

# TRIGGER CALL FOR



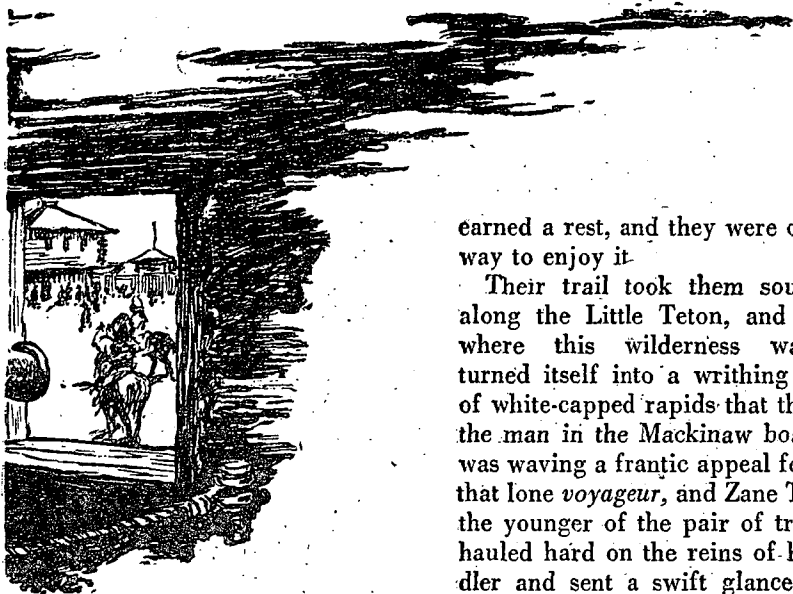
by

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*The summer rendezvous had to wait for Zane Tolbert until he probed the weird plot that threatened to plunge Fort Bighorn into a flaming war with the Assiniboines*

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# A FREE TRAPPER



## I

THEY were headed for the summer rendezvous in Wyoming where friends would meet and whiskey would flow, and they were a light-hearted pair, these two free trappers, as they rode along this sunny morning. A hard season was behind them; they had trapped and traded among the Mountain Crows and the River Crows, the Gros Ventres and the Assiniboines, and they had even penetrated the land of the dread Blackfeet and returned with their hair intact. They had

earned a rest, and they were on their way to enjoy it.

Their trail took them southward along the Little Teton, and it was where this wilderness waterway turned itself into a writhing stretch of white-capped rapids that they saw the man in the Mackinaw boat. He was waving a frantic appeal for help, that lone *voyageur*, and Zane Tolbert, the younger of the pair of trappers, hauled hard on the reins of his saddle and sent a swift glance at his gray-bearded partner.

"Trouble," Zane said tersely. "He's let himself get sucked into the rapids, and yon boat's too big for him to manage."

"Wagh!" Pelly River Pete Stone agreed in the nasal jargon of the mountain men. "And that thar's a Bighorn Co. boat, or this old hoss don't know fat cow from pore bull."

Mention of the Bighorn Fur Co. brought a frown to Zane's brown, high-boned face. Then: "It's Baptiste LeNoir!" the young trapper cried in sudden recognition, and he came down from his saddle to make a high, handsome figure in his fringed buckskin. He shed his powderhorn, bullet

mold and hunting knife as he ran to the river bank, and he took to the water in a clean dive. Some vagary of the current had swept the Mackinaw shoreward, and Baptiste LeNoir, the only *engagé* of the powerful Bighorn Co. whom Zane called friend, had seized this hope of salvation to go over the side and was feebly threshing in the water.

Resisting the hard pull of the current, Lane struck out with all the strength that paddle and portage trail had put into his muscles, and he saw the *engagé* carried toward him. Reaching, he got a hold on LeNoir's long, black hair and the two of them were bowled over and over and swept toward upthrusting rocks. Then Zane caught a glimpse of Pelly River Pete running along the bank, a rawhide rope in his hands, and abandoned his efforts to try for the shore. Getting an arm around a rock, he held fast to LeNoir.

"Pete!" he shouted frantically. "Hurry!"

Torn from this boulder, the two would be carried out into midstream, and now Zane could only pit his strength against the river and hope that Pelly River Pete's rope would reach them in time. And in the midst of this endurance contest against death, he reflected that most men would brand him a fool for risking his skin to save a Bighorn hireling.

Free trappers were anathema to the Bighorn Co. and especially so was the little band led by Zane Tolbert. That same band was now far down the trail, gone on with the pack ani-

mals carrying the season's catch of furs. Zane and Pete had let them go ahead while they themselves had followed buffalo sign beyond a timbered ridge.

Every one of those hairy mountain men who trapped where fancy took them and traded wherever they pleased had had occasion to curse the name of Fort Bighorn, and Drake Anselmo, its factor. Sharp competition had made sworn enemies of Anselmo and Zane Tolbert, but Baptiste LeNoir, when in the employ of a British company far to the north, had once saved Zane's life a few years before. And, in turn, Baptiste would be saved today if Zane's strength held out.

Then the rope came whistling. Zane managed to get it around LeNoir and to wrap his own arm around the rawhide, and in this manner Pelly River Pete hauled them toward the shore. A few minutes later the two lay on the grassy bank, Zane gasping for breath.

Pete bent to examine Baptiste. The French Canadian *engagé* was unconscious, and Pete, his fingers exploring rapidly, sucked in his breath.

"Tain't no wonder he couldn't handle his boat!" the mountain man ejaculated. "He's got a bullet hole in him you could drive a bufler through!"

Zane crept over to the swarthy Baptiste and, seeing the wound, he wondered what inner strength had sustained the *engagé* so far. Then LeNoir opened his eyes, staring blankly for a moment.

"Who shot you, friend?" Zane demanded.

"I am come in toward the shore at Plew Rock," LeNoir gasped. "The gun, she sing from the bushes, and Baptiste is gone to de deep sleep. *Sacré bleu!* When I am open my eyes, the boat she is in de rapids!"

"So someone shot you before you could come ashore and make portage around the rapids! Who, Baptiste? And what fetched you down the Teton alone, anyway?"

"I am look for you, *mon enfant*. The big trouble, she is come to Fort Bighorn. The Assiniboines, dey send the war smoke curling to the sky. Soon they make the strong fight, I t'ink. It is bad . . . bad . . ."

"Trouble for Fort Bighorn!" Pelly River Pete growled. "That suits this old hoss. Let the Injuns burn 'em out, I say!"

LeNoir's dark eyes were on Zane. "Your father, the chief *bourgeois* of de Bighorn, has come up the rivair from St. Louis," the *voyageur* said pointedly.

"I know," Zane said and tried to keep his voice even. "The furland has been full of rumors that Henley Tolbert is at Fort Bighorn." Eagerness edged into his tone in spite of himself. "He sent you to find me, Baptiste? He wants my help against the Assiniboines?"

But Baptiste, with a soft sigh, had closed his eyes, and it was a long moment before either of the trappers realized that the *voyageur* was dead. They sat staring at each other wordlessly until Pelly River Pete, still holding silent, began scooping a grave in the river bank's soft and



Zane Tolbert

yielding earth. Zane fetched one of his *epishemores*, and this saddle blanket was used to wrap Baptiste's remains before he was rolled into the shallow hole.

When the rocks were heaped, Zane said, "He did me a mighty favor, once," and this was the epitaph for Baptiste LeNoir, French-Canadian peasant who had traded the security of paternal acres for a *voyageur's* perilous life and meager pay.

"He was coming down river to fetch a message to you, Zane," Pelly River Pete said thoughtfully, "and somebody used a rifle to try and stop him. Why, son? And what's putting the Injuns on the warpath against Fort Bighorn? That's queer doings in these woods!"

"Hard riding might fetch us to Fort Bighorn by sundown tomorrow," Zane said absently.

Pelly River Pete regarded him with hoisted brows. "Zane, we've been pards since that day in Inde-

pendence when we put our backs together and stood off a bunch of river riffraff that craved the sight of mountain blood. But we ain't never asked questions of each other. Yet they tell it fom the Clark's Fork to Fort Galpin on the Missouri that Henley Tolbert, the head booshway of the Bighorn Co., hates his son and aims to run him out of the wilderness. Considering that, thar's no call to risk our ha'r for him!"

"You've listened to a lot of woodland rumor, old-timer," Zane declared. "It's high time you had the truth. There's been no hatred between my father and me, Pete. We were just too much alike—a pair of proud, stubborn mules. He had a fine desk job for me in the Bighorn's offices in St. Louis but I preferred the wilderness end of the business. He told me I was too soft for the mountains; I told him I'd turn free trapper and show him. That was ten years ago, when I was eighteen. I haven't set eyes on Henley Tolbert since. But meanwhile I've piled up a stake in down-river banks. When it's big enough, I figger to dump it in his lap."

"And he's given all his factors orders to ruin your trading, whenever they get a chance," growled Pete. "Look how Drake Anselmo's worked against us in this stretch o' furland."

"It's a game between dad and me," Zane said softly. "But that doesn't matter now. Danger threatens Fort Bighorn; my father needs me, and I want to think that he sent Baptiste after me. I'll overtake you at the rendezvous, old hoss."

"We better cache our fixin's," Pete

said gruffly. "We'll need to travel light to reach Fort Bighorn tomorrow."

Thus did the old mountain man announce his decision, and Zane smiled as they fell to work digging a cache. Into it went their sacks of beaver traps, extra moccasins and buckskins. Zane changed from his own wet garb before they were ready for the back trail. He kept rifle, powder horn, bullet pouch and implements for making fire, and he left his hatchet fastened to the pommel of his saddle. High noon found them retracing their steps along the Little Teton, riding single file and in silence.

Zane's thoughts centered on the brief message Baptiste LeNoir had fetched. It made little sense, that talk of war in the woodlands; there had been peace for many seasons, and certainly the Assiniboinés, few in number this far south of the Milk River, had been tractable enough. But now the signal smoke was going up, and the tribe was gathering for an onslaught on Fort Bighorn. Zane Tolbert had seen the red fury unleashed before. Shuddering, he urged his wiry mountain saddler to greater speed.

They threaded a wild, timbered land all that day and made camp not far from the upthrust of Plew Rock. Zane had taken flint, steel and pieces of punk from his bullet pouch, ignited a fistful of dry grass, heaped tiny sticks upon the blaze, and he had his hatchet in his hand when the gun spoke from the bushes. But there'd been a slight footfall—warning enough for both Zane and Pelly

River Pete. The oldster dropped the wood he'd been gathering, and Zane swerved sideways as a rifle ball whipped within an inch of the gay bandanna he wore tied around his head.

Zane's rifle was close by, but he didn't take time to reach for it. Instead he sent his hatchet sailing; the firelight glinted on the blade as it arced through the air in the direction of the gun flame, and a fierce howl of anguish testified to some kind of a hit. A stocky, swarthy man reared into view, but only for an instant, and then his moccasins beat wildly through the underbrush. Zane and Pete, who had dived for cover, came to a quick stand, but the would-be bushwhacker was already far gone.

"Wagh!" Pelly River Pete ejaculated. "The same sneakin' devil that done for pore Baptiste at Plew Rock, I'll wager. Let's see what kind of sign he's left."

"No need," said Zane. "I got a glimpse of his face after I'd nicked him with my hatchet. It was Jules Menard."

"Menard! Drake Anselmo's breed brother-in-law. So the chief *comis* of Fort Bighorn wants us dead!"

Zane shook his head. "Menard's chief clerk no more," he said. "The River Crows told me not long ago that Anselmo had dismissed Menard from the company's service. But even if the man's turned renegade, why should he be hankering for our scalps? Pete, let's say nothing about this at Fort Bighorn, but we'll keep our eyes and ears open. Jules

Menard tried to keep Baptiste from reaching us, it seems, and then he tried to stop us from getting to the fort. Why?"

The shattered silence of the night had restored itself; there was only the rippling wind in the pine tops and the distant rumble of the river to give him answer. Zane Tolbert shook his head in bewilderment.

## II

They came to Fort Bighorn in the last light of the next day, and Zane, gazing upon the log stockade with its towering bastions, saw at once that the few Assiniboinés who usually camped before the fort had struck their lodges and left. That in itself was an ominous sign.

A scowling clerk answered Zane's loud thump on the huge gate and admitted the two mountain men into the small areaway between the palisade and the rear walls of the sod-roofed log structures of the post. Indians were allowed to enter this section to trade, and Zane knew that the bastion cannon, loaded with grape shot, frowned down upon him.

"What brings you here, trappers?" the clerk demanded.

"Business with the big *bourgeois* from St. Louis," Zane said curtly. "Take us to him."

Shrugging, the clerk led them toward the council room, and other clerks and *engagés*, their Indian wives and half-breed children staring curiously at the trappers with a certain unnatural restraint, came crowding around. Before they'd reached the flagstaff in the middle of



the square, Drake Anselmo appeared.

In a land where men ran to lean-ness, this olive-skinned factor of Fort Bighorn, who was a mixture of French, Spanish and English blood, made a huge, thick-waisted figure. For over a decade he'd served Henley Tolbert and served him well, and he and Zane Tolbert had clashed often in the past.

"Ho!" Anselmo exclaimed as he recognized the pair. "You are not welcome at Fort Bighorn, mountain men."

"I've come to see my father," Zane said and put his hand to his rifle. "Are you going to take me to him, Anselmo?"

Pelly River Pete had crowded close behind Zane, and together they must have made a formidable-looking pair, for Anselmo, after studying them speculatively, said, "Come along." He ushered them into the council room and through it to a large, adjacent room where a fire smouldered smokily in a huge, rock fireplace, and a tallow taper, placed upon a long table, cast a feeble glow.

In the thickness of the shadows, it took Zane a moment to recognize the gaunt, gray-haired man seated at the end of the table, for this man looked much older than Zane had supposed he would.

"Dad!" he choked. "Don't you know me? It's Zane."

He'd taken an eager step nearer, and he saw now that the older Tolbert was garbed in black broadcloth, as always. Stirring, the gray-haired man said, "State your business with the Bighorn Fur Co."

There was nothing but coldness in that voice, no note of welcome, and Zane said desperately: "Baptiste LeNoir overtook me down river, but he got caught in the rapids and died after I hauled him to the shore with my partner's help. Before he died he told me that you were here and that war with the Assiniboinés threatened this post."

A bony hand lifted in a gesture of annoyance. "A race of sentimentalists, the French. Yes, it is true that a crisis threatens us. LeNoir came to me and said you'd be on your way to the Wyoming rendezvous where men of your independent ilk gather at this season, and he claimed he could overtake you. He thought a father and son should be standing shoulder to shoulder at a time like this. I told him to mind his own affairs, but it was reported to me later that he left the post in spite of my wishes."

Zane stiffened, remembering the bullet hole in Baptiste LeNoir, but he banished his sudden suspicion as too wild for credulity. Henley Tolbert, proud and stubborn as ever, might not have wished an appeal for help carried to his son. But he would never have ordered LeNoir's death. A hard man, Tolbert demanded absolute obedience from his hirelings, yet he treated his *engagés* with greater consideration than did many a rival company.

"I'm sorry to hear of LeNoir's death," the elder Tolbert added with his first show of emotion. "He was a good man."

"This trouble?" Zane asked. "I've come many miles to learn about it."

The gray-haired man shrugged. "I've been here only a few weeks, and when I first came up from St. Louis, the Indians who were camped nearby possessed an albino buffalo robe. They are a rarity, and I directed Anselmo himself to barter for it. But the Indians would have none of his offer."

Anselmo had eased his big body into a rawhide-slung chair. "As you know, trapper, the white buffalo is sacred to the Assiniboinés. I offered them eight horses for it, or any kind of trade goods with a bartering value equivalent to the price of forty ordinary robes. But they wouldn't sell."

"Wagh!" Pelly River Pete snorted from where he stood with his chin resting on the end of his rifle barrel. "As well try to trade the Jesuits out of the candles they use on their altars!"

"I know that," Anselmo said. "But M'sieu Tolbert ordered me to make the try, and I obeyed. And now that the robe has mysteriously turned up here—inside the post—

there's no explaining it. But it makes the devil's own situation."


"The Indians came to us and reported that the sacred robe had disappeared from the lodge of their medicine man," the elder Tolbert explained. "Since we had tried to buy it, they naturally suspected us of the theft. We could only try to assure them that we knew nothing of the robe. Then, that very night, one of the clerks found the robe here. But the Assiniboinés had already returned to their village, and our *engagés* tell us that their war smoke is calling all their kind for battle. Returning the robe now would be like admitting we'd stolen it and regretted our action. We'd lose face with all the tribes. Yet to keep it means that war is inevitable."

"Then," said Zane, for his mind had been busily at work, "there is only one simple solution. I've traded with the Assiniboinés; I call Standing Elk, their chief, my friend. Let me take the robe to them and give them some wild story about finding it in the forest. They know that the Bighorn Co. hates me; they'll never suspect that I'm doing this for you. And your fears will be over."


SIGHT TESTER

THIRST BESTER

Guess which line is the longer—  
but don't bet on it



ANSWER:  
no feeling—measure them  
—both are the same—



5¢

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"No!" The gaunt man behind the table came to an abrupt stand. "I want no help from you, Zane. There was a day when I needed your help and made a special place for you in my St. Louis office. You chose then to go your own wild, independent way. More than that, you accepted financial help from Branson Tolbert, who happens to be a distant cousin of ours, but who also happens to be the bitterest enemy I've got. Go to him if you have any favors to extend, Zane. You seem to owe him a greater obligation than you owe your own father."

"So that's it!" Zane declared hotly. "Yes, I needed traps and trade goods to get my start ten years ago, and I advertised for a backer. Branson Tolbert wrote me from Independence that he'd stake me. At that time he was only a distant kinsman with an offer of help; it wasn't until later that I learned of the hatred between you and him. Once I realized he'd only staked me to spite you, I paid him back with interest and severed all relationship with him long ago. But it's eaten at your pride that Branson Tolbert gave me my start, eh? Well, to blazes with your pride at a time like this!"

"Get out!" the elder Tolbert thundered. "Get out before I call my clerks and have you thrown out!"

"I'm not going!" Zane insisted just as angrily. "Safe and snug in your St. Louis office, what have you learned about the wilderness? You've no idea what this war will mean. Other tribes may ally themselves with the Assiniboinés; all white men may be prey to the gun and the

tomahawk, and there'll be no trapping for any of us in this area for years to come. If that sacred robe isn't returned, my business is endangered as well as yours. I've got a stake here, and I intend to protect it!"

"Perhaps his solution is the only one," Anselmo put in. "I beg you to consider his offer, M'sieu Tolbert. He has respect among the Assiniboinés, I know. And he can be the salvation of all of us."

The gaunt, gray-haired man sank back into his chair, and his voice was weary when he spoke. "I still want nothing from him," he said. "But perhaps he was right about my ignorance of the frontier. Since there is no other way, give him the robe and let him return it to the Assiniboinés."

Turning on his heel, Zane marched stiffly from the room, Pelly River Pete stalking after him. Into the adjacent council room, Pete drew in a long breath. "Wagh!" he ejaculated. "So that's the great Henley Tolbert of St. Louis. Ye come by your stubbornness honestly, boy!"

Drake Anselmo came into the council room and, unlocking a great chest, he drew forth the white robe and laid it before Zane. Examining this rarity, Zane said: "Have you got a blanket I can wrap it in, and some rawhide thongs to tie it and make carrying loops? I'll leave at dawn, and I don't want prying eyes to see me with the robe on the trail."

Anselmo nodded and fetched the required articles, and when Zane had fashioned a bundle to his own

satisfaction, the factor said: "Come, I'll show you to sleeping quarters."

Casting a last glance at the doorway to the room beyond, the room where the elder Tolbert still sat, Zane hoisted his bundle and followed Anselmo out of the building. On the way, Zane, stirred by a sudden remembrance, said pointedly: "I haven't seen Jules Menard around the fort."

"He is no longer with the Bighorn," Anselmo said with no change of tone. "He was insubordinate, and I tolerated him because his Indian wife and mine are sisters, as you doubtless know. But I finally had to dismiss him."

Later, when the two mountain men were stretched upon straw-filled ticks in the quarters assigned to them, Pelly River Pete said: "Best leave our hosses here, Zane. No guessing the mood of the Injuns, and we'll want to walk light till yonder robe's returned to 'em."

"True," Zane agreed. "But I'll be going alone, old hoss. No, don't argue. I can't put my finger on anything, but somehow I'll feel safer if you're here, keeping an eye on things. Somebody's working against this post, and likely from inside. Keep your powder dry and your eye sharp, Pete. All the danger may not be out on the trail."

### III

Tired from the long trail to Fort Bighorn and his tussle with the Little Teton, Zane slept soundly that night, but he was awake before the first flush of dawn. Groping in the

gloom for the bundle he had prepared, he got the sacred robe in place on his back, and slipped from the room without awakening Pelly River Pete, who still snored lustily.

Out into the square, Zane was surprised to find Drake Anselmo apparently awaiting him.

"I thought you'd be making an early start, so I fetched food for you," explained Anselmo and proffered a package. "But where's your partner?"

"Pelly River Pete will wait here," Zane said. "This is a one-man job."

The factor shrugged and let Zane out through the small gate that was set in one of the leaves of the main gate. "*Au revoir*," Anselmo said. "May good-luck attend your mission."

Munching the food Anselmo had given him, Zane faced toward the Assiniboine camp. A well-worn game trail skirted the Little Teton, but he took to the underbrush instead, mindful that any prowling Indian might be anxious to count coup, mindful too that Jules Menard might be somewhere about, his rifle thirsting for a target. Setting a steady, mile-eating pace, Zane kept his own rifle in his hand, and by high noon he was nearing his destination.

He saw the smoke of a council fire curling upward long before he reached the ring of lodges, and he heard the steady throbbing of ceremonial drums above the murmur of the nearby river. When the time came, he stalked boldly into the camp.

Dogs came running to yip at his heels, squaws regarded him stonily,

the drums ceased beating, and the ring of warriors squatted around the council fire remained unbroken until Standing Elk, the chief, rose to a high erectness. A commanding figure with his quill-decorated robe held tightly about him, he stood staring at Zane in silence, no welcome in his glance. Zane spoke then in the common tongue of all the thirty-three bands of the Assiniboine Nation.

"Many times have I come to your camp," he announced. "But now you wonder why I come in *Wahegoshmewi*, the month of the Full Leaf Moon, when the furs are no longer prime and there is no trading between red brothers and white." He swung the bundle from his back. "I bring great tidings to my friends, the *Wadopabina*. I bring that which belongs to them and was stolen."

Jarred from their impassivity, the squatting warriors began to murmur excitedly. But: "How do you come by this thing you bear?" Standing Elk demanded.

"Several suns ago my trapping party found a strange man—half-Sious and half-white from the look of him—making a cache in the woodland," Zane lied glibly. "From the shelter of bushes we watched him, seeing that he had the stealthy way of a thief, and when he had gone, we opened his cache. This is not done by the mountain men, as you know, and we would have reburied what we found had we not discovered that it belonged to the *Wadopabina*. For it was the robe of the sacred white buffalo, and already the leaves whispered that our Assiniboine

friends made strong medicine for the warpath. Many marches have I come to return this robe to you, so that your medicine may be made good for hunting and trapping and planting—the ways of peace."

The Assiniboines were as excited now as they ever allowed themselves to become, but they let Standing Elk do their speaking for them. Raising his hand in a stately gesture, the chief said: "It is good. Three days have I fasted alone and away from camp, looking for a sign to guide me on the warpath. And always my vision showed me the sacred robe in the big log lodge of Drake Anselmo to the south. Now I know that the Being who brought this false vision was an evil Being, for the robe was not at Fort Bighorn, after all."

Zane breathed easier now, assured by Standing Elk's manner that the Assiniboines were eager enough to forget the warpath now that the sacred robe was being restored to them.

The medicine man rose from the circle, flinging his arms wide and beginning a tale of how his tribe had stalked the buffalo herd with the albino bull that had given them their prized robe. He related how that herd had seemed always to gather in such a manner as to shelter the white one until his, the medicine man's, medicine had proved the stronger, and the prize buffalo had fallen to their guns. It was a long story, and it was accompanied by the proper re-enactment of the chase and the kill, and Zane, knowing the ways of these people, waited pa-

tiently until its finish. Then he knelt and cut the bindings of the blanket, unrolling its contents with a grand flourish.

"Here is your sacred robe!" he cried. "Here is peace between red men and white! Take it, my friends!"

Then he was staring with unbelieving eyes at the article that had spilled upon the ground. For it was an ordinary black buffalo robe, and not the sacred white robe he had been given by Drake Anselmo.

The gathered Assiniboinés were surprised too, but their surprise turned swiftly to anger. Instantly a horde of warriors closed in upon Zane, seizing him violently. He tried vainly to explain, but where were the words to make sense at such a time? Wrestling his weapons away, the Indians bore him downward, lashed his hands and ankles with rawhide thongs and dumped him unceremoniously into a small, smoky lodge.

At the entrance, Standing Elk regarded him angrily. "You heard of our loss and came to our camp to make a great speech and then to laugh at us after you had made us believe our sacred robe was being returned," the Assiniboiné accused him. "But we *Wadopabina* do not laugh at the white man's poor joke. Nor will you laugh when the night comes!"

The Indian was gone then, and the flap closed after him, and Zane was left alone to fight against the rawhide thongs until the perspiration burst forth from him and his skin was rubbed raw by his effort. And

all the while he cursed the luck that had trapped him. An ordinary robe in place of the sacred robe! He'd prepared the bundle himself, and therefore the switch must have been made while he slept so soundly. And he hadn't noticed any slight disarrangement of the rawhide thongs that bound the bundle, for he'd slung it on his back in the darkness before dawn at the fort this morning.

There'd been treachery at Fort Bighorn, of course, treachery that had sent him to his doom. And all the good that had been accomplished by this mission to the Assiniboinés had been undone in an instant. A devilish brain had plotted his downfall, and doubtless the downfall of the Bighorn Fur Co. at the same time. Drake Anselmo? The factor had known about the bundle, yet Anselmo's loyalty to Henley Tolbert had always been above question.

Through the sweltering summer afternoon, Zane lay there, listening to the sounds of the camp beyond the hide wall of the lodge, and he tried to interpret those sounds, for they took on a strange significance.

In mid-afternoon a messenger came to the camp; Zane was sure of that, for he could hear the warriors assembling to listen to some sort of speech, and though only fragments of words came to his ears, they carried a white man's accent. Later there was a wild flurry of hoofs, much shouting and talking, and many warriors departed. After that there was comparative quietness.

Had the Assiniboinés ridden away,



*Pelly River Pete.*

in strength to carry a war to Fort Bighorn? Did they still suspect that their sacred robe was within its log walls? Or had they forgotten their animosity toward the Bighorn Co. now that they had Zane Tolbert to fasten their hate upon? There was no telling.

Dusk came; Zane could see that the day was waning by watching the change in the sky through the smoke hole overhead. He craved water and food, but nothing was brought to him. This was part of his punishment, he supposed, and he did not blame the Assiniboines for their attitude. They had grasped at the only possible explanation for his behavior. He had appeared to make fun of their holy of holies, and he could understand their just wrath.

Yet the night was to bring his doom, unless the departure of the warriors meant a change of plans. Again Zane tried his strength against the rawhide, and again he failed to loosen it. Then, soon after the bit of sky overhead turned black, he

heard a faint footfall to the rear of the lodge, and he stiffened, listening intently. Suddenly a knife blade was thrust into the lodge wall. The knife was pulled swiftly downward, and the first starlight glinted through the slit thus made. A man bulked big in the opening, and Zane wondered then if he were to die now, alone and unable to lift a finger in his own defense. Then groping hands were seeking his bonds, the knife that he had feared was freeing him, and a familiar voice was whispering in his ear.

"Thar's no one out behind, boy. Crawl on yore hands and knees, once you've rubbed some circulation back into ye. Easy, now."

"Pete!" Zane whispered and fell to chafing wrists and ankles. In a few minutes he came out of the lodge and followed his gray-bearded partner as they crept toward the nearest bushes. But all the while questions were thronging through Zane's mind—questions and a vague and growing fear. He was saved, snatched from the Assiniboine camp by Pelly River Pete Stone. But this same Pete Stone was supposed to be at Fort Bighorn, watching for trouble there. What new development had sent the old mountain man away from his appointed post?

#### IV

When they had crawled far enough away from the Assiniboine camp to make it safe to come to a stand, Pelly River Pete extended Zane's rifle, knife, bullet pouch and powder horn to him.

"Mighty keerless, those Injuns," Pete explained. "They left yore possibles laying beside one of the lodges. I stumbled on 'em while I was creepin' to whar they was keeping you."

"You saw them take me prisoner?"

"Reached camp just as they was totin' you into that lodge, all trussed up. 'If I'm to hang onto my top-knot,' says I, 'this old hoss had better keep to the brush till the sign's right.' It's been a long wait for deep dark."

"I'm mighty obliged," Zane said. "But I didn't think you'd be away from Fort Bighorn."

"Kept my eyes peeled like you told me to," explained Pete. "Warn't long after sunup when I saw an *engagé* scale the palisade and hit out for the woods. Mighty queer doings, I think, so I cut after him. When he saw me coming, he took to shooting, and I had to bring him down with a rifle ball from Old Betsy. Packin' a bundle, he was, and a letter. Inside that bundle was the white robe. Soon as I saw it, I knew you'd been tricked; thar wouldn't be *two* of them sacred robes. So I headed here mighty fast—but not fast enough."

"The letter—" Zane began.

"Hyar," Pete said and produced it. "I cain't read, Zane. I was keeping it for you."

Zane turned the envelope over in his hand. "Fetch the robe along, Pete. I'll have a look at this letter when we can risk a light."

Pelly River Pete got the bundle

from the crotch of a tree where he'd left it and the two went stealthily through the underbrush, their ears cocked for any sound of alarm from the Assiniboine village. But Pete had managed the rescue carefully and there was no hue and cry. As he catfooted along, Zane said: "What was all the stir in camp after I was tied and put away?"

"Couldn't rightly tell," Pete said. "A messenger came to camp—another of them Fort Bighorn *voyageurs*—and after he'd palavered with Standing Elk, there was a heap o' talk, and mighty soon those Injuns was ridin' south. I itched to foller 'em, but I figgered I had to get you free first."

Zane nodded. "We can build a small fire at the side of yonder bluff," he suggested. "Looks like the redskins aren't going to find me missing until morning."

When the flint had been put to use, and a tiny blaze was crackling, Zane bent for a look at the letter. It was written in a precise, scholarly hand that won his eager attention, and it was addressed to a certain Jules.

"Jules Menard!" Zane cried in sudden understanding. The message read:

My Dear Jules:

Raoul will bring this to the usual place, and I hope it comes into your hands soon. Zane Tolbert and his partner arrived at the fort last night. He mentioned that Baptiste LeNoir met with an accident in the Little Teton, and I presume you had a hand in that. You are to be commended for trying to keep LeNoir from reaching young Tolbert, as per my last instructions. But I



must reprimand you for allowing Tolbert to reach the fort.

Tolbert left this morning to return the sacred robe to the Assiniboinés, thus making peace with them, but he will learn too late that he is carrying only an ordinary robe. I am sending the white robe with Raoul so that you may hide it in the woodland. If it were to be discovered here now, the finder would realize that Zane Tolbert had been tricked.

My dream, nourished these many years, will soon see its fruition; Fort Bighorn will be wiped from the wilderness, and the path will be cleared for a new and greater company—my own. Today I am sending a messenger to the Assiniboinés, promising them the return of the sacred robe and many gifts if they will come peacefully to the fort. Zane Tolbert commands great respect among the tribes, I'm told, and there is the chance that he might sway the Assiniboinés from the warpath in spite of having the wrong robe. This must not happen, so I'm taking this last step to insure the doom of the Bighorn Co.

When the Indians are crowded into the trading areaway, expecting the gifts our dupe of a messenger will promise them, I will fire the bastion cannon into their midst. What power on earth will stop a war, then? And in the confusion, Raoul and I will escape the fort to join you, my precious Jules, and we shall watch the destruction of Fort Bighorn in safety. And when my own company is established, you shall be the *bourgeois* of my biggest post, and Raoul, too, shall have a fitting reward. *Au revoir*, and good luck!

All this Zane read aloud to Pelly River Pete, and when he'd finished, the young trapper said, "There's no signature, of course. He was remembering that this might fall into the wrong hands. Even through his scheme were exposed, there'd still be no proof against him."

"Drake Anselmo!" Pete exploded. "It's plain as the hump on a buffalo's back! All these years he's

drawn Henley Tolbert's pay—and planned to ruin him. A company of his own, after the Bighorn has been burned out of the wilderness! And that sneaking brother-in-law of his has been working with him. That explains how the sacred robe disappeared from Standing Elk's camp, then turned up in Fort Bighorn!"

But Zane's whirling thoughts were elsewhere. "No time now for talking!" he barked and scattered the tiny fire with a quick kick. "So that's why that messenger came to the Assiniboinés this afternoon! And they're already long gone on their way to the fort! Pete, we've got to pray that the cannon hasn't yet been fired! Come on!"

Then the two of them were hurrying along the Little Teton, clinging to the cleared game trail this time. And as Zane stumbled through the dark hours, his mind was miles ahead, seeing Fort Bighorn as it might look upon his arrival—a smoking ruin. But he still clung to one feeble hope.

The Assiniboinés might not have reached the fort until dusk. That would mean that they would put up lodges and wait for the gates to open in the morning. Then, as was the custom, a few of them would be allowed through the small gate and into the trading areaway, and here gifts would be presented to them while the loaded cannon frowned overhead. The Assiniboinés, come to make peace, would fear nothing and have no suspicions. Not until that cannon was discharged into their midst. There'd be dead and dying

strewn within the fort—and survivors beyond the gate to make war.

"Hurry, Pete!" Zane urged. "Hurry, man!"

Their moccasins beat a steady tattoo against the trail, and Zane begrudged the moments when they paused, panting, to recover their breath. The miles seemed elastic, stretched twice their actual length, and the dawn came all too early at this season. Very soon the eastern hills were etched in scarlet, and they were still in the timbered land. But when the sun first showed itself, they burst into the clearing and Fort Bighorn sprawled ahead of them. Before its gates stood a half-dozen lodges, proof that the Assiniboines had camped for the night. But now the small gate was open, and the Indians were streaming inside.

"There's still time!" Zane gasped. "But mighty little of it!"

Pelly River Pete was unwinding that same rawhide rope that had snaked Zane and Baptiste LeNoir from the Little Teton. As they neared this far end of the palisade, he sent a loop arcing over a pointed post.

"Up hyar, boy," Pete suggested. "Anselmo will be in the cannon room and able to see anybody who comes in through the gate. Sight of us would make him set off the cannon that much sooner."

Zane had had this same strategy in mind, so he quickly went up the rope. Pete, after hiding the bundled robe, passed up their rifles, climbed the rope, and the two came along a catwalk that was built high up on

the fort's inner wall to allow defenders a firing place. Below them they could see the sod-roofed structures of the fort, but they had eyes for nothing but the bastion ahead, for within it was the cannon.

They reached the bastion quickly. The door to the cannon room was slightly ajar, but though they'd expected only one man to be within, there were obviously two. One was speaking, and he said: "When I found Raoul with a rifle ball through him, I knew something was wrong. I came here to find out why. Now don't worry. Nobody saw me come over the palisade."

"Perhaps it is best," the other replied. "In a moment my work here will be through. Then we can leave together. Watch below, Jules."

Zane and Pelly River Pete were shoulder to shoulder, and Zane felt his partner stiffen at the sound of that second voice. But Zane was already lunging into the cannon room, and the two within whirled in astonishment to face him—Jules Menard, swarthy, stocky brother-in-law of Drake Anselmo, and the other man, the one who held a pitch flare dangerously near the fuse of the cannon.

"Wagh!" Pete ejaculated in vast astonishment. "It's ain't Anselmo, after all! Are you seeing what I see, boy? Henley Tolbert, your own father, all fixed to fire the cannon that will bring ruin to his own company!"

## V

There was no denying it. That tall, gaunt man in black broadcloth was certainly not Drake Anselmo.

But that changed nothing, for he was sweeping that pitch flare toward the cannon's fuse, and that gave Zane no choice. Leaping upon the elder Tolbert, he wrested the flare from him, flung it to a far corner, and at the same time Pelly River Pete closed with Jules Menard.

Thus the four of them were locked in combat, two and two, and Zane found that the man in his grasp possessed a wiry strength that belied his gray hair. Also the elder Tolbert was fighting with the strength born of desperation, and was wielding a long, wicked knife that he had whipped from beneath his coat.

There was no room here to bring a rifle into play. Letting his long gun fall, Zane used his left hand to get a hold on the man's wrist before that knife could descend, and then the young trapper wrenched out his own knife. For seconds the two stood straining against each other, but the elder Tolbert managed to thrust Zane backward and make a wild lunge for the burning flare.

In that instant Zane had a quick glimpse of Pelly River Pete and Jules Menard, and these two were also pitting knife against knife. But even as Zane glanced, Pete lunged under Menard's down-descending arm, and the old mountain man's own knife sank deep. With a low moan, Menard sprawled forward and died.

"Wagh!" Pete shouted exultantly. "Your hatchet must have nicked Menard's knife arm the other night, boy. He was a mite too stiff. This hyar old Green River has counted coup."

Then Pete, too, was lunging for

the elder Tolbert, for the gaunt, gray-haired man had swerved sideways and was snatching Zane's fallen rifle from the floor. He swung the long gun in a devastating arc, catching Pete with a glancing blow along the top of the head, and the old mountain man sank to the floor, unconscious.

Zane was upon Tolbert again, wrenching away the rifle, and then it was knife against knife once more. They came together with a hard, solid crash, strained tightly for a moment, and Zane was pressed back against the cannon. Through the aperture, he could see the Indians milling below, receiving the looking glasses and bits of colored cloth that were being presented to them, all unmindful of the doom hovering above. Then Zane felt his adversary's knife point at his throat, and he drew away with a desperate effort, lunging blindly with his own knife at the same time. And the blade, piercing the breast of the elder Tolbert, sent the man staggering against the wall where he slumped downward, dead.

Feet were pounding along the catwalk; the sounds of struggle had been heard and men were coming on the run. But Zane only stood staring, looking down upon his dead kinsman and finding some scant consolation in the thought that there could have been no other finish but this. Then Drake Anselmo bulked in the doorway, a half-dozen clerks and *engagés* at his back.

"So!" Anselmo ejaculated, his eyes sweeping from the two dead men to

Pelly River Pete, who was groaning his way back to consciousness, and then on to Zane. "You killed him, *m'sieu!*"

"To save Fort Bighorn from ruin," Zane said wearily. "He was about to fire the cannon into the Assiniboines below."

"A brazen lie!" Anselmo snorted. "Why would Henry Tolbert make trouble for his own company? Your father and you have hated each other for years. That hatred finally culminated in bloodshed. The facts are all too obvious, my young rooster. And you'll hang from the fort's gallows for this!"

"Better read this letter first," Zane said and, producing the message that had been meant for Jules Menard, he told how Pelly River Pete had come by it.

Anselmo read with widening eyes, and when the factor had finished, Zane said: "I found an ordinary robe in my bundle when I arrived at the Assiniboine camp. Somebody made a switch while I slept here at the fort."

"Henley Tolbert went to your quarters that night!" Anselmo said in bewilderment. "I thought it was the act of a father too stubborn to accept his wayward son, yet anxious to look upon him while he slept. And your father knew about the bundle, since it was prepared within ear-shot of him."

"He changed the bundle, Anselmo; his letter the same as admits it. Pete thought *you* wrote that letter. I never had time to tell him different; we were saving our wind on the trail. But I recognized the

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handwriting as soon as I saw the letter."

"But I still don't understand," Anselmo declared. "Why would your father drive his own Bighorn from the wilderness in order to start another company?"

Pelly River Pete's eyes had fluttered open; the old mountain man looked around, but he was still too weak to rise.

"Now, perhaps, you are prepared for the truth, Anselmo," Zane said. "That dead man by the wall *isn't* my father. It's Branson Tolbert, our distant cousin, a renegade of the worst sort, and my father's most relentless enemy."

"Branson Tolbert!"

"Of course," Zane said. "There is a family resemblance between him and my father that is quite remarkable, considering the distant relationship and the differences in their natures. Branson Tolbert even fooled me the other night, but the light was very dim in that room where we talked, and it's been ten years since I saw my father. Probably it's been longer since you actually faced Henley Tolbert, Anselmo. He's stayed in St. Louis, dealing with his far-flung posts by messenger."

"I'm beginning to see. . . ." Anselmo said slowly.

"Branson Tolbert obviously prepared himself for the impersonation, and he played the part devilishly well," Zane said. "He even reminded me of the hatred between Henley Tolbert and himself, just as my father might have done. I never saw Branson Tolbert, which made

fooling me that much easier, but I was in correspondence with the man years ago when he staked me. His handwriting hasn't changed. That's why I recognized the truth when I saw that letter to Jules."

"And Jules was working with him, hoping to be a *bourgeois* in Branson Tolbert's company," Anselmo mused. "Him and Raoul."

"We'll never know how long those two worked for my father's enemy," Zane said. "Probably only since Branson Tolbert arrived here. It would have been like him to spot any treacherous element within the post and to make such men his pawns. Menard doubtless stole the sacred robe and fetched it to the fort. When LeNoir went after me, in spite of Branson Tolbert's wishes, Tolbert sent word to Menard to stop LeNoir or to stop me from coming here. Likely Branson was afraid I'd recognize that he wasn't my father. He gave in to my proposition to take the robe to the Assiniboines because he didn't want our talk prolonged. Even then he'd probably fashioned his scheme to betray me by switching robes. But all his scheming has come to an end now."

"Thanks to you," said Anselmo with respect.

"And to Pelly River Pete for spotting Raoul," Zane added, kneeling beside his partner. "The sacred robe will be restored to the Assiniboines, and we'll tell them the whole truth. They're anxious for peace; they proved that by coming here so readily to accept gifts."

Anselmo signaled a couple of *engagés*, and they hoisted Pelly River

Pete and carried him triumphantly from the room, Zane following after them. The sacred robe was fetched from where the two mountain men had left it, and presented to Standing Elk within the hour. There was much talk, and many questions to be answered, but in the end there was a solemn council within the fort, and the pipe of peace was passed around for red men and white to draw upon.

It was in the midst of this ceremony that there came a heavy thundering at the gate, and when it was opened, a crew of buckskin-clad trappers poured into Fort Bighorn. At their head was a gaunt, gray-haired man, and Zane, staring in astonishment, made no mistake this time. Running forward, he joyously cried, "Dad!" And Henley Tolbert came to meet him with outstretched hand.

"I can't understand it!" Zane exclaimed. "You here, and with my own outfit of free trappers!"

"Met them while I was making portage miles below on the Little Teton," Henley Tolbert explained. "When we got to powwowing, they said their booshway was called Zane Tolbert. I showed some interest, and they swore they could lead me to you. And they did, by a marvelous feat of tracking, starting from a spot on the Little Teton where we found a fresh grave."

"So the rumors that you were coming up from St. Louis were true," said Zane. "Branson Tolbert was here impersonating you, dad; but he'll never trouble you again. That's

a long story, and the telling can wait."

"I'm not surprised," his father said grimly. "Word that my precious kinsman had left for the mountain country is what took me out of St. Louis. Branson had always borne watching, and there have been times in the past when he's traded on the resemblance between us. This might be another of those times, I reasoned, so I cleared my desk and came for a tour of inspection."

"And you came with your hand extended," Zane said quickly. "Does that mean our old quarrel is forgotten?"

Henley Tolbert closed one eye in a solemn wink. "I've studied Drake Anselmo's reports carefully for many years," he told his son. "At my insistence, Drake gave you sharp competition, but, in spite of that, he admits that you can outrade him with any of the tribes. When a smart business man like your father runs up against that kind of competition, he proposes a partnership, Zane. How about your free trappers joining up with the Bighorn? I'll handle the St. Louis end of the business; you and Anselmo and my other factors will take care of the mountain country. Are you interested, you sunburned, dog-eating young heathen?"

"Wagh!" Zane exclaimed in the best manner of Pelly River Pete Stone who stood grinning at his shoulder. "And we'll make a mighty fine pair of partners, dad, or this old hoss don't know pore bull from fat cow!"



*When Long Jerry Lucas roared into town,  
Hutch Snavelly knew it was up to him to take  
on the battles of those two troubled-trailed*

# ORPHANS OF CHAPARRAL

by L. P. HOLMES

It wasn't that Hutch Snavelly really needed any steady help around the livery barn and corrals, for he was not a lazy man and there was always a broken-down drifter coming along who, for the price of a meal, a bed in the harness room and a pint of liquor, would help out with the most onerous chores. It was something about the kid himself which decided Hutch.

The kid had come into Chaparral on foot, plodding down the long, dusty road from LaPlante. Hutch, seated on the bench at the shady corner of the livery barn, busy cleaning up a set of harness, had spied the advancing figure while it was still a long way out there and had watched with idle curiosity. And now the kid was standing before him, dusty from the long hike and asking gravely for a job.

Especially did Hutch like the kid's

eyes. They were clear gray and honest, and set wide apart, a good sign, according to the old saying, in man or horse. Yet there was a pinched look about them, as there was to the kid's cheeks and the whole, splinter-thin figure. Hutch Snavelly had an idea.

"When did you eat last, son?"

The kid's eyes dropped and he gnawed at his under lip as though to keep it from trembling. "Night before last," he admitted huskily.

"What?" yelped Hutch, coming up off the bench as though he'd been stung. "Great glory! You mean to say you ain't had anything to eat since Monday night? What's the matter with those outfits between here and LaPlante, they all turned miser?"

"I didn't stop in at any of them," admitted the kid. "They're cow outfits, and I ain't a cowhand. I'm a