

SERGEANT KINNAIRD



CHAPTER I.

FROM Montana, Chief Mountain nods his white locks to the Crow's Nest in Canada. And a day's ride beyond is a crease in the Rockies from which swaggers Belly River to run in the foolish winding path of a lost child. Fifty miles on its way, a reaching bank of yellow clay throws it, like the loop of a lariat, about a corral of wooded flat, etched by thin red lines of dog willow and the soft grey of silver leaf, with here and there the ghost post of a white poplar.

On the high cut-bank sat a Sergeant of Mounted Police peering moodily into the hollow. "That's what I call untrammelled hell, Somers!" he exclaimed, as the lifting wind came twanging up from the river, vibrant with Piegan and Blood war cries. "Crisp up here, and look at the firewater dance!"

A slim figure in khaki that had sprawled in the buffalo grass behind, lazily curled to a seat, and a boyish voice growled discontentedly, "I'm sick of Nichies!"

The Sergeant laughed ironically. "You sick of them, you moist water colour of a trooper! Heavens! your regulation number is the last but three. Wait till your soul has starved for years in Fort Nelson, with nothing to eat but food—your whole life tied up in a beefskin, steers, whisky, and N. W. M. P.—that's the writing on the wall. Ride, ride, ride—when the sun is sheol, and the blizzard is loaded with buckshot, and the paths of glory lead to steers, stolen or strayed!"

"You've got botts, Sergeant; but bite your own ribs," the youth replied gravely.

"This breaks the monotony. It's elemental man in a pastoral play—he acts natural." And the Sergeant swept his long arm over the bushy hollow that held a corralled riot, a pantomime of decorated devils. Campfires flared petulantly in the erratic wind, small red eyes blinking in the dusk that was settling down over the lowland. Shadowy figures darted here and there like wolves of a pack at play; voices chanting guttural war songs to the boom and twang of tomtoms mingled with a crackle of rifles; the howl of train dogs and the shrill voiced cries of squaws cut the heavier turmoil.

"They're drunk. Phew! I can smell 'em!" the constable exclaimed.

"Yes, the Government has given each animal down there, from patriarch to pup, five dollars of license in depravity. All the treaty money we saw paid out to-day will be in Stand Off to-morrow; the dead Indians will be buried in the branches of those willow trees; and the whisky runners of Stand Off will have another laugh on the police."

"Why don't we catch the whisky runners?" Somers queried petulantly.

"That's what the Comptroller at Ottawa asks the Commissioner at Regina; and the Commissioner sends the query along in a big blue envelop to Major Dixon at Fort Nelson; the Major interrogates the detachment; and Troop C curses the outlaws at Stand Off; and Stand Off laughs. It's a long answer, kid, and you're welcome to it."

"Make open the Trail!"
an Indian
Cried, pushing forward

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"It's no answer. Why don't we catch them?" the boy persisted.

"Because we wear a uniform, and picket a troop horse instead of hobbling him and ride from point to point according to Form D. We can't jump over the red tape, that's why. Across the line the Yanks would turn the job over to John Wilkie; he'd slip in men that didn't look alike animated posters, and find out where the whisky was brewed. We patrol the border, right enough; but all we catch there is just a bluff. They're moonshining it up in that stone wall somewhere." Kinnaird nodded toward the mass of gloom that rose against the western sky.

"But the Major doesn't think that way," the boy objected. "He's been writing Sergeant Hawke, at Border City, wiggling us for not catching the runners crossing the line. God of Great Prairies! I've sat in the saddle that locoed for sleep I've had to rope myself to the horn!"

Suddenly a low, tremulous howl moaned over the hill, and the gaunt form of a wolf outlined against the chrome sky from a knoll on their left.

The boy laughed. "Let's pull our freight, Sergeant. We're in bad company."

As Somers rose to his feet a rifle snapped viciously down in the hollow. There was a low, whining "Pzing-g-g!" and a bullet buried itself in the hill.

Kinnaird laughed as the constable, throwing himself back to earth, said, "Somebody's knocking, Sergeant. See who it is!"

"Some drunken Nichie potting at me for the wolf."

As Kinnaird spoke there was a tattoo of rifle shots, and bullets passed in music like the flight of humming birds. Pounding hoofs were drumming at the trail that angled up the hill, and the "Ki-yi-yi!" battle cry of Indians carried to their ears.

Kinnaird spread the flat of a hand above his eyes. "They're running something—something on a cayuse," he said. "Hope it's a whisky runner and they get him. Come on, youngster, we'll mount! These red devils may stampede our horses."

As the policemen coiled the picket lines of two horses that had been feeding and swung to the saddles, a galloping cayuse slipped from the hold-

ing shadow of bush, and a hundred yards behind a group of pursuing Indians hung on its trail.

"It's a breed," Kinnaird advised, "and the Nichies are stark, staring, murder drunk. Line up, Somers! Let the breed slip through, and then close in! Put that hammer down!" he added sharply, at the click of a cocking carbine.

The breed had raised the crest of a bank, and on the level, his cayuse, lean neck stretched like a swan's galloped from the merciless slash of rowels that bit into its flank. The rider's face was a mask of dread. As the fleeing horseman thundered past, Kinnaird held his wide brimmed hat aloft, and called to the Indians, "Halt!"

On they swept like galloping fiends, their yellow bodies vermilion smeared, their raven hair flicking the breeze like pirate flags.

The Sergeant flung his heavy bay fair across the trail, and, throwing the muzzle of a gun forward, cried again, "Halt!"

A shower of dirt spattered against the khaki, almost thrown on its haunches, a cayuse slid on braced feet till its chest rammed the officer's leg.

"Make open the trail, Soldier Ogama!" an Indian cried, pushing forward. "I am Two Moons; and Dupre, who now skulks like a wapoos (rabbit) behind you, has spoken with the forked tongue to Sleeping Water, who is squaw in the tepee of Two Moons."

"Ho, brother," began the Sergeant, using the same soft voice of dignity in which the Indian had spoken; "we, who are soldiers of the White Mother, have sat here in peace with our faces held to the yellow sky, our eyes not seeing the evil of firewater that is down in your tepees. Our horses have eaten of the sweetgrass, and now we journey back to the fort with a report of the trail that is quiet. Then the soldiers will sleep in the fort, and your people will sleep in their tepees; and when the sun comes again in the sky trail they will journey back to the reserve; and their rations will not be cut, nor will any of the young bucks go to Stony Mountain where they die choked by the walls of the jail. I have spoken, Chief. Go back in peace!"

"Give into our hands the pinto man, who is Dupre!" Two Moons demanded.

Kinnaird wheeled his horse, and, putting his hand on the breed's shoulder, said, "You are my prisoner in the name of the Queen!"

He nodded to Somers, and the constable drew a pair of handcuffs from his blouse and clicked them over the wrists of Dupre. Then the Sergeant threw his horse as a barrier against the crowding Indians, saying:

"Dupre is a prisoner of the Great White Mother; and her soldiers must defend a prisoner with their lives. He will be taken to Fort Nelson, and when you tell to the Major Ogama of the wrong, he will be punished."

"We will take Dupre. Ho, braves! the wrong was in our tepees, and his punishment must be judged in the Chief's lodge!" A gaunt Indian pushed in his pinto between Two Moons and Kinnaird; and as he said this his thick lips lapped at