

# BLACK FEATHER

By HAROLD TITUS

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## SYNOPSIS

Rodney Shaw, independent trader, arrives in Michilimackinac in 1818, determined to fight the trade monopoly established by the John Jacob Astor company in the Northwest territory. He is met by Conrad Rich, an elderly clerk, Ramsay Crooks, Astor's dominant figure, and Annette Leclere, local beauty and inspiration to all the traders, especially to Burke Rickman, a ruthless trader who is the instrument of destruction to traders refusing to amalgamate with the Astor company. Roused to town bully, wearing the black feather, symbol of invincibility, knocks down Shaw's head oarsman, Basile, and Shaw in return throws Rousset into the water. Ramsay Crooks presents the symbolic black feather to Shaw. Later, at a conference, Shaw scorns Astor's proposal virtually to surrender his independence, announces his readiness to fight the amalgamation, and prepares to depart the following day. At a ball that evening Shaw recognizes Burke Rickman as the Astor agent who had previously robbed him of his partner and his trade, and as a dangerous rival for Annette, with whom he is infatuated. There is an exchange of bitter words. Annette is chosen queen of the dance, and chooses Shaw as king for the following evening. Basile warns Shaw to hasten his departure and tells him an old man awaits him at his tent. Shaw finds Leslie, an old free-trader, who proposes that Shaw join him and go to the rich Pillager country, where Astor is planning to send Rickman. He shows him a map and an Indian ceremonial stone given him by Standing Cloud, Pillager chief. Shaw accepts Leslie's offer. The spying Rickman finds Annette alone and artfully seduces her, plagiarizing Annette into boasting of his plans, until Rickman learns of the partnership and the departure for rich unclaimed ground. He follows Shaw to Leslie's camp and hides within earshot. Shaw finds Leslie very ill, attended by his clerk, Giles. With Giles as a witness, Leslie gives Shaw the map and the Indian stone. After Shaw departs, Leslie dies. Rickman ascertains the old man's death, and plunges a knife into his heart. Shaw, reaching his camp, finds soldiers with a warrant for his arrest on a charge of murdering Leslie. Basile reports to Shaw in prison, that Rickman embarks the following day, and that Giles is intimidated from telling the truth. Shaw, impatient at the delay, orders Basile to hold all in readiness for the moment he can escape. Annette makes love to Rickman, hoping to delay him.

## CHAPTER IV—Continued

But Basile did not see all, heard nothing whatever. He did not observe Rickman's attempt at a final kiss; did not see Annette twist and squirm from his arms; could not hear her one honest word of the entire passage.

One word, a strained, gasped: "Never!"

It was that word that sent Rickman away, an unhappy, if commanding figure.

And so Burke Rickman had a day and a half the advantage, even though events might give Rodney his freedom of movement before another dawn.

Indeed, it seemed until late afternoon that another quiet northern night would follow. But as the sun began to drop a murk appeared in the south, and the wind veered and softened and a thunder head rose above the strait and Rodney's heart picked up its measure.

Basile came, on the pretext that the men were demanding the balance of their compensation, and Rodney told him to trade what remained of the packs.

"The storm will come, master."  
"And give me cover for my task!"

When the revelry is at its best, launch the canoe. Wait for me on the northern side of the island. I'll cry as a great owl."

The storm broke at midnight, a furious lashing of wind and playing of lightning and cannonade of thunder. Tentatively, Rodney touched the bar, and drew its edge slowly along the softer metal. Its rasp was covered by the drum of rain and wind in the trees.

And then began his battle with his prison. Savagely he sawed with the short file, putting all the strength he could bring to bear against the cutting edge. Siney as he was, the task was labor.

The first bar went in twain and by a tentative test he knew his strength as great enough to bend it outward. . . . But two more bars remained before he could hope to squeeze his broad shoulders through the opening. He sawed madly. . . .

The second bar yielded and the edges of the file were dulling. Another thunder shower impending and lightning became more frequent.

The third bar was sundered and he dropped the file, a tremble in every muscle. The sentry passed beneath his window, moving slowly on toward the clump of cedars. Rodney gripped the first bar with both hands and leaped against it. Slowly it yielded. The bar protruded at an angle outward.

The guard did not look up. The second bar bent before Rodney's strength, and then the third.

His fingers gripped the outside edge of the stone window ledge. He leaped, wriggling himself outward, belly on the sill.

He breathed free air. His head and shoulders were outside the prison. He wriggled frantically. The whitewashed wall of the building spread below him. In another second he would be silhouetted against it for any eyes to see.

And the last lightning flare of the spent storm revealed him, hanging there, swaying like a pendulum, ready to drop to the turf below.

The sentry's shout went through Rodney like a knife stab.

He let go his hold. He dropped, rolling in the wet grass. He was on his feet, crouching, gauging the approach of the soldier whose feet thudded on the path.

Shaw backed a step, gripped the corner of the building, swung around it, and began to run.

"Halt, or I fire!" the guard cried. "Fire and be—"

The crash of the musket cut off Rodney's cry of defiance. He felt the breath of the bullet on his cheek and a savage elation swept him. The musket was empty. The sound of the shot would rouse the garrison and the roused garrison would rouse the village. But he was free, plunging into drenched shrubbery. Free, in cover, with a plan before him and all he asked was this meager chance at freedom!

He ran with all the strength in his chest and legs. He gained the shingle of the island's northern beach, standing there alone in the darkness. He fought to still his breath and gave the hollow, falsetto cry of a great owl. He listened and from somewhere across the water it was answered and he heard the thud of an oar against canoe rail and ran that way, crying out again. . . .

Rodney was wading out, to his knees, to his hips. He was being lifted into his canoe by loyal hands



"Halt, or I fire!" the Guard Cried.

as, streaming water, he gained his place. "Bravo!" he breathed. "Bravo, my brave children! . . . To oars, now! . . . March!"

Sixteen days, men had said, from Point Iroquois to the St. Louis. Shaw laughed as his canoe nosed into the bay which is the mouth of the river. They had silently passed Rickman's brigade encamped on the shore three nights ago. Sixteen days? he taunted. Eight! Eight days from the point of the Iroquois. Your names shall live forever, green in the boastings of the North! . . .

One passes the air of opposition disdainfully, and Shaw did not even glance at the walls of the company fort they breasted at sundown, with its flag limp and men staring. They would see, they would tell, but it would be days, yet, before Rickman arrived with intent ears to hear their telling.

On above was the first portage and there camped the canoe maker of whom Leslie had told. The great canoe was abandoned at the native's camp and two smaller craft procured because the other would be unwieldy in the narrow rivers and difficult to transport on the long carries.

These arrangements made, the portage awaited. Nine miles it was; 10 pauses; a winding, twisting trail, up tortuous clay banks, over unyielding rocks, with the forest brushing the grim faces of men who toiled with great diligence over it.

"Up, good children!" Shaw cried, flinging portage collars at them. "Up, Jacques, with your back of an ox. You will lead!"

Jacques, grinning, twisted thong ends about a package, shouldered the straps and nestled his forehead against leather. Another package was set on the first and hunched into position; a third, and the man grinned. Two hundred and seventy pounds he bore. But as he swayed forward for the first slow step he was halted by Rodney's cry.

"Un autre, mon enfant!" The smile died and a hurt look came into the fellow's eyes. "No?" Shaw's question was mock incredulity. "My good Jacques says No?" He stood a moment, shaking his head dolefully. "Too great, the burden? Yes? But look. Observe the trader, then! Regard a back untried by the collar!"

He dropped to his knees and adjusted the thong to a package. He slung it as he rose and gestured toward his burden him.

Another, a third. . . "Quatre!" He was bidding them do to him what had made the great Jacques demur. Amazed, they piled his burden higher. "Alors, cinq!" They murmured and burst into laughter and sobered quickly and did his bidding. Five packages? Four hundred and fifty pounds!

"Allez!" he cried and led the way with a grunt of command for them to follow.

He moved bent far forward, right hand on the topmost piece which towered above his shoulders, left arm at a stiff angle for balance. He swayed from side to side; the muscles of his legs bulged and corded against buckskin.

Upward, on and on, reeling as he gained the crest and then, upon level ground, moving steadily, stifling moans. And now he reached the first pause. His packages thudded to the ground, he straightened painfully and turned to watch the approach of his brave but humbled Jacques, who came on with many a gasped Sacral and Rodney calling a good-natured taunt that one should puff so under half a load.

They snored that night beside a tiny stream threading abrupt hills heavily clothed with pine and hemlock.

Shaw frittered no precious moments of the hours, wasted no pound of his men's strength, but assurance, now, rode high in his heart.

He would have been less assured had he been back yonder at the company fort at the river's mouth to see Burke Rickman land and to hear what was told to him.

"You're certain?" Rickman asked. "A tall man? Tall as I? And broad? . . . And with a leathery old devil at the steering oar?"

Yes, that was certain.

"Damn!" said Rickman, without passion, now, but calculatingly, as one who knows he must plan well and promptly. He looked at Conrad Rich, whose eyes were wide, and smiled without mirth.

"Fools!" he muttered. "They let him escape. After I'd arranged matters so he'd never annoy us again, they—" He broke off, biting his lip, and Conrad started slightly as he sensed the fact that Rickman had betrayed himself and his part in the arrest of Rodney.

Rickman paced the room. "At knife portage yesterday?" he queried and did not so much as nod at the confirming reply. "Three days ahead. . . . Well! So we will show the jackass what it costs to forge ahead in rivers."

And now another company of men feverishly fought the turbulent St. Louis. A small company, this: Three men, a single canoe, with only an oilcloth and blankets and meager foods as burden.

Rickman's brigade was reforming for the river travel but this detachment went out ahead, light-footed if not light-hearted.

And so, as embers died in Shaw's camp, three pairs of eyes watched and three pairs of brawny hands clung to alder branches to hold their canoe in its vantage point while Shaw slept heavily, storing energy for the morrow.

He had taken precautions, had posted a boatman to watch. But the stream was noisy. Its rush and tumble drowned small sounds, such as a man cautiously wading under the alders.

So the guard could make no sound as a hand clamped over his mouth from behind, and a knife-butt rapped his skull. No, the guard did not waken Rodney Shaw, but the thing which one cry from the guard could have prevented did.

He sat up sharply. The sound which had roused him came again, and yet again; a hollow, crunching crash. His men were stirring about the dead fire, indistinct, mov-

## Duels Remain a French Custom; Span Legal Gap, According to an Official

Private dueling in France is still a custom that persists after centuries, and there is a real reason for French dueling, not just a Heidelberg custom of giving the other fellow a scar on his cheek, but really settling a grave affair, writes a Paris United Press correspondent.

The cause of dueling is a legal one, according to J. Joseph-Renaud, who has officiated at more duels in France than any man alive. Dueling is the means of replacing a gap in the French legal system, which does not promise to be changed for some time.

In fact, French law is based purely and simply on the protection and right of private property. Honor and personal integrity find no place before the law unless an insult or a libel involved a real loss of working time, or private rights. There is no serious libel law in France—the result is the institution of dueling.

Moreover, dueling has its own private legal code. Persons who have a quarrel don't just go out into the woods at dawn and shoot at each other as is popularly believed. As a matter of fact, nine out of ten

ing humps, muttering busily through their sleep.

Once more, that sound, as Shaw leaped to his feet and then came a splashing in the water, a grunt, a muffled exclamation out there in the stream. He was bounding to the water's edge, still bewildered by sleep and a prey of racing misgivings. Now came the sound of paddles, driven deeply and, in answer to his hail, a mocking, taunting laugh.

Rodney just stood there, staring at the gaping holes in the birch skins and the broken ribs of his canoe. It was vast, irreparable damage, done by stoutly wielded axes. His transport lay wrecked, with his only source of replenishment more than a hard day's march behind!

He must retrace the way he had come, wait until canoes could be built, lose all he had gained and more. Well, it was so; no other procedure was open.

## CHAPTER V

They did not sleep again. They prepared the goods for a move by land and when the first hint of daylight appeared took up the task.

Upstream and back into the forest, Rodney led them, establishing a camp in a place from which it could not be observed by travelers on the river. There, under heavy guard he would leave his goods while he made his way down to the canoe maker's and awaited the building of a new transport. When the camp was made he led two of his stalwarts under heavy burdens over the way he had come.

Near the end of the journey, which consumed the entire day at forced march, he heard the voices of men in the river far below the heights he traveled.

A canoe had just passed a shallow rapid, half light, and the boatmen had been removed. These goods were largely casks. The casks held alcohol, he knew, each five-gallon container potentially 30 of spirits, as liquor was diluted in the trade.

A wealth of property, there. Enough to ensnare a mighty band of hunters.

His heart went down, then; it fell lower than it had on his arrest; lower than the level it had reached when he watched Rickman put off from Michilimackinac.

At dusk he stalked into the canoe maker's camp and told briefly of his need.

The fabrication of one canoe had already been started, but it was a small craft, a two-man canoe, with less than half the capacity of the four-fathom canoes used by brigades in river travel. It, however, was the thing to which Rodney turned with shining eyes when his bargain for other work had been driven.

How long would its completion require? he asked.

The Indians chattered, argued, declaimed. . . . Three, yes; two, perhaps. . . . Rodney gave the man a cautious gill of spirits to bind the pact.

Cajoled, flattered by Rodney, the entire family worked, master craftsman about the canoe, children digging spruce roots, holding one end in their teeth, stretching the other to arm's length and splitting expertly with knives. The grandmother gathered pitch, the wife more cedar and birch bark.

The men had been sent back to Basile at dawn and, with the next descending sun, the old steersman would be there to listen to the seditious plan Rodney had hatched to meet the emergency confronting him.

But old Basile looked skeptically at the canoe when he arrived. "So small?" he questioned. "For three men, at the most?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

## Basilik is a Lizard

The basilisk is a lizard of tropical climates. It is so named on account of a fancied resemblance to the basilisk of ancient fable. It is about 2 1/2 feet long and greenish brown in color. The head, back and tail have serrated crests.

## Ask Me? Another?

A Quiz With Answers Offering Information on Various Subjects

1. What is the largest liner that has gone through the Panama canal?
2. How many of our Presidents owned slaves?
3. Who first discovered the principles of magnetism?
4. What are the elevations above sea level of the Great Lakes?
5. How much space does a ton of gold occupy?
6. Roman senators were appointed for a term of what duration?
7. Are all eyes of the same size?
8. How is salt secured?

depends upon the orifice or aperture through which the eyes are seen. It is the variable diameter of this opening that creates the enormous impression of different sizes of eyes.

8. There are three ways in which salt may be secured: First, by mining; second, by evaporation of sea water; and third, by digging wells until a salt vein is struck and then pumping water and pumping it up again as brine.

## Favorite Recipe of the Week

**Apple Sculpin.**  
6 apples (medium size)  
3/4 cupful brown sugar  
Juice of 1 lemon  
1/2 cupful butter, melted  
2 1/2 cupfuls crushed ginger-snaps  
1/2 teaspoonful cinnamon

Pare, core, quarter and slice the apples in thin sections and sprinkle with lemon juice. Blend together the sugar, cinnamon, melted butter and ginger-snaps crumbs. Fill a baking dish with alternate layers of sliced apples and the crumb mixture. Cover and bake for 1 1/2 hours in a moderate oven (350 degrees F.) A top-of-the-oven oven will do admirably for baking this dessert. Serve hot with ice cream or cold with plain cream.  
Yield: 6 servings.

### "I Planted a Flower"

Die when I may, I want it said of me by those who knew me best that I always plucked a thistle and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower would grow.—Lincoln.

## Smiles

Another Gail  
"I can't understand why I didn't accept you the first time you proposed."  
"That's easy. You weren't there."

Cruelly  
"Madam, your confounded dog has torn my trousers!"  
"Naughty, naughty Fido! I shall punish him severely. I shall take his pink ribbon away from him for a whole week."

He Kept His Word: The man who said to a woman: "Your slightest wish shall be my law"—and married her.

## LETTERLY SPEAKING



Mary's Aunt—Since leaving college, has Mary's B. A. helped her much?

Mary's Ma—Maybe it has; but her M. A. has helped her still more.

Beyond Him  
She did not understand the thermometer, but she took her husband's temperature with it and then held a match under it to read it properly. She sent a frantic message to the doctor: "Come at once: temperature 156 degrees."  
To which the doctor replied: "I can do nothing. Send for the fire brigade!"

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