

The Riders of the Plains

The Story of the Royal North-West Mounted Police of Canada

By PERCY LONGHURST

THERE is a glamour, a sense of romance and adventure, of wonderful and out-of-the-way exploits and experiences, attaching to the mere name of the Royal North-West Mounted Police of Canada, that cannot fail to capture the imagination of the adventurously inclined—and that means most of us who haven't grown too old to be thrilled by tales of daring courage and enterprise.

I have known scores of the "Riders of the Plains," have been with them, worked with them, listened to them (but for an unfortunate want of a couple of inches or so of stature I'd have been one of them), and it is easy for me to understand how and why it is this body of men—the finest body of its kind throughout the world—has gained the reputation it owns, and why the mere thought of them and the work they do—and have done—stirs the imagination.

Their work to-day may not be so exciting as it was twenty-odd years and more ago, but still there is much in it that appeals to the young fellow with a sound, strong body, a love of the unusual, and preferring a free, out-of-door life to being herded in an office or factory.

Excitement! It's true enough that the men of the Police to-day aren't called upon to quiet hostile outbreaks amongst the Indian tribes, to take over and run a country considerably bigger than the whole of Great Britain, as they did in the Yukon Territory when came the big gold strike in the Klondyke in 1898, but there's still excitement to be found.

What do you think of a single policeman (it's not so long ago since it happened) being sent to bring down into civilisation a poor

chap, a clergyman, whom existence in one of the wildest and most desolate parts of the great Northland, nearly a thousand miles away from the nearest town, had driven insane?

Imagine that fellow starting off with his companion—who wasn't willing to go, and objected vigorously—for a seven-hundred-miles drive with a dog-sled and team, in the middle of winter, with the temperature at anything in the neighbourhood of fifty degrees below zero. Imagine him travelling hour after hour with the poor lunatic, camping at night with him in a big hole dug in the snow, wrapped in their blankets before a blazing pine wood fire; watching him, talking to him, keeping him quiet, taking care that the unfortunate man didn't do either himself or his companion an injury.

Think what that journey means, making forty miles a day over the frozen snow; suddenly turning from trying to kindle a fire to find that the lunatic had possessed himself of an axe, and evidently intended using it on his guardian's head; of chasing the man across the white waste, struggling with him for possession of the weapon; of being compelled to tie him up to prevent a further occurrence of the kind; of trying to save not only himself but his charge from frostbite, snowstorms, and blizzards! Yet that's one of the jobs that Constable Pedley had to perform, and he got his man safely to the end of the trip, too, with no more hurt than a frost-bitten big toe.

What do you think of being sent on a mission through a country known only by wandering bands of Indians to try and capture an Indian murderer—sent alone, mind you;

a trip that lasted nine months, alone nearly all the time; finding food where it might be obtained by rifle shot or snare; facing thirty or forty red men, who were determined that they would not give up the murderer—and getting the better of them all and every other difficulty into the bargain, and coming back from the trip with the culprit in safe charge.

That doesn't look as though the adventurous and exciting side of the North-West Mounted Policeman's life had departed, does it? Yet these are by no means isolated examples of what the Police are called upon to do.

In khaki jacket and blue breeches, "Stetson" hat and high brown boots (in winter he has a fur outfit and moccasins), armed with rifle and six-shooter, mounted on a good horse, the Mounted Policeman patrols the wide plains, keeping an eye on everything. There is hardly an happening in which he is not, or likely to be, concerned. His "beat" may be several hundred miles in length—as extensive as the whole of England itself. He is the representative of the law—often the law itself—and others realise it as well as he does himself.

It is a grand life, of freedom and responsibility; of enjoyment and unswerving devotion to duty. But it isn't always a picnic. That little trip of Constable Pedley's was no pleasure trip, eh? Winter brings the worst time. The cold and the snow and the blizzards can't be allowed to interfere with duty. The policeman has to turn out all the same, and he can never be sure that he'll get back to his post alive. There's the horror of getting lost (and don't run away with the notion that it's only the tenderfoot who loses himself in the great wilds; old hands of thirty years' experience are just as liable should a great storm happen); of snow blindness; of cold

such as we in England can't form any idea of. There is the possibility of accidents to his horse. No, it's not all honey.

It's a hard, though a grand, life, and it isn't too well paid, either—not well enough paid, so many think. What would the average worker think of a wage of six shillings a day? But the Mounted Policeman doesn't grouse—or strike. To a large extent he's his own master. He has to obey orders, of course, but the manner of carrying them out is left a whole lot to himself. For a chap of the right type the life has many compensations.

And here's a yarn (not a made-up one but something that actually happened) that tells you what type of fellow is wanted in the Police—and that the force gets.

A constable was sent to arrest a red man who was wanted for the killing of a squaw. His tribe was known to believe that he was justified in committing the crime, and their assistance to him against the law was confidently expected by the commanding officer of the post. Yet he sent but a single man to effect the arrest—which indicates the officer's confidence.

In due course the constable located the encampment of the tribe, only to be told by the chief that the man wanted was not there, which was found correct when the policeman came to search the tepees. No one could or would say where the man had fled.

Nothing daunted, the constable took up the trail, and, after several weeks of tracking, trailed the fugitive to a lonely shack set in a clearing in a great wood. But he wasn't quite sure, so, hiding amid the brush, he sat down to watch the cabin. After many hours' watching he saw an Indian stealthily make his way to the shack. For a few minutes he waited, then, just as he was about to follow,



The mounted policeman patrols the wide plains, keeping an eye on everything.

a second red man made his appearance, disappearing into the shack. One of the two was the man wanted.

Did the mounted policeman hesitate? Not much! That kind of thing isn't the way of the police. With the utmost care—for he knew well enough the Indian wouldn't hesitate to shoot did he catch a glimpse of the uniform—he made his way to the open doorway of the cabin, and stepped in.

And then what happened?

Well, no one knows exactly; but from what was related to me by one of a patrol that by chance came upon the cabin about thirty hours after their comrade's having entered it, I guess you'll be able to form a fairly correct notion for yourselves. This is what the patrol found.

Close by the empty fireplace lay a dead red man, shot in two places. He wasn't the criminal. *That* one was lying against one of the cabin walls, a long knife in his hand, very much alive, quite unhurt. Don't forget that it's a point of honour amongst the police to take their prisoners alive and unhurt if in any way possible.

Propped against the wall opposite the red man was the constable, and half way across the floor to where he lay was a trail of blood. He had a six-shooter in his right hand, and his forefinger was on the trigger. He looked half dead, but even as his comrades entered the hut his eyes did not leave the red man. On the floor between them was his carbine, still loaded, and a single-barreled rifle that had been discharged. His left arm was broken, he had two knife-wounds, and a wound from a rifle bullet in his back. He hadn't eaten for two days; he hadn't closed his eyes in sleep throughout the previous night. He was just about played out. But, although shot in the back while struggling with the second Indian, whom he had ultimately killed, desperately wounded as he was, he had contrived virtually to take his prisoner—and keep him.

What would have happened but for the arrival of the patrol can only be left to the imagination. For my part, I believe that,

somehow or other, the constable would have done his full duty.

To-day there is not much chance of the R.N.W.M. policeman having any fighting with the Indians to do, for the red men are settling down into farmers, cattle breeders, and the like; but though the chance is not a big one, it still remains. There are tens of thousands of square miles in Canada in much the same condition as they were a hundred years ago, and the wandering red men who pass to and fro have altered but very little. They know little of the white man and his laws; they know the police—whom they fear and respect—are few in number and widely scattered; and their habits and thoughts have altered but little. There is still a chance of the adventurously minded policeman getting all the excitement he wants. One can never tell what may happen.

Meanwhile, the policeman goes his way, taking rides of a few hundred miles as a matter of course; settling disputes here, making inquiries there if anything goes wrong; keeping an alert eye for forest or prairie fires in the summer and autumn, ready to investigate cases of horse or cattle rustling; very capable and determined, very confident and self-reliant. His next job may be to ride across to the next section and find out who it is that is smuggling alcohol into the country, or to take a thousand-mile journey to the Eskimos of the furthestmost North.

He must be prepared to act as policeman, explorer, dog-driver, woodsman, surveyor, blacksmith, and mail carrier. He is supposed to know a bit of everything, from doctoring a sick horse to building a winter house, or prescribing the proper medicine for an Indian papoose that is ill.

If you want any help, be sure he'll do his best for you, no matter what your need. But don't do anything you ought not to do, because no matter how much he may like you, no matter who or how important you are, there's going to be nothing that will interfere with his doing his duty. "In the King's Name" the Royal North-West Mounted Policeman will see his own brother in gaol if necessary.