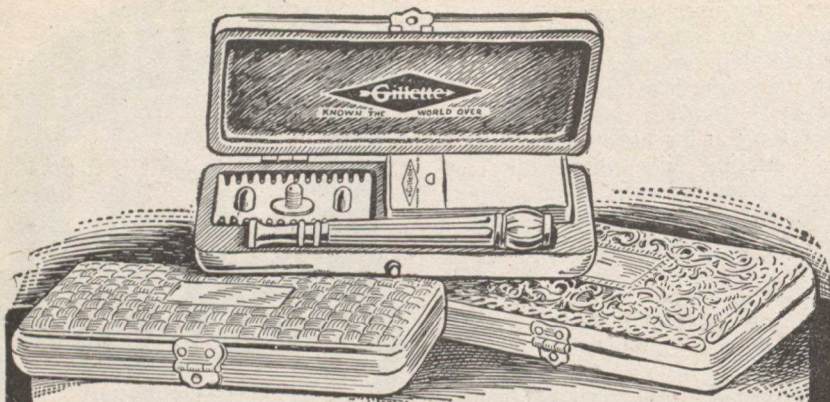


SERGEANT KINNAIRD

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16.



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'em up. I sent Cayuse up ter Little Divide to keep his eye skinned on the Pop to-night. He was nigh drunk, anyway."

The clack of Kootenay's heavy tread down the bare wooden stairs struck ominously on the ears of Chris, who sat, her mind tortured like a frail boat tossed by the meeting of many waters. The men whom Kootenay had gone to summon were men who, when roused, shot first and reasoned afterward; and they would ride out to-night consumed by a desire for vengeance upon the man they thought had betrayed them. And if Preacher Black was found at the pound with the policeman, he would be shot as a spy. She had lived in dread of this menace to Black's life. She knew of the under-current of distrust that flowed sluggishly beneath the surface resignation to his presence—it was like a stream of naphtha inflammably susceptible to a spark of proof. And somehow the impression impinged on her mind, confused by all the talk, that the preacher was really going out to the pound to meet Somers.

What if he had allied himself with the police to put down the illicit traffic which, as she knew, he abhorred? She combatted this thought vehemently, crying to herself, "No, a thousand times no! He's a man preacher!" But even if this was true, she must save him from the passionate men who would hold his life as the life of a prowling wolf.

The tramp of heavy feet ascending the stairs broke the girl's trend of thought. She heard her father greet Tough Wilkins and Bender, and ask, "Whar's Dakota?"

It was Kootenay answering. "He sot in to stud, and luck sure up and clawed his pockets inside out while you'd rope a steer; then he pulled out fer his shack dumb hostile."

"Well, we got ter git him!" Mayo declared. "One of you boys ride over to Stony Creek and yank him back."

Chris heard Kootenay clatter down the stairs on his way to summon Dakota, and the subdued drone of her father's voice as he told his two companions of the policeman's presence at Bleeding River and the suspected complicity of the Sky Pilot.

The avengers were men, one of them her father—kind and ordinarily fair; but, roused by adjudged tyrannical interference they were wolves. merciless and harsh,—while she was a woman in love with the man they were determined to slay, a woman of the West, one to act, rather than sit in a helpless atmosphere of mental defence: a horse her solution to the terrible situation, perhaps even a pistol in defence of her object.

She buttoned on a loose fitting caribou skin jacket, and slipped a pistol belt beneath, outlining her course of action. She would ride Chinook to the mission shack and warn Black not to go forth, making some excuse if she encountered Dupre. If the preacher had gone, she would ride to the pound and draw him away from his fate.

Chris had a hand on the door when her father's voice checked her with a sudden start of dismay. Chairs clattered a warning as he said, "I guess I'll go and saddle up so's to be ready when Dakota and Kootenay come."

The girl realised that she now could not get Chinook out before the others had left. Then she might try to outride them in a detour of the trail. But she could go to the mission on foot, and perhaps her horse would not be needed.

Down the stairs she crept, through a back door, and, avoiding the street, ran across the prairie. In ten min-

utes the mission shacks loomed against the sky. The walls held a solemn gloom; no light glinted from the window. "My God! he's gone!" Chris gasped—"gone with that wolf on his trail!"

Now the girl walked, her moccasin-ed feet calling from the grassed prairie no note of betrayal. Twenty yards from the shack she halted to listen. The night held a sullen stillness. She cast herself to the prairie and held her ear to the ground. Once she caught the muffled echo of hoofs; but they were faint, far away.

Cautiously she crept up to the door and tapped on its planks. There was no answer. Then she slipped round to the small logged inclosure, roofed by maskeg hay, that was a stable, and in its open doorway, black in gloom, said softly, "Whoa, Badger! Steady, boy!" She entered, and with coaxing words passed her hand through the space of a stall. It held nothing! She reached up and touched the wooden peg that should have held Badger's saddle. It was not there!

The girl turned heavily from the shacks which seemed to crouch in mournful abnegation, looking in the smothering night light like mausoleums holding but the dead hopes of betterment for her people. Many times Chris had looked across the prairie at night, and in a crude way pictured the light in Preacher Black's windows a star of hope. Now, swinging at a rapid walk over the back trail to the Lone Pine, she was torn by a conflict of feelings that were passionate and full of despair. She had accepted Black's politic masquerade of Christian rectitude as genuine. His normal manliness had not only enhanced this quality, but had deafened her ears to insinuations. She would have staked her life on the truth of his professed mission; but now if he was in league with her father's enemies, the police, this treachery murked the idealised conception.

Walking swiftly, her heart tortured by the conflict of love for Black and angered despair at the seeming lessened nobility of his manhood, the girl was startled by the erratic shuffle of a cayuse's gait. Chris raced to the left and threw herself to the prairie, where she crouched as the shadowy form of a horseman slipped by. Then she sprang to her feet and hurried forward. She knew it was one of the avengers on his way to discover if the preacher had left for the pound.

The sudden vision of danger to Black acted like a spur to Chris's hesitating mind. It was an elemental argument, convincing in its terrible reality. Without her help he would probably be murdered that night. It was simply a question of the life she perhaps held in her hand.

Again her mind worked impetuously in this direction, her feet beating at the prairie with hastening accord. As she approached the stable, a light glinted from a chink between its logs. Peering cautiously through the slit, Chris saw her father bring his hand down on his horse's rump in a sounding slap as he turned from the stall, and heard him say:

"Thar, Tough! I'm ready ter take a hand in the Gospel slinger's game." Then he stepped to the door and, peering out into the night, added: "'Pears like as Bender's comin' back. Somethin's gallopin' out thar on the prairie. We'd best wait here till Kootenay turns up with Dakota, if that skunk's pulled his freight fer the pound."

Standing in the shadow of the wall, Chris saw Bender's horse loom in the moonlight. He checked him in a