

## SERGEANT KINNAIRD

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from its leather pocket asked sneeringly, "Do you want mine too, dad?"

"You'd better keep that popgun, girl. You'll need it when Stand Off sassyety falls to discussin' this event."

Three men slipped to the floor of the pound, and now stood glowering in silence at Somers, who had recklessly dropped his arms to fold them across his chest.

Mayo, coming forward, peered suspiciously about the pound and asked, "Whar's that other coyote?"

"Who do you mean, dad?" Chris asked.

"That sneakin', prayin' hypercrite, the sky pilot."

"Preacher? Did you think you had trailed into a wedding?" The girl's clear voice rang out on the night air in a mocking laugh. "That's too funny, dad! I see—"

"Shut up that jay chatter, Chris!" Mayo commanded angrily. "Whar's the preacher?"

"He lives in Stand Off, dad, and I shouldn't wonder but what he's in bed now."

Mayo stared with angry incredulity into the girl's mocking eyes. "What's he doin' here?" stabbing with his thumb in Somers' direction.

"It's no secret now, dad. You caught us, didn't you? Who put you on my trail? Was it the preacher, and you're running a bluff on me?"

"By Heavens! don't try to kid me, girl!" The father clenched his fist angrily; but the look of utter mystification in his eyes as they turned away sheepishly from Chris's fearless stare to rest curiously on the composed figure of Somers, showed that he was completely baffled.

"He's sure picked up my trail to-night," the girl continued with seeming anger, "and give you some church notions about it not being proper. I know his way. And what's it Dakota's business? And you, Tough Wilkins; and you, Kootenay?"

The three men addressed shrunk away, and Kootenay drew the back of his hand across his mouth in a shamefaced manner.

"Look a-here, Chris!" Mayo rasped. "That palaver sounds purty cute; most like an actress speech in a play. We may be plumb locoed by that fool breed; but the hands ain't played out yet. This individual of the Gov'-ment's coyote pack jines us for a little passeer to Stand Off, till we see what cards Dupre has drawn, then we'll call a showdown. Git your broncho cinched quick!" he continued, turning to Somers. "We'll cross examine you when there's more evidence in."

"I've nothing to tell, Mr. Mayo, except that I'm fond of Chris. I'm sorry—it's all my fault—"

Though in verity this statement was literally true, the speaker was following the girl's lead in deception. He understood her plan now; though he realised that they were both at a tangent in their knowledge. When Dupre had escaped, Major Dixon had sent Somers off to warn Kinnaird, fearing that the breed would make for Stand Off, and, recognising the Sergeant, denounce him as a spy. Somers had cached himself and horse in the pound, meaning to ride in to the old mission through the night. He was mystified by the impression that Kinnaird knew of his presence and was coming to meet him.

As the constable stood irresolutely for a second, half expecting that Chris would in some way indicate the next move, a solemn stillness held in the walls of the pound as the echo of their voices died away. A rose-tinted moon hung in the eastern sky and its soft mystic light picked out in

faint tints the encircling walls, till, the figures blurred dramatically in the centre, it looked like the amphitheatre of a prairie coliseum. The fire had died to a heap of glowing embers, reflecting its red faintly on the tall, slim figure of Somers and the powerful, loose hung frame of Mayo. His lean, hungry face craned forward, catching more of the red blush of the firelight. A little deeper in the shadow stood the girl; and beyond loomed sinister forms, the moonlight glinting from the steel barrels of their rifles, penciled lines of silver white. A calling whinny from Chinook cutting with vibrant force the heavy quiet, startled in vociferous answer a loon that winged its night path over the river. Its harsh, demoniac call, like the laugh of a maniac, caused Chris to shiver in her wet clothes.

Scarce less harsh was Mayo's voice as he snarled, "What the hell you waiting for, Somers? You want an orderly to saddle up for you?"

"Come along, Frank," Chris added, conscious that Somers was on the edge of a rebellious mood.

The constable turned to his picketed horse which, its first fear of the men passed, now stood eyeing them sleepily, and threw the military saddle on its back, cinched it up, clattered the bit between its teeth, kicked the picket pin loose, and coiling the line buckled it to the saddle.

"I'm ready, Mr. Mayo," he said.

"You sure are, Somers! And you'll sure unpack that picket line again, run it through the curb, and Dakota will most generous cinch the end of it to the horn of his saddle. You might wander from the trail 'twixt here and Stand Off, and sorter get lost."

Somers ran the line through the ring on his curb, and tossing the end of it to Dakota, lifted to the saddle. "Come on, Chris! Pick up Chinook, and we'll hit the back trail for home," Mayo commanded.

In silence they passed up the slight incline in the opening of the wall, Dakota leading Somers' horse.

Bender was waiting on the prairie with the horses of his companions. Chris called to Chinook, and he came trotting up through the gloom.

"All right, Kootenay; you and Tough pull out in front," Mayo ordered. "Now, Dakota, you lead off with the guest, and the rest of us, promiscuous like, just trails."

Down along the river bank, as silent as a war party of Indians, they moved, splashed noisily through the ford, up the farther bank and broke into a trot for Stand Off.

Chris was wondering in nervous apprehension what had become of Preacher Black. How strange it was that neither he nor Dupre had been seen! Evidently her father's party had not encountered them on the trail. An unreasoning dread forced itself into her mind that perhaps the minister had encountered the breed. She knew that Dupre was as vicious as a wolf.

And Somers, with the fuller knowledge in mind that Dupre would recognise Black as Kinnaird, whom he had cause to hate, was a prey to an apprehension that could see no possible escape from disaster.

Mayo sat his horse in moody silence, angered by all these many things of suspicious mystery; lost in vain conjecture as to the movements of Preacher Black and Dupre.

And as they slipped like sinister shadows over the moonlit prairie the man of their tortured thoughts was trailing in the shadow of death.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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