

SERGEANT KINNAIRD

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had been a fearful fight for moral rehabilitation. His grand physique had helped him win; but he looked on his victory as tentative—he might again fall—and to drag a woman down into the hell he had once known would be horrible.

More than once these days he had received tribute from Chris to his Christian abstemiousness with a keen sense of shame. He was a coward in it all; he dared not trust himself.

One effect the girl's evident regard had, was to enhance Kinnaird's growing repugnance to the role of spy he had assumed so cheerfully at Fort Nelson. Curiously he had slashed Dupre for attributing to Somers this very influence of a woman over his duty. There was a difference. The constable held a sworn duty to Government, while he had only himself and his mission to hold fealty to.

Kinnaird sought relief from this disquieting situation in hastened effort to discover the illicit still he now felt convinced existed. There was a trail leading off toward Kootenay Pass, its evidence of traffic unexplained by the apparent uselessness of its existence. Nothing was produced up in the pass—neither minerals nor food products; there was no through traffic, except, perhaps, an occasional Stony Indian seeking mountain sheep.

One day, Kinnaird, riding fast and in a great detour, took up this trail, following it in between the foothills till he came to a cessation of wheel ruts. From that point a pack trail crawled upward over a wooded slope. He cached his bronco in a thicket of giant ferns among the pines, and like an Indian followed cautiously the winding path, dark penciled on the moss and lichen boulder clay. On it men had written with moccasined feet the message of their going and coming in letters that spoke of pack laden shoulders.

Where the path wound its terrific way along a ledge of a precipice that walled a caldron of mad waters, Kinnaird crept. At a sharp turn the ring of an axe came echoing from the gorge beyond. Surely it told of wood fuel for a still; for there was no habitation of man in that wild, barren spot. He retraced his steps to wait for a time when there might be nobody in the pass; and then, taking his life in his hands, he would follow the trail that dipped down into the gorge of secrets.

CHAPTER V.

THE following day Kinnaird rode out to Stanford Ranch with Chris, at her request. Cayuse George had brought the information that the Hon. Stanford was "sure locoed from bug juice."

Poplar Bar furnished ample proof of the accuracy of Cayuse's diagnosis. Evidently it had been a picturesque debauch. Lord Stanford, the Honourable's pater, looked down on a badly wrecked dining room from a massive gilt frame out of one sinister eye, a bullet having carried away the other painted optic. A round hole in his forehead and another in his cheek told of inaccurate marksmanship. The log house was deserted; but, invited by a maudlin voice singing a verse from an old hymn, Kinnaird discovered the dissipated son of a lord sitting in a bucket down a well, clad simply in a pistol belt. When pulled up by the bucket rope, he was indignant at this interference with his desire for coolness, and fired pointblank at his tormentor. While Kinnaird soothed the tingling nerves of the Honourable with the thrust of a morphine needle, Chris rode over to Hobbema Ranch

and brought an Englishman to look after him.

As they trailed back to Stand Off, Chris was in a mood trying to her companion, painting a word picture laid in with strong chiaroscuro. Kinnaird knew that his temperance was the high light she set against the moral gloom at Poplar Bar. With a sense of relief he saw the continuance of Broadway cut across their path. He followed with his eye its serpent creep into the west, wondering if it really led to the cave of the forty thieves.

A crackle of six-shooters and the hilarious cries of two men rising shrill above the pound of galloping hoofs smote suddenly on his ear, sweeping westward. Two cowboys were racing neck and neck, a virile, moving picture of cyclonic intensity. Kinnaird laid his hand on the girl's arm, and checked Badger where the trails crossed. The next instant the animated storm swept by, a gust of its powder-perfumed breeze whipping their nostrils.

With a snort of sudden aroused desire for action, Badger plunged and whipped to the other trail. His leap was like the uncoil of a watch-spring; and Kinnaird, unpoised, wrenched fiercely at the bridle rein. With the quickness of a diving loon the horse's head went down, his spine arched like an Indian's bow, his four hoofs gathered to the compass of a hat, and his rider soared skyward, to discover on his return Badger diligently prowling up the trail in pursuit of the exuberant jockeys who, eager in their own affairs, were unaware of the added starter.

A smothered laugh from Chris awakened the unhorsed man to a sense of his uncanonical exclamation of disgust; and, rising with an apology, he watched Badger gallop with pricked ears as though he was hypnotised by the flapping pageant out in front. Half a mile on the trail the horse dropped to a trot; and as the distance between himself and the cowboys increased, his interest flagged. Slower and slower the trot showed, until it merged into a walk.

"What am I to do?" Kinnaird asked presently.

"I guess you're most effective set afoot," the girl answered; "and generally in that case a man walks."

"I couldn't catch him in a thousand years afoot," he objected, looking at Chinook suggestively.

The quizzical expression of the girl's face changed to one of paled apprehension. "And you couldn't rope Badger on that trail short of the pass," she declared, a serious vehemence in her tone. "He'll make straight for his old stable at Kootenay's."

Kinnaird touched Chinook, and walking at the horse's side turned toward the post. "I'll get another horse and follow him," he said presently.

"Tain't needed; they'll bring him in."

"They—who?"

"Some one'll pick him up on the trail," the girl stammered in sudden confusion.

"He'll wreck my saddle."

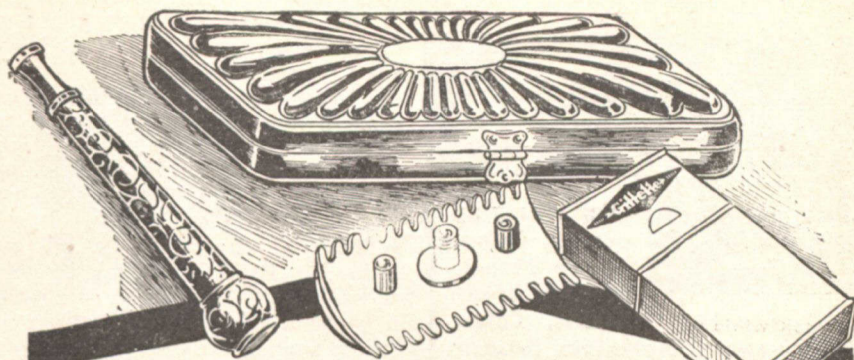
"Promise me you won't go after Badger!" Chris pleaded.

"Why, please?" Kinnaird queried impatiently.

"Matteo is back."

Kinnaird shrugged his shoulders.

"I know you don't fear him," Chris said; "but he's a copperhead snake—he'll strike in the dark. Why did he come back here a week ago? He's been brooding over being driven out by ridicule, and I know from his eyes there's murder in his heart. And I think he's up in the pass to-day."



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