

Vanished Men

By GEORGE MARSH

INSTALLMENT ELEVEN

THE STORY SO FAR: Bound for the Chibougamau gold country, six men lost their lives on the Nottaway river. Red Malone, Garrett Finlay, brother of one of the six, and Blaise, half-breed guide, arrive at Nottaway posing as surveyors.

The stiff line of Blaise's mouth eased into the shadow of a smile. "Wal, it is not first time woman make two man look like fool. But smart or fool, you are fren' of me! I fight for you just de same!"

"That's the talk, you old carcass!" Red clapped Blaise on a thick shoulder.

Finlay went to the tent and shortly returned with his reply to Lise Demaris which he handed to Malone. It read:

"I trust you and believe in you. That night when they left me in the swamp I was pretty bitter. Against my better judgment I had put my faith in you and walked into a trap. It was hard to believe, after that talk of ours, after that moment on the beach before you left, but I had to. Later, the bitterness faded. There had been something too honest about you, too real to have been acting. Now I know that without your knowledge they followed you to the sand beach.

"I cannot meet you until next week. You'll hear from me then. But please don't worry. We'll take care of you. I've just received good news from the railroad. The break is coming soon. Everything will turn out all right. Kinebik has double-crossed Isadore to save his hide and I'm leaving tonight for the head of the lake. Keep a brave heart. You are safe.

"Garrett Finlay."

Finishing reading Red said: "Great stuff, chief! Wish it was true! If Isadore gets hold of this note, what a jolt he'll get!"

"Exactly. I had to consider that possibility so fed him a headache. It would send Tete-Blanche to the head of the lake hunting us while we're making for Matagami. Besides, I've got to keep up her courage."

Having ordered Moise and Michel Wabistan to meet him on his return with news from the old chief, that night Finlay passed Isadore's and spent the next day concealed near the outlet. The following evening the Peterboro slipped into the Quiet Water, the slow moving thoroughfare connecting Waswanipi with the chain of large lakes to the west. Three days paddle away lay Matagami and the Hudson's Bay post.

The murk of a thick July night blanketed forest and water.

"It's made to order for us, Garry!" whispered Red, from the waist of the boat where he sat behind Flame with his Lee-Enfield across his knees while, in the stern, Blaise handled the canoe with a buried paddle.

"Remember the island which splits the river about five miles below here?" returned Garry. "That's where they'll camp. They'll figure that a canoe can't pass them there without being seen or heard. But they didn't count on a night like this."

"If they hear us and shoot do we lie doggo and push through, or—"

"We don't fire unless we have to! I want to pass them without their knowing it. We have to return this way, you know."

"Very good, sergeant! Good luck to us!"

"If they're guarding both channels, we've got to pass within yards of them. Have a pineapple handy, Red! Warn us when you throw it so we can flatten."

"I'm hot to toss one into that mob."

"All right! Remember, no firing unless we're caught!"

As they rounded a bend Blaise stopped the boat with a swift thrust of his paddle. In the distance, like a new moon smothered in drift, a yellow smudge stained the blackness.

"They've got a fire!" whispered Finlay. "I don't understand it!"

"We drop close and have a look," returned Blaise.

The canoe moved on and was again checked. "You hear dem?"

"No."

"Singing!" muttered Red. "The damned fools are singing!"

"They're drunk!" whispered Garry.

"They sure are!" returned Malone, inhaling the damp air through his teeth.

"Ah-hah! De Montagnais drink Isadore's whiskey!" grunted Blaise.

"Indians! So Tete-Blanche wins!" Disappointment, like wind off a barren, turned Finlay cold. "Kinebik's won over the Montagnais! Thank God, we didn't bring Lise!"

"This is luck!" whispered Malone. "They're so drunk they've forgotten us."

"We can't be sure. They may have a guard on both shores," warned Garry. "We'll take the right-hand channel, Blaise. What in—"

The sudden squaring of feet and wings as a flock of disturbed shell drake skittered ahead downstream, stopped the boat.

"That cooks our goose!" cursed Red, softly. "They'll know something startled the ducks and will lay for us!"

"Go on, Blaise!" snapped Finlay. "We're in for it, now!"

The canoe was passing the fire. In seconds they'd be clear and lost

to investigate their deaths. They visit Isadore, rich fur man living in an isolated, palatial home. He seems implicated in their deaths. Here they meet Lise, his pretty stepdaughter. After answering her appeal for help, Finlay is ambushed, but later escapes. They continue to keep it a secret that they are Mounted Police. Sent to investigate the deaths of the six "drowned" men, Finlay believes Lise is innocent and writes her a note.

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"They didn't believe we were on the survey," replied Finlay. Into his gray eyes crept the mist of memory. His voice was rough with pain as he asked: "Did those boys stop here last summer?"

"Yes. Nice boys, too!"

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"Your brother? Oh, I'm sorry! You didn't say one was your brother when you told of finding their bodies."

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downstream. Then there was a grating sound as the nose of the Peterboro slid over a sand bar and the canoe came to a dead stop. They were trapped, yards from the shore!

Finlay and Red swiftly traded rifles for poles while Blaise strained to free the boat. One false move and they'd draw a blast of fire. They threw their weight desperately on their poles. There came the low call of "Kekway!" from the murk. The three men stiffened.

Crouched in the gloom the crew of the canoe waited for the crash of rifles in their faces. A silence so deep it beat like sound, pulsed in their ears. Ten—twenty seconds and the men in the bow felt the canoe tremble. Blaise's signal to go! Like one man they strained against their poles. There was the scrape of wood on sand, the low wash of water and the canoe was backed clear.

The nose of the boat had sheered off into deeper water when again, the call of "Kekway!" rose from the invisible shore. The three stopped breathing as the boat drifted. Suddenly there was a movement in the alders and spurts of flame from exploding rifles stabbed the gloom. With a savage thrust Blaise jumped the canoe downstream. The enraged airedale rose under his blanket, but was forced flat. There was a stampede of feet along the shore and full in their faces blazed a barrage of rifle shots.

The canoe grounded and was cleared again while the rifles of the

Montagnais spat blindly at the invisible target. At last, far downstream Blaise trailed his paddle.

"Thanks, Isadore, for that whiskey!" panted Red, splashing water on his bleeding cheek. "If it hadn't been for the fact that they were drunk for a fare-thee-well, they'd have slaughtered us on that bar! Good thing we didn't let them have it, though! They'd have fired at the flashes. I thought they'd jump into the canoe."

"They didn't know what they were shooting at, Red! The guards on shore heard the duck pass; then the wash of water when we shoved off. By now they probably think it was one of those bank beaver we saw when we came up the river."

"W'en Injun gret drunk dey like to shoot de gun," grunted Blaise. "Dey navare know if we pass or not unless nose of canoe leave mark on dat bar. I tink not. De current take care of dat."

"You're right, Blaise," said Finlay. "We had them guessing. And we'll keep them guessing. I wonder if Kinebik has won them all over or if these were only a few of the wildest Tete-Blanche bribed with Isadore's whiskey."

"It looks like Wabistan had lost all his influence," said Red.

"Mebbe," replied Blaise. "We see." And his long paddle bit chunks from the water.

"Lise was right when she warned that Isadore is trying to bottle us up," said Finlay. "With the Montagnais hunting us all over the lake we'll have to step lively or we'll never see that plane from the north."

CHAPTER XII

Three days later the keel of the Peterboro slid into the gravel beach at the Hudson's Bay post at Matagami. The door of the white-washed log trade-house opened and two men started for the landing. At the gate of the slab dog-stockade surrounding the trader's quarters a tall girl, whose golden bob the sun touched into flame, curiously watched. From a window of the frame house a woman and two half-grown children stared at the three men on the beach, for white travelers were rare at Matagami, buried in the Nottaway wilderness.

"Good day, gentlemen! Welcome to Matagami!" The trader, a sandy-haired man of fifty, shook the hands

of the strangers. "I'm Duncan McNab, in charge here, and this is David, my head man."

Finlay introduced himself and his friends. "We passed through the lake some time back, Mr. McNab, on our way in to map Waswanipi."

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McNab slowly returned the badge. His eyes strayed from the bronzed faces of the Mounties to the lines of their hard bodies filling the wool shirts and whipcord breeches. "Police, eh? I might have known from your eyes and the set of your shoulders. Well! Well! Up on Waswanipi posing as surveyors! So it's Isadore, at last!"

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"Yes. Nice boys, too!"

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"Thanks," said Finlay. "I'll shut up my dog, too, before there's a fight."

Shortly the three white men sat in the traderoom.

"Now, Mr. Finlay," said McNab, exhaling a cloud of smoke, "would you mind getting down to brass tacks?"

Finlay was measuring the caliber of the man whom circumstances had forced him to trust in order to insure the delivery of his message to the railroad. This trader looked a man full in the eye and had a straightforward way with him. He seemed staunch. According to reports he had been worsted by Isadore in the fight for the fur trade. That was in their favor and should keep his mouth closed. There was nothing to be gained by waiting.

"How well do you know Jules Isadore?" Garry suddenly asked.

The veins lifted in McNab's neck and temples as he tore his pipe from his teeth and rasped: "Too damned well!"

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McNab slowly returned the badge. His eyes strayed from the bronzed faces of the Mounties to the lines of their hard bodies filling the wool shirts and whipcord breeches. "Police, eh? I might have known from your eyes and the set of your shoulders. Well! Well! Up on Waswanipi posing as surveyors! So it's Isadore, at last!"

"Yes," said Finlay, "it's Isadore, at last!" Then he described the events of the past weeks while McNab, drawing furiously on his pipe, punctuated the narrative with outraged grunts.

"That's the story, McNab. For the present, not a word, even to your wife. When can you send a canoe to the railroad?"

"We're sending one shortly," he said. "But their firing on you on the Nottaway, then ambushing you, and you supposed to be on the government survey! I can't get over it, Sergeant! Of course I'd heard at the railroad of these reported drownings and had had my suspicions."

"They didn't believe we were on the survey," replied Finlay. Into his gray eyes crept the mist of memory. His voice was rough with pain as he asked: "Did those boys stop here last summer?"

"Yes. Nice boys, too!"

"One was my brother."

"Your brother? Oh, I'm sorry! You didn't say one was your brother when you told of finding their bodies."

"No."

"It's tough, Sergeant Finlay, damned tough! That crook—" McNab stopped his pacing to stand over Garry and shake a thick finger. "Why—why the man's a lunatic—mad as a hermit wolf! He can't get away with this!"

"He's managed to so far."

McNab's face filled with blood as his anger increased. "I've seen a lot—guessed a lot, since the Company sent me here three years ago to try to save the trade on this lake. We learned that Tete-Blanche was bribing our hunters with whiskey to leave us and trade their fur with Isadore. I reported it to the Company and the authorities. His freight was searched at Nottaway but they found nothing. They thought I was trying to hurt him because he was a competitor, and dropped it. I was reprimanded by our District Inspector for bringing charges I couldn't prove. Couldn't prove!" snorted McNab. "I had all the proof in the world."

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