

# A Cowboy's Christmas

By ZENAS DANE.



It was one of the coldest of December days in Western Alberta. There was not much snow, but the ground was frozen hard, and a strong, fierce wind, unhindered by hill or tree, swept across the wide waste of dreary plain on which the little town of Cochrane stood, a picture of dreariness and desolation.

The streets of the town were deserted, excepting for the occasional appearance of a man or boy hurrying, with head bowed against the wind, to or from one of the two or three little stores in the town, or, it might be toward a small, square-front building at the end of one of the short streets, a building above the door of which was the word "Hotel," in bold black letters on a white board. Two or three lean, shivering horses, bridled, but without saddles, were hitched up in front of the hotel.

Double lines of iron, stretching far away toward the east and the west, marked the course of the railroad to which Cochrane owed its existence. South of the town there was a little wooden depot painted a dull brown.

There was but one passenger train a day from the east, and it would have taken a colder day than this to have kept most of the men in the town from going down to the little station to see the train come in. This was their one diversion, the one break in the dull monotony of their uneventful lives. In the summer time the women and children often came with the men.

To-day unusual interest seemed to be felt in the incoming train, and when the smoke from its engine was seen fully ten miles away, the men lounging around the stoves in the stores and hotel, as well as those in their own houses, buttoned their coats up to their chins, pulled their hats and caps down around their ears, and hurried away to the little depot, where they congregated around the stove, engaging in one general topic of conversation.

"I tell ye," said old man Dilly, "if this here railroad company knows what it's about, it'll send an agent here what has some grit. That there Tom Henson never was fit to keep no railroad station in a cowboy country. Them cowboys from over on the Bad Lands Country never'd treated Tom the way they did if he'd just a-spunked up to 'em an' showed a little clear grit, stid of tryin' to beg off like he did. If there's anything a cowboy natchelly despises it's an out an' out coward."

"Wal, I dunno," replied Joe Fraser, the postmaster, who had just come into the station with a very flat mail-bag in his hands. "I dunno ez Tom could of done much diff'rent from what he did. You take a lot of half-drunk cowboys out on a tear, and I tell you they're a hard lot to handle."

"Oh, I know, I know," assented Mr. Dilly, smiling grimly. "Plague take 'em! But it don't help a feller none to git limber-jinted an' wilt before 'em. That sort o' thing just ags them on. Hello, Kearney; how much'll you take in trade fer a ticket to Paris? I'm thinking of goin' fer the present soshel season."

A glass slide with "Ticket Office" painted on it, dropped in the wall to the left, and the face of the man addressed as Kearney appeared at the opening. He grinned at the facetious remark of Mr. Dilly, but made no reply.

"Heerd anything 'bout the new agent yit?" asked the postmaster.

"Nop," replied Kearney, "but he'll be a chap that no Alberta or Saskatchewan cowboys can skeer off, you can depend on that. I told the comp'ny to send on a reg'lar terror if they could find one. 'Spect he'll come bristlin' with pistols and knives."

Kearney was "boss" of the section hands stationed at Cochrane, and at present he was also acting as ticket-agent, the regular agent having uncer-

moniously fled from the town three days before.

The cowboys on the ranges, lying on all sides of Cochrane, made frequent visits to the town during the winter months, and at each visit "took the town," as the inhabitants expressed it, a proceeding that began in the drinking of a great deal of whiskey at the hotel, and ended in their racing at breakneck speed on their half-wild bronchos up and down the streets, firing off their pistols, hooting and howling, and doing anything and everything contrary to law and order.

On their last visit, after going to one of the grocery stores and helping themselves to a case of canned oysters and a box of crackers, they concluded to go to the railway station for an informal party in the waiting-room.

The terrified agent, a young man newly arrived from the east, thought they had come to visit some sort of punishment on him, and began to beg for mercy, an unwise proceeding that resulted in his being ordered out of the town on the first train, and he gladly went.

The men hurried out to the long platform as the train came in, and when it had come and gone the only passengers it left were a small, slightly-built woman dressed in black and an extremely pretty, bright-eyed little girl, with a profusion of yellow curls falling down to her shoulders.

"He didn't come," said old man Dilly, to a neighbor. "Thought better of it, I reckon. Wonder who the wider is?"

The "wider" came forward, holding the little girl by the hand.

"Is Mr. Kearney here?" she asked of one of the gaping crowd. Kearney, standing near enough to hear the question, said:

"I'm him, ma'am."

She held out her hand, and gave the crowd an electric shock by saying:

"I'm the new agent and telegraph operator from Winnipeg."

"Well, sir," said Mr. Dilly, speaking of the affair afterwards, "you could of knocked that hull crowd down with a feather when that woman said that."

The crowd stared in unbroken silence until the new agent and her little girl had gone into the ticket office; then the men hurried back to the town, each eager to tell the amazing news to those who did not already know it.

The women of Cochrane, for years remote from the great centers of civilization, and far behind in the progress of the age, were greatly scandalized.

Mrs. Dilly, who had been crouching over the fire most of the day, suddenly became heedless of the cold and, throwing an old shawl over her shoulders, faced the wind and ran with flapping garments to the farthest end of the street to talk the matter over with Mrs. Ferguson.

"Did ye ever hear of the like in all yer born days?" she asked, excitedly.

"What'll the women be a-doing next?"

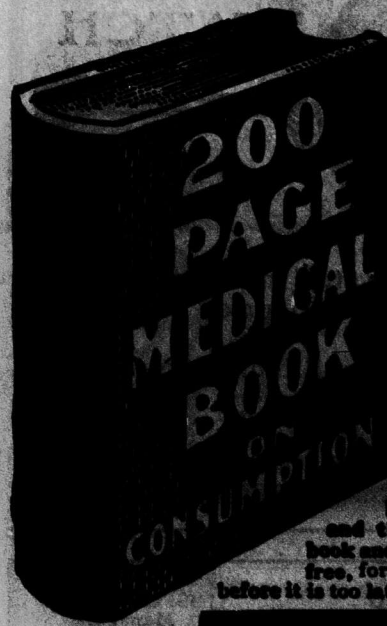
"Well, I've an idee she'll wish she'd kep' to dish-washin' an' other proper female work 'fore she's been here long," said Mrs. Ferguson. "Them cowboys ain't a-goin' to keer nothin' fer her bein' a woman. It just natchelly ain't in 'em to be gentlemine. Wonder if she knows what a cowboy is, anyhow?"

Mrs. Hartman, the new agent, had a very well-defined idea of what a cowboy was, although she had never seen one.

She had been a telegraph operator and had learned bookkeeping before her marriage. When her husband died, and left her dependent upon her own efforts for a livelihood for herself and her little girl, she felt obliged to go back to her old occupation, but with the determination to secure as soon as possible some situation where she could have her little girl with her.

The railroad officials knew her to be a bright, fearless woman, and when the vacancy created at Cochrane by young Henson's flight was made known to the company, Mrs. Hartman was offered the position.

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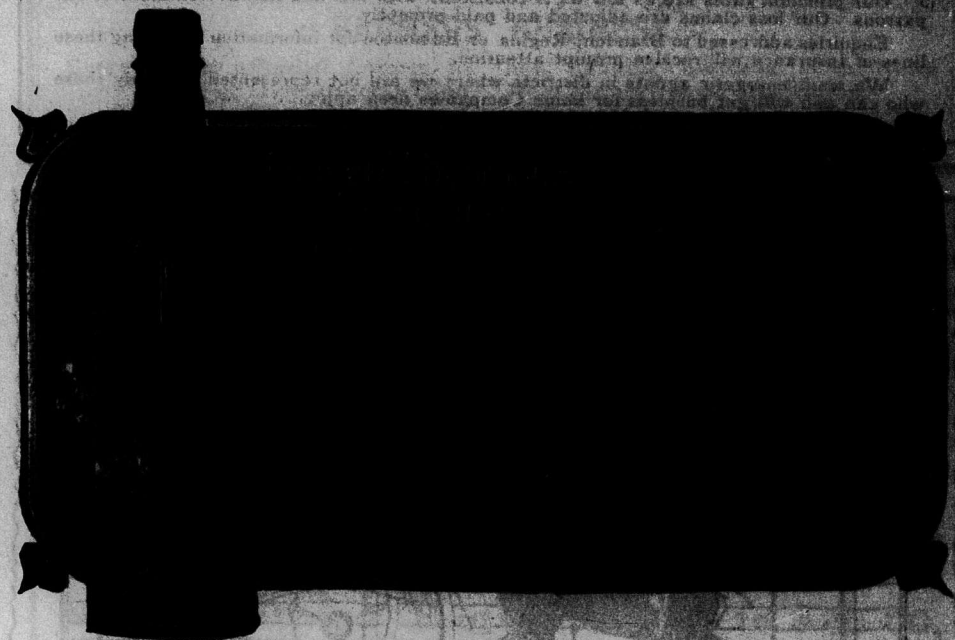
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