

Partners

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D. M. McGowan

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Partners

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Narration by David M. McGowan

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Forward

Several careers before the one from which I retired I was sitting in a booth in a restaurant having lunch when I overheard a conversation in the booth behind me between four co-workers. I can't remember precisely but I suspect they were sawmill workers since I do recall it was in Chetwynd, BC but I've heard the same sentiments several times and I suppose similar conversations have taken place hundreds if not thousands of times in a similar number of locations.

"They'll never see eye to eye. He's got a business degree from some university and the young fella never got out of high school. He's a brave youngster though. He'll tackle almost anything and usually get 'er done."

Since I'd met several who fell within the parameters of both descriptions I started working on their story the next time I was at the computer. Eventually it grew into "Partners"

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He wasn't sure, but he believed it had been two months. It had been June first when he left Pembina in Dakota Territory and a week later, he had been struck down by a fever. He lay in his tent for either two or three days, but he thought it was two. If it had been indeed two days, then it

was June 29, 1866, two months to the day since he had ridden away from his land, his home, and his life near Kingston.

While swinging around in the saddle to check the loads on the two pack horses he thought of that other life. Not only had he ridden away from a hundred acres of farm land which he owned free and clear, but he had also left a steady and rewarding job teaching his neighbor's children. He had turned his back on 35 years of life, and all the things he had worked toward during that time.

"Turning my back on that life was nothing," Tom said aloud, something he found himself doing more and more as the long days of sun, wind and rippling grass ran one in to the other. "I turned my back on a way of life to make that one, and perhaps this new one will last longer."

Tom Brash had once been a husband and father. When he rode away to the west he left behind the graves of his wife and two sons.

"We should be close to those lakes," he said, attempting to turn his mind away from painful thoughts of the past. He turned again to look at the gaunt horses knowing that his mount looked no better. Except for the days he had lain in the grip of a splitting headache they had traveled every day, and the pace was taking its toll on the fine animals. "When we find those lakes, we shall rest for a few days. I'm sure you'll appreciate it."

In his saddle bags he carried maps of the country through which he rode. Some of these he had made from information to be found at Queens University. Most notable were copies of the Palliser maps. Some of the information he had collected had proven to be inaccurate, but not to a point that had caused him great difficulty. He had discovered most of the discrepancies by talking with men who knew the land, but at this point had not found anything on the ground that varied from his charts.

Two days ride west of Pembina a Métis man had confirmed the existence of what he called "Old Woman Lake" near the eastern edge of the Cypress Hills. However, their existence had been touched on earlier by a mountain man he met in Fargo.

"Yer maps is all which-a-way," the old trapper had declared. His finger touched a point far to the west near the mountains. "Them two rivers don' meet. One takes of south 'bout here," he touched a curve in the river as shown on the map. "Turns in t' the Milk an' then in t' the Missouri. This un here turns and goes in t' what they call the Saskatchewan." He appeared ready to say more when something further east caught his

attention. "This here shows some swamp or marsh. That there's Cypress Hills country. I ain't never bin there but that's 'bout where the Old Woman Lakes should be."

He thrust the paper at Tom. "You be sure t' take that with yuh when yuh head out, 'cause if yuh depend on it, you're gonna die. An' if it disappears with yuh we won't have to worry 'bout it leadin' somebody else off the track." Though his face showed no expression the twinkle in the old trapper's eye took the coldness from his statement.

Tom's last contact with his fellow man had been at the Métis camp. They were two days from Ft. Garry on their first big hunt of the new season and had little to offer but hospitality, but of that they gave in plenty. In return Tom gave them coffee and flour, sure that he had more than enough on his two pack horses.

Turning once again to glance at the horses, Brash thought about the supplies that remained. He swung his eyes around, taking in the vast land through which he rode. "Perhaps I was somewhat hasty in estimating my requirements."

Gently he halted his mount and swung down. Pouring water into a large handkerchief he wiped dust from the nose of his mount and then the two pack animals. After a short drink he removed the bandana from around his neck, poured some water into it, and then wiped his face and neck. Hanging the canteen from the saddle he began to walk, leading the horses.

He was slightly taller than average at five feet ten inches. Even though his legs were slightly longer than his torso, many overestimated his weight for he was as thick through as he was wide. He wore military style, knee high riding boots, heavy cotton pants and shirt, and a leather vest. His long moustache was streaked with grey, and the long sideburns under his flat crowned, flat brimmed felt hat were almost white. At some moment during this day, June 29, 1866 he would be thirty-sixth years old.

He was well into the Cypress Hills now, and climbing. Despite the heat and tired horses, he altered his course and angled up the hill. From up on top, he might be able to see something that would indicate the location of the lakes. Perhaps he would cross the trail of some animal going to water. Seeing a grove of trees might also help, for many trees could not grow without some water.

Pausing for a moment he turned and looked back toward the south east. Although he had been in this wide-open land for more than a month he still was not used to the vastness. Distance seemed to contract, and what appeared to be a hundred yards would prove to be five hundred.

The climb was much steeper and longer than he had anticipated, but he did finally approach the top of the hill. Before he crested the ridge however, he heard a murmur that he thought might be human voices.

His mount stopped when he dropped the reins. He stepped back beside the animal and drew a Colt revolving shotgun from the scabbard that hung down from the cantle. With the scatter gun in his hands, he continued up the slope, cautiously scanning the country as he moved forward. He knew that he might meet full blood Indians who would not be as friendly as the Métis' he had camped with. The Assiniboine, Cree and Blackfoot all claimed these Cypress Hills as their own. None of them looked kindly on those who might trespass, but those who met the Blackfoot seldom complained about poor treatment. If they did object it was only to their captors just before they died.

The voices grew more distinguishable as he advanced, though he could still not understand any words.

A shot rang out so close that Brash dropped to his knees thinking for an instant that it had been aimed at him. A scream was cut short by the sound of a blow. Tom dropped to his stomach and crawled to the top of the ridge where he could look into the hollow beyond.

A lake lay before him, perhaps the very one he sought, one arm of it disappearing off to the left. Directly below him on the shore of that lake were the remains of a camp that had been destroyed. A small teepee lay torn and scattered through the remains of a cooking fire and utensils. The body of an Indian man lay tied to the remains of a travois frame, a hole near the center of his bare chest, and blood staining the earth beneath him. Another form from which Brash thought he could hear moans - and guessed was a woman by what he could see of her dress - lay near the bound corpse. The camp was bordered by the lake and the hill, and by thick stands of aspen and willow which gave way near the water to wide strips of cracked and drying mud.

Two men also stood in the clearing. Each of them wore full, dark brown beards and buckskins, the clothing showing as much grease and almost as dark as the face hair. One wore a battered felt hat, his leggings

tucked into high topped riding boots. The other wore a fur cap, the ear lugs tied together on top, his feet in moccasins which extended to just below his knee. The one with the felt hat held a rifle in his left hand, and a coil of rope in his right. Fur Hat had just finished loading his rifle and was removing the ramrod.

"Well, I reckon we isn't gonna have any more fun with the Injun," Felt Hat commented.

Fur Hat cursed. "Wasn't much fun in 'im, Seth. Got more out o' watchin' his chest blow up."

Seth poked the moaning bundle with the toe of his mule-ear adorned boots. "Well, mayhap Mrs. Injun'll be more entertainin'."

"Nope!" a new voice announced.

Both men spun to see a slight figure step from the trees. From his perch high above, Brash saw a boy of perhaps fifteen in cloths that were little more than rags. He wore no hat and his hair was a long, snarled mess. A piece of rope was tied around his waist to hold his pants up, but just under it was a gun belt. The right side of his too-large coat was hooked behind the butt of a large holstered revolver. In his hands he held a rifle, thumb on the hammer and finger on the trigger.

"What's yer prob'em, boy?" Seth asked.

The boy nodded at the moaning bundle. "No more hittin'," he announced.

Fur Hat grinned. "Well, she ain't no use then, is she?" He cocked his rifle and swung the muzzle.

The boy cocked his rifle and swung it toward Fur Hat.

"Look out, Hank," Seth called.

Before Brash could even realize that what he had thought was a rope was actually a bull whip, Seth flicked it toward the boy. The very end of the braided rawhide snapped around the barrel of the boy's rifle. Seth jerked and the rifle landed in the dirt.

Hank laughed. Seth grinned and brought the whip back, swinging it over his head for another strike at the boy. A shot rang out and the whip flew from his hand.

The boy stood with a smoking pistol in his hands.

Brash knew his eyes had been on Seth and the whip, but the appearance of the weapon was a shock. Apparently, it was also a shock for Seth and Hank. Seth was doubled over holding his ringing right hand

between his legs, eyes large and round, and fixed on the smoking muzzle. Hank's eyes were similarly fixed, his thumb still holding the hammer of his rifle at half cock.

"Hammer down," the boy instructed.

Hank gently released the hammer.

Seth took his hand from between his thighs and shook it violently. "He ain't fast enough to shoot us both," he concluded. He still held his rifle in his left hand.

On the ridge above, Brash realized that at least twenty feet separated Seth and Hank. Even for someone as fast and accurate as the boy appeared to be it would be difficult to stop both men before he was himself hit by someone's return fire. Brash also suspected that there was a great deal of luck involved in the shot that took the whip from Seth's hand.

"You first," the boy announced, his revolver pointed at Seth.

Hank smiled. "Then you second," he said swinging the muzzle around toward the boy.

"I believe you may be second." Brash did not know what made him call out. One of the things that had forced him from his home was well meaning people who, after the death of his family, constantly demanded that he communicate with them, and here he was getting involved with people he didn't even know. What he had just witnessed, however, was brutal, and the boy needed help. He shoved the muzzle of his shotgun over the hill and into view.

In the clearing, Hank had stopped the swing of his rifle. Seth had started to raise his own weapon and the weight of it against his left wrist was starting to make his arm tremble.

"Put 'em down," the boy said.

Seth and Hank leaned over and carefully placed their weapons on the ground.

"Short guns an' knives," the boy said.

Two large Bowie knives, a Colt, and a Smith and Wesson revolver hit the ground.

The boy pointed with his chin. "Over by the Injun," he commanded.

Both men walked backward until they stood near the corpse.

Still holding his pistol, the boy retrieved the weapons. The knives he left on the ground. One pistol he put in his own holster, the other behind

his rope belt. The rifles he picked up with one finger looped through their trigger guards. His eyes never leaving the two men he returned to the edge of the clearing, leaning the rifles against a tree.

The pistol at his waist was a Smith and Wesson. He broke it open, dumped the cartridges on the ground, and then threw it to land near the knives. "Stand steady," he ordered, then exchanged his own weapon for the one that had been in his holster. It too was a Colt, so he used the tool from his gun belt to pull the caps from the nipples, then threw the weapon to land by the Smith.

Still facing Hank and Seth so he could keep an eye on them while he worked, the boy turned his attention to the rifles. The first was a Springfield .58, muzzle loader so he simply pointed it over the lake, cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger. Throwing the empty weapon to land near the pistols and knives, he raised the other rifle. It was a Spencer similar to his own so he opened the loading tube in the stock and dumped the rim fire cartridges on the ground, then worked the action to eject the one in the chamber. He threw the Spencer to land by the Springfield.

Gesturing with his chin again the boy indicated the pile of weapons, then the horses. "Mount up," he advised. The heel of his hand rested on his holstered Colt.

Hank and Seth looked at each other then slowly and carefully picked up their rifles.

As he picked up the Smith and Wesson, Seth eyed the cartridges that lay on the ground at the boy's feet. "Them car' ridges is hard t' get," he complained.

"Rough," the boy replied

Keeping an eye on the boy the two men moved quickly toward their horses. In turn the boy didn't fall too far behind them, watching to ensure they took only their own mounts and pack horse.

On the ridge above, Tom Brash rose and returned to his own animals. With reins in hand, he led his mount over the hill and down into the campsite, the pack animals following readily.

Having just watched the two men ride away the boy returned to the camp site, but did not acknowledge Brash's existence. Instead, he went to the Indian woman and rolled her over on her back. Her left eye flew open and her arm came up over her face.

The boy squeezed her shoulder gently. "Won't hurt yuh," the boy said.

Tom could see a bad cut on the right side of her forehead that was already causing that eye to swell and close. The left side of her mouth and left cheek were also swollen and discolored.

"I have some medical supplies," Brash announced.

The boy looked up at him and nodded.

Tom removed his bandanna and held it out to the boy. "Perhaps you could take this to the lake and get it wet? We will need to wash her off before we bandage her."

The boy nodded again, took the bandanna and rose. Tom turned to his horses to retrieve bandages.

As he reached into the pack about where he knew his medical supplies to be, a scream came from behind him that made the horse jump. He turned to see the woman sitting up and looking at the dead man, her hands over her mouth. The boy was running back from the shore.

The woman jerked sideways and fell over the body of the man just before Brash heard the sound of a shot. Both he and the boy looked to Seth and Hank, who were in the relatively open area along the lake perhaps two hundred yards away. Hank held his Springfield over the limb of a tree, smoke still rising from the barrel. In the silence following the shot they could hear the two men laugh.

The boy cursed, threw the wet bandana on the ground and picked up his Spencer. Hank and Seth sprinted for their horses.

Tom put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Does there need to be more killing? You will become an animal like them."

The moment was gone. The two men disappeared behind the finger of hill that pushed out toward the lake. The boy lowered his weapon.

Pointing with his chin toward the dust cloud that remained, the boy said, "Hunt us now. Should a shot 'em."

"You think they will come back?" Tom asked.

The boy nodded, and then indicated Tom's horses.

"For my horses?" He was aware his horses would be highly valued. They were not yet used to the food or climate, and had been worked hard, but they were both taller and heavier than the local mounts.

The boy nodded again and added, "An' packs."

"Well, I would think your shooting skill would be enough to keep them away unless they are completely daft," Tom observed.

The boy shrugged. "Ambush."

Ambush was not new to Brash. His early training had been full of the honor of addressing an adversary in a gentlemanly manner, but his experience had included attacks from cover. Those attacks, however, had come from people of a different culture on the other side of the world, and not from white men with Christian backgrounds.

"I suppose it takes all kinds," Tom said. "And one's proclivity for fast and accurate marksmanship is certainly curtailed when one is dead."

The boy indicated the shotgun in Tom's hand. "Only weapon?" he asked.

"I have a rifle."

"Best get it," the boy responded, almost sneering at the shotgun.

Tom felt his anger rising. "This is the finest of shotguns. It is a Colt 10-gauge revolver. I have four shots available and another cylinder in my saddle bags."

The boy turned and looked at the dead woman, then at the trees from where Hank had fired. "Two hundred yards?" he asked.

Tom's irritation increased another notch, for the boy was right. Loaded with heavy ball the shotgun might be good for half that distance but not with him shooting it.

He also realized that annoyance was rapidly becoming the strongest of his feelings. As he stowed his shotgun in the scabbard and removed his Colt revolving rifle from its place in one of the packs, he considered the source of this irritation. In a country in which he had come to expect no fellow humans he had suddenly found five, two of them torturing and killing two others. He had just witnessed acts of barbarism of a type that he thought only happened at the end of a long battle. In an earlier life he had heard of such actions, but had never actually witnessed them. The sudden appearance of the fifth person - that one a boy - and the subsequent confrontation had been an additional shock.

He had also been a teacher. He was used to acceptance and obedience from his pupils, not ridicule and orders. True, now that he was closer he could see the boy was older than his original estimate, but he was still quite young.

Behind Tom the boy cursed, then asked, "That a rifle?"

"A Colt revolving carbine, actually," Tom replied his pride in the weapon obvious. "Six shots, forty-four caliber."

The boy shook his head and cursed again. Tom marked another reason for irritation - the young man's constant foul language.

"Better go with yuh," the boy concluded, pointing with a thumb over his shoulder toward where Hank and Seth had disappeared. "Yuh got no range, an' them boys'll kill yuh."

"I've handled things quiet well up to this point," Tom protested. He had no wish to be accompanied by this foul-mouthed youth. He had been enjoying his solitary travel.

"More 'n likely ain't had to face up to nothin' like them two," the boy pointed out. He nodded at Tom's pack animals. "Them two's carryin' light. Double up the load. I'll ride the other un."

"My horses need rest," Tom protested, "not a greater load." He waved his hand toward the three Indian ponies. "What is wrong with those animals?"

The boy cursed. "Nothin' 'sept they's Blackfoot." He indicated the two bodies. "They'll have folks. Any young buck's got three horses an' all this truck layin' around is pretty well off. Young buck that's well off's gonna have friends. Them folks find yuh with them horses, you'll be wishin' yuh got shot by Hank an' Seth."

Again, Tom fought down his anger, forcing himself to admit that, in this land in which he was a newcomer the boy might be right. He had certainly heard stories of the Blackfoot and their dislike of white men. There was also no doubt that the youngster had managed to handle the two killers. True, the Indians were dead, but he and the boy still drew breath. He began to loosen the packs for redistribution.

"Perhaps we should bury these unfortunate victims?" he asked.

The boy cursed, shrugged, then added, "Don't know as they dig holes fer the dead. Might put 'em up on platforms. Best just leave 'em lie."

Having set one of the pack bundles on the ground, Tom turned and looked at the two bodies. As he did so he realized he had been avoiding looking at them. "Perhaps we could take a moment to lay them out in a more - uhm - seemly position?"

The boy turned, looked at the bodies for a moment, shrugged, and then cursed. "Reckon."

When Tom had loaded all the freight on one pack saddle, he led the animals into the remains of the camp. The boy had rolled the bodies around until they lay side by side, one right hand clasping the left hand of

the other. Seeing the arrangement, Brash found it suddenly difficult to swallow. He had to clear his throat before he spoke.

"I do believe we should be moving on," Tom noted. "We still must find a suitable spot and make camp. The day is quickly disappearing."

The boy was down on one knee and resting his forearm on the other, his gaze on the bodies. He turned his head to look at Tom who was surprised by the complete lack of expression on the boy's face. His deep blue eyes were neither cold nor hot, full of love nor hate, but rather as blank as a deep pool.

There was a pause while the boy came back to the present, then he responded. "Reckon," he nodded. He pointed with his chin toward the east. "We'll light a shuck that a way."

"But that's east," Tom protested.

The boy cursed. "Yuh don't say?" He pointed with his thumb toward the west. "Them two went west." He stood, rifle in one hand, and walked to the edge of the trees where he picked up a small bundle. Returning to the now unburdened pack horse he grasped the forward sawbuck and swung astride. "We'll go 'round the east end o' the lakes and turn back 'long the north side. It'll keep them away from us fer a few days." He jammed the small pack down in front of himself and against the forward sawbuck. The rifle he carried in his right hand.

Tom realized that once again the boy was right. "That would seem to be prudent," he agreed and mounted his own animal.

"Be a spell 'for we camp," the boy added. "Tomorrow 'for them two realize we ain't on their trail. Get a lead while we got the chance."

They rode in silence for some time while Tom thought about the expression, or lack of one he had seen on the boy's face when he turned from the bodies. It dawned on him that he knew nothing about this boy except that he was particularly adept with a firearm, had attempted to protect a stranger, a stranger not of European descent, and had an especially wild appearance. True, much of this appearance could be attributed to the rags he wore, but his long, slightly bent nose also added to the perception.

"I'm afraid I have been severely remiss in not observing the normal social graces," Tom observed. Leaning over in the saddle he extended his hand toward the boy. "Thomas Brash, late of Kingston, Canada West, and now of where you see me."

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The boy looked at the extended hand for a moment, then took his Spencer in his rein hand and grasped Tom's. "Frank Clement," he responded.

Tom noted there was no mention of his origin.