



THE CRACK SCOUTS OF THE NORTH-WEST MOUNTED POLICE.

## TALES OF THE NORTH WEST MOUNTED POLICE

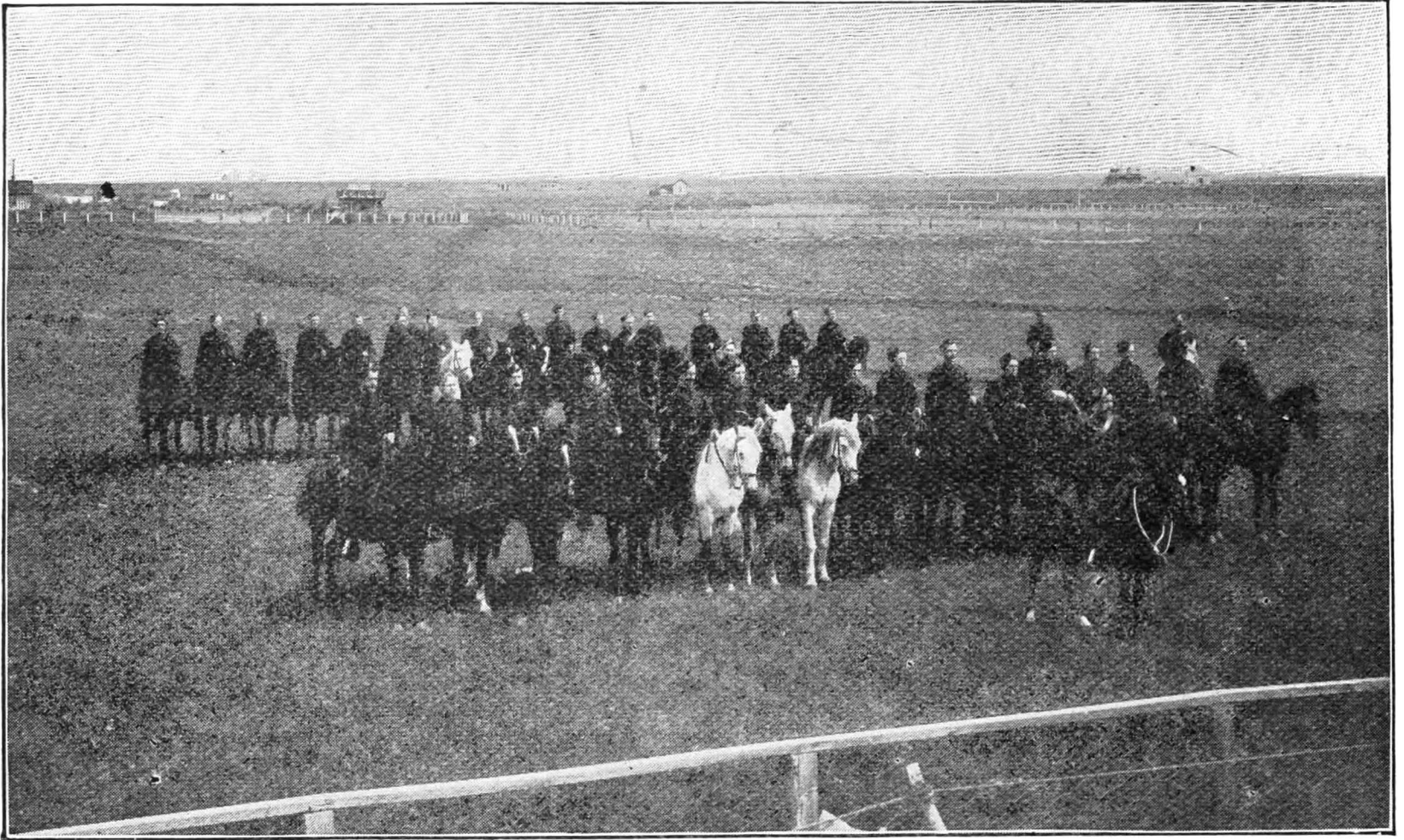
By AGNES C. LAUT

**W**HEN the west-bound train creeps past the rolling wheat fields of the Canadian North-West into the endless reaches of the ranching lands where lonely houses stand against the offing solitary as sails at sea, civilization seems to be receding farther and farther rearward.

Northward, the browned hills and deep-cut ravines full of what the white man calls "sloughs," the Indian "sky-coloured water," billow over the skyline, a heaving sea of prairie. In that direction, you know the outermost limit of these fenceless fields must be the Arctic Circle. Southward, is the same sweep of hill and valley; and you know in this direction there is an imaginary line called the Boundary. Between, zigzagging across the sloughs, wriggling link by link like a measuring worm around the ravines, is the dwarfed form of the crawling train. As the train rushes past, a blind owl flops up stupidly from the stone crest of some hill. With an eye to the manoeuvres of the owl, buzzards and eagles are liting overhead in a sort of dreary enjoyment of desolation. At the sandy end of the sloughs,

cranes are stretching their long necks Coyotes skulk under shelter of cliffs the same colour as their own hide. Badgers hulk clumsily among the gopher mounds; and the traveller will be a very blind observer, indeed, if he does not catch a glimpse of a red fox loping over the prairie. The Indian encampments with blanketed braves and red-skirted squaws lounging against the white tepees only increase the impression of utterly primitive wilds. Civilization has receded so far behind that it has dropped over that rearward horizon altogether.

And yet it is well known that any one—man or woman, tenderfoot or old timer—can travel through these wilds from the Boundary to the Arctic in perfect safety from all harm except the elements. Of that, too, the traveller can see proof in some rancher's daughter, wind-blown and full of life, reining up her pony to let the train go past. She has ridden ten, fifteen, perhaps twenty miles from the ranch house on the far offing. She has come alone and will go back alone, and is safer than if she were in the thick of a populous city. Such



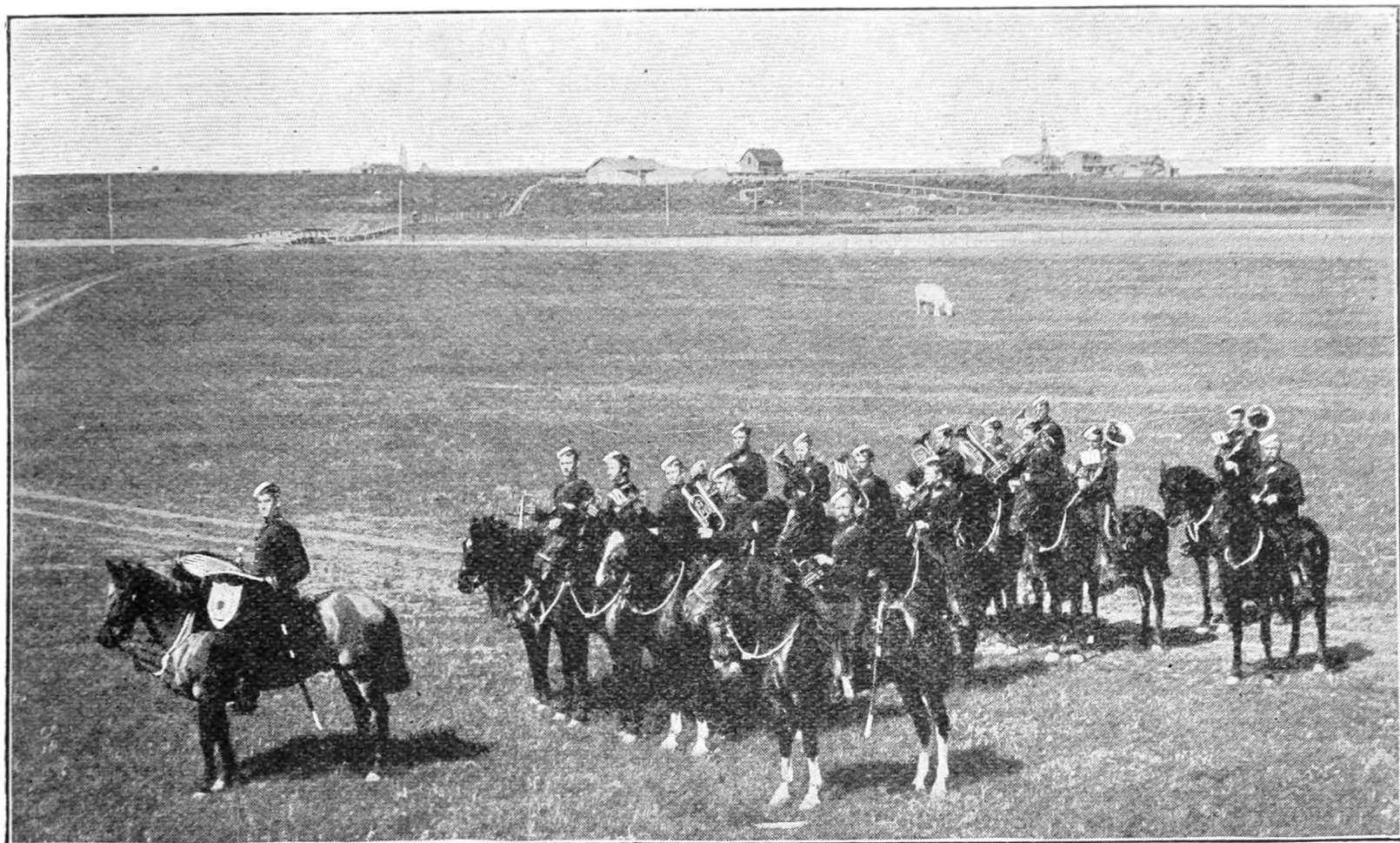
MORNING DRILL OF THE MOUNTED POLICE STATIONED AT REGINA, NORTH-WEST TERRITORY.

conditions in the early settlement of a region populated by a hundred thousand savages are without a parallel in the history of this continent. In Quebec and New England, in Ohio and Arizona, and Mexico and Minnesota, every forward step of settlement has been marked by bloodshed and massacres that are untellable in horror.

Even as the traveller asks himself the reason of the difference, there looms up the living explanation: a solitary horseman, white helmet, white gauntlets, red coat and gold braid, black trousers with yellow stripes, riding boots and, perhaps, a carbine. On he swings, over the prairie, at the loping gait of all plains horses, erect as a British cavalryman, but unlike the English rider never leaving the leather, sitting tight, a part of his horse, in harmony with its every motion so that there is no jar, exactly as the cowboy rides. Presently he stops, still as a statue. A flash of light burns in the sky above his head—he is off, galloping in the opposite direction. He is on patrol; and the scout, whose beat is next to his, has heliographed

some signal so that the two are scouring the prairie, ten, twenty, thirty miles apart, on the lookout for some desperado heading into the country, for some horse thief, or "calf-rustler," or smuggler of illicit wares to the Indians. Next to the second patrol may be a third, next to the third a fourth, so that a line of prairie two hundred miles wide is being patrolled as thoroughly as if there were police stationed at every five miles. This mobile force, sent out in detachments of one, two, three, seldom more than four, trained to independent action and self-reliance, always on the move to prevent rather than to punish crime, is the secret of the safety that has prevailed in the North-West Territories since that country was taken over from the fur companies.

It was in the early seventies that the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company ceased and the Dominion Government took over judicial rights in all that vast territory which lies like an American Russia between the Boundary and the North Pole. The ending of the monopoly was the signal for an inrush



THE BAND OF THE NORTH-WEST MOUNTED POLICE.

of adventurers. Gamblers, smugglers, criminals of every stripe, struck across from the Missouri into the Canadian territory at the foothills of the Rockies. Without a white population, these raffish adventurers could not ply their usual disreputable traffic. The only way to wealth was by the fur trade; and the easiest way to obtain the furs was by smuggling whisky into the country in small quantities, diluting this and trading it to the natives for pelts. Chances of interference were *nil*; for the Canadian Government was thousands of miles distant without either telegraph or railway connection. But the game was not without its dangers. The country at the foothills was inhabited by the Confederacy of the Blackfeet—Bloods, Piegans and Blackfeet—“tigers of the prairie” when sober, and worse than tigers when drunk. The Missouri whisky smugglers found they must either organize for defence or pay for their fun by being exterminated. How many whites were massacred in these drinking frays will never be known; but all about Old Man’s River and Fort

Macleod are gruesome landmarks known as the places where such and such parties were destroyed in the seventies.

The upshot was that the Missouri smugglers emulated the old fur traders and built themselves permanent forts; Robbers’ Roost, Stand Off, Freeze Out, and most famous of all Whoop-Her-Up, whose name for respectability’s sake has recently been changed to “Whoo-Pup,” with an innocent suggestiveness of some poetic Indian title. Whoop-Up—as it was known to plainsmen—was palisaded and loop-holed for musketry, with bastions and cannon and an alarm bell. The fortifications of this place alone, it is said, cost over two thousand pounds, and it at once became the metropolis of the whisky smugglers. Henceforth, only a few Indians were allowed inside the fort at a time, the rest being served through the loop holes.

But the Blackfeet, who loved a man-hunt better than a buffalo hunt, were not to be balked. The trail by which the whisky smugglers came from Fort Benton zigzagged over the rolling

prairie mainly following the bottoms of the precipitous coulees and ravines for a distance of two hundred miles to Whoop-Up. Heavy wagons with canvas tops and yokes of fifteen and twenty oxen drew the freight of liquor through the devious passes that connected ravine with ravine. The Blackfeet are probably the best horsemen in the word. There were places where the defiles were exceptionally narrow, where the wagons got mired, where oxen and freight had to be rafted across rain-swollen sloughs. With a yelling of incarnate fiends that would have stampeded more sober brutes than oxen drawing kegs of whisky, down swooped the Blackfeet at just these hard spots. Sometimes the raids took place at night, when tethers would be cut and the oxen stampeded with the bellowing of a frightened buffalo herd. If the smugglers made a stand there was a fight. If they drew off, the savages captured the booty, and there was also a fight; but in this case the victims were the Indians killed in their own drunken brawls. Then the smugglers organized their famous Spitzzi Cavalry to escort the freighters and defend the fort. Officers were named and regulations drawn up, after which the demoralizing trade went on merrily for the smugglers, but to the utter degradation of the natives.

Protests from the fur company defrauded of lawful trade, and petitions from the missionaries, called the attention of the Dominion Government to the outrageous state of affairs at the foothills of the Rockies. An act was passed for the formation of a mounted constabulary. The spice of danger, deviltry and adventure in the duties of the new force appealed to the popular mind. Men of all ranks tumbled over each other in their eagerness to enlist. Sons of lords, generals and famous novelists enrolled shoulder to shoulder with discharged "Tommies" and Indian scouts; and, curiously enough, the

Mounted Police retain the same heterogeneous elements to-day as when the first enlistment took place. Three hundred men were enrolled and drilled; and in July, 1874, the Mounted Police began their famous march of two thousand miles across the prairie to the foothills, two divisions striking off northward, one only coming to Old Man's River, the smugglers' stronghold, where Colonel Macleod at once marked off the square for a fort on an island in the river. Cottonwood logs were daubed with mud, whitewashed outside and lined with factory cotton inside. Then a British flag was hoisted in opposition to the smugglers' regime.

Here, then, was a handful of men surrounded by a confederacy of Indians noted for their aggressive ferocity. Not a day's ride distant was a fort much stronger than that of the Mounted Police, with cannon, abundance of ammunition and provisions, and four times as many outlaws as there were police. Inside the smugglers' stockades was whisky enough to win the whole Blackfeet Confederacy as allies for the traders. The first thing was to secure the friendship of the Indians. Colonel Macleod invited the chiefs to the new fort. They were *fêted* by the police, given exhibitions of military skill, and shown the cannon. Pointing out a tree more than a mile away, the colonel bade the chiefs watch it. The next instant a cannon-ball tore it up by the roots. That was a better shot than the old mortar over at the smugglers' fort could make. The Blackfeet were greatly impressed; and their visit marked the beginning of a friendship between the Mounted Police and the Indians that has lasted to the present day.

The smugglers were too wary to call down attack from the entire Mounted Police force by attempting armed resistance. They played the well-known game of smugglers the world over. Whoop-Up lay in the bottom of a deep ravine. On one side was a defile



INDIAN SCOUTS.

through the hills named "Slide-In." On the other side was a narrow pass called "Slide-Out." When the redcoats rode clanking through "Slide-In" the smugglers quietly slipped away through "Slide-Out." Patrols scoured the boundary line to the south. Scouts dressed in civilian clothes haunted the south side of the line, and sent word for the patrols to look out for bands of smugglers nearing the boundary along the Benton trail; but instead of smugglers, behold four priests with their personal belongings on a train of pack mules to the fore! But the men who entered "Slide-In," dressed in black robes, left "Slide-Out" in the buckskin regimentals of frontiersmen. The police, of course, exercised the right to search the incoming freight of the ox trains for dutiable goods; and, without going into details in each case, it may be stated that liquor was found in every imaginable disguise—in piano boxes, in stoves, in barrels of coal oil, in bags of flour, inside the yellow rim of a cheese—yes, and to be perfectly explicit, inside what were ostensibly hymn-books and coffins. The most common form of smuggling liquor to the Indians then, as it is to-day, was in bottles labelled "Perfume," "Painkiller," "Ginger," "Medicine."

The smugglers were on the most friendly terms with the police, and frequented Fort Macleod just as the police frequented Whoop-Up; and sometimes surprising discoveries were made during these friendly visits. The

story is told of an officer absently poking his cane in the ground as he stood talking to an old trader in front of the man's store. What the sensations of the trader were when the officer's cane suddenly clicked against the iron hoop of a buried barrel one may guess. An excavation in front of that store resulted in the spilling of several kegs of liquor. The complete gamut of smugglers' wiles had soon been exhausted by police vigilance. Spilt liquor was poor profit. In a few years the smugglers had either quietly withdrawn from the country or taken up more lawful methods of barter. In a force so promiscuously recruited as the Mounted Police, there were sure to be backsliders. To them the whisky traffic offered irresistible temptation. It was so easy to drain the kegs and fill them with water before reporting at headquarters that they had been confiscated and smashed.

Such was the origin of the North-West Mounted Police force sent to patrol and maintain law in a region larger than all the states of the American Union west of the Mississippi. So excellent was the work of the force that when settlement came in, people preferred the services of the Mounted Police to a local constabulary. The first enlistment of 300 was increased to 500 during the construction of the railway, and to 1,000 during the Half-Breed Rebellion of 1885.

The end of open whisky traffic did

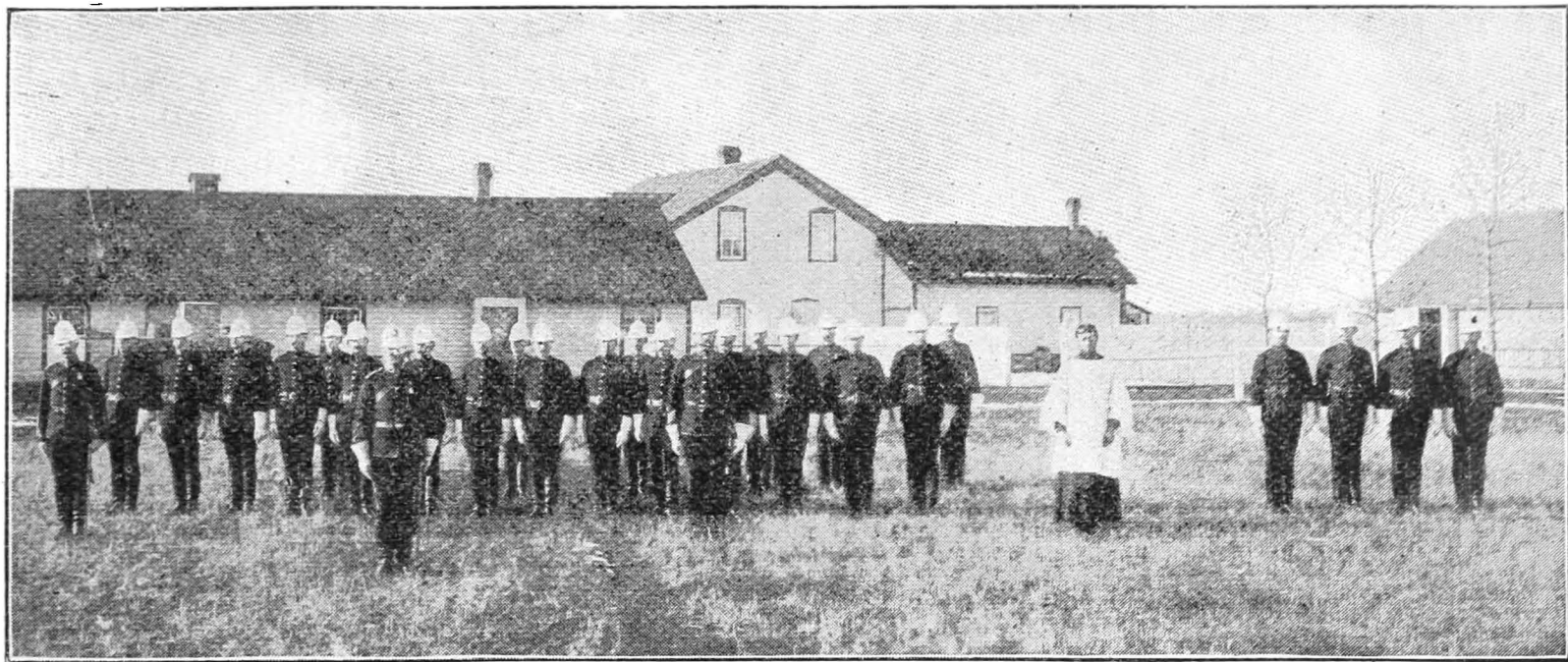
not mean that smuggling had entirely ceased. In those days, liquor was not only forbidden for the Indians, but prohibited to white men throughout the entire Territories, except by special government permit for small quantities. The duty of watching all incoming freight, whether by pack train or ox-cart or railway, fell to the police. The most likely avenue of illicit trade was, of course, along the Boundary, an imaginary line 1,800 miles long with absolutely no settlement at its western end. The deep gullies and rolling hills offered countless hiding places for smugglers. Only the most vigilant patrolling of the Boundary could check the traffic. In summer time, with a good horse under him and frequent relays, this was pleasant enough for a scout; but when winter came with blinding blizzards on fenceless prairies and a temperature that froze the mercury at forty-five below zero, there was work to test the mettle of heroes.

Not long after Fort Macleod was established, urgent occasion arose to send a dispatch to a distant post in the south, warning the officer to be on the lookout for an incoming desperado. The thermometer stood at thirty-five below zero. It was night; and the north wind was humming with that peculiar half growl, half croon, which, every westerner knows, foretells a blizzard. To delay until the storm had passed would let a criminal, hunted for months, slip through the patrols. And then, the policeman's first consideration is duty, *not* the preservation of his own life. The question was—who was the best man to go. A scout of Indian blood would be the most likely to get through a storm without losing his way; for the native rider "travels by the wind," that is, when the white darkness of snow and tempest wipes out all points of the compass, the Indian, like the moist-nosed moose, gets the feel of the wind on his face, knows which direction the wind was coming from when the

sun disappeared, and so gains the points of his compass. Under no conditions whatever will a good Indian scout loose his way; but then, under no condition whatever can a scout of Indian blood be tempted to set out when a storm is brewing. On the other hand, it was not wise to tempt desertion in a land 2,000 miles from fresh recruits, by demanding impossible tasks of men who could as easily ride south over the Boundary and be free, as to a distant police post in the teeth of a storm.

The choice fell on a young man from a home of luxury in an eastern city. He was light, wiry, a swift rider, a splendid pathfinder and one of the most trusted scouts. There was not yet much snow; so he set out on horseback with snow shoes strapped to his saddle. The storm did not break for some hours; and it was hoped that he had reached the police post. A week passed. He did not return. A second messenger was sent. The first had never reached his destination. When spring came, thawing the snow, no sign of horse or rider was found on the prairie. It was commonly thought that one more name must be added to the black list of deserters. But by chance, a detachment set out for the north. The bones of a saddled horse were found on the lee side of a cliff. That disproved the scout's desertion; for why would a deserter travel north? Then it was remembered that the wind had veered completely from north-east to south-east; and the rider, knowing that the wind should be on his back, had turned north. The body was found on the bank of a river. His horse had evidently given out; and the brave fellow had pressed on till the river bank told him that he was off the trail. Then the long frost sleep had claimed him.

Almost as unfortunate was another scout sent with a dispatch to one of the smaller outposts. It was towards spring, when the mid-day sun thaws the surface of the snow and the night



CHURCH PARADE AT MACLEOD, NORTH-WEST TERRITORY.

frosts harden the melted crusts to a glare of ice as dazzlingly bright as the blinding flash of sunlight from polished steel. The thaw had crusted over the trail, and the scout had to keep a sharp eye on the way not to lose the path altogether. Suddenly the mid-day sun developed extraordinary hues. Magenta, purple and black patches began to dance on the snow alternately with wheels and rockets of cheese-coloured fire. Then the light went black altogether, though the man knew that it was broad day. He had become snow-blind. The only thing was to give his horse the bit. The horse stood stock still. By that he knew that he had lost the trail altogether, or the broncho would have followed any visible path. He wheeled the horse about. It still refused to go on; and then the man inferred that the crust of ice had been so hard that the horse could not follow back the way it had come. That night the trooper slept under saddle blankets, with the faithful horse standing sentry. For five days the policeman wandered blindly over the prairie, losing all count of time, eating snow to quench his thirst and sleeping in the holes that the broncho had pawed through the ice-crust to the under-grass. The trooper was now too weak to mount and keep the saddle. As a last hope the thought struck him

that if he unsaddled his horse and turned it loose, it might find its way back to the fort, and so notify his friends that he was lost. He did this; but the faithful creature refused to leave the man lying on the snow, and stood over him in spite of all his efforts to drive it off. The pathetic scene enacted between these two—the blind and half-dead man and the affectionate horse well able to look after itself—can better be imagined than described. On the sixth day the mail-carrier found the pair. The trooper was severely frozen; but rider and horse lived to see many another day's service.

Sometimes the outlaw who is leading the scouts these perilous races fares worse than the Mounted Police. One long vigil for a criminal heading from Montana to the Canadian boundary ended in the patrol espying a black form writhing helplessly on the snow. The refugee was picked up snow-blind and so badly frozen that his hands and feet had to be amputated. He was cared for in the hospital of the barracks till relatives came and took him away, the police deciding that he had suffered sufficient punishment.

It is not surprising that men who had served such an apprenticeship at scouting should have distinguished themselves at the Half-Breed Rebellion. Some of the scouts who attached them-

selves to the force at that time were guilty of acts that must always bring the blush of shame to the white man; but these were recruits picked up temporarily for special service, and their provocation was great. For instance, one of the regular police under Inspector Dickens, son of Charles Dickens, the novelist, was attacked by a mounted Indian. Just as the trooper turned to face his assailant the Indian's horse stumbled, throwing the rider to the ground. The white man's hand was on the trigger of his weapon; but to shoot a fallen foe would not be true to the traditional code of police honour. A moment later the enraged redskin had leapt to his feet, and the policeman fell, shot through the heart. At another time the police scouts came suddenly on the mutilated bodies of two comrades. Not satisfied with laving their hands in the blood of the slain, according to the savage superstition that such an act imparts bravery, the squaws had defiantly stuck the hearts of the dead on poles directly across the path of the advancing scouts. These acts should be remembered when stories are told of Indians found scalped.

As the troops approached one beleaguered post, where twenty-five Mounted Police were defending 500 refugees, half of whom were suspected to be in sympathy with the rebels, the scouts were sent forward under cover of night to ascertain the state of the assailants outside the post. The chief scout was famous for his daring, and, leaving horses to the rear, scattered his companions in a semi-circle, and gradually approached inside the Indian lines. When they were in the thick of the rebels a fire broke out in the village, lighting up the night. The scout dropped to hiding in some long grass, where, by the light of the fire, he could watch what the Indians were doing. Creeping forward, he was peering through the grass, when an Indian voice grunted out a cough directly in his ear, and the scout

found himself cheek by jowl with a tawny-skinned tatterdemalion, who evidently mistook the policeman for a fellow rebel. Exactly what conversation took place between the two is not related; but the scout did not enlighten the Indian as to the error, and as soon as opportunity offered slipped back among the grasses and fired the shot that was to be the signal for the troops.

The same swift, decisive self-reliance has characterised all the dealings of the Mounted Police with the Indians. In those days the prison where criminals from the Territories were confined was at Winnipeg, 2,000 miles by pack trail from the outermost police posts. To have kept a horse thief at the scene of his action in a reserve of several thousand Indians, with only a defence of twenty or thirty policemen, would have invited disaster. In one case, scouts discovered that the Blackfeet were planning to rescue their brave as he was being driven across the plains. A detachment of police rode away east *without* the prisoner. Quietly, another detachment left at night, and also rode away to the east. Finally, a third detachment *with* the prisoner slipped out from Fort Macleod at midnight. The first two companies had spread themselves out in a patrol with relays of fresh horses for the entire distance between Fort Macleod and Fort Walsh, which was the next eastern fort. Only stopping long enough to hitch fresh teams to the wagons, the escort had dashed across 300 miles to Fort Walsh before the Blackfeet knew that their warrior had been carried off.

Latterly the duties of the Mounted Police have been of a more peaceful nature, for the most part those of a mobile constabulary. These duties cover a region 1,000 miles wide, 500 miles from north to south. Boundary patrols are still maintained to intercept the horse thief who drives a ranch band across the line to be quickly sold; and on the Boundary patrol the police



annually travel more than a million miles. The "rustler," who appropriates unbranded animals for his own herds, must also be watched, traced, and punished. Prairie fires that might sweep away the year's food for the herds must be guarded and checked. Foreign settlers who know neither the laws nor the climate of the country must be advised and frequently helped. Gold seekers pouring into the frozen north are under surveillance, too. All these duties distribute the seventy-nine odd detachments of police from the International Boundary to the very gates of the Arctic in Yukon.

Listening to the conversation of the Mounted Police, as one encounters them everywhere in the North-West, in the red coat and white helmet of dress parade or the sombrero and khaki of scouting costume, it is distinctly evident that they are men of a different stripe from the Tommy Atkins of the British

regulars. The Mounted Policeman is a *head*, not an automaton nor a flunkey. This was curiously illustrated during the visit of the Prince of Wales to the Territories last year. As the royal train drew in to one of the frontier towns, two liveried outrunners dashed breathlessly to the platform, shouting excitedly for the police "to get out the royal horses." The troopers of the university type smiled and said nothing; but one of the frontiersmen in khaki frowned and took a bite of chewing tobacco.

The two little men in livery became apoplectic.

"Don't you men hear? Get out the horses? Whose going to get out the horses?"

The trooper in khaki again calmly took consolation for the insult from his tobacco. "Have some? No? Horses? Did you say *horses*? Well—don't burst your buttons! What do you think *you* are here for? Get 'em out yourself."