

This material may be
reproduced by copyright law.
(Title 17 U.S. Code).

THE BELOVED MURDERER

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

AUTHOR OF "OKO-KAN, THE BULL MOOSE," "THE OTHER MAN'S WIFE," ETC.

McKERRING had heard the sound. He knew that it was not the falling of snow from the low-hanging spruce boughs, or the crunch of an animal's paw or hoof. There was no guessing or conjecturing in his mind. He simply knew that it was human, and that it sent a little shiver up his spine.

He did not move hastily, for the same quick instinct told him that to move hastily was to meet sudden danger. He was bending low over his birch-bark fire, arranging pieces of wood over the crackling flames. When he straightened himself, he did so slowly, and with a careless and cheery whistle, his hand resting as if by accident on the butt of his big service revolver.

It was as he had expected. A man on snow-shoes stood looking at him half a dozen paces away. As carelessly as if by accident, the stranger's hand, too, rested upon the butt of the revolver which swung in a holster at his side.

As McKerring had expected, the man's shaggy hair and short beard was of a reddish, auburn color, like his own. In the eyes, the hair, and the form of the two men there was a curious resemblance, though McKerring's face was smooth.

He smiled and nodded. He knew the man, could have spoken his name. There were but two white men in that wild and desolate region of snow and wilderness—himself, Dan McKerring, of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, and this other man, Scotty Grimshawe, the murderer, whose trail had baffled him up until a few hours before. He had never seen Grimshawe, but that this was the man he was certain; for the stranger answered to every line of the printed description which McKerring carried in his breast-pocket.

All that day he had expected to come upon Grimshawe. Instead, Grimshawe had surprised him, and could undoubtedly have

killed him, if he had known that McKerring was a man-hunter sent out especially to run him down.

For a moment both men stood with their hands on their guns. Each was ready for action, and yet neither betrayed a spark of menace to the other.

McKerring saw that he had the advantage of the situation. Scotty Grimshawe did not know who he was, but he knew Scotty. He suddenly raised his hand from his pistol holster and held it out to the other.

"Who in thunder are you?" he cried.

The other also extended his pistol hand, and gripped McKerring's.

"Thompson, from the post up at Fort o' God," he said. "Who are you?"

"McKerring," said the young man truthfully, for he knew that his name would be unknown. Then he tacked on an explanatory bit of fiction. "I'm mapping out a timber-line for the government."

He dropped back to the fire, and for the first time made a careful note of his visitor. He was half startled at what he saw.

Even as the man stood, smiling, he swayed in his snow-shoes. He put out an arm to balance himself. Then he struggled with his long bush caribou shoes. It was an effort for him to kick them off, and when he had done it he was breathing in a curious sort of way. As he dropped his small pack from his shoulders, there was a clatter of tinware; but the folds of the pack fell together in a way that showed it was almost empty. McKerring noticed all this, and when the other looked at him again he saw the red, telltale glow in his eyes.

Over the fire which McKerring had built a pot of tea had begun to simmer, and on the snow was a pan of sliced bacon. Scotty's eyes traveled to them hungrily, and he laughed in a half apologetic sort of way.

There was something in that laugh,

some
thetic
symp
flush
face
guess
"Y
"S
and s
ful o
and
cold—
He
instan
Mc
He w
that
murde
the s
sergea
him i
cash.
the n
murde
for m
law's
likabl
As
soft p
side t
the ni
throug
be tim
would

As
blanke
in the
eyes h
noticed
holster
was ea
"Th
—up h
matter
"Lo
trail e
was tw
gotten
big an
lost!"
McK
coals f
the tw
to the
tin of
"Fi

something in the outlaw's face, in the pathetic droop of his shoulders, that struck a sympathetic chord in McKerring's heart. A flush entered into the other's storm-beaten face when he saw that McKerring had guessed the truth.

"You're hungry," said McKerring.

"Starving," replied Grimshawe quietly, and still smiling. "I haven't had a mouthful of grub in three days and two nights, and when you're fighting storm, an' this cold—"

He stopped, with an ugly cough. In an instant McKerring had him by the arm.

McKerring was young in the service. He was ambitious. The word had gone out that the capture of Scotty Grimshawe, the murderer who had eluded the best men in the service for a year, would mean a sergeantcy for the lucky man who brought him in, and fifteen hundred dollars in cold cash. But in this moment he forgot that the man whose arm he gripped was the murderer. He had not seen a white face for more than two months, and the outlaw's countenance was a strong, blue-eyed, likable one, thinned by hunger.

As he half dragged the man toward the soft pile of balsam boughs and blankets inside the small tent that he had pitched for the night, a plan of action leaped quickly through McKerring's mind. There would be time to make the arrest—later. They would have supper first.

II

As Grimshawe dropped down upon the blankets, facing the fire, he laughed again in that nervous, apologetic way, and his eyes hung to McKerring's face. McKerring noticed that he carelessly swung his pistol holster around in front of him, so that it was easy at hand.

"Three days without grub is a long time—up here," said McKerring. "What's the matter?"

"Lost my compass, and have missed my trail ever since," replied Scotty. "That was twelve or fifteen days ago—I've forgotten just how many. It—it beats all how big and empty this country is, when you're lost!"

McKerring was raking together a bed of coals for the bacon. A few minutes later, the two were sitting facing each other, close to the fire, with meat, bannock, and a big tin of beans between them.

"Fill up!" invited McKerring. "Don't

be afraid of over-stocking! I travel with two dogs and a sledge. They're over there in that bit of sheltered bush. I've got plenty of grub."

He could see that Grimshawe was trying to hide his starvation as much as possible, and it made him like the man, in spite of the fact that he knew what he was. Grimshawe's crime had been a shocking one, but no one could have suspected his record from appearances. It was some time before he seemed at ease, and began to eat a little more ravenously. When McKerring opened a second can of beans, he protested. McKerring insisted, and he cleaned the tin.

Suddenly McKerring reached half-way across the narrow space that separated them.

"That's a curious carving on your gun," he said. "Would you mind letting me look at it?"

For an instant Scotty Grimshawe's eyes darkened. The two men looked straight at each other, McKerring smiling carelessly as he pointed at the gun. The outlaw's laugh was a little harsher as he pulled out the weapon.

"Sure!" he said. "It's an old gun—had it for fifteen years. Take a look at it."

He held it across to McKerring, butt first, his left hand slipping into his coat-pocket at the same time. Scarcely had McKerring taken the weapon, when the other man's hand reappeared with a murderous-looking little Savage automatic.

"But this is a still queerer one," he added, and there was a curious glitter in his smiling eyes. "Ten shots as quick as lightning," he went on, passing the automatic to his right hand, and never for an instant taking his eyes from McKerring. "Goodness knows what gunmakers won't do next!"

McKerring felt a warm flush in his face. Even now, the outlaw had the drop on him; but he felt no uneasiness or chagrin at the fact. He admired the other's careless generalship.

He was confident, also, that Scotty would offer him no harm so long as he did not make the first aggressive move. So he returned the revolver, butt first, and with a good-humored laugh brushed his cap back until it fell from his head. He half turned about to pick it up, falling off his guard easily and with no show of fear.

Scotty's pistol arm stiffened. For an instant the muzzle of his revolver covered

McKerring, and he stared hard at the other's bare head. When McKerring turned again, however, the outlaw's arm had fallen, and he was poking his gun into its holster.

"You're red-headed, same as me," he remarked.

"Not red," objected McKerring, as Scotty took off his cap to prove his own particular feature. "Not red—but mighty near it!"

"I'm not very good at colors, when they overlap," said Scotty. "Mine's red. That's what I call it. Now, if yours ain't red, what in the name of Sam Hill is it?"

"Auburn," said McKerring confidently. "Look here!"

He thrust a hand suddenly into his breast pocket, drew out a flat, buckskin-covered object, and quickly revealed a photograph. During the last nine months McKerring had not met a white man to whom he had not shown that picture. He held it out to the wondering gaze of the outlaw.

"Look there!" he urged again, and his face was flushed with a sudden glow. "She calls it auburn. Hadn't she ought to know?"

A pure, sweet, girlish face smiled out of the picture into Scotty Grimshawe's staring eyes. He looked at it long and intently, and McKerring noticed that his fingers trembled a little.

"Your sister?" he asked at last, in a low voice.

"No. She's going to be my wife."

Scotty gave the picture back. The eyes of the two men met.

"She's going to be my wife," said McKerring again, and his voice trembled with unspoken joy as he looked down into the face that seemed to smile at him still more sweetly. "She's going to be my wife—when I get out of this!"

Scotty's hand touched his arm. In amazement, he saw that between the outlaw's fingers there was another photograph. He took it.

It was a young woman's face that looked out of this picture—a little less girlish than the other, but with wonderful dark eyes which seemed almost alive in the firelight, and which thrilled him with their sadness.

"Your—your sister?" he asked, and tried to smile at his attempted joke.

The outlaw's voice was so low and tender that it seemed filled with reverence.

"My wife," he said.

"Your wife!"

Startled, stung almost to pain by a sudden thought, McKerring stared again at the picture. For a few moments he did not wish Scotty Grimshawe to see his face.

The outlaw's wife! The dark eyes gazed up at McKerring, almost pleadingly. Their wonderful beauty stirred his soul. They seemed to be filled with an unspoken prayer—a prayer for him.

The murderer's wife! He had never thought of that—had never guessed that Scotty Grimshawe might have a wife! He turned the picture over, and there, in faded writing, he read:

To my darling boy, from the girl who will think of him every hour, and pray for him on her knees each night, until he comes back to her. And he—he must always remember his Jeanne.

With a sudden exclamation McKerring caught himself, and returned the photograph to Grimshawe.

"Pardon me, old man," he said. "I didn't mean to read that!"

"Glad you did," said Scotty, and his smile was filled with the warmth of the love which those words brought home to him. "I've read 'em a million times. I look at the picture every night before I turn in, an' it makes me dream. Only—sometimes—"

"What?"

"Sometimes," said Scotty, a strange look stealing into his eyes, "I wish she hadn't been so sad that day—when it was taken. It was the day I came away, an' she had been crying—a long time. That's why her eyes—why, confound it, they're almost crying now, you know!"

There was a moment's huskiness in the outlaw's voice.

"I noticed that," replied McKerring softly. "But there—there's love there, too, old man. It's love that makes them look like that—love an' grief. I wish—" He looked at the smiling face in his own photograph, and then added, a little regretfully: "Maybe, if she'd had her picture taken on the day I left, there would have been more of that in her eyes. But this was taken a year before. She cried, too!"

"You haven't seen her in a long time?"

"Eleven months. But she writes me three letters a week, and there's always a stack of them waiting for me—somewhere. And you—"

"A year," dear heart, s know, but let It won't be l of this, and up to me in t McKerring belt. He toss back in the t ness left Scot laughed, and the laugh.

"These th said, and he McKerring's.

"This thing side for three third weapon

For a flash McKerring re of the dark-ey photographs s tween them, in

"Ladies pr attempt at hu short.

Both men the same won in a lightnin minds. McKe

"Do you r them?" he as looking straight

"Yes," said "And mine at me!"

"I guess it' to be sitting w explained Scot

"But it's q I say it's migh exclaimed McK

He settled b filling his pipe

"I wish she down in a big l way she almos

since she was a we were out in away down in

The apple-blos "red an' white tree looked like

'em now. She big one, and m when I came

flowers all over her hair was lo

"A year," said Scotty. "God bless her dear heart, she writes me often enough, I know, but letters don't reach me very often. It won't be long now. If I don't get out of this, and go down to her, she's coming up to me in the spring!"

McKerring was unbuckling his pistol-belt. He tossed the weapon on the blankets back in the tent. For an instant the softness left Scotty Grimshawe's face; then he laughed, and there was a nervousness in the laugh.

"These things *are* uncomfortable," he said, and he tossed his weapon in beside McKerring's. He pulled out his automatic. "This thing has been wearing a hole in my side for three days," he added, and the third weapon followed the others.

For a flash their eyes met again. Then McKerring reached across for the picture of the dark-eyed wife. He placed the two photographs side by side on the blanket between them, in the glow of the fire.

"Ladies present!" he cried, with another attempt at humor, and then he stopped short.

Both men stared at the pictures, as if the same wonderful discovery had leaped in a lightning flash through both their minds. McKerring looked up.

"Do you notice anything queer about them?" he asked. "Is she—your wife—looking straight over there at you?"

"Yes," said Scotty.

"And mine, too—my girl—is looking at me!"

"I guess it's just the way they happened to be sitting when the pictures were taken," explained Scotty.

"But it's queer, and—and—by George, I say it's mighty nice to have it that way!" exclaimed McKerring.

He settled back comfortably, and began filling his pipe.

"I wish she'd had it taken with her hair down in a big braid," he said. "That's the way she almost always wears it—has ever since she was a kid. It was that way when we were out in the old orchard that day, away down in a little village in Illinois. The apple-blossoms were out," he went on, "red an' white an' pink, so thick that every tree looked like one big flower. I can smell 'em now. She got a start of me, a good big one, and made me run to catch her; an' when I came up to her she was shaking flowers all over her, like a snow-storm, an' her hair was loose an' shining all about her,

an' her eyes—" He stopped, half breathless, and laughed softly into Scotty Grimshawe's tense face. "That's when I—I popped the question," he finished. "She laughed, an' then cried, an' I—"

He puffed out a thick cloud of smoke that hid his face.

Scotty chuckled with sympathetic understanding.

"I don't know whether mine laughed or cried," he said, leaning a little farther back in the gloom, "because I was so scared that I asked her in writing." He leaned over again, until his face was in the fire-glow, and spoke confidentially, "You know, that picture doesn't flatter her. She *is* pretty—prettier to me than any other woman I've ever known. It was her eyes that floored me. They scared me stiff, they were so big an' bright an' soft. When I wrote her, I couldn't believe I had a ghost of a chance. I had to pinch myself to make sure all was true when I got her reply. And when I went to see her—"

He stopped, and settled back into the gloom again, leaving McKerring to understand. A question shot into McKerring's head.

"Any kids?" he asked.

"One," said Scotty, and his words sent another of those strangely uncomfortable chills through McKerring. "You see, I didn't know—and he was born after I left."

"You've never seen him?"

"No."

"A boy?"

"Yes, a boy—a buster—ten pounds when he came. She's named the little codger after me, you know, an' she says she shows him my picture half a dozen times a day. He's chewed up two already, accordin' to her last letter."

There was a silence, and the fire burned low. Beyond the edge of the timber-line they could hear a rising wind beginning to wail over the barren. McKerring spoke.

"I guess I'd like a girl," he said. "Five or six of 'em!"

He could hear Scotty chuckling.

"You want to wish for boys, then," he advised. "That's what she says—wish for what you don't want, an' you'll get the other. Funny how we remember all those things up here, ain't it? You don't appreciate what an angel a good woman is until you've been away from them for a long time. I haven't seen a white woman in seven months."

"Not quite so bad here," replied McKerring. "Only four—but it's been like four years!"

"But it does a man good, sometimes," came Scotty's voice from out of the deepening darkness. "An' then, again, it may act the other way, an' make him bad, a sort of beast, a—a—"

"A murderer, for instance!" snapped McKerring.

There was a half-minute of terrible silence. Each man could hear the other breathing, could almost feel the tenseness of the other's body.

"I was thinking of that," said Scotty at last. "The want of a woman's hands and a woman's voice sometimes makes a man kill another man. Perhaps, after all, he isn't so very much to blame. Now and then there may possibly be a good excuse for killing."

McKerring rose and began throwing fresh logs upon the fire. Then he turned to Scotty Grimshawe, who had also risen to his feet.

"We'd better get to bed," he said. "I'm tired."

He went into the tent and rearranged the blankets, while Scotty peered in at him from the door. The two big revolvers and the automatic he hung on the tent-cord. He began undressing, and Scotty followed suit. An hour later they were asleep, side by side—the murderer and the man-hunter—with the flames from the crackling logs throwing dancing shadows into the tent, and lighting up their faces.

McKerring's last thought was that he would do his duty in the morning. It would be an unpleasant task, but he must do it. After breakfast he would arrest Scotty Grimshawe, the man-killer.

III

THE night fell deeper and more silent, except for the wailing of the wind over the barren. And McKerring had a dream. It was a dream of two women—one young and blue-eyed, with frolicsome masses of gold-brown hair; the other older and darker, with eyes that seemed to look from out of heaven. The former was kneeling at the latter's feet, her face buried in the older woman's lap; and the great dark eyes seemed staring straight at him as their possessor stroked the gold-brown head.

He awoke, shivering. The fire was out. A few dull coals glowed in the darkness.

He remembered Scotty, and put out a groping hand.

The other half of the bed was empty!

For a few moments he half sat up, holding his breath. Then he moved toward the door, rose cautiously to his feet, and searched for the hanging weapons. One of the big guns and the automatic were gone. His own remained.

He listened for a long time, and heard nothing. He stared outside, and could see nothing. Then he built up the fire, laughing a little savagely as he thought how the cautious Scotty Grimshawe, murderer, had given him the slip.

But, after all, was he sorry? Would he have arrested Scotty in the morning? He looked at his watch. It was already morning—the cold, black, silent morning of the Great Barren. It was four o'clock.

The fire burned more brightly, and lit up the tent. Not until then did McKerring see the folded bit of paper tacked to the tent-flap, with black marks drawn around it with a charred stick to attract his attention. He took it down, and opened it close to the fire. It was Scotty Grimshawe's farewell note.

It read thus:

I've weakened at the last moment, old man. I've been on your trail for a long time, but when I came in starving and half frozen, and you treated me so well, I couldn't do what I had planned to do. And then, when you brought *her* out, I thought of my own little girl at home, and I couldn't take your life away from you. I've taken half of your grub, but you're getting off cheap at that. Go back to her. Name that first little girl after my Jeanne, and write to me some day. I knew you were Scotty Grimshawe from the moment I laid eyes on you; but I can't take you in. Good-by!

SERGEANT WILLIAM MCRRAINE,
Royal Northwest Mounted Police, N Division, Fullerton Point.

Dan McKerring read and reread the note. Then he laughed, and his laugh rang out above the wailing of the wind on the barren, above the crackling of the fire. He folded the note and placed it in his breast-pocket. Some day—quite soon—he would show it to the girl, and tell her the story. Then they would hunt up Mr. and Mrs. William McRaine.

With the light of day he was prepared to take up once more the trail of Scotty Grimshawe, murderer.



THE pris
the wa
been
cropped, he w
prescribed for
his sentence
criminal. He
in the peniten
degree.

On his arr
and his belon
him. A watc
of silver coins
on the table h
and before w
were such be
taken from p
awakened no
one thing, an
in the palm o

He looked
prisoner. It
fierce, haught