

SERGEANT KINNAIRD

By W. A. FRASER

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

DAVID KINNAIRD, Sergeant in the Canadian Northwest Mounted police and Frank Somers constable saved a halfbreed named Dupree from a mob of infuriated Indians in the Rocky Mountain country. Dupree was given three months in the guardhouse, having attempted to murder his captors.

Kinnaird's term of enlistment having expired, he went to Stand Off, a little town supposed to be headquarters of a gang of whiskey runners, in hope of winning an inspectorship by breaking up the moonshining, and incidentally to save Somers from the alleged machinations of Chris, daughter of Thad Mayo, outlaw head of the illicit business. He was disguised as the Rev. David Black, missionary. His rugged manhood won the moonshiners' favour and apparently was winning the affection of Chris herself.

Kinnaird went through several critical experiences with the Moonshiners; but managed to allay their suspicions, and finally was appointed judge of the races on Stand Off's great day. Considerable tension was caused by the arrest by Mounted Police of two Stand Off inhabitants for horse stealing.

Mayo's suspicions are aroused and later when he hears that Somers has been seen hiding in the pound, evidently awaiting the coming of Black, he and his followers waste no time in planning a capture of the men. Chris, secretly listening to the plot, determines to save Somers and the preacher Black from her Father's vengeance, and with this daring purpose in view rides forth into the night.

STILL looking for a slope in the high cut-bank of the coulee, Chris had travelled fifty yards when the clink of iron shod hoofs against the creek's stony bed fell on her ears like the tinkle of bells. The sound came from straight ahead, a hundred yards. She knew it was the five riders crossing White Mud by the trail. Again she had lost the lead.

Dejectedly Chris made for the trail and dipped down into the coulee, her mind stunned by the failure of her race against crime. She was almost helpless now. It was less than a mile to the ford of Bleeding River, and again on the farther side only a mile to the buffalo corral. And the men riding ahead, their passionate resentment probably inflamed by liquor, would trap Preacher Black and the policeman like foxes in the hollow of the pound. Perhaps roped from its walls as they sat talking, they would be dragged to smother in the running waters of Bleeding River.

Tears of anguish and anger at her own helplessness coursed down the girl's cheeks as Chinook clambered over the stony bed of White Mud Coulee and climbed its steep side.

Chris had almost determined to gallop on and thrust herself among the men to declare that they must abandon their errand, when the horse, following the trail, turned sharply to the right. Like an inspiration a thought flashed through the girl's mind that she had one more chance. In five seconds it had detailed strong and vivid. For a mile the trail ran parallel with the river to the ford; while the buffalo pound, on the opposite side, lay in a straight line from where she had now checked Chinook. It was not more than a quarter of a mile and Chinook could swim the river. More than once he had carried her through waters as swift.

"At any price!" rang in the girl's ears, as, driving the chestnut straight on, his gallop carried her in a few minutes to the river bank. From the gloomy hollow floated the droning growl of Red Stone Rapids which reached from a little lower down to the ford, as down the sloping bank Chinook crept cautiously, his hoofs sliding in the red clay till they rattled on the graveled bar. Then the girl, slipping from the saddle, took off her skirt, and remounting urged him forward.

With an angry shake of his head and a rebellious snort, Chinook sprang away from the water, and fought his way half a dozen yards along the bar before Chris could check him, and with a wrench of her strong hand, turn him toward the stream. He obeyed the call this time.

Hazed in the mystic moonlight, the river, a hundred yards wide, glided smooth and placid; but as Chinook waded its sloping bed the waters raised a white crest of anger against his strong limbs, and hissed surlily as the girths dipped, and his broad chest raised them in a foaming furrow like the prow of a boat. There was a gliding, canoe-like move as the horse was swung off his feet. Spreading his nostrils, he answered with a snort of defiance.

Chris, familiar as she was with the running rivers, which still held the velocity of their moun-

tain birth, realised that in her eagerness to cross she had taken the river's power too carelessly. They were angling down stream at a swift rate, and none too far below began the rapids. She should have gone a hundred yards higher. She braved Chinook with a call of encouragement, and drew his head a little up stream with the bit. The horse seemed to understand. His ears, which had pricked forward, now swung back and forth impetuously, as though he gauged his distance by the sullen call of the rapids which grew louder as he swam.

They were halfway across, and Chris could see the combing turmoil of the lashed waters where the rocks churned them to foam. One glance at the snowlike line, another at the dark rim of the farther bank, and, doubling her skirt across the high horn of the Mexican saddle, she grasped the stirrup leather with fingers of steel and slid her body into the river down stream from Chinook.

The horse swam freer. Left to his own intelligence, he edged more into the current and fought stronger.

Once the girl's feet struck a rock that just broke the surface of the waters, sending a shiver of dread to her heart. If Chinook but legged a sunken rock and faltered, they would sweep into the seething caldron that seemed sucking them into its maw. Ten yards more to the bank, and half that distance were the swirling, rock tortured rapids.

There was a sudden lurch of Chinook's body that almost yanked the stirrup leather from the girl's hand. For a second she hung in affright. Then his barrel rose up, damming the current, and he lunged forward, his strong feet firm clutching at the river bed. They had just made it. The girl's legs rasped against a water lashed rock which stood like a post to the gate of death they had slipped.

On the bank the chestnut stopped, spread his legs wide, and shook himself till the saddle flaps beat against his strong sides like the drum of a pheasant.

Chris slipped into her wet skirt, sprang to the saddle, and as they angled up the sloping bank she caressed Chinook's neck, saying, "You brave, wise old chap! You knew more about it than I."

On the prairie she halted to listen. There was no sound of galloping horsemen, no clamour of strife; nothing but the sullen boom of the rapids growling in anger over her escape.

Chris touched Chinook with her heel, and he moved out into the prairie. The pound should be straight ahead, she mused, dipping her head low that the mound of its sides might show in the line of vision. Suddenly its banks loomed ahead and to the left. Ten yards from it she slipped to earth, threw the rein over Chinook's head where it dangled in anchorage, and, crawling cautiously up the circling mound which was like the rim of a huge bowl, peered into its depths. The gloomy hollow was silent. Indistinctly the blurred form of something grew into the girl's eyes. It might be a horse or a boulder.

She whistled. There was no answer. "Frank!" she called softly.

The clicking note of a revolver's hammer drawn to place came in answer on the dead night air.

"Don't shoot, Frank! It's me, Chris. I'm coming down to you. I'm alone." And down the gravel wall that had been sloped by prairie storms the girl glided to the floor of the pound, and, with the same low voiced assurance of her identity, crossed to the figure of a man she could now make out in the dim moonlight.

"You here, Chris! Heavens! what are you doing here?"

At the ring of Somers' boyish voice, the girl, with a sob of relief, asked, "Is Preacher Black here?"

"No," he answered. Then, suspiciously, "Why should he be here? Why are you here, Chris? What has happened?"

"First, start a fire, Frank."

"A fire! Are you mad, girl?"

"Quick! do as I tell you! I'll explain. You must trust me! I've ridden to-night to save lives! Quick! Is there any wood here? Have you a match?" Stooping, Chris swept the ground with her fingers.

"Yes—here!" With a knife Somers rasped shavings from a dry stick of poplar and touched them with a match.

Eagerly Chris topped the licking blaze with small wood, saying, "We must have light, Frank. In the dark men sometimes shoot friends as well as foes."

"What is it all about, Chris?"

"Preacher Black—you were to meet—you came to see him, didn't you?"

"He wasn't coming to meet me."

"You lie, Frank, to save him; but it's foolish. God knows I wish it wasn't a lie!"

"You are wet," Somers said evasively, touching the girl's leather coat, which in its wet tenacity threw the sweet curves of her symmetrical figure into strong relief. "Tell me, please, what has happened."

"I swam the river to save your life, my boy."

"My life, Chris?"

"Yes; his too. Now will you tell me?"

The girl looked angrily into the man's face, which held only a sullen silence in the flickering firelight. "You won't answer—you cannot! Then I know. The fool! Listen, Frank! Five men from Stand Off have galloped out on the preacher's trail to-night, and now they are between the ford and here."

Somers grasped a pistol; but Chris, putting her hand on his arm, said, with a swing back into the post speech, "Quit that, kid! You wouldn't last a minute. Sit down beside me. Quick! Do as I tell you!"

"Are you mad, Chris? To be trapped here in this hole, one against five! Am I not to escape?"

"Whisper!" she commanded, her own voice just pitched to reach his ears. "You couldn't escape! Even now they're out yonder making the circuit of this pound; and if you did, wouldn't that seal his fate? Wouldn't they hear the gallop of your horse?"

"But the firelight—if I'm to fight it out!"

"You're not to fight, Frank. You're to make love—to me. Do you mind? When they come remember you're here to meet me; that I sent for you."

"Heavens, girl! I can't do that! What will they think of you?"

"If any man says what he thinks, I'll kill him. And isn't the price worth it—to save your life and his? Murder is worse than what men may say about me."

Somers put his hand on the girl's arm, and his voice, in its whispered intensity, vibrated a despairing note as he asked, "Chris, do you love Kin-Black?"

Her head drooped and her eyes rested on the red embers moodily.

"As you said of me a moment ago, Chris—you do not answer, and I know. But it is madness, little woman. It's worse—it's hellish if he has taught you to love him, because—"

The girl's arm suddenly stiffened away from Somers, and she interrupted him with a sharp "Hush!"

Chris had averted her face at the man's passionate whisper, her eyes sweeping the pound's rim, and now they carried back to his face, wide in dread. "Don't flinch!" she whispered. "They're watching us from the bank. I saw a rifle thrust its black maw over the edge. Raise your voice and say you want to marry me! Hurry!"

Somers looked at Chris curiously. There was a tone of suspicion in his voice as he asked, "Is this—I don't understand—"

But the girl interrupted him with a low, bitter voice, "Yes, it's a plot to rope a tenderfoot youth into offering his hand to a girl who is trying to save the life of a man she loves—a man, I say, Frank, and your friend. Now speak, if you are a man, too!"

There was nothing very clear in it all to Somers except the terrible sincerity of the girl's manner. It was this that caused him to say, in a clear, firm voice, "I wish you'd marry me, Chris, and make me happy! I'm tired of all this dodging."

He was answered by a harsh voice, "Throw up your hands, Somers!"

"Quick! Do as you're told," Chris whispered as he hesitated.

In compliance he swung on his heel till his upstretched palms faced a grim figure that loomed menacingly, rifle to shoulder, in a broken part of the wall.

"Chris," the snarling voice called, "relieve that skunk of his weppins and bring 'em here!"

"Trust me, Frank," the girl whispered as she unbuckled the belt that held the big revolver. Then with a defiant swing she stepped to her father, dropped the belt at his feet, and drawing her own pistol

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23.