

**THE  
LONE TRAIL**

**BY  
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# **THE LONE TRAIL**

## **CHAPTER I**

### **THE MURDER AT THE T-INVERTED R**

Inspector Barker, of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, raised his frowning eyes from the weekly report he was scrawling, to watch absent-mindedly the arrival of the Calgary express as it roared out from the arches of the South Saskatchewan bridge and pulled up at the station.

It was a morning ritual of the Inspector's. Three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, relatively at the same hour—if Rocky Mountain slides, foothill floods, and prairie snowstorms permitted—the same train broke in on the mid-forenoon dullness of the "cow-town" of Medicine Hat; and the same pair of official eyes followed it dully but with the determination of established convention, clinging to it off and on during its twenty minutes' stop for a fresh engine and supplies to carry it on its four days' run eastward.

But on Mondays the transcontinental was favoured with a more concentrated attention. On that morning Inspector Barker prepared his weekly report. A pile of letters and staff reports scattered his desk; a smaller pile, the morning's mail, was within reach of his left hand. His right clumsily clutched a fountain pen. Thirty years of strenuous Mounted Police duties, from Constable to Inspector, during a period when Indians, rustlers, cattle-thieves, and the scum of Europe and Eastern Canada, were held to a semblance of order only by the stern hand of the "red-coats," had robbed his chirography of any legibility it ever possessed.

His iron-grey hair was rumpled by frequent delvings of his left hand, and the left needle of his waxed moustache was sadly out of line. His tunic was open—he never removed it when on duty—more in capitulation to mental than to physical discomfort, though Medicine Hat can startle more records in July than in the depth of winter, cold-blooded official reports to the contrary notwithstanding. His pipe lay cold beside the half-spilled tobacco pouch that always adorned the corner of his blotting pad.

Over on the station platform before his window the crowd thinned. A man ran along the top of the cars with a hose, thrusting it into a tiny trap-door, flicking up a slide in the nozzle, holding it a moment till the tanks below filled, flicking the slide down again, and then on to the next-trap door. A butcher's boy with a heavy basket on his arm scrambled down Main Street, crossed the track, and galloped with shuffling feet along the platform to the diner. The conductor drew his watch, examined it critically, raised his hand, and the fresh engine started noisily for its relief at the next divisional point, Swift Current.

Any morning that the Inspector was on duty the arrival of the Calgary express produced a similar scene in and out of the Police barracks—except a few of the trimmings indicative of mental irritation; any *Monday* morning you would find trimmings and all.

Yet throughout the tangle of that summer's special Police task Inspector Barker's mind reverted in his moments of leisure to the passing of an innocent daily train.

He was lowering his eyes reluctantly to the completion of his weekly irritation, when the desk telephone rang sharply, peremptorily. He jerked it to him.

"Yes, yes!"

"I'm sorry, sir, to have to report——"

"Drop the palaver, Faircloth!" snapped the Inspector. "I take that for granted."

"A murder was——"

"Hold on, hold on! Hold the line a minute!"

The Inspector dropped the receiver, scrawled an illegible but well-known "Barker, Inspector," at the bottom of the sheet before him, jammed it into an envelope and sealed it. At least he would have a week of freedom for the task implied by Corporal Faircloth's interrupted disclosure.

"Now!" he shouted into the telephone, one hand instinctively buttoning his tunic to more official formality.

Faircloth restarted:

"Last night, shortly after midnight, at the T-Inverted R——"

"Bite it off, for Heaven's sake!" broke in the Inspector. "Who, and how, and by whom?"

"Billy Windover—shot—cattle-thieves!" the Corporal chipped off.

For just the fraction of a second Inspector Barker waited. Then:

"Well? Nothing more?"

The Division knew that tone.

"Two hours before we were informed," apologised the Corporal. "Trouble on the telephone line. Followed the trail—they got the cattle as well—till lost it in fresh tracks of the round-ups."

The Inspector laughed shortly.

"Did you expect a paper-chase trail?"

The Corporal made no reply. Usually it took him a sentence or two to remember the Inspector's impatience, but for the particular interview concerned he observed the training well when he did recall it.

"Why didn't you telephone right away? Why did you give the trail up? Oh, damn it, wait!"

For a moment or two the only sound in the barracks office was the buzzing of the flits on the dirty window glass. Thereafter he was himself.

"Any strangers seen out there in the last couple of days? Any cowboys off their beats?"

"No time yet to enquire, sir."

"Get Aspee and Hughes out immediately. Did the tracks lead toward the Cypress Hills?"

"No, sir."

"Hm-m-m!"

"A bit north-east—far as we could follow."

The Inspector paused. "What's your plan?"



"Going to scurry round—to look for the cattle."

It came with just a suggestion of defiance, as if the speaker were a little ashamed of the sound of it but was prepared to defend it. The Inspector laughed.

"God bless you!" he mocked. "How did you think of it?"

"The very cattle themselves," Faircloth persisted. "It happens——"

The Inspector's laugh became less pleasant. "And you think——"

"Pardon, sir; but it isn't quite as silly as it sounds. I know this particular herd almost as well as their own punchers—and I think I know something of brands."

"Lad, your optimism is contagious—but this dairy-maid tracking is such a new stunt in the Force. When you come across Co-Bossie and Spot give them my compliments and ask them to drop in some afternoon——"

He sickened of his own banter.

"Get Aspee and Hughes out immediately," he rasped. "Remain yourself within reach of the phone for fifteen minutes. I'll have a campaign then.... Do you happen to recall that this is the third case of cattle-stealing in your district in a month? ... By the way, know anything about dogs—tracking dogs? I expect a couple of rippers from down East in a day or two. I'll get them out to you. See what you've let the Force sink to! Now hustle!"

He slammed the receiver into its place and sank back in his chair, chin resting on breast. A constable, receiving no reply to his

knock, opened the back door softly—and closed it again more softly. He knew that attitude of his chief.

## CHAPTER II

### MORTON STAMFORD: TENDERFOOT

Corporal Faircloth hung up the telephone receiver and strolled to the door, still bridling at the Inspector's ridicule. For several minutes he stood looking thoughtfully out on the familiar prairie scene, where not another spot of human life or habitation was visible as far as the dark line of hills to the south-east. But an incongruous telephone line, stretching a zigzag course of rough poles away into the south-eastern distance, told of isolated ranch-houses cuddled in far-away valleys.

A dark spot moved into view over a southern rise and crept along the top. Faircloth instinctively seized a pair of field-glasses from a case hanging beside the door and focused them on the distant rider, then, content, dropped them dreamily back. Away off there lay Dead Dogie Coulee, just now, he knew, full of cattle.

The telephone behind him rang, and he hastened to it, trying to compose himself for the Inspector's orders. But it was not Inspector Barker.

"Hello, Faircloth!" called a laughing voice. "How's the Cypress Hills hermitage?"

"Oh, Stamford!" Faircloth was thinking rapidly. "What's the little editor got on his mind now? Make it brief: I'm expecting the Inspector to call up."

"Why has who been murdered by whom?"

Faircloth laughed. "The brevity of it deserves more than I can tell you. Who told you—anything?"

"The Inspector."

"Then why not get it all from him?"

Stamford chuckled into the telephone at the other end.

"I got the impression that my arrival at the barracks was inopportune. The extent of the particulars I got was a particular request to betake myself elsewhere. I betook. I came to a friend."

"And the friend must fail you. You're too hopeful for the West, Stamford. I'd tell you all I dare—you know that. No, not a bit of use pleading."

"Then," said Stamford, "permit me to tell you to your face that when next I see you I'll——"

Faircloth cut him short with a laugh. "No threats to the Police, little man. I'll tell you what I'll do. On Thursday I'm coming to town for the Dunmore Junction cattle shipping. By the way, as a tenderfoot you should see it. Drive along out and hear the latest. Bye-bye! I'm busy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dunmore Junction, bald, bleak and barren, four miles from Medicine Hat, consisted of nothing more than a railway station, a freight shed, and a commodious freight yard, marking the connecting point of the Crow's Nest branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway with the main line. It could not well be more and remain the principal shipping station for the vast herds that roamed the prairies for eighty miles from Medicine Hat. The open spaces

about the Junction were necessary for the herding of the steers awaiting their call to the shipping stockades. Even the station staff lived in Medicine Hat, the shifts changing with the arrival and passage of the trains to town.

Thither Morton Stamford, editor of the *Journal*, directed the only trustworthy horse in town and a good-enough buggy. As a new experience he could not afford to miss the cattle shipping, though the following day was publication day.

Morton Stamford was a tenderfoot. What was more deplorable from his point of view, he looked it. He was small, fair-haired, mild and inoffensive of manner, and from stiff hat to cloth-topped boots was stamped as a fresh arrival from "the cent-belt," as Western Canada termed the petty East where the five-cent piece was not the minimum of exchange.

Two months ago he had dropped from the train at the town of the funny name, attracted as much by the name as by the advertisement in *The Toronto Globe*. When he had succeeded in steeling himself to the general atmosphere of disdain and suspicion, as well as to the rival occupancy of his room at the hotel, he discovered sufficient enthusiasm left to inspect the newspaper he had come to look over. And, having decided that the introduction of modified Eastern methods would be profitable, he had come to terms with the disgusted English proprietor whose stubborn adherence to the best traditions of *The Times* and *The Telegraph* "back home" had, at the end of his resources, convinced him that Huddersfield or Heaven was his home, not the riotous, undignified, unappreciative Canadian West.

Already Stamford had seen more of the real life of the West than many an old-timer citizen of Medicine Hat. Such portions of a spring round-up as were within range of a buckboard, a bucking contest, and limited visits to four ranches had almost made him an authority on Stetsons, chaps, and cowboy slang. He simply doted on cowboys, without discrimination. He loved the Mounted Police, too, who had quickly discovered in him a soul above steers and bronchos; and at his fingertips was a motley assortment of stories of doubtful and certain unauthenticity that painted the future in rosy colours of excited hope just round the corner.

He was small of stature, but imagination and a capacity for thrills are not corporally circumscribed.

When he arrived, Dunmore Junction was no longer lonely. Within two miles of the station platform was more life than Medicine Hat had seen since the buffalo drifted drearily to other hunting-grounds before the civilisation of the rancher and the barbarism of gory hunters. Out there in the rolling folds of the prairie two thousand head were looking for the last time on their limitless pastures, kept under control by a cloud of cowboys, in herds as distinct as possible according to ownership. Scarcely a steer was visible, but at intervals a wildly riding cowboy dashed from a coulee in pursuit of protest against the extended restraint.

Back of the station, where his livery horse was tied with the care and insecurity of a tenderfoot, a dozen bronchos dozed, a few tied to the rail, most merely with reins thrown to the ground. About Stamford the platform was alive with lounging cowboys in every style of cowboy dress; and among them the station-master and his staff, a couple of brakemen from the shunting-engine crew, and three or four ranchers—scarcely distinguishable from their own

punchers to-day—were more alertly eyeing the preparations for the coming task.

For two days it would continue. During that time several score of cowboys would sleep and eat on the prairie, fed from their own mess-wagons, with here and there a bed-wagon, though in the semi-arid belt about Medicine Hat there was little danger of rain from June to September.

It was a Red Deer River shipment. The thin line of ranchers along the Red Deer, sixty miles to the north of Medicine Hat, had combined, but most of the herd belonged to "Cockney" Aikens, of the H-Lazy Z ranch.

Stamford recognised Aikens immediately. Only a blind man would fail at least to see him.

Cockney Aikens, his nickname derived from an aggressive English origin he did his best to flaunt, stood well over six feet without his riding boots, his big frame wrapped in a wealth of muscle no amount of careless indolence could conceal. Handsome, graceful in spite of his lazy movements, he seemed to have gone to brawn. Laughs came easily to his lips, and the noise of them made other sounds pause to listen. "Cockney" was to him a compliment; if anyone implied otherwise he was careful—and wise—to conceal it.

"Hello, you little tenderfoot!" he called, as Stamford wound humbly and unseen through the indifferent wall of Stetson hats, flannel shirts, and leather or hairy chaps that blocked the end of the platform. "Where's that girl I advertised for?"

Stamford grinned.

"You're an optimist, Cockney. Just as I get some innocent female rounded up to clean your boots, grill a coyote steak, and wield a branding iron between times, she finds out the semi-lunar location of that unearthly ranch of yours. I warned you that the *Journal* might find the missing link, a mother-in-law, or the street address of a Cypress Hills wolf, but a 'general' for the Red Deer—impossible!"

"About all I see for it," growled Cockney, "is to kidnap one—unless you open your eyes to the only possible use for a man of your dimensions and come out to wash my dishes yourself. I'll pay you as much as you can hope to make from that mangy sheet of yours—a more honourable living than robbing a struggling rancher of two shillings for a hopeless ad."

Stamford solemnly produced a large leather purse and extracted a coin from the cash department.

"Here, you overgrown sponge! I figure that ad cost me a quarter in setting, make-up, run, and paper—a shilling, if you can understand no other values. Here's the other quarter. But bear in mind this—if you take it I'll show you up. I'll camp on your trail, rout out your past crimes, and publish them to the last drop of blood. I feel sure you've committed burglary, murder, or arson somewhere in your dark career; and, besides, you're an arrant bully."

Though Stamford knew as much—or as little—of Cockney Aikens' past as the rest of Medicine Hat, and the big rancher's merry and spendthrift ways belied suspicion of irritation at the loss of "two shillings," the blatant exaggeration of the editor failed



somehow to carry off the banter lightly. Cockney's face went grim, and a strange silence fell along the platform.

Then Cockney himself smothered it by a physical retort. Reaching over, he seized Stamford's shoulders and lifted him by the coat at arm's length until their faces were on a level.

"If I had this much added to my stature," blustered the editor, in affected fury, vainly striking out his short arms at the face opposite, "I'd punch you on the nose."

"If you were this size," grinned Aikens, "I mightn't take liberties. Just the same," he added, with a ring of boyish disappointment in his voice, "it would be one h—l of a fight. You've got the white matter, I guess, but I'm just spoiling for a rough-and-tumble. I haven't had what you might call exercise since—" he flushed through his tan, "—oh, for a long time."

It so happened that everyone, including Cockney, was thinking of the "exercise" he had once, largely at the expense of the police, town and Mounted; and the memory of it to the one most concerned was not sweet.

A long line of cattle cars rolled quietly down the track before the corrals, a brakesman on the top keeping up a steady signalling to the engine. When the first two cars were opposite the gangways from the two loading stockades, his hand shot out and the train came to a violent halt. Almost instantly the gates at the bottom of the gangways opened and two lines of steers from the crowded, white-fenced pens rushed up the slope to the open doors of the cars.

The lounging cowboys sprang to life. Throwing themselves in excited abandon on their bronchos behind the station, they tore

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