

sprawling stop at the stable door, and said, "He's pulled out, right 'nuff. Everything's dark as Billy-be-damn. Hoss gone, and no sign of Dupre; so I guess the breed's trailed him."

Mayo muttered a curse, and slipped half a dozen shells into the magazine of his rifle. "Load up!" Mayo's voice carried a sharp, cruel ring that made the girl shudder. The metallic click of the rifle breech sounded cold and merciless.

The next instant Bender called, "Thar's Kootenay and Dakota. I see 'em pass the store light just now."

Mayo pushed hurriedly into the stall, backed his horse out, and leading him passed with the other two round to the front of the house.

CHAPTER VIII.

Chris darted into the stable, seized her saddle and bridle, and, hurrying to the corral, called to Chinook. The chestnut came forward warily, and held his teeth closed in playful obstinacy when the girl shoved the steel snaffle between his lips. Angered, Chris jabbed her thumb beneath the horse's tongue, the snaffle clicked over the teeth, and then, throwing the saddle to place, she cinched it up with a hurried roughness that caused the pampered Chinook to shake his head irritably.

Mounting, Chris circled the corral, keeping beyond the radius of house lights, and crossed the street to the northward. Just as she dipped into the solemn toned prairie, tortuous splashes of light and shade just merged into a vast expanse of moonlit solitude told her that the five men had ridden out on the trail of Black. She had hoped that perhaps the allurements of a drink might hold them at the Lone Pine while she stole the start. Now her task was more difficult. They would ride fast with the quarry in front, and she would have to carry Chinook wide lest the beat of his hoofs told them of another rider that went their way.

For a little she jogged Chinook at a trot, bearing to the west; then she touched him with her heels, and he broke into a gallop, his long, swinging stride carrying them over the level prairie till its grassed turf floated by in the blurred, smooth glide of a mighty river. Faster and faster she urged the chestnut till he raced as if her own life hung on his speed, as though blood seekers galloped on her trail.

Half in the way of instinct, the girl judged her course, the small hand always a little heavy on the rein that lay away from the trail, knowing that Chinook, left to himself, would surely edge toward it. Twice Chris checked the eager horse to cool out his lungs, and then on, mile after mile. Suddenly in the dim moonlight contorted lines cut the silver-grey veil that hung so mystically before the girl's eyes. With a start of affright she drew the curb, almost throwing the chestnut to his haunches.

Chris listened. There was no echo of hoofs. She put Chinook forward at a cautious walk, peering with head thrust low. Then she laughed in relief. It was only bushes growing on the bank of White Mud Coulee. She urged Chinook on, peering into the hollow for a crossing; but the horse turned obstinately to the right, grabbing the bit with his teeth, and thrusting his head out as though intimating that it was impossible. Chris threw the rein slack, and the horse took his way along the bank. The girl realised that she had gone farther than she had thought. They were six miles from Stand Off, and she had hoped to strike the trail ahead of the others before reaching the coulee. She must have circled too wide.

TO BE CONTINUED.



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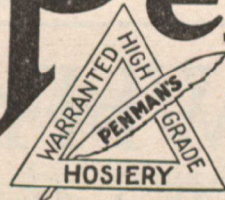
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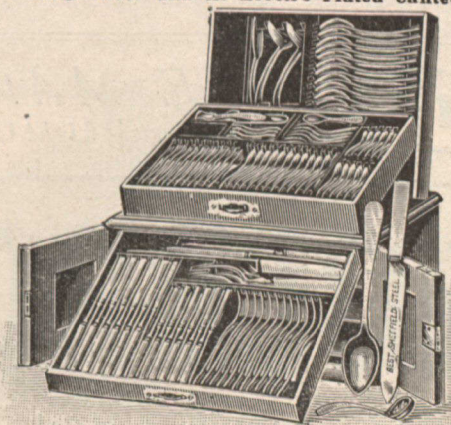
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