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PEACE RIVER PENDLETON

By HAMILTON CRAIGIE

Every man to his trade indeed; for by his very use of tools may one know him as a craftsman, a hard worker, a villain——or even a murderer

PEACE RIVER" PENDLETON was sharpening his ax.

The logs were "in"; presently the crew of Camp No. 10 of the Babine Development and Timber Company would be on the way southward over the Skeena to Port Essington and the Coast. The wangan-boss had shouted "Grub-pile!" but Peace River continued to whet the great blade with slow, sure, steady strokes, as if his life depended upon it.

And perhaps, by a grim jest, that is just what it did, as will be seen when the time is served.

Peace River grunted, turning the great blade of the four-and-a-half pound axe upward to the light. That blade had never failed him—yet. It was a good blade, and it had served him well; as a weapon, behind it the lift and drive of the great shoulders and the mast-like arms, it would be chain lightning. But Peace River had never used that axe save as a woodsman uses it—to cut down trees. But there are some trees that stand too long.

Now he twisted a long horse-hair from the shoulder of his mackinaw, drawing it smoothly across the glistening edge. There were several threads in the handful; they parted now on contact with the razor-like steel, hanging by a single hair.

There might have been an omen in it if Pendleton had been superstitious. Now he merely grunted again, squinting along the bright blade as a shadow bulked suddenly between him and the light.

The man who faced Pendleton, powerful as he, himself, was, could never have handled that axe as could its owner. In his hands it would have been a weapon, to be sure, but an unaccustomed one; in the

giant timber jack's it could be on occasion a whirling white blindness of steel, and he handled it like a giant, to the quick heave and thrust of his powerful shoulders, as a lesser man might twirl a peavie, say, or a white-water man a pike-pole.

And the great axe was as well known as its owner. It had his initials on it, burned into the handle; there could be no mistaking it.

Now the timber-jack looked upward, and a swift shadow, like the sun on water, passed over his dark, hard-bitten countenance. When Peace River smiled—that was another matter. Then you could follow the smile inward to find a heart that was as sound as a new-minted dollar. But just now there was no smile, but a grim, straight, brooding look that might have been a warning to the man who faced him, sneering.

"You, Peace River!" he said.

Speech can be meaningless and yet charged with meaning. Now there was a drawling insolence in the tone, a snarling violence in the trap-like mouth, twisted like an animal's, the lip lifting from the stained and blackened teeth.

"Denver," for that was all the name he went by, was tall and broad; he was a bigger man physically even than Peace River Pendleton. But he was not a woodsman; beneath the stubble of a new-grown beard his face had that curious, dead pallor found not merely in cities. And there was a perpetual, blinking cast to the furtive eyes; when he spoke it was out of the corner of his mouth, in the prison twist. And he had got a job at Camp No. 10 for the sole reason that they were short-handed, and a man was a man. Old Tom Hardesty would have hired the devil himself and welcome, if he could have used him; there was but one species of human that Old Tom had no manner of use for, and that was, to quote his own quaint phrase—a "jude."

But there was certainly nothing of the dude about Denver. Now his little eyes narrowed at the corners as he leaned close.

"You, Peace River!" he repeated thickly. "They're callin' you 'Peace River,' ha? Well, I hear you're a hellbender in a scrap, ha? Well, now, you listen here a minute, old-timer."

His voice fell to a purring insolence, a low note, falling almost to a mutter.

"You an' Mary Sigerson, you ain't been friends lately. Well, an' you ain't going t' be, Mister Peace River Pendleton."

"We'll leave the lady's name out of it!"

The words were low, even, controlled. The strong hand holding the axe turned it over; there came a quick wrench, and the head was jerked clear of the stout haft. There are few woodsmen who can "strip" an axe-blade, but Pendleton did it without visible effort. It was as if, too, he would not trust himself with that axe in hand, with that sneering face thrust close to his. But for the matter of that he had been meaning to put a new wedge in it—a taper screw. It had been his own invention.

But now, at that poisonous reference to Mary Sigerson, the veins in his neck and temples stood out in ridges. He got to his feet, lurching a little, as a bear lurches, lumbering and slow. For he was thinking of Mary, and of her father. The "timber-waddy jude," Hardesty had called him—perhaps with reason.

Sigerson's camp was close at hand, at the portage at "Forty Mile," and was in a way a permanent one. It had been only the previous season that Pendleton, acting as guide and general handy man for the opulent Sigerson, had met his daughter, Mary, for the first time. Mary had liked the

upstanding axeman; she had made no secret of her preference, but there had been Sigerson to reckon with. And Peace River had never forgotten the sportsman's sarcastic stare, the slow, head-to-foot inspection, the drawling, amused comment of, "Well, but my good man, of course, you understand—or is it possible you don't?"

Pendleton had felt within him the beast which is in every man rising to the surface, but he had thrust it under with an effort.

"You timber-waddy dude!" was all that he had said, but as such things fall out, rumor had magnified the matter—he had had a fist-fight with Sigerson, half killed him, threatened to "get" him, and so forth. And it was generally understood thereafter that he "had it in" for the sportsman.

And now, the thought of this hulking jailbird and Mary! It was too much. He knew that Denver had been a casual visitor to the Sigerson camp, but others of the lumbermen—sealers, timber-cruisers—had been welcome there. There was nothing unusual in that. But that Denver had presumed—! It was too much.

As in a red mist he beheld the broad, flat face close to his, heard the unspeakab1e epithet, even as his fist, behind it the full weight of his two hundred pounds of iron-hard muscle, had crashed full upon Denver's jaw. Or, rather, he thought that it had. Peace River Pendleton was a fighter. As a rough-and-tumble mixer, he was without a peer from Babine Lake southward to Port Essington, but as a boxer he was just a fair amateur, and little more. Before he had sunk downward in the scale to the man that he had become, Denver Ed Gunderson had been a heavyweight fighter of renown; it had been his own undisciplined character which had kept him from the championship. If Peace River had heard that name of Gunderson he would have known him upon the instant, but it would have made little difference. For the measure of a man here in the North Woods, the British Columbian wilderness, was the measure of his heart.

Peace River grunted, the force of the blow turning him half round. But the blow found empty air. For Denver, grinning his cold grin, had stepped inside the punch even as his own left fist, lifting from his shoe-tops, came upward with the speed of light.

That punch had, aforetime, won many a fight for Denver Ed Gunderson; a lesser man than Peace River Pendleton would have wilted in his tracks. But Pendleton took it, his feet braced, head lowered and weaving from side to side, as a grizzly meets the onslaught of wolves. Then, fists going like flails, he was on top of his adversary, crowding him backward along the snow by the very force and fury of his attack.

But Denver Ed, light on his feet for all his bulk, side-stepped, circled with the lithe ease of the professional. Most of Peace River's blows he took upon his shoulders, his arms, picking them out of the air before they were well started, countering with heavy rights and lefts. But he could not set himself for another haymaker; the timber-jack had come in close, his great arms reaching now for this elusive antagonist, who mocked him even as he reached him on occasion with punishing blows.

Denver Ed's sojourn in the timber had served him well. Soft from months and years of easy living, sledge and maul and axe had hardened and toughened him so that indeed he was by now almost the man that he had been in the past. And he could take it. For there was nothing yellow about Denver Ed. As for his heart, that was black, and it was just a muscle, without pity and

without fear.

But as the fight went on, his easy sneering abated, if by the merest shade; his confidence, the careless ease of the master giving a boxing lesson to a pupil, began to waver, to dissolve in a sudden, strange, uneasy apprehension.

This fellow—he could take it, and then some! But there was more to it than that. There was a grim earnestness, a resistless fury, an invincible, dogged determination about Pendleton that for the first time planted a thin, entering wedge of doubt and disbelief in Gunderson's heart. Why, the fellow didn't know when he was beaten! He had hit him with everything but the bucket, in the parlance of the squared circle; hooks, jabs, uppercuts, straight-letting his face into a red smear; pile-driving rights and lefts, jolting him backward upon his heels. Why, the fellow was beaten to a fare-you-well!

But he could hit; there was no doubt about that, Gunderson grudgingly admitted as he ducked under a long, curving left grazing his jaw. It was followed by a right just inside his guard. The blow, traveling a scant six inches, spun Gunderson like a top, jarring him to the heels. He grunted, falling into a clinch, and upon the instant felt himself lifted, swung.

For if he had thought to rough it with this timber-jack, he found now that all his skill, his shiftiness, the tricks which had brought him the nickname of "Elbows" for his brutal infighting, availed him nothing. It is common knowledge that a good rough-and-tumble fighter, given his chance, may and frequently will, best the cleverest ringmaster that ever drew on a glove. Something of this flashed through the mind of Denver Ed as suddenly he felt those iron arms contract, pinning him helpless as though with hooks of steel. Peace River Pendleton bent, straightened, heaved; there came a sudden, brief explosion of movement, and the body of his antagonist catapulted over his head.

Gunderson fell heavily on one shoulder-point, twitched a moment, then, rising, his mean mouth dripping curses as a man turns the spigot of a barrel, made a quick pass for his hip.

And in that instant Pendleton swung.

Gunderson, going for his knife, saw the blow in the split second that his guard rose to block it. It was a perfect defense, even for that mighty blow, but there were no entangling gloves to smother it. Straight through that guard, as if it had been paper, the great fist drove; there came the sound as of a butcher's cleaver on the chopping-block as it landed with a smacking thud. Gunderson bent, swayed, stumbled, recovered ; then, in a long, slumping fall, he was down. He twitched a moment, then lay still, his face upturned to the still, gray sky.

It had been a knockout—clean.

Peace River Pendleton grinned, a mere spasmodic contraction of the lips, as he stood over the fallen man, his gaze somber, even in his hour of victory. His thoughts were bitter, brooding, turning now to that camp a scant five miles northward across the timber—the camp of Einar Sigerson. His eyes turned to ice now as Gunderson stirred, grunted, got slowly to a sitting position, then, unsteadily, to his feet.

But there was no fight left in him—with his fists.

He turned without a word, shambling onward over the snow. At a little distance, he halted, dark face twisted over his shoulder. Words came.

"You got away with it this time, Mister Peace River," he said tensely, "but—an' you can smoke this with your cigarette—I'll get you, an' I'll get you

good!”

II

PENDLETON watched him go, then, with slow steps, he steered an uncertain course for the bunkhouse. First, however, he picked up his axe.

Hardesty met him at the door. His eyes widened at the sight.

“Great tomcats, man! What you been doin’ t’ yourself?” he exclaimed. “Look like ye’d been clawed by a painter!”

Behind him, Morse, the sealer, echoed it, “A catamount—sure an’ certain!”

Neither man had seen the fight; it had been, so to speak, without witnesses. Pendleton grinned through split and blackened lips.

“I reckon I have been,” he mumbled, “even if he did walk on two laigs. Saved me a dentist’s bill, anyway,” he continued, as he spat out a tooth. “That fancy tooth-puller down at Hazelton now, he’d a charged me good an’ plenty, I’ll tell a man!”

He grinned again, then abruptly his face hardened. He swung round abruptly at a cool voice at his elbow.

“Why, hello, Pendleton, is that you? You—you’re not well, ha? Oh, excuse me!”

There came then the sound of a discreetly smothered laugh.

It was Sigerson. Dapper, precise, from the jaunty set of his fur cap, to the high-laced boots, he stood peering and grimacing in the doorway, nose sharpened to a pointed question, mouth with its infinitesimal mustache hiding the faintest of faint grins. Sleek—that, in a word, was Einar Sigerson. And seeing him, and Mary, you wondered, and gave it up.

With the reek of battle still upon him, Pendleton, his face dark, leaped now without sound, arm raised, upon the dapper insolence who faced him, poised, serene.

It is doubtful if it was the timber-jack’s mind to do him actual hurt. But Hardesty and the sealer leaped between.

“Easy does it, old-timer!” grunted the wangan-boss. “Easy now. ’Twon’t do, ’twon’t do at all. That’s the stuff!”

Sigerson, paling slightly, had made two stiff, mincing, backward steps. Now, as he turned going out the door, Pendleton found voice. Strangely enough, the words were almost an echo of Denver Ed Gunderson’s.

“You listen to me, Mister Sigerson. Some day I’m goin’ to fix you—an’ I’ll fix you good!”

Ill

IN THE bunkhouse at Camp Ten the crew slept, fathoms deep in dreams. Presently there would be a moon, but just now the darkness was ink-black, save for the spectral shimmer of the star-shine upon the snow, filtering downward from the remote blue dome of the sky.

Abruptly, out of the dense shadows at the rear, a formless black blot showed for a moment against the snow. There came the brief, darkling glimmer of star-shine upon steel; then, at a swift, stealthy lope, the figure was across the clearing, lost in the black belt of timber to the north.

In the confusion of tracks around and about the clearing the trail of this midnight prowler would be lost as in a labyrinth of converging trails. The shadow chuckled now, and the sound was not a pleasant one. Denver Ed Gunderson, pausing only long enough to fit the head to the axe-helve— for that was how he had found it, just as it had been left by the timber-jack—went forward now among the

trees along that dim trail which led northward to vengeance—and the camp of Einar Sigerson. And the axe was the good blade of Peace River Pendleton.

Only that day Mary had given Gunderson his answer, and his sentence, and it had been but a single, incisive word.

"You!" she had said, the whole essence of loathing in a phrase, a word.

Now that which he was about to do would be easy enough—to leave that bunk-house undetected, and to return as he had come. It was too easy, when you thought of it. For he could have walked over the bodies of those sleepers, fathoms deep in dreams, and none ever the wiser; a charge of dynamite would scarcely have awakened them. Still, to make assurance doubly sure, he had seen to it that there would be no slip-up; certain white powders which he had obtained, no matter how, and the coffee—it had been too easy.

In the dense darkness of the timber he had paused to fit the axe-handle to the blade—and by so doing sealed his fate.

Remorseless as his four-footed brothers, kin of fang and claw, Denver Ed Gunderson possessed the heart of a cougar and the conscience of a wolf. He had nothing in particular against Einar Sigerson, but he would use him now as the instrument of his revenge against Peace River Pendleton. And another instrument was also in his hands. It was a two-edged weapon, indeed, an edged tool with which presently he would kill two birds with the same stone—or steel. It was all one, he reflected, with an inward grin.

And, as he thought of it, there was a certain matter between him and Sigerson, that, as well as another pretext, would serve him now, dovetailing with his purpose.

Mary had departed that morning for Hazelton. Gunderson knew of this, and that, too, gibed with his plan. And the sportsman, as was common knowledge, carried a considerable sum in cash upon his person. Here again Denver would accomplish a double stroke.

For it was well known that between Pendleton and the father of Mary no love was lost, and there was the timber-jack's threat no later than that very noon:

"I'll fix you—an' I'll fix you good!"

Denver Ed, grinning in the darkness, reached Sigerson's camp, circled it, then, axe in hand, approached the cabin door.

A little wind, rising among the pines, murmured like voices whispering together out of the dark, as Denver, his hand upon the staple of the door, listened for a few moments to the sound of heavy breathing, slow, like the measured beating of a heart.

"Open up," he called finally. "It's me—Denver. I want to see you, special. Open up!"

There came a fumbling at the door. Einar Sigerson, heavy with sleep, heard that harsh summons with a sudden, strange prevision of evil, coming upon him out of the dark. For there was a cadence in the voice, an eagerness, which Denver could not all conceal; it rang now, vibrant in the midnight silence;

Sigerson, hesitating a moment, reached about him in the darkness for his pistol, but he could not find it. Well, anyway, what was there to fear? The man outside was Denver Ed Gunderson; he had nothing to fear from Denver Ed. He shivered suddenly in the frosty air.

"Someone's walking over my grave," he muttered, and with the words flung wide the door.

Instantly he knew that he had blundered. And he knew it by that sixth sense which warns of danger. He could not

see Gunderson's eyes, but the rigid poise of the man, the forward-thrusting tilt of his head, the hunched shoulders, affected him with a sudden sense of crisis.

"What is it, Denver; what's wrong?" he asked, his voice strained and hoarse.

Gunderson's answer came with a sort of snarling violence.

"You know damn well! You sicked me onto this Peace River Pendleton, an' what he did to me was a-plenty; you musta knowed that he would. Me, I ain't forgettin' that, Mister Sigerson." His thick tones rose to a kind of singing fury. "An' what's more, you ain't never paid me f'r the job, but— you'll pay me now, you mangy wolverine!"

Sigerson's protest died in his throat. He made one halting, backward step, flung out a hand.

The great axe rose; it fell, like the Hammer of Thor.

IV

BOOTS ALLISTON, Sheriff of Kitkargas, gazed down at the giant where he sat dejectedly before the great sheet-iron stove in the bunkhouse at Camp Ten.

"I'm right down sorry, Peace River," he said huskily, "but the evidence is against you, and it's pretty strong. You were heard to threaten Sigerson; it's common knowledge that you didn't exactly love him; and the axe—-there's no mistake about that. It's yours, isn't it?" he asked, but the words were less a question than a statement of fact.

The timber-jack nodded, without speech. The two men had been friends, but, as sheriff, Alliston had no other choice than to perform his duty. Now he turned heavily to a thick-set, grizzled man in the doorway; it was Hardesty. The latter had been examining the axe, perhaps drawn by a morbid fascination to the weapon which had killed a man.

Alliston cleared his throat. Plainly it was a task which was repugnant. In his heart he was divided between wonder and disbelief, but duty was duty, and he had been sworn to uphold the law, without fear and without favor.

"Well, Peace River," he was beginning, "I reckon we'll be on our way—" when at a word from the wangan-boss he ceased abruptly in mid-speech.

The wangan-boss seemed in the grip of a sudden, strange, overmastering emotion.

"Peace River," he barked abruptly, "you stay where you are! Why, dammit, man, I'd take your word against a stack of Bibles, an' you can smoke that with your cigarette. But, by God, I don't have to! Because," he paused, "because you never killed Einar Sigerson. But I got a damn blazin' hunch who did!"

He wheeled, calling out the doorway to Morse, the sealer, yelling a quick, barking order.

"You heard me?" he then asked, turning to the two who gazed at him in a sudden amazement.

"But——" began the sheriff. "Wait!" rasped Hardesty, with a smile secret and grim. "I'm no detective, but I'll lay the price of this winter's cut against a plugged nickel that I'm right!"

Ten minutes passed, then there came a quick clamor from without. It was the sealer. He burst in now without ceremony.

"I sent for Denver, like you said, Mr. Hardesty," he told him. "He was off by that blowdown with Pedersen, that thick Swede. Pedersen says that the minute he heard he was wanted he lit out, the other way, hell-bent. An' so——"

"And so that proves it!" exclaimed the wangan-boss. "It proves, anyway, that he was afraid to come and *see!*"

He grinned widely at Alliston.

"But he won't get away, will he, Boots? I reckon he won't, lessen he starves to death this side o' Hazelton. An' so we got him—like that!"

He opened and closed one huge, hairy fist.

"Well," he continued, to the two who faced him now, Pendleton on his feet, eyes like live coals set in a face dead white, "I didn't know, certain-sure, until I set that trap just now, but, first, I knew that no woodsman had swung that axe back there at Forty-Mile—I'll tell you why in a minute. And in all this outfit the only man who was not a woodsman was this Denver Ed. And the reason why I knew was this!"

He held up the axe for them to see. Alliston and the timber-jack crowded forward.

"It cuts both ways, ha? Well, the blade was off, see? And this Denver Ed, he had to fit it on again before he—used it. But there was one little thing he never noticed, and for the matter of that neither did I until just a few minutes ago, and it was a thing that no axeman, no timber-jack would have failed to notice, or to feel, either, for that matter. He put the head on—curved end foremost; you see—*wrong end first!"*

He dropped the great blade, ringing, at his feet.

An axe, even an ordinary axe, curves inward, the straight end foremost; in a woodsman's axe this is even more pronounced. The murderer, unaware of this—for it was not as an axeman that he had been hired by Hardesty—had betrayed himself with the very instrument of his vengeance. Or, rather, it had betrayed him at the moment, of his greatest need.

Its purpose accomplished, the great axe lay where it had fallen, upright against the empty door. The good blade of Peace River Pendleton had not failed.