

flamboyantly cognomened by the dwellers. It was Race Day. Annually in Stand Off came a day of speeding horses and correlative devilry. Everybody would be in town, and several hundreds who were nobody,—Indians, breeds, and nomads of the plains. And—quick thought!—not a soul would remain up in the gorge of distillation. The joyful ones would be flattered by the preacher's absence. Whisky and cards and horse racing would atone in excelsis for a dearth of evangelical endeavor.

Kinnaird's mind galloped, eating into a plan at speed. He would intimate to Mayo that he was going out to rehabilitate the disrupted nerves of the Honorable, and Mayo, shrewd and foxlike of insight, would take this as a delicate elision of his constraining presence. Well clear of Stand Off, he would cut an ellipse in the prairie, and before midnight read the conjectured secret of Mad Squaw Gorge.

VERY simple the program; but entirely voided by the fact that the good citizens were at that very hour, with exquisite drollery, selecting the sky pilot as judge of the races. It had been the highest civic honor in Stand Off since the city's inception; and partly in the way of atonement, and altogether because of his neutrality, being the one man in the gathering who would not have a bet down, it was now conferred on the preacher.

Kinnaird knew nothing of this till he sought out Mayo casually to explain his intended defection. Then it was made clear to him that Stand Off, having done itself proud in this magnanimous way, expected a proper appreciation. Kinnaird yielded,—he couldn't help it without arousing suspicion,—determining to use the night for his errand.

There were a multiplicity of races, variable, extraordinary, unique, interminable, and it was five o'clock when the great race of the day, the Stand Off Challenge Cup, was called as the wind up. It was primitively simple in its conditions: "Chinook Against Any Horse in the World." Chinook had never been beaten, and all Stand Off had dollars to meet the dollars of anyone rash enough to attempt this impossible feat.

Three days previously a small parcel of humanity done up in parchment had listlessly drifted into Stand Off on the back of a leggy bay. And casually it had transpired that the "loosed gopher," as Cayuse George tagged him, thought Pipestone could make Chinook look like an effete mule. The little man had the tired, resigned air of a dweller in an arid desert; but, viriled out of his parched despondency by the quick whisky of Stand Off, he had cheerfully wedded dollar to dollar of Chinook money that Pipestone could sure tampline the other package of hoss flesh over the half-mile course, or his name wasn't Silent Eli.

AND now, at five o'clock, with a start of dismay, followed by a sense of repugnance, Kinnaird saw Chris, mounted on Chinook, pass down Broadway, which was the race course, on her way to the start, half a mile deeper in the trail. The girl had ridden past the preacher judge, almost brushing against his shoulder, with averted face, as though she avoided an expected look of disapproval. But this dual feeling of ethical sensitiveness ramified not to the larger area of humanity. All Stand Off rose up on its hind legs and cheered as the girl passed; even potted at the complacent sky in a crackling fusillade of encouragement.

A sudden hush fell over the mosaic of beaded blanket and buckskin coat and loud shirt that had noisily patterned in and out where the judge lined his eye from post to post across Broadway in front of the Lone Pine.

Craning his neck past Kootenay's bulk, Kinnaird saw a puff of smoke and the mad leap of chestnut and bay showing against a solid wall of humanity, as men closed in from either side, like the swing of gates. As the filmy lace of smoke threw upward, a hoarse cry, unintelligible, many lipped, crumpled the stillness, and then they stood in silence as if the prairie had slipped back a thousand years into solitude. He could see a gleam of yellow where the low hung sun caught the golden legs of Chinook in front of the bay. Chris was off in front. But on Pipestone, low crouched to the wither, was a figure that spoke of sinister content; and that long, steady reach of the bay was the gallop of a race horse,—smooth and an eater of space, that stride. On the breeze stream streamed the coal black hair of Chris, as, too erect, she sat the looser striding Chinook.

Kinnaird's blood leaped in a palpitating not as bay and chestnut swept in strife up the trail. The drumming of their

eager hoofs was music that thrilled. Now they raced neck and neck. The girl's body rocked as though she urged Chinook. And on the bay a monkeylike figure crouched as motionless as though the man slept. A hundred yards away their hoofs beat with fierce impetuosity side by side; they galloped as a team.

Kinnaird felt the smothered crush of bodies as men, tensed by the struggle, closed in silence about him. No one spoke. They scarce seemed to breathe, so still the suspense held them.

There was a curious sense of long drawn out time in his mind, as if bay and chestnut had galloped for ages, and would gallop on and on like creatures in a dream. But the thunder of hoofs now churned the air like a huge drum. He could see the blood red gleam of spread nostrils that sucked at the air. The girl's face showed drawn and blanched; her lips twitched, as though she called to Chinook to gallop, gallop.

Suddenly, the brown, wrinkled face of the man on Pipestone showed above the lean reaching head of the bay. His shoulders heaved. An arm swept upward. There was the snakelike writhe of a quirt in the air, and surely the black legs of the bay pounded at the turf a yard in front of the other.

"Gad! she's beaten! Chris, my girl, it's too bad!" This had slipped from Kinnaird's lips in a whisper. He held his breath as the girl drove at Chinook.

A FEW strides, a slight cutting down of the other's lead, and then, with a surging rush, the two thoroughbreds, the bay head showing in front, swept between his eyes and the white poplar post across the course.

Shrill above the rising clamor sounded the voice of Cayuse: "Hell's cut loose! Oh! won't somebody take my gun off'n me 'fore I shoot that gopher on Pipestone?"

Nobody paid any attention to the excited Cayuse. It was just the phrased thoughts that surged through the minds of all Stand Off.

Mayo pushed his way through the turmoil of troubled men, and asked Kinnaird, "What hoss got it, judge?"

"Pipestone won." "Guess that's correct," Kootenay substantiated. "The red hoss jus' shoved out his lips, an' sorter won by the skin of his teeth." The speaker laughed a mirthless cackle at his own humor.

Through a rent in the human wall the two horses came back. Chris, slipping dejectedly from the saddle, asked, "Was I beat?"

Kinnaird nodded. "I thought so. Poor old Chinook! That's the first time—" Her voice choked, and Kinnaird saw the heavy black lashes whip bravely at the moist brown eyes. As she drew at Chinook's rein, Mayo said:

"I'll take the hoss, Chris." "No—no!" the girl answered fiercely; and the crowd cheered as she led the chestnut away.

PART of Kinnaird's official duty was to hold the stakes. And as Silent Eli waited for his winnings, two men, dressed as cowboys, stood viewing Pipestone with evident interest. One of them ran a hand casually down the horse's cannonbone.

"I guess it's all right, judge," Mayo said. "Nobody ain't made no kick."

As Eli held out his hand for the purse, the man who had caressed Pipestone's leg slipped a pair of strong fingers in the red handkerchief knotted about the little man's neck, saying, "I arrest you in the name of the Queen! Don't pay over that money!" He stopped abruptly and stared, a look of half recognition in his eyes as he turned them on Kinnaird.

An oath and a twist recalled him from his momentary hesitancy. Another hand had thrust in between him and his prisoner to grasp the wrist of Eli, wrenching his fingers loose from the butt of a six-shooter he had reached for beneath his leather shirt.

"What's all this, stranger?" Mayo asked, his lean face set in a look of anger. "This man's a horse thief!" Eli's captor declared.

"You're a liar!" snapped the jockey. "Who are you, stranger?" Mayo demanded.

"Sergeant Hawke of the Mounted Police. This horse was stolen from the breeding ranch of Marcus Daly. His name's not Pipestone; it's Redwing. And no wonder he beat Chinook; for he's a stake winner!"

Silent Eli sneered. "It's bunk! It's a lie! I bought the hoss. He's Pipestone, right eruff."

"Here's the warrant," Sergeant Hawke continued. "The horse was trailed from Daly's to the border, and I had in-

structions to seize him where found and arrest the thief. We thought he'd head for this point to-day."

MAYO took the sheet of orders from the Sergeant's hand, and running his eye down it, said, "This invoice don't seem to jibe with the freight. The hoss that was run off wore a white sock, while this critter comes purty near havin' four black legs."

"The high fore has been stained. Look for yourself," the Sergeant answered.

"I guess that's right," Mayo said as he straightened up from a close scrutiny of the leg. "But it's writ here that the hoss thief was five feet seven, sorter pinto toned in the mug, piercin' black eyes, etc.; while this gent is gopher built, sandpaper complected, and eyes blue as Injun beads."

Mayo had carried these observations on in a monologue, as he ran his eye over the manuscript. Suddenly he started, folded the paper and handed it back, his lean jaw rigid as if he had shut his teeth against further speech.

"Yes," Sergeant Hawke added, "we haven't got the principal thief. A dago cook for one of the stable gangs disappeared at the time the horse was missed. His name is Dominic Matteo, and he's wanted."

Matteo, who had been down at the start, heard his name as he pushed to the center of the group, and called, "Who want me?"

"Are you Dominic Matteo?" "Yes. What you want?"

At this answer the Sergeant's companion, with a quick move, had him by the wrist and shoulder, saying, "You're my prisoner in the name of the Queen!"

With a snarl of rage the Corsican twisted his wrist free. As he grasped at a pistol in his belt a strong hand pinioned his arm with a thrust from behind, and Mayo's voice said sternly:

"No gunplay ain't allowed in Stand Off at the Civic Round Up! Tain't sport, nohow."

Matteo twisted his head and sneered. "You let de p'lice come into Stan' Off an' take one you men?"

"No!" Mayo's voice held a curious solemn dignity. "We don't stand fer the p'lice nor nobody else interferin' with men's rights; but we ain't ag'in' takin' a hoss thief any time. Tain't no salubrious climate here for a hoss thief!"

He turned to the Sergeant, and added with the same grave dignity, "I've heard talk 'bout Stand Off shelterin' hoss thieves, and wuss; but it's a lie. If Matt here run off that hoss, he's yourn to take away. And he orter feel kinder grateful fer your sassiety."

There was a terrible significance in the words that caused the Corsican to shiver; it cowed him. As he hung tremblingly at bay in the constable's grasp, like a roped coyote, his shifty black eyes fell on Kinnaird, and he flared up furiously:

"It's him!" he snarled, pointing his small, lean finger. "He bring de p'lice here, cause he's 'fraid! He's spy! How dey know I come back?"

Mayo stood in heavy browed silence while the Corsican raved in fierce denunciation of the sky pilot for a little, then he said, "You ain't provin' none that you didn't run off the hoss, Matt, and evidence is all ag'in' you."

There was a sharp click as he spoke, and a pair of iron bands were on the wrists of Eli, and next Matteo's hands projected stiffly from handcuffs.

"I just want to say, Sergeant," Mayo continued significantly, "hoss thieves will be give up here any time; and you ain't got no call to come here fer 'em again. Stand Off ain't no stoppin' place for the Mounted Police. I guess there ain't no cause ter interfere any more with the fun. You can pull out with your prisoners and hoss soon's you like, Sergeant."

AS the police moved away with the horse and thieves, Mayo, sweeping the faces of his men with eyes in which burned heavy, sullen anger, said, "There ain't no call to interfere with the p'lice's trappin' this time, men, and there ain't nothin' to be said. I guess Matt set this trap that he got caught in-hisself to bust Stand Off's bank over Chinook."

The great race with its tragic finale seemed to have pumped all exuberance from the atmosphere. A sudden passionate gunplay would not have had the depressing effect of this thrust of the law's strong arm. It was the first time in the history of Stand Off that the Mounted Police had claimed and taken a man.

The post soon emptied of all but two or three ranchers who remained to buck against the whisky men in stud poker.

To be continued next Sunday



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