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Sergeant Kinnaird

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16.

At one corner loomed a desolate pine in solitary loneliness. It was an auk's egg—a connecting link between the present sweep of grassed prairie and the dim past of forest age. The pine's huge, gaunt arms drooped somberly against a sea of gold, through which a red sun sank to rest in the mighty cradle that curved from Chief Mountain to the snow silvered crown of Crow's Nest. Jagged peaks bit with purple teeth into the chrome sky with the angular harshness of a Titanic saw.

Broadway, worn to chocolate baldness by its monopoly of traffic, held for a hundred yards to the east its city lines of straightness, and then, as if indifferent of its unshacked prairie way, crawled loosely in looping bends to a point of obliteration.

But all these things of elemental grace were lost on Kootenay & Co. They were busy potting the gophers. It was a game of chance for the drinks. A shot apiece, and the gopherless marksman paid. A bullet from Kootenay's six-shooter had just rolled to one-side a little fawn coloured head that for a second had peered inquisitively from a neck ruff of tawny earth, when Tough Wilkins exclaimed:

"Jinks! thar's an outfit trailin' from the east. Give me a kind of jump when I fu'st looked. It's complected like a Mounted P'lice team."

He rolled his eyes in apprehension; but the others laughed, and Kootenay, seizing the rung of his chair, tipped him to the verandah floor, crying, "You scrag necked son of a jack pine! what you want to throw a fright like that inter us fer?"

As the three men watched, giving up the gopher play for raillery of the police, a cloud of dust beat up from the trail behind the approaching team, its centre split by the form of a galloping horse.

"Thar comes Chris," Cayuse George cried. "Chinook's eatin' up the trail as if 'twas a gen'ral of p'lice on that buckboard, an' he wanted a bite of him."

They saw the galloping horse overhaul the more leisurely team. His chestnut coat glistened patches of reflected gold as he capered in unwilling restraint while his rider conversed. As horse and rig started again, Kootenay called through the open door:

"Matt! Matt; Whar the devil's that dago?" he growled to the unanswering interior.

A sinister, olive skinned face hung forward through the door at that instant, and a pair of piercing black eyes, animal like in their restless query, searched the little group, as their owner asked, "What you want? Who lose dis time?"

"Thar's guests comin' fer you," Kootenay answered, jerking his thumb down Broadway. "Chris is roundin' up patrons fer the Lone Pine, an' you'd better fry a stack of bacon, cause it's most grub pile time."

The buckboard swung up Broadway to the verandah, and a tall, athletic man in clerical black slipped quietly from the vehicle.

"Holy Smoke!" muttered Cayuse in appalled whisper. "If it ain't a sky pilot! An' us a-figgerin' it was some man!"

"Wall," Kootenay drawled, "thar's a heft of beef about them shoulders that I reckon might prove tough ropin' if the owner was riled."

The girl slipped from Chinook's back, and, in a voice that held an imperious tone running through its apparent softness, called, "Matt, Preacher Black is going to make

camp here to-night. Stir around and help get him located!"

Matteo was a Corsican. His vitriolic blood effervesced at the touch of Kootenay's caustic chuckle, and, turning away in sullen anger, he entered the front room, flung into a chair, and, tilting its back to the wall, sat in an attitude of insolent inhospitality.

When Preacher Black entered he stood for a second looking about inquiringly, and then said, "I'd like to get a room for to-night, and supper."

"De house full. Dis ain't stoppin' place fer sky pilots no time," the Corsican snarled.

"There is room, Matt," a clear voice contradicted sharply from the door.

As the girl came forward, Matteo, squirming uncomfortably from the stab of a pair of fearless brown eyes, growled, "Ver' well Miss Chris; you de boss here. I'm jus' de cook, eh?" Then he swaggered to the verandah, and Chris, calling a halfbreed, directed him to take the preacher's baggage to a room.

It was indeed David Kinnaird that disappeared through a doorway behind the breed. He had ceased to exist as Sergeant of Mounted Police at Fort Nelson, and had demised as David Kinnaird on the long circuitous trail of deceitful covering, to reincarnat at Mound of Bones as the Rev. David Black, missionary to the good people of Stand Off.

Out on the verandah Matteo was venting his spleen in words of sarcastic villainy. "To-night dere's no game of draw, seniors," he began. "De Prote'ant pries' he's make de bank, an' you must pray. Ho-ho! Stan' Off is goin' be holy city! Pha-a-a!" and Matteo spat contemptuously.

"Kinder runs through a crack in my cocoanut, Matt, that you feel like a cowpuncher as has parted unceremonious from a buckin' hoss."

"What's dat, Kootenay?" Matteo snapped.

"Wall, Chris called your bluff, an' you quit."

The Corsican's sallow face blanched livid at the drawling taunt. "Sapristi! Can a senior fight the senorita? Is a bronco broken by one t'row de rope?"

"Wall," Kootenay answered lazily, "I'll take it all back, Matt, when you make good with the sky pilot."

"Matt'll sure stampede the preacher. He's wuss hostile'n a grizzly when his pan's hot," Tough Wilkins proffered ironically.

"I'll gamble the licker he don't," Kootenay drawled. "I ain't more'n moderate learned in men critters; but the stranger favours a jaw as don't run to quittin'."

"Tough don't play my han'," the Corsican snapped, "if I don't make dat mission coyote pay for de drinks. I set de five-gallon keg on de table for everybody."

At that instant a harsh lipped bell clanged with the persistence of a perambulating alarm clock broken loose to wander in automatic discord till it ran down. Chair legs wailed in anguish on the plank floor of the verandah as the sitters sprang to high heeled riding boots filled the front room with a clattering echo as the men charged with the exuberance of boys for the supper room.

Matteo, who was major domo of the Lone Pine, took a seat beside the door, where it was his custom to collect fifty cents from each diner as he issued. There was anticipatory satisfaction in his face, and his black eyes turned furtively to the door at every sound of an approaching step.

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