

North-West ROMANCES



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Flaming River

By EDWIN M. SAMPSON

To save a wild-eyed, frenzied woodsman, Sgt. Manning ran the gauntlet of flaming Yellow River death. Yet neither blood-debt nor trail comradeship could swerve him a hair's-breadth from the eye-for-an-eye edict of the Law.

WITH a quick sweep of his arm, without checking for an instant the speed of the light canoe he was driving recklessly down the narrow, tortuous stream, Sergeant George Manning, of the Mounted, thrust his limp service hat under the surface and carried it back to his head. The scooped up water drenched his head and shoulders, and soaked the handkerchief that covered his nose and mouth. Manning was fighting for his life.

High overhead heavy clouds, expanding and bursting into monstrous, fantastic shapes as they swept along on the strong east wind, rolled over the tree tops and covered the North Woods like a huge, billowing blanket. Fire, that great, devastating terror, was racing after the smoke with the speed of the wind.

It was Manning's first trip into the Yellow River country, and he was staking his life on the correctness of the map furnished by the department. If the engineers had made no mistake, Pine Creek should soon swing westward, giving him a straight-away run of about a mile to Caribou Lake, a body of water large enough to insure safety.

Crouching on one knee, he threw all the strength of his powerful shoulders into the stroke and strained his eyes for the turn, his only hope.

The air was stifling. Thick pungent smoke filtered down through the tall spruces and choked him. A racking cough tore his lungs—every breath was torture. Tears ran from his smarting eyes, almost blinding him.

Every second brought the fire nearer. The low-tone, monotonous roar, at first faint like the rumble of distant surf, was growing louder, and the air was becoming hotter.

One moment his hopes were soaring; the next instant they dropped into the depths of despair. He began to doubt

the map. Those two curving blue lines—they were wrong! What did a turn, more or less, in the course of an obscure little stream mean to the men who drew them?

"Damn them . . . damn them!" he gritted, catching the water savagely with his paddle. "I might have had—"

The canoe plunged through an overhanging bush and struck the bank, hurling him forward on his hands!

"Thank God . . . the bend!" he gasped, quickly thrusting the paddle into the gravel bottom. "Only a mile—then—"

A choking cry checked his muttering.

"Help . . . help!"

He sprang to his feet. His blood-shot eyes strained to pierce the haze . . . then he saw! Only a few feet away, a man on his hands and knees! Someone else caught in the net of flame . . . crawling hopelessly for a place of safety!

"Quick . . . quick!" he cried hoarsely. "Jump . . . jump!"

"I'm caught . . . trap!" came the moaning answer.

The next instant, Manning was ashore bending over the fallen man.

The jaws of a heavy, double-spring bear trap were closed on the right ankle! A strong chain ran to a staple in a nearby tree.

WITH the strength of desperation, for he knew that only a few seconds stood between him and death, Manning tried to force down the springs. He could not move them.

"Here . . . take this!"

Manning stared—the man was holding out a hunting knife!

"Use it . . . quick!"

"You mean—" Manning hesitated.

"Cut off the foot, or . . . finish me!"

With a shudder, Manning seized the knife.

Rushing death was roaring greedily for



Only a few feet away, a man on his hands and knees! Someone else caught in the net of flame. . .

them. Flaming sparks, darting downward like tiny comets, were dropping by the thousand. Most of them flickered out on striking the ground; but here and there one harder than the rest survived, and a little flame curled upward.

Gritting his teeth, Manning reached down.

"I'll get you out! Stand up!" he yelled, heaving the man to his feet. "Steady!"

With the trap upright, he balanced, a foot on each spring. Gripping the man's leg to keep from falling, he stooped and jammed the knife handle between the steel jaws. As the springs gave under his weight, he forced them apart.

"Easy . . . I'll say when! Now—slow . . . little more . . . there!"

The foot was free! Manning jumped, and the jaws snapped.

"Quick!"

He caught the staggering man as he was sinking down and dragged him to the canoe. A moment later he was shooting down the stream, with Caribou Lake a mile away—a mile with hell howling at their heels.

The heat on his back was like a blast from a furnace. The rushing wall of flame was close behind. He could see the little puffs of steam when the large sparks struck the water; but he could not hear the hiss he knew they made. The stranger's lips moved, but he could not hear a word.

The man was pointing to the north. Of course, safety lay in that direction, but it would be sure death to take to the woods. Heat had made him delirious! In an effort to make himself heard, he started to crawl toward the stern. Manning ordered him back with a curse neither heard. Again he shouted and pointed so vehemently that Manning looked.

The nearness of the inferno was driving the low-lying smoke to higher levels, and Manning saw, almost abreast of them, a break in the solid line of underbrush.

His heart leaped! It was the mouth of a little stream!

As if he read Manning's thoughts, the stranger nodded wildly, then jerked the spare paddle from under the thwart and caught the water. Two quick strokes turned them, and they flew into the narrow channel. It was win or lose in the creek—they could not turn back.

Manning did not attempt to guide—he left that to the man in the bow whose life depended on his knowledge of the course. His trust was not misplaced. They darted under a fallen tree that bridged the stream, grazed a jagged boulder, and swung around projecting bushes and snags without once slackening speed.

Behind, the fire had leaped the creek. Little patches of curling flame were springing up abreast of them—the advance guard of the leaping, seething mass less than a hundred yards away.

For a half a mile, they ran the gauntlet of blistering heat and blazing branches that rained upon them, working in perfect unison; then the strain began to tell—it was more than man could stand. The strokes became erratic—it was each man for himself.

How far they must go, and what lay beyond, Manning had no idea; but he did know that the end was near. It was only a question of time. Hope had vanished, yet he continued to ply his paddle doggedly.

Sometimes, when a man is face to face with certain death, his thoughts turn from the danger to things far away. It was so with Manning—he was wondering if Inspector Jenkins would ever know how he died . . . when he saw open water ahead!

A LAKE! The sight brought strength to his lagging arms.

It was small. The hanging smoke-clouds, reflecting dull red, gave it a dreadful, unearthly appearance, but it was paradise after hell. To draw a breath that did not scorch! To escape the terrible shriveling heat!

To the north, where a counter air current was rolling back the invading clouds, a tiny island arose in mid-lake. Tree-clad to the water's edge, with a perfectly arched skyline and a round bare rock for the southern extremity, it had the appearance of a crouching animal.

This was their goal, and without a pause they forged on until they were behind the sheltering bulk of the rock.

Manning pulled off the handkerchief mask and bathed his face. The stranger leaned over and drank from his cupped hand. Neither spoke. They relaxed and watched the great fire rolling unabated to the south.

Finally the stranger extended his hand. "Thanks, old man," he said simply.

"Same to you, stranger," answered Manning, clasping the hand.

THEY were typical outdoor men, with health, strength, and youth—neither over thirty. In build, both were broad-shouldered, with slim waists, and no superfluous flesh. With that the similarity ended. Manning had light, curly hair, blue eyes, and clean shaven face. The stranger's eyes were steel-gray, hair straight and brown, and a short, reddish-brown beard covered his face.

Manning next broke the silence.

"In the trap long?" he asked, wetting the grimy handkerchief and pressing it to his smarting eyes.

"About five hours. Think I could've worked out, if the fire hadn't broke loose." He reached down and began to unlace the heavy moose-hide pack from his injured ankle. "My name's Dunn—Phil Dunn. Been up here about two years—trapping. This morning, I left my canoe on the Pine and started over a last year's line. That old bear trap—one of my own I'd forgotten—grabbed me before I'd gone far. Lucky for me you came along; and lucky for you I was there—you'd never have reached Caribou. If we hadn't pulled into Porcupine—"

Manning lowered the handkerchief with a start. "Is this Porcupine Lake?" he asked quickly.

"Nothing else—this rock's the head of the sleeping porky," declared Dunn. "You've heard of it?"

"I have. I'm George Manning, and I'm after a man said to be located on Porcupine."

"Then I'm your man!" laughed Dunn. "Nobody else here."

"You won't do," grinned Manning. "The fellow I want has a bad scar running from his left temple to his chin—one that beard of yours wouldn't cover. From what I'm able to see of you, Phil, you'd be a pretty respectable looking chap, if you'd mow the whiskers."

Dunn touched his ankle gingerly. "Many thanks," he grimaced.

"By George! I forgot that foot!" cried Manning, leaning down. "Swing around—I'll take a look."

Dunn removed a woolen sock and extended his foot.

"Hu-u-un! You're lucky," announced Manning, working the ankle. "Badly bruised, but no bones broken. That bull-moose saved you—hold still." From his pack he took a first-aid kit and deftly applied a bandage. "There, that'll feel better! Now, lead me to your shack—I'm dirty and tired and hungry enough to eat boiled loon!"

IT was evening. The sky was cloudless. Off in the east, a haze of smoke that hung low over the smoldering forest was all that told of the great conflagration.

As the rosy glow of the sun faded, the orange-tinted rim of the big moon arose slowly from behind the pointed top of the spruces outlined on the sky. Only the lapping of the little waves on the narrow gravel beach, and the gentle sighing of the light breeze broke the stillness. It was too early for the usual sounds of night-life in the forest; or perhaps the inhabitants had not recovered from their fright of the afternoon.

On a bench before a small, well-built log cabin near the shore, Manning and Dunn smoked and gazed along the shimmering, silvery pathway that ran over the rippling surface from the water's edge to the full moon, now free from the tree-line.

"Phil," said Manning abruptly, "where is Barker?"

Dunn looked up in surprise. "I knew you were after Ben," he said slowly, "but I didn't think you knew his name."

"We've known it since the night of the murder," said Manning. "Two weeks ago we heard he was here with you. I want him."

Dunn shook his head. "You're too late, George."

"He's gone?"

"Six weeks ago."

"North?"

"Or south, or east, or west," agreed Dunn.

For several minutes they smoked in silence, then Manning knocked his pipe on the edge of the bench.

"You know he murdered a man in Dalton?" he asked.

"I know only this—that he killed a

skunk in self-defense," retorted Dunn.

"By shooting him in the back!" snapped Manning.

Dunn stared at the trooper, his pipe in mid-air. "Ben Barker never shot a man in the back!" he said slowly.

"The bullet that killed James Duncan entered under the left shoulder blade and went through the heart," declared Manning.

"I don't care who told you that—it's a lie!"

"That's right, Phil, stick up for your friend," said Manning. "All we know is that Barker suddenly appeared in Duncan's shop and opened fire. A half-breed, Joe Charlevois, working in the back room, heard Duncan call Barker's name, and ran in as Duncan fell. Joe tried to stop Barker, but he got away with his left cheek slashed."

AS the trooper paused to light his pipe, Dunn remarked: "Some different from Ben's story."

"No reason, as I can see, for Joe to lie—"

"A half-breed lies without reason," broke in Dunn.

"Well," Manning went on rather sharply, "at least he gave us Barker's name and said he saw a long sunken scar under the right collar bone, when Barker's shirt was torn open in the scuffle."

"That much is true—I've seen it many a time," granted Dunn. He puffed a cloud of smoke upward and when it had drifted away, he exclaimed bitterly: "Justice! You've condemned him, sentenced him, and are all set for the hanging . . . all on the word of a lying half-breed!"

"We'll listen to the other side when I take Barker in," said Manning grimly.

"You won't have to wait that long," exclaimed Dunn, swinging around to face the trooper. "I know—I'll tell you!"

"I'm willing—shoot!"

For a moment, Dunn gazed silently at the rippling water; then he began abruptly.

"I came to Porcupine because I wanted to be alone. It's miles from anywhere, and I never expected to meet anyone here; but I was wrong—Barker came in right on my heels, and I couldn't refuse to share camp with him. I intended to move on the next day, but he was such a likable chap I

put it off. We built this cabin and had just time to make a trip to the Post on Lake Peter for supplies . . . then things broke.

"We were both green, and winter caught us—sewed us up tight before we knew it was on us. It wasn't long before rations got low, and we had a pretty tough time. We froze together and starved together, and when spring break-up came I knew him as well as I knew myself. If there's any bad in a man, it'll come to the top when food is so scarce every bite has to be counted."

As Dunn paused, Manning nodded. "Correct," he declared; "winter here would bring out every drop of yellow. Now, that explains how you got together . . . what about the fight?"

"So you'll understand, I'll go back a little," said Dunn, striking a match and holding it over his pipe. "Barker and Jim Duncan were partners for several years—general store in southern Ontario, and were doing well. Everything went fine until Barker caught Duncan robbing the safe. Before he recovered from the shock, Duncan shot him and fled. To save Barker's life, a rib was resected—that left the scar your half-breed saw."

"And when he recovered," said Manning, "he oiled his gun and started after Duncan!"

"When he left the hospital," answered Dunn evenly, "he was stone broke. He said he had only one thought—to recover from Duncan, and put him behind the bars."

Manning shrugged and smiled skeptically. "Yet he carried a gun and . . . used it!"

"He was hunting a man who had once shot him down," said Dunn. "I believed him, for a man tells the truth, when the temperature is fifty below and not a week's rations in sight. For over a year he hunted Duncan. Finally, he saw him in the street in Dalton and followed him to his shop."

"The instant Duncan saw him, he dodged behind a side counter and started shooting. It was kill or be killed with Barker, so in self-defense he returned the fire until his gun was empty. As no sound came from Duncan, he hastily reloaded and darted to the rear of the shop, where he could look up behind the counter. He saw

Duncan stretched out, then the half-breed leaped from a door behind him. A shot would have saved him that cut cheek, but Barker was no killer—he knocked the half-breed out and escaped."

Manning frowned thoughtfully. "Why did he run away?" he asked.

"Couldn't take a chance with the half-breed as witness."

"Why did he come here?"

"He'd been in once before, on a hunting trip."

"Why did he leave?"

"The guide, who brought him in before, found us here; Barker feared he would tell the police—as he did."

"He should have stayed and faced the music," said Manning.

"And been hanged!" exclaimed Dunn. "Didn't that half-breed accuse him of murder?"

Manning did not answer. His eyes were fixed on the lake.

The long silence that followed was finally broken by the eerie cry of a loon from the meadows along the shore; then a little screech-owl, emboldened by the sound, began to wail tremulously from his perch on a nearby pine. In the forest across the lake a young timberwolf howled mournfully at the rising moon. The wood folk were awakening.

Manning knocked out his pipe and got to his feet.

"Phil," he said earnestly, "I hope I don't find your friend Barker. If I do, he goes in."

"I understand, George," said Dunn; "but I don't agree. Ben will never rest easy until he's cleared. I know the country—I'll help you find him."

THIRTY-SIX hours later, Manning and Dunn shot the miniature rapids on Squaw Creek and started down Elbow Lake—a long, narrow pond with a creek very like an elbow near the middle. They headed straight for the point on the inside of the crook which was formed by a narrow rocky ledge, terminating in a huge, preglacial boulder. With two paddles working, they soon reached it.

"Better landing on the other side," announced Dunn, paddling bow. "From the top of that rock you can sweep the whole lake and if there's anyone here which

isn't—" he stopped the canoe with a quick back stroke.

"What's wrong?" asked Manning in surprise.

Dunn pointed to a thin wisp of smoke spiraling upwards over the rock. "Never found anyone here before," he declared, swinging the bow to shore and easing up on a flat rock. "Won't do any harm to look him over before he sees us."

"You ought to be on the force, Phil," said Manning with an approving chuckle. "Wait here—I'll climb the ridge and see if I know him."

Dunn waited until the trooper had wormed his way over the top, then he pushed off.

"I'll take a peep from the water side," he muttered. He had almost reached the point, when he drew in the paddle, leaned back and laughed softly. "It's contagious—caught it from Manning! Why, at any other time, I wouldn't have thought anything about that smoke! I'd have let out a yell and gone in to shake hands and—"

The sharp crack of a gun interrupted him!

A rifle! And Manning's rifle was in the canoe! With a vicious stroke, Dunn shot the canoe around the point and stared across the little moss-carpeted clearing.

A black-bearded giant with gun half raised was advancing cautiously toward a still, huddled figure lying at the base of the sloping rock!

"Pierre Boucher!" gritted Dunn, drawing his revolver and leaping as the canoe slid noiselessly up on a tuft of water grass.

A twinge of pain from his injured ankle warned him to go slowly, but he did not heed. He had something else to think about—Pierre Boucher! The treacherous guide . . . he had driven his partner away . . . he had killed George Manning!

Dunn could have shot him, but he set his teeth and ran. He would hang him! He would try him, judge him, sentence him and leave him hanging over Manning's grave!

Suddenly, as he ran, a wave of relief swept over him. Manning was alive . . . he raised himself on his hands! Then the relief changed to rage . . . Pierre Boucher stopped and deliberately raised his gun! Crack!

Dunn fired from the hip and missed—

but the shot turned the big guide's attention from Manning.

Boucher whirled and fired at the very instant Dunn's ankle gave way, throwing him heavily. The revolver flew from Dunn's hand and fell several feet away. He raised on his knees, but dropped quickly as a bullet sang by his head. All thought of hanging vanished. He started to crawl for the gun.

A bullet splashed dirt into his face! Another plowed the moss close to his hand as his fingers closed on the butt!

From where he lay, he fired twice, then paused. Pierre Boucher's arms dropped to his sides. He turned on his heels and swayed unsteadily. He stumbled, recovered quickly and, before Dunn realized what he was about, lurched into the dense woods and . . . disappeared.

With a roar of rage, Dunn sprang to his feet and hobbled painfully after him.

"Phil—stop!" Manning was sitting up, his hands pressed to his thigh. "Stay out of the woods—he'll get you! He can't get away . . . he's hard hit!"

Dunn hesitated, then limped back quickly.

"Where did he get you?" he asked anxiously.

"Through the leg—the fall knocked me out," answered the trooper. "But he'd have finished me a minute ago if you hadn't taken a hand. Thanks, Phil; we're more than square."

"Forget it and tell me how the devil he got you in the leg? You went over head first!"

"I couldn't see him, and was dropping down to a ledge when he plugged me," grimaced Manning. "Here, give me a hand—"

"Sit still!" commanded Dunn. "Don't even think till I have a look at that leg."

Disregarding Manning's protest, he limped to the canoe and returned with the first aid kit.

"Now, lean, lean back . . . ah-h-h!" he sighed with relief, when he had bared the wound. Missed the bone—went clear through! Ten days and you'll forget which leg it was!"

He applied a moist antiseptic dressing, then arose and inspected his work. "Pretty fair for an amateur, eh?"

"Feels better already," declared Man-

ning. "As you say it doesn't amount to much, but it stops our search."

"Yes," answered Dunn, glancing regretfully toward the woods. "We'll have to let Pierre Boucher go for—"

"What?—you know him?" cried Manning in surprise.

"He's the guide who brought Barker in—who dropped in on us. Wonder what he's been up to—he shot on sight."

"If he hadn't, I'd have got him!" snapped the trooper. "He took Nathan Levi, a Montreal Banker, into the woods, and a week later Levi was found below Nelson's Falls—a bullet through his head."

Dunn stooped and lifted Manning. "Well, we know where he is, we'll get him later. Now, my job is to get you home."

They started for the canoe, one hopping and the other limping.

"We're a fine pair to draw to," grunted Manning between hops. "Just two good legs between us!"

SEVEN weeks passed before Manning was fit for duty. He did not make the rapid recovery Dunn predicted. The wound was trivial, but the loss of blood and the hard journey from Elbow Lake left him without resistance to fight off the infection that developed.

The first aid kit was small, was soon exhausted. To meet the emergency, Dunn washed and boiled the used dressings; but the dreaded infection developed, and Manning's condition became serious. Supplies were absolutely necessary, and so Dunn placed the things that might be needed within the trooper's reach, and made a record-breaking trip to the Post. With antiseptics and dressings, the infection was checked.

THEN, one night, Manning said he was ready to start out.

"No hurry, George," objected Dunn, "Rest another week."

They were lounging in the rough, homemade chairs before a big spruce log that blazed in the stone fire-place, for the nights were already so cold a fire was necessary for comfort. By day, the chill in the air told that fall, the short and sometimes almost indistinguishable interval between summer and winter, was not far away.

"I've been resting over a week now! I'm fit for anything," declared Manning,

working his leg vigorously. "Tomorrow, I'm off for the Elbow. I'll look around a bit, for Pierre can't be far away."

"And if you find him?"

"I'll beat it! Can't waste any more time, for the weather's liable to break any day."

"If you weren't so damned bull-headed," growled Dunn, "you'd make a bee-line for Dalton now."

Manning laughed as he filled his pipe and struck a match.

"Phil," he said sobering, "do you mind if I ask you something—something that's been on my mind for a long time?"

"Shoot away!"

Manning gazed at him a moment, then asked abruptly:

"Why have you buried yourself in the woods? Of course," he went on quickly, as Dunn's expression changed, "it's none of my business—needn't answer if you'd rather not."

Dunn scowled silently at the dancing flames.

"I know you're not hiding," Manning continued. "No man could live two months with you and think you capable of crime."

"Thanks, George," said Dunn quickly. "I've never done anything I really regret—my conscience is clear. Sometime, I'll tell you about it . . . not now."

"Righto!" said the trooper. "Now, here's a question you can answer—have you any family ties?"

Dunn shook his head. "All alone in the world."

"Then why not join the service?" exclaimed Manning arising. "It'll give you something to live for!"

"Me? Join the Mounted?" cried Dunn aghast at the thought.

"Why not?" demanded the trooper. "For a year, you'd work with a regular, and I'll see that you're teamed with me!"

"But I—I never—" stammered Dunn.

"I want you, Phil . . . will you come?"

After a moment's hesitation, Dunn arose quickly and gripped Manning's hand.

"Sergeant Manning, meet Trooper Dunn," he said solemnly. "Tomorrow we'll run up to the Elbow, then—"

A sound from outside made them stare in astonishment.

"E-e-e-ah!"

Someone on the lake! The cry was repeated.

"E-e-e-ah!" The sound rang over the water.

Dunn threw open the door, and they hurried out.

"Hello!" called Manning.

"Hello!" came back from the water.

A canoe appeared in the moonlight, and a moment later ran up on the shore. A man sprang out and came to the cabin. He was an Indian.

"Billie!" exclaimed Dunn, waving him inside. "What are you doing so far from the Post?"

"Campbell send letter," answered the Indian, pulling an envelope from his shirt and passing it to Manning.

Wondering why Thomas Campbell, the factor at Lake Peter, would be writing to him, the trooper hastily opened it.

"Pretty chilly out, Billie—pull up a chair," said Dunn. "Had anything to eat? No? Well, I'll soon throw something—"

"Campbell has forwarded orders from headquarters," interrupted Manning. "I'm called in, Phil, so we'll have to leave Pierre Boucher till next spring." He held the paper so Dunn could see and chuckled.

"See that? There's your name—Philip Dunn! You're included in the orders! I was so sure of you, I told Inspector Jenkins about you in the report you carried to the Post last month—how you saved my life—that you'll be a credit to the force."

"And what does he say?" asked Dunn quickly.

"Listen to this," answered Manning, reading: "'From your report, Philip Dunn is the type of man we want. Bring him in with you. As to your suggestion that he be paired with you, I believe that can be arranged; but, in fairness to Dunn, make it clear that your territory is one of the hardest, and a tough job for a new man.'"

"The harder, the better!" cried Dunn, his eyes sparkling. "We'll hang a 'To Let' sign on the door and start in the morning!"

Billie, who had been squatting on the floor before the fire, looked up.

"You say you leave Pierre," he remarked.

"No good—he go."

Both men whirled on him.

"What's that?" demanded the trooper.

"I see him on Otter today, when I come down West Branch. He don't see me—he go up creek slow like tired."

Dunn jerked his poncho from a peg and spread it on the floor. He began to pack.

"You keep house tonight, Billie," he snapped; "and when you leave, shut the door!"

Manning's eyes sparkled. "Phil," he exclaimed, "I'm making a prediction—if you stay in the harness five years, you'll be holding down an inspector's job!"

"We've got to be on our way, if we expect to get him, haven't we?" demanded Dunn. "We're breaking camp a little earlier than we thought, that's all."

Manning chuckled, as he started to make up his pack; and Billie, seeing that he had been forgotten, arose and glided to the shelf that held the provisions.

AS Pierre Boucher had not gone up the West Branch, Manning decided, and Dunn agreed, that the big half-breed was taking a roundabout way west to cut out the Post—that he would follow the Round Lake, Cedar Creek, Basset's Pond trail and make camp for the night somewhere near the pond, where they hoped to surprise him.

With that object in view they set out, two grim-faced men who knew there would be a fight unless Pierre was taken unaware.

Midnight found them stealing up Otter Creek. The only sound in the stillness of the forest was the soft swish of the water curling around the spruce paddles. Their strokes were easy and seemingly effortless, yet the force behind them shot the little canoe swiftly ahead against the current.

At daybreak, as the first rays of the rising sun struck the surface of Basset's Pond, they emerged cautiously from the mouth of Cedar Creek and landed.

"We've lost our chance to catch him sleeping—he's on his way now," said Dunn, glancing around. "He must have made camp—"

"Right here!" exclaimed Manning, bending over the remains of a fire. Scattering the ashes with his foot, he dug a hole with his knife and thrust in his hand. "Ground's warm—he hasn't been gone a half hour!"

"Wait a minute!" called Dunn, as the trooper started for the canoe. "Are you sure about the time—half an hour?"

"Positive!" declared Manning. "He isn't a mile away now."

"Then we can head him off, if you don't object to a little mud and water," announced Dunn. "Crooked Creek meanders all over the country and finally comes back to within a mile of the pond . . . but half of that mile is beaver marsh."

"Well, we're losing time—let's go!"

Across the pond they raced. Leaving the canoe and their packs, they plunged into the unbroken forest. For a short distance the ground was solid, then they came to the edge of a treacherous looking swamp—the beaver marsh.

"Come on!" called Dunn, as Manning stopped. "I know the way—I've been through it!"

He jumped to a tuft of grass, slipped off and plowed ahead, knee-deep in the black mud. With a bound, Manning was after him.

To make time was impossible. The oozing muck gripped their legs and held with a tenacity that threatened to strip the pacs from their feet. Half buried trunks of once great trees barred their passage, and the tough roots of the swamp grass tripped them and threw them into the reeking mire.

Hand in hand they floundered on until they reached solid ground.

"We've beat him, Phil! We've won!" gasped Manning.

"Not till we . . . reach the creek," panted Dunn, staggering ahead through a clump of silvery birch. "It's right here—"

He stopped abruptly. On the bank of the Creek, he saw Pierre Boucher, gun raised—saw him just in time to drop as the rifle cracked.

With a whoop of exultation, Pierre leaped.

Dunn's hand flew to his holster, groping wildly. It was empty—the revolver had been lost in the swamp! He was helpless! With an effort, he tore his eyes from the rage-distorted face of the half-breed and flashed a glance at Manning. He saw the trooper whip up his gun and fire.

Pierre Boucher stopped with a grunting cough. His eyes dilated—he staggered, then lurched on toward Dunn.

"I . . . get you!" he snarled.

Again Manning's gun cracked.

The rifle dropped from Pierre's hands. His knees sagged, but he straightened up by will power alone. For an instant, he balanced unsteadily, then he raised on his

toes, half turned and fell across Dunn.

With his revolver ready for instant use, Manning advanced cautiously and rolled the big half-breed over on his back.

"He's gone, Phil—Pierre Boucher has cheated the hangman," he announced. "Our work is done—we can go in."

Slowly Dunn arose. He gazed a moment at the man on the ground, then turned to Manning.

"George," he said solemnly, "as I laid there with no means of defense, I saw death in the muzzle of Pierre's gun. I didn't fear it, but I didn't want to go before I squared myself with you."

"Squared yourself?" repeated Manning. "Why, man, you did that long ago!"

"No, I deceived you about Barker—I didn't want you to find him," said Dunn huskily. "He never was very far away—he was nearby all the time, but you wouldn't have known him . . . had you see him. He has no scar on his face! Joe Charlevois saw a stream of blood from a little scalp wound—that's all. Pierre knew and thought I set you after him.

He paused and raised his hands to his throat.

"Well?" said Manning.

With a jerk, Dunn tore open his shirt. There was a long, sunken scar under the right collar bone!

"I took Dunn's name, when he left me," he said steadily. "I'm ready—take me in, George."

There was triumph in Manning's smile. He scarcely glanced at the scar.

"That's no news to me, Phil," he exclaimed. "You had no scar on your face,

but I suspected you from the first. I knew the truth a month ago—I saw the scar on your chest, when you leaned over to dress my leg!"

"You knew . . . a month ago!"

"Yes, but I wanted you to tell me."

"And—and you recommended me . . . asked me to join . . . to pal with you—"

"Phil, I—"

"Ben, you mean. From now on I'll use my own name."

"Too late for me to change—you'll always be Phil," declared Manning. "I asked you to join because I believed your story. Now, I've another little secret—it came in the Inspector's letter last night, and I kept it for this occasion. After I left Dalton, Joe Charlevois was cut to pieces in a drunken fight. Before he died, he confessed. He hated Duncan and took advantage of the shooting to put in a shot for himself—he shot Duncan in the back!"

"Then . . . I didn't kill . . ."

There was a suspicion of moisture in Phil's eyes as he turned and looked over the black, treacherous marsh. Like the last two years, he had fought his way through it . . . he was on solid ground at last.

Suddenly he faced Manning.

"I can hardly believe it, George!" he exclaimed. "I'm free . . . free to go wherever I please!"

"Free!" snorted Manning scornfully. "Where do you get that free stuff? Free? I'll say you're not! For the next year you take orders from me!"

For an instant, Phil looked puzzled; then he straightened stiffly and saluted.

"At your service, Sergeant!"