

THE FINDING OF FITZGERALD

A True Story of the Royal North-West Mounted Police

T. MORRIS LONGSTRETH

"WE'LL never know now," said the Mounted Policeman, more to his photograph album than to me, "what made him do it. Fitz wasn't the one to talk, anyway."

I smiled inwardly. They were all alike in that, these Mounted Police, and now Staff-Sergeant Dempster was talking at last. To be sure I had survived several hours of misgivings. He had read my letter of introduction and said nothing—had invited me to supper and said next to nothing, and we had done the dishes still in silence, until a photograph on the wall had blessedly led to the album whose pages were memory.

I reasoned that if a man had crossed from Halifax to Vancouver, taken the boat to Skagway, the train to White Horse, another boat down the Yukon to Stewart River, and then penetrated for three days into the dark backward and abysm of that territory to see Dempster at his little isolated detachment, it would at least prove a certain sincerity. But the famous non-com. who was now lighting his pipe, had met other sincere questioners and remained unmoved, and I wondered what *might* move him.

The regular features of his almost Indian-dark face spoke steadiness,

his deep brown eyes and low voice harmonized with the vast silent setting beyond the cabin door, for he had lived so long with stillness as to condemn expression. And then, without preamble, he spoke of the days of Francis J. Fitzgerald, while I watched the long, motionless sub-arctic summer twilight gather over one of the great solitudes of the world—the theater of this story.

"We'll never know now what prompted the brown-haired boy, rather tall and slight, to stand before the recruiting officer in Halifax—the autumn of '88 I think it was—and say he would like to join up. He had been working in a shoe store and found that walls were a torment to him. He told Sergeant McGibbon his age was twenty-one years and six months, and when McGibbon expressed a doubt that despite a blasted Irish assurance, he looked barely seventeen, Fitz remarked that one shouldn't always judge a man by his looks. There was something attractive about him, even as a kid, and when the sawbones passed on him as a fair candidate, McGibbon swallowed his doubts and signed him on. So Fitzgerald went home and announced to his family he was leaving for Regina.

"Fitz hadn't been long on the force before he emerged from that state of suppression so becoming to a buck, to appear before the Commissioner—Commissioner Larry Herchmer, then—to answer to the charge of using profane language toward a superior. He was sternly admonished, since cursing even a corporal is improper. Still more improper was it to be seen crossing the barrack's-square under tow, like one of his native Halifax barges, with a constable carrying his hat. Fitz's defense was just like him. He said that if he had been able to get more liquor during the winter, the few drinks he'd taken wouldn't have gone so to his head. Herchmer warned him that he'd be dismissed for a single repetition.

"Fitz must have taken the warning to heart. For nine years nothing was heard of him even on the defaulter's sheet. But the life had got him. He kept on re-engaging, postponing the commonplaces of civilian ambition—money, a home, a settled existence—and acquiring a fondness for the unfrequented places and the strange enjoyments which are the gift of insecurity. As a boy he had let an old sailor tattoo a star on the back of his right hand; a star, mind you, and not an anchor—there's a difference. And now, after nine years, his star was about to rise.

"Inspector Moodie, one of the great pioneering men of this outfit, chose Fitzgerald for company on the long patrol from Edmonton up here. It took the best part of two years, and Moodie recommended Constable Fitz for promotion. As a corporal he volunteered for the mounted rifles

in the South African War. An incident of that time will show you his determination to carry out anything he set his mind on. He was camping several miles from the place where his application had to be registered. During the night he was awakened and on rushing out of the tent to see what was wrong, caught his little toe in a guy rope and broke the bone. The next day he walked several miles without his boot which he put on just before reaching the office. He was afraid if they knew of the broken toe he would not be able to get away with the bunch.

"It was shortly after the war that I first saw him. He had just come from London. He was handsome now, straight, well-set and his clear gray eyes seemed able to tell your very thoughts. He had won honors, the confidence of men, and had seen the world. Down East he met a girl who must have had more than the usual charm, for Fitz went to the length of getting engaged."

The staff-sergeant paused to refill his pipe. "With all respect to women," he resumed, "they are not a man's destiny. That is a mystery already in the veins, a necessity to be drunk from the cup of chance. This girl must have seen the star on Fitzgerald's hand, and caught the eagerness in his voice when she let him talk about his long patrols, the passes of the Skeena and the silent rivers flooding north. But she blinded herself to these signs or she would have insisted on his 'purchasing.' She made the mistake of letting him go North unmarried, to finish out his term. They never ceased to be engaged, but never saw each other again. She could not know, and per-

haps Fitz did not fully comprehend how deeply wedded he was to the North. It is a strange and silent bride whose hold, once established, is too strong for any man to break. Why should a man, able, witty and with social gifts, seek a place like this? Why should he turn from men and desire the unconsciousness of nature? I have often wondered, but I do not know.

"I said a place like this, but where Sergeant Fitzgerald went with three constables in 1903, to establish the detachment of Fort Macpherson, was infinitely worse. Here at Mayo we get several mails a summer, but in those days, if a boat reached the delta of the Mackenzie once a year it was an event, and the fort, which was a Hudson's Bay Company hut surrounded by the dilapidated shelters of Eskimo and Indian, was still farther away, up the Peel, and as filthy as inaccessible. But Fitz saw to it that his men fitted themselves into the life of the place, a thorn in the trader's flesh, a godsend to the missionary, and for the natives a source of unfailing relief when hungry, ill or bored.

"Consoling the natives was not, of course, the primary reason for the creation of this outpost. Macpherson was to be the base for a more ambitious undertaking—the conquest of the western arctic. Whalers had tapped oil and were playing hob with the natives on the coast, customs were to be collected, and to collect customs one must occupy the country. So leaving two constables at Macpherson, Fitzgerald took a Constable Sutherland with him to Herschel island where the emotional Irishman and the high-strung Mon-

treál had established the most northerly police post in the world.

"Fitz never would talk much about those days. He aged under them. Herschel island was no place for a white man—a bare rock, devoid of wood or fresh water, some distance from shore, in a zone where the wind never ceased blowing and the shore ice never disappeared; for company, whaling crews; for duty, curbing animal debauch and collecting tithes. Yet they carried it out, kept the whalers from landing liquor, and established law and order—just the two of them. Never for a day did they let the force down.

"Yes, Fitz came into his own there. It was a curious paradise his star had led him to, yet more congenial than the prairie, city or sea. And when a man definitely throws in his life with the North, it becomes at once home and kingdom to him. As staff-sergeant and inspector, Fitz managed his frozen kingdom well, jesting with Constable Carter, a good solid worker, keeping house at Herschel with Selig and Kinney, vying with Forrest, the best Northern man that ever mushed from Dawson to Macpherson."

"After yourself," I interpolated.

"After nobody." Dempster looked out of the window for a full minute before he continued. "I must tell you about that stretch of country, 500 miles over the Yukon watersheds. Harry Mapley was the first man to make the run. He had built up a pretty fair frontiersman's physique in the wilds of London, like a lot of men in the outfit, and showed us that a hazardous patrol across treeless plateaus and along intricate

bottoms could be looked on merely as a welcome break to headquarters' routine.

"Forrest brought the time down to twenty-one days in 1907, and more than once Fitz and I discussed how it could be lowered. Finally Fitz's turn came to try. He had persuaded Commissioner Perry to permit him to reverse the patrol, enabling him to return to Macpherson with the winter mail. This time, Fitz determined, the record should fall. He would leave every superfluous ounce behind, even to a shot-gun, and would not take a guide. Guides are likely to be slow, and Constable Carter, who had just taken his discharge, wanted to come out, and do the guiding. With them went a good Northern man, Taylor, and a young fair-haired fellow, Kinney. They engaged Indian Esau to put them on Mountain Creek which was hard to strike, then leave them to their own resources. You can picture setting out on the shortest day of the year, 1910. It was seven in the dark of morning when they left, a light snow falling. A blue mist lay on the river-white, and all Fort Macpherson lined the bank to see them off: old Trader Firth with his fifty years' beard, the Rev. Mr. Whittaker and his wife, Corporal Somers who would now be in charge of the post, guide Esau's wives and all the rest of his swarthy tribe, not forgetting the dogs.

"See you in March," I can imagine Fitz saying to Somers, and to his party; 'all right, boys.' The dogs lean into their collars, sledges creak and move, the party fades, becomes a dot, disappears into the bluish dark—yes—and into eternity."

There was no sound in the detach-

ment, none without in the midnight dusk faintly glowing with the beauty of the stationary sunset. I certainly did not intend to speak. At length Dempster continued:

"That January the cold passed all knowledge. Eighty degrees of frost, even ninety, day after day, sent the inhabitants of Dawson hurrying from shelter to shelter. Our O. C. forbade horses to be taken out. Dogs bled at the mouth. We reminded one another in barracks that the weather was the cause of the Macpherson patrol being overdue, but when January turned February, we peered often and anxiously down river in the hope of seeing the black dots emerge from the gray-blue mist.

"At last they were seen, February 20. 'It's about time,' said Superintendent Snyder, and his look showed the strain he had been under. We gathered to welcome the party, and I do not want to feel again those doubts and certainties when the men proved to be Indians, among them Esau's cousin. He told the O. C. that Fitzgerald had sent back his guide from Mountain Creek before New Year's Day. It was only twenty days from Mountain Creek to Dawson.

"In a few minutes Superintendent Snyder sent for me. 'You will leave to-morrow, Corporal,' he said, 'to locate the whereabouts of this party. Where would you expect to pick up their trail most surely?'

"Inspector Fitzgerald would have to cross the Hart River divide, sir,' I told him, and showed him on the map where it would have to be.

"Then it would be advisable to make for that point and take up his trail. I can't give you any specific directions. You'll have to be guided

by circumstances and your own judgment.'

"The next day he sent me off with, 'Bear in mind, Corporal, that nothing is to stand in your way until you get in touch with this party.' Snyder was a good officer.

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"March is a quick month up here. The sun circles higher every day, the weather warms, the snow grows heavier. I knew we dare lose no time; for an unusual thaw, much water on the ice, illness or any wrong-headedness meant dangerous delay. But I had good men: Constable Fyfe, ex-Constable Turner and an Indian guide, Charley Stewart. Down the Yukon, up Moosehide Creek, over Seela Pass"—Dempster's long finger traced the route—"down the Blackstone, across hills to Cache Creek, down to Michel Creek, out upon Big Hart River, on to Wolf Creek, up that and over to Forrest Creek, and so to the Little Wind—a fairish distance to unravel in twelve days. The snow was at its deepest, and we had to watch for the slightest buried sign. It wasn't just patrolling, you see, it was ransacking a landscape 500 miles long and indefinitely wide, and at panting speed.

"The first hint of a previous traveler was seen on the twelfth day,—merely a depression in the snow, and a depression so slight as to be noticeable only when one sighted across a sheltered level, but certainly an old trail. Whether Indians or whites had made it, or in what direction going,—there was no clue. The river having been frozen to the bottom, flowed on top, submerging all traces, and the ghostly sign could be picked up only on widely separated bars.

Where the Little Wind flowed into the Big Wind, it was lost. There was but one way to find it: to cross and recross the river, poking here, there, in circles, patiently, deftly, trying to feel a harder snow compressed by a snow-shoe underneath. And after all, it might not be there.

"That was a day of foggy, uninviting, waist-deep toil, with the mercury at forty-two below, and in the end we had to pull across the river to make camp in some standing timber we saw there. Fyfe was ahead, I remember, and his 'I'll be damned' was the first intelligence of fact. Some one before us had hoped for shelter in that timber, and had left empty corned beef tins such as the outfit used; and an unrotted gunny sack proved the camp not so very old. Even yet we couldn't tell which way the party had gone, but a strange uneasiness came from a simple cause the next day: the trail went around the river points instead of cutting corners.

"'I'm afraid somebody's broken a leg or something,' said Turner.

"'How could they?' I asked.

"'You smashed a couple of ribs yourself,' Fyfe reminded me of the last trip when I'd fallen against the portable stove.

"'Suppose they had broken anything,' I replied, 'they would just as well have gone on as turn back. Besides Fitz wouldn't turn back. Not that wild Irishman. No, he wanted to be tough and talk about it afterward.'

"I thought I was speaking truth, but the uneasiness deepened when four miles farther on we reached another night camp and in the next day's travel three more. 'Looks like

hungry,' said Indian Stewart. Only great weakness of men or dogs could compel such brief day's travel, and there fell on us one of those profound pauses that come when men are thinking but unwilling to express their thoughts.

"At last we reached the mouth of the Big Wind and there, stalking across the wind-blown ice like ghosts of the living, we saw a line of old snow-shoe marks, pointing downstream. We knew now we had been following a retreat. How pressing a retreat, we discovered the next day in an old prospector's rotting shack. It was dark, and as Turner entered, his first match showed an empty toboggan standing against the wall, its canvas sagging, and beside it hung seven sets of dog-harness, while in the corner lay some paws of dogs and bare shoulder-blades. 'Eating dog, by God!' he exclaimed.

"'Trouble, all right,' said Indian Stewart.

"We were very quiet that night. Discoveries had been coming too fast, and we wondered what the next would bring. Yet it was impossible to conceive of anything truly serious. Fitz was invincible. I don't like to say so now, but I had set out on that patrol hoping to have the laugh on old Fitz. When I saw those shoulder-blades however, I was willing to forego the laugh to find him safe. Our hope of this was strengthened by tracking him up the drifted mountain creek, over the difficult windy portage, over the Caribou Born country and so to Trail River. Just down that to the Peel, down the Peel to Fort Macpherson and the mystery would be solved. All was plain sailing, and we clung to the half-

concealed trail, finding a dog skin in every one of Fitz's camps, but worrying less and less.

"Upon reaching Indian Colin's fishing cabin it was dark, and we had supper well under way when I caught sight of something lashed to the rafters. 'What's old Colin got cached up there?' I asked, never foreseeing the blow it was to give us. It was a despatch bag lettered R. N. W. M. P.

"'To lighten his load,' began Turner.

"But Fyfe interrupted him. 'It's no use. We're less than two days from the fort.'

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"That was the terrible truth. The undeniable logic of that bag's presence cut the last string that held our hopes together. Those letters uttered one question which could not be silenced: why hadn't Fitz come back for the bag? It was a question we had to pass the night with, and it got us up early the next morning. Five miles farther was a portage, a slough, a little frozen lake, and sitting in the middle of the lake, we found a police camp-stove, cups and tent-poles with the tent. It was as if a final dash had been determined on. The retreat, it was plain, had become a rout, yet the fort was so very little farther. Soon we saw something fluttering on the cut-bank 200 yards away—a blue rag tied to a willow.

"From the rag a dim trail led into the bush, led to the fact itself. There, in a neat little camp, we came on two bodies, lying side by side, the darkened shadows of Kinney and Taylor. It was plain to read what efforts Fitzgerald and Carter had made to provide for those boys until some one could return with aid. A

camp kettle half full of moosehide cut in pieces stood near them—a stew of taunting bitterness. They were wrapped in all the blankets. Probably they had lived for days, listening for the crunch of a snow-shoe, starting at the deception of voices in the trees. Kinney had died first, and then Taylor, crushed by this desertion, surrounded by the dark and loneliness and cold, sick in body and mind, endured until he could endure no longer, and had ended it. The friendly rifle lay across him.

“We covered the bodies with brush since we could not take them with us, and pushed on through the cloudy March day with a raw wind starting out of the west. The trail was snowed deep here and we lost it many times in the ten miles before we came to an indistinct mark leading to a cut-bank on the right limit. Here Fyfe, poking about, kicked up a snow-shoe, broken. This was the end. In a moment I came upon the body of Constable Carter. When the snow-shoe had broken, there was nothing for him and Fitzgerald to do, in their state, but build a fire—a signal of smoke, you see. And so they made their fire and sat there, talking, only the trees know what, and lay there, thinking, only the hares know how long. But one thing is known. Discipline stayed with them, discipline proved stronger than hunger or fear of death. In all those days of efforts to find their way we never found evidence of discipline faltering a moment. There is no word in Fitz’s diary, even to its last entry, of any wavering in self-control, and it takes trained courage to keep men going two hundred miles on dog-meat, seventy on none at all.

“They were only twenty-six miles from Macpherson when Fitzgerald lit that last fire. After Carter died, the Inspector made the effort to carry him a few feet away, cross his hands on his breast, and cover his face with a handkerchief. Then he went back to resume his own death-watch, and the snow told of a gallant tenacity. There were many paths trampled to gather firewood, and when the handle of the blunted ax broke, when it was settled that he was to enter the serene twilight, Fitz picked up a scarred branch and wrote his will on a last scrap of paper. Perhaps you have seen it at Headquarters: ‘All money in despatch bag and bank, clothes, etc., I leave to my dearly beloved mother, Mrs. John Fitzgerald, Halifax. God bless all. F. J. Fitzgerald, R. N. W. M. P.’

“So it came about that the name of the outfit was his last word. He lay down on the cooling embers and his face was calm as in a falling to sleep. The horror must have passed from him: the terrible exertion, the hunger, the responsibility for Carter lying there and for those boys waiting up the river. Instead there must have drifted through his mind other days: the strange congenial activities at Herschel island, the wistful features of a woman waiting, and the first time that he was up before the O. C. at Regina; the day he told the recruiting officer he was twenty-one, and the sailor tattoo man at Halifax—and home.

“When we came on his wasted body, it had already begun to shape itself to the contour of its mother earth. His left hand was lying peacefully on his breast, but the right was extended—the hand with the star.”

A CLUBLESS WOMAN'S WORLD

Foundations Women Have Built Are Priceless and Indestructible, but—

IDA CLYDE CLARKE

THE WOMAN'S club movement is slowing down. The woman's club, as it has flourished for two generations, is middle-aged. There is nothing in its method or in its program to capture the imagination of the women of the younger generation. Club daughters of today may "carry on" half-heartedly for a time, but club granddaughters of to-morrow will find the club, as it is now constituted, wholly inadequate as a means for either pastime or profit.

During the next quarter of a century the woman's club will decline steadily from its original and now half-conscious purpose, and by 1950 it will be so changed as to be scarcely recognizable. Let no club "fan" of to-day become alarmed. The woman's club as an institution is not going to pass out suddenly. It will linger, sustained by its glorious memories and stimulated by slogans, until finally it will be assimilated and absorbed into something newer and finer, and its passing will be so gradual as to escape the notice of those who are passing with it.

There will always be clubs and organizations of many kinds, but they will be composed of people who have like interests. Those interested in art will form art-clubs, those who

care for music will have their music-clubs, and those interested in civics will associate themselves together for the purpose of furthering civic improvements. Sometimes these clubs will be composed of all women and sometimes of all men, but the division will be according to interest and not sex.

But a blight has struck the "cure-all" club, officially known and much exploited as the "departmental club"—the club that undertakes to do at least a little of something about everything that is wrong, but not very much about any one thing. Men know better. They have no such clubs.

Intelligent women are coming to see that breaking a group into departments, divisions, committees and sub-committees, leaves it weak and helpless against the great and challenging tasks, and they are becoming increasingly unsatisfied with what the average club of this type has to offer.

Even the fine club-houses in some of the larger cities are being thrown open more often and more widely, are developing into community centers. Why read papers to each other about music when we can listen to the best music over the radio? Why talk about art when the best ex-