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The Silent Force

Scenes from the life of the Mounted Police of Canada

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Chapter VIII

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The whole affair palpitated with international comedy. The impartial onlooker could enjoy the rare view of three nations stepping lightly. The Americans, inwardly praying that the Sioux vanish from their sight, were offering in studied phrases to take them back. Canada, just as eagerly hoping to be rid of them, was contenting herself with only politest dissent. While the Sioux, in warm protestations of love for their White Grandmother, concealed their delight at the prospect of perpetual food.

The strain of all this diplomacy told broadest on the Sioux, for a measure of a man's civilization is the degree to which he is able to endure hypocrisy. And there were so many reminders of the natural state of things: scapls dangling from the belt, horses—other people's horses—grazing with a subconstable for sole proprietor. Once, at Wood End, this particular temptation resulted in the making off with a few police horses from the herd. The non-com in charge had fired some remonstrative shots over the thieves' departing heads, in reply to which Sitting Bull sent back word, instead of the horses, that his young men were not to be disturbed. At once Inspector Allen rode with a dozen men to the Sioux camp and informed Sitting Bull that he was forgetting where he was, that the laws of Canada had not changed, and he would thank him for the horses. The temperamental old necromancer was

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in one of his recurrent ugly moods, and said that he would like to see Allen take the horses. The officer held up his end of the conversation by replying that he would take Sitting Bull's own horse if he knew it was stolen. Whereat Bull said it was. The vistas of new disaster opened as if by a sliding door.

Little is known about Inspector Allen, but in this abbreviated action the clouds part and a figure in uniform nudging his horse nearer and nearer to sudden death if Sitting Bull so wills. He draws close enough to put his arm about the Indian's sacred person and lifts him from the saddle, drops him on the ground, and leads off the horse. The tribe are thunderstruck, which gives the Police the necessary moment to wedge their mounts between the savages and their officer. Then they close in a wild melee. Shouting, and striking, disentangling, retreating, the Police reach the fort, where they stable the emblem of dangerous victory and throw the place into some sort of shape for defense. Every spare vessel is filled with water, the extra ammunition boxes are buried, and letters to friends written and cached in an iron box. "Whatever we do," wrote Allen, "we shall give a good account of ourselves."

With twilight the Indians gathered, riding along the bench above the fort, ki-yi-ing, shooting at the flag on its pole in the stockade, and hurling threats at the flag-silent inmates, threats which the interpreter admitted were descriptive of their fate to come. Bravado was the only role, for if the Indians should break through their unsophisticated respect for scarlet nonchalance or reason away their dread of scarlet vengeance, the fort would be but slight shelter, and help was impossibly far away. So the men darkened the barrack-room, to give the appearance of having gone to bed, and smoked and whispered on the rack of suspense, waiting for the attack signal, and in

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imagination perishing, no doubt, twenty times to the hour. Once a concerted war-whoop brought hope to those who would have it over; but a lull succeeded.

The half-breed imperturbable, stole out. Chief Broad Tail had interfered. The squaws were screeching around him, saying to the young braves, "Lend us your breechclouts and we'll choke the cousins of the Long Knives." Provost brought Broad Tail back to