



It was trail's end for Sergeant Nolan—for he willingly threw himself into a demon's murder trap to maintain the honor of the Northwest Mounted Police!

With every ounce of his remaining strength Nolan swung that last punch. It caught the outlaw square on the chin, sending him down like a poleaxed steer.

The Mystery Of Ghost Lake

by JAMES ROURKE

SERGEANT NOLAN suddenly awoke, aware that the dogs were stirring in their snow nests and rumbling low growls. Snug and warm in his sleeping bag he lay for a few seconds motionless and alert. A breeze sighing through the trees bore upon its breath softly falling snow, the flakes hissing gently as they floated into the still glowing embers of the fire. Beneath the snow-burdened evergreens something stirred and the

dogs growled more threateningly. The vague outlines of a form showed close to the remains of the fire and spoke:

"Don't draw your gun!"

"Eh?" Nolan jerked to a sitting position and breath spurted from his lungs in a steamy plume of surprise, for it was not a harsh command, but words uttered in a voice low and musical.

"I have you covered," the soft voice went on.

“Don’t move!” Followed swift movement and the fire suddenly blazed as a handful of resinous branches were flung upon it.

“Well, I’ll be—” exclaimed Nolan, as he saw that a revolver was pointing straight at him, and that the weapon was held by a girl.

She was young and she was pretty.

She stood to Nolan’s left. To the north the aurora borealis fanned weird rods of tinted light in the heavens. The glow from the sky and the light from the flickering flames dancing about the girl caused her to appear almost ghostly. But the heavy revolver she held showed real enough. Ignoring the weapon, Nolan got to his feet. He built up the fire until it illuminated the whole glade.

“Now,” he said, taking a step towards her, “what is the meaning of this?”

She did not recoil and he saw her face more distinctly. It was a lovely face, but it bore a look of stark horror.

“You must go.” She spoke insistently, her voice a-quiver with dread. “You were watched all day. You are heading for Ghost Lake. You must go no further.”

Unmistakably, Nolan saw, she was in deadly earnest. And strange, almost unbelievable tales had emanated from the Ghost Lake district lately—that was why he was here.

A GIRL had appeared to travelers, whispered tales had it—the Flame Maiden, the natives called her—and warned them to turn back. To those who did not turn back things happened. Some vanished—never to be heard of again. Others were found aimless wanderers—mentally deranged—gibbering idiots. Their ravings had been the same—they had seen the Flame Maiden. And too many men had been found in this region with unbalanced minds to longer regard the tales as superstitious prattle. The Mounted had been ordered to investigate. And now this girl was here telling him to turn back, and emphasizing her command with a gun. Nolan’s lips tightened and he stepped to her side.

“Young lady,” he said firmly, “I am not a native to be easily scared. Drop this silly, melodramatic nonsense and get down to brass tacks.”

“It is not silly, melodramatic nonsense.” She shivered slightly. “I wish that it was. Look!” She swept back the hood of her parka and stepped closer to the fire. “Don’t you recognize me?”

“Good Lord! Joan Broome!” Nolan exclaimed as he eyed the wealth of gleaming curls now tumbling about her face. Excerpts from an official notification flashed into his mind: “Girl, aged twenty. Violet eyes. Clear, healthy complexion. Slim, graceful build. Most striking feature, naturally curly, flame-colored hair.”

Together with her father, Martin Broome, chief engineer with the Silver Beech Radium Ore Company at Great Bear Lake, she had vanished completely one blizzard night. And as he eyed her hair, gleaming and scintillating in the glow of the fire, Nolan understood why natives to whom she had appeared and warned called her the Flame Maiden.

“Well—” he began.

She interrupted: “I suppose that the Mounted have been hunting for father and me ever since we disappeared?”

“Yes.” Nolan smiled quietly. “And this is certainly a lucky break for me; I’ve found you and solved the mystery of the Flame Maiden all at one stroke. If you will lead me to your father I’ll take you both back.”

Joan Broome shook her head, her eyes frightened, pleading.

“I wish you could, but others have tried, and—oh, you must have heard the tales.”

“Others have tried?” Nolan stiffened. “Explain further, please,” he said gently.

“My father and I were kidnapped by a man I know only as Sloane,” she began hurriedly. “Sloane has two other men with him. We are on an island in Ghost Lake. To keep others away Sloane forces me to steal upon travelers, threaten them with this pistol, order them to turn back and also reveal my hair and call myself the Flame Maiden. Most have heeded my warning; some have not, and—” She ended with a shiver.

“According to the tales I’ve heard, Sloane captures them and destroys their reason,” Nolan finished for her. “D’you expect me to believe anything so fantastic?”

“Yet it’s the truth!” She stepped closer, her face livid. “I have seen them. He shuts them in a small cabin for hours. When he releases them they are out of their minds.”

“Then,” Nolan said firmly, “this man Sloane and his two companions must be taken in charge. Please guide me to the island.”

“I daren’t.” Again she shivered slightly. “One

policeman hasn't a chance. You must get help. Remember they are three to one and armed and desperate."

"I wonder." Nolan smiled faintly. "Most of these 'desperate' characters submit tamely enough when it comes to a showdown, you know. But perhaps it would be better to return for the other two members of my detachment, and you are returning with me."

"No!" she protested tremulously. "I can't. If I do, then Sloane will carry out his threat to imprison my father in that cabin. I must return alone to the island."

"You're going with me," Nolan said firmly. "We'll take care of your father."

"No!" She stepped back affrightedly. "Oh, look!"

Nolan wheeled to follow her pointing finger. "I see nothing—" he began as he turned back, then swore as he saw that he had been tricked. The girl was gone.

Savagely he flung in pursuit. He had not gone fifty paces before he realized the hopelessness of trying to follow her through the night-shrouded woods. He made his way back to camp to await daylight.

NOLAN spent the few remaining hours until daylight conning it all over for the hundredth time. First, the furor caused by the disappearance of the mining engineer and his daughter. Then the weird tales emanating from the Ghost Lake district. But this region was all of two hundred miles from Great Bear Lake; at first they had seen no connection between the two happenings. But now Nolan knew there was a connection.

But why had Sloane kidnapped Broome and his daughter? There had been no demand for ransom; that was one thing that had made their disappearance the more baffling. And why had this man Sloane instituted a reign of terror in the district? And exactly how did he destroy the minds of the too inquisitive ones? His reason was obvious; to turn them loose to impress and frighten others. And he had succeeded; trappers, natives and others now avoided the Ghost Lake district like the plague. For over a week of hard mushing, apart from the girl, he had not met a soul.

He stirred and glanced about him. Dawn was beginning to filter through the trees. He fed and tethered the dogs. Ghost Lake was but a few miles

away and he would not need the animals to follow the girl. Then he cooked and ate a hearty breakfast.

Mid-morning found Nolan standing on a high bluff staring out over the frozen snow-covered expanse of Ghost Lake. An icy wind was scooping the snow all about him in whirling clouds. Through the welter of frozen particles he could discern an island a bare half-mile from shore. By peering steadily he could just make out a faint trail beneath the fresh film of snow. He started to clamber down the high bluff.

Reaching the bottom, he paused to get his service revolver from under his parka. Three men, the girl had said, so he might need it. He was still fumbling with the holster flap when something seemed to fill the air all about him with a swishing sound. His arms and head and shoulders were suddenly entrapped in something which held him powerless. It was like he was wrapped in a great spider web.

And then he saw two men. He took a vicious blow on the temple and everything went black.

Head a throbbing, brain dazed, Sergeant Nolan opened pain-weighted eyes. He tried to struggle to his feet, and found that he was bound hand and foot. With an effort he lifted his head and at once a jarring pain burst in his side. Dully he realized that he was being kicked.

"Well, young fella," a hard voice said, "we had to take you. You was too dumb to turn back when warned."

Nolan stared and saw that he was in a roughly-built shack, and that three men stood close. One of them stooped and cut the lashings about the sergeant's feet.

"Get up!" ordered the man who had first spoken.

Nolan got to his feet. Then he saw the girl. She was staring at him with eyes eloquent with reproach and dread. At her side was a middle-aged man. Nolan took him to be her father. In his eyes was that same look of reproach and dread.

Nolan turned back to the man who had kicked him.

"Are you the man known as Sloane?" he asked, then his eyes gleamed in surprise. "Sloane," he repeated softly, eyeing the man closely, noting his auburn hair and week's growth of beard. "I've seen your face before—on a United States reward poster. 'Red' Harvey was the name under the picture."

“And a lotta good that’ll do you now,” the man grinned. “Sure I’m ‘Red’ Harvey, and here’s a coupla my pals also wanted across the line for a mite of plain and fancy murdering. What’re you going to do about it?”

Nolan did not reply at once; his eyes were roving all about the cabin swiftly appraising. He saw his revolver and cartridge pouch hanging upon a nail, and next to it—his lips twisted—a square of heavy fish netting. So that was what had felt like a giant spider web!

“Take it all in—you ain’t got long,” Sloane said sneeringly. The words brought Nolan’s eyes back to his captors. For a moment he eyed them steadily, then:

“You men are fools,” he said tautly. “Better men than you have tried to get away with high-handed stuff up here. They’re in jail now—or dead.”

“Yeh?” Sloane grinned mockingly. “Well, we’re playing safe. No killing unless we have to. We’ve a better scheme that makes sure no one can squeal on us. We’ll fix the old man and the girl the same way when we’ve done with them.”

“But why all this?” Nolan asked.

“Gold!” Sloane said. He pointed to the far end of the big room. “In case you don’t know, that’s gold-milling machinery.”

Nolan turned his head and stared.

The machinery, a small mill for crushing the rock, and mechanism for extracting the precious metal, was such as could easily be transported to this remote spot by a dog team.

Starry lumps of ore lay on the parked floor. It was high-grade stuff. The wire gold was plainly discernible. Nolan understood the whole thing now. Sloane had brought the mining engineer to the island and forced him to conduct the technical operation of extracting the gold from the rich ore. His daughter’s welfare had been the club which had driven the mining engineer to obey.

SLOANE and his two companions, since they were “wanted” men, could not appear openly and file claim to the rich lode. So they had been working it secretly, and by building up the legend of the Flame Maiden, and turning loose, deprived of their reason, those who had learned too much, had sought to frighten away all who ventured near. It was a damnable scheme and it had worked.

“Simple yet airtight, eh?” Sloane taunted. His

voice suddenly hardened and he thrust his face within an inch of Nolan’s. “And now, Mister Nosey Mountie, we’re going for a little walk—ending at a cabin. In only a few hours your brain’ll be gone.” Followed by his two henchmen bringing Nolan, he led the way from the building.

The party halted before a small log cabin. “Looks just like an ordinary old shack, eh?” Sloane asked as he unlocked the door. “Well, Mountie, you’ll soon learn different.”

The other men pushed Nolan inside, flung him onto the one bunk the building contained and lashed him securely, then left him there.

As best he could Nolan stared about him. All he could see was that the place was absolutely bare from dirt floor to log ceiling. It was bitterly cold. The wide cracks between the logs were unchinked. And there was no bedding upon the bunk on which he lay, only a sacking-covered pillow that concealed something hard. How could just being lashed to the bunk in this rough shack destroy a man’s reason? Yet—Nolan recalled the others, and remembering caused him to struggle. The ropes only cut in more deeply.

Later, when he was almost numb with cold, a soft whisper made him turn his head.

“Are you conscious?”

“Yes.” He could just discern Joan Broome’s shadow outside the wall against which he lay.

“They’ve gone for a load of ore, but they might be back any moment,” came hurriedly. “I can’t get in the door, but I’m going to try to cut you loose.” A knife lashed to a stick was poked through a chink between the logs.

“Tell me if I jab you,” came further whispered words.

Fumblingly the blade found a thong, commenced to saw. A faint grunt escaped Nolan as the knife point pricked his arm.

“Have I cut you?” came the agonized whisper. “I can’t see you at all.”

“Cut away,” Nolan whispered back.

He could hear her frightened breathing and suddenly she gasped, as there came a loud shout and the tramping of feet.

“They’ve missed me! Do your best!” The knife and stick fell across Nolan’s body and he heard her receding footsteps. Followed a rough, “Where’ve you been?” and the slamming of a door.

For a few seconds Nolan waited, then moved an arm. It stopped. He moved it again. The veins stood

out upon his forehead with the effort. Then the strand the girl had sawed upon snapped, freeing his right hand. With the knife he began to work upon the other ropes. They were of rawhide, stiff, tough. He freed himself at last and got to his feet—and suddenly clutched wildly at the wall for support, his brain reeling, fevered. The attack passed, but he realized that he had got free just in time! Something had already begun to affect him. What it was he could find out later.

A cautious testing of the door showed him that it was secured from the outside, and it was too stoutly built to break down. The place was windowless. He was still a prisoner.

Staring through a chink he saw that twilight had fallen and a light glowed in the larger cabin. In some way he must attract attention, make them come and open the door. He thought swiftly then commenced to shout, wildly. Nolan backed to the bunk and stretched himself prone.

Now he could see the man's shadow as he crouched and peered through a chink. Deliberately Nolan commenced to rave.

"Fooled 'em, fooled 'em! A thousand bucks expense money in my body belt and they never found it." He ended with a crazed cackle then held his breath, waiting.

He heard the man mutter to himself, then the door opened cautiously. Sighting the sergeant still lying prone he slowly advanced to his side.

"It ain't taking you long to go," he grunted, staring down. "Usually takes a day and a night. Well. I sure can use a thousand bucks in cash."

Putting down the lantern he leaned over the bunk.

"Cr—ack!"

HIS shoulder braced against the bunk Nolan put all he had into the blow, and his fist caught the man full on the jaw. He slumped sighingly. In hurried seconds Nolan had lashed him to the bunk, picked up the revolver and the lantern and made his way outside.

"Everything okay?" The question was shouted to him as he emerged, by Sloane, now standing at the door of the large building.

"Sure," Nolan replied, and turned his back as if to again lock the door. Came the sound of a door closing and Nolan breathed easier; in the gloom Sloane had thought him to be the other man. For a moment Nolan stood immobile, thinking rapidly,

then slowly, quietly, made his way toward the main building.

Dousing the lantern he cautiously peered through a window. Seated upon chairs he saw Sloane and the other man, and Joan Broome and her father, and the girl and her parent were in between the door and their captors. He could not enter and cover the kidnapers with his gun, for they could shoot from behind the shelter of their prisoners, and Nolan did not doubt but that they would shoot.

He groped in his brain for another ruse, then stepped up to the door and rapped loudly, at once then stepping to one side. From within the cabin came startled exclamations, and he sensed suddenly stiffened attitudes and staring eyes. Followed muttered words, the scraping of a chair and heavy footsteps. The door flung open and Sloane's companion, gun in hand, appeared.

Nolan's revolver slammed down on the other man's head. At the same instant Nolan leaped back to the window. He saw that Sloane had backed to the far wall, and was holding the girl in front of him with his left arm. His right hand held a heavy revolver. The engineer was on his feet, white-faced, his eyes on his daughter.

Again Nolan did some fast, cool thinking. Two men out but Sloane was still on his feet and armed and protected by the girl.

"Scared to come in, Mountie?"

"No!" As he accepted the challenge Nolan hurled his revolver through the window. The sudden crash of breaking glass had the desired effect. The tensed Sloane swung swiftly toward the window and fired—and in that brief instant Nolan was back at the door and had launched himself. A hundred and eighty pounds of bulleting force he sailed through the air. With both hands he grabbed for Sloane's right wrist and hung on. The heavy revolver was jerked clear and went spinning to the floor.

"Get gun! Watch other man," Nolan panted as he thrust the girl to one side, then Sloane was at him.

Sloane was bigger and heavier than Nolan and he fought with deadly, murderous savagery. Nolan ducked and dodged, shooting in swift punches at every opening. His left caught Sloane full on the chin; he expected to see the man drop. Instead Sloane cursed through blood-flecked lips and rushed.

From the corner of an eye Nolan saw that Joan and her father had tied the unconscious man, dragged him inside and shut the door. The girl had the revolver, but dared not use it. Her father, obviously ill and weak, could not throw himself effectively into the tangled whirl of hurtling bodies and flying fists. Everything depended upon Nolan's unaided efforts. The knowledge braced him.

Sloane fought silently, cunningly, with every trick he knew. Again he rushed. Nolan slipped.

THE fists twisted into an iron ball in the small of Nolan's back gouged relentlessly. The sharp agony made him twist and writhe furiously in convulsive torture. Desperately he straggled—and his right hand jerked free.

He rained short jabs at the other man's face. They had no effect. Sloane tightened his grip, the veins swelling in his neck from the effort. The sight of the veins called to some unassailable portion of Nolan's brain. He unclenched his fist, and, even as his spine commenced to crack, with the wedge of his hand struck and struck again at those purple veins. Again Nolan struck. Sloane staggered back, clasping a hand to his neck.

As Sloane stood there swaying on his feet, still feeling his neck, Nolan swung with all his strength to the heart. Again he smashed to the same mark. Sloane swayed, sagged. Nolan braced himself, then with all his weight behind it, smashed his right to the side of the neck. Sloane half turned, crumpled slowly to the floor.

For a moment Nolan stood panting, refilling his

lungs with life-giving air, then turned to Joan Broome and her father. "Watch him!" he said briefly, turned and made his way outside to the small cabin. Not until he had his three prisoners tied securely and lined up in the main building did he voice the question that had never been absent from his mind.

"That cabin?" he asked the engineer. "What makes it work the way it does?"

A SHIVER ran through the older man as he answered:

"It is the pillow on the bunk," he said slowly. "When they kidnapped us they also stole a sled-load of pitched-blend from the Silver Beech Mine. It contains a rich quantity of radium. How Sloane learned I do not know, but all medical men and mining men know that radium in close proximity to the human brain over a period of hours does great damage. At our mine we only let our underground men work in very short shifts."

"Good Lord!" Nolan breathed. And this middle-aged engineer and his daughter had been unwilling parties to the whole devilish scheme. But that nightmare was now ended. He turned to look at Joan—a flame-haired girl regarding him steadily with lovely eyes from which all horror now had fled.

The Flame Maiden! The Ghost Lake mystery was solved but the Flame Maiden remained—infinitely real and wholly desirable. And from the look in her eyes Nolan had a hunch that to him she might become even more real.