. The clothes were carefully darned and mended, and the kitchen truck was so bright that you could see your face in it.

“Then there were some curtains and little fixings that gave the place a ‘homey’ kind of look. I reckon old Jack was well brought up.

“It was pitiful to think of that lonesome, old crazy man keeping things so neat, with not another eye to see it but his own, winter and summer, year in and year out, and he in the middle of the prairie. You know what that’s like now, eh, Kid? and your conscience was clean, too. Think of what — wait, I’ll get the books.”

Bill arose and went into the tent. Presently he returned with a half dozen leather-covered memorandum books in his hand.

“This is what we found in a cupboard in the cabin,” he said. “Look careful at ’em, Kid. There’s a terrible lot of trouble set down in a curious way in those little books. Here’s the first one.”

He handed it to me. It was marked on the outside in good bold penmanship “John Winthrop Barrington” — Captain Jack’s name under different circumstances of life. Beneath the name was the date “1873-74.”

I opened it and read the first entry — to me a most astonishing one; judge for yourself. Here it is.

“August 13. One year ago to-day I killed my best friend. The murderer’s hell is in his own breast. May God have mercy on my soul.”

All the succeeding entries were merely the date, and a repetition of the last two sentences.

So page after page the simple horror of that record ran. Written neatly, carefully blotted, all as methodical as the entries some snuffy old clerk might make in his ledger.

What a strange mind the man must have had! I thought of him, living in such deadly loneliness with his crime, jotting down his monotonous remorse. Perhaps moving his pen slowly by the light of his evening candle, which, soon after extinguished, left him face to face, in the darkness in the vast solitude of the prairie, with his conscience and his God.

A chilliness traced down my spine.

"Are they all like this?" I asked Teasdale as I returned the book.

"All but this one," he answered, "and this is the last."

I took it from him. The date on the outside was 1879—three years previous to the time of which I am writing.

For the first two months, the same two sentences appeared. Then on March the 6th came this:—

"I am going mad."

Again I thought of that lonely cabin, and shivered.

That entry continued for a month. Just those four words each day. Then on April 13th came a statement that made my hair prickle at its roots.

"April 13. Spring and flowers. Warm air. Thank God! *I am mad!*"

Could such a thing be? May a man be crazed and know it?

Evidently it was so. John Winthrope Barrington had no purpose to serve but the truth when he wrote. He never thought of any eye but his own seeing that record of his sufferings, so peculiarly Anglo-Saxon in its restraint.

I turned over the other pages of the book. They were filled with rough sketches of a man being hanged. Some had the tongue protruding from the mouth. In others the eyes were rolling. All had the limbs contorted in various ways. A touch of horrible drollery marked them. They were not good to see.

"My own little shack seems like the home of peace and contentment, in contrast, Bill," I said, as I passed the book back. "What was the end?"

"The end?" he answered with raised eyebrows, "Why, we

buried 'em, of course. Who Jack was, or where he came from, we never discovered. The Swede's pardner skipped the country, so that left him on our hands.

"We planted them both in a mound on the bottom. Foster planed off a board, and wrote an epitaph on it. We stuck the board up between them — here's what it said. I made a copy of it in the last book to keep the history together. Here it is."

I looked over his shoulder and read :

"To the right lies Captain Jack, who killed a man, and regretted it. To the left lies Knut Anderson, who killed Captain Jack. Whoever you are, this is God's business, not yours. Pass on."

