

The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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McNamara, his boots loosely "squeaking" while oaths still poured from him in such profusion that Dextrly whistled.

"Ain't he a ring tailed wonder? It's plumb solemn an' reverent the way he makes them unstead cuss words sit up an' beg. It's a privilege to be present. That's a gift that is."

"You'd better get some dry clothes," they suggested, and Slapjack proceeded a few paces toward the tents, bobbing as though treading on pounded grass.

"Ow-r" he yelled. "These blasted boots is full of gravel."

He seated himself and tugged at his foot till the boot came away with a sucking sound; then, instead of emptying the accumulation at random, he poured the contents into Dextrly's empty gold pan, rinsing it out carefully. The other boot he emptied likewise. They held a surprising amount of sediment, because the stream that had emerged from the crack in the sluices had carried with it pebbles, sand and all the concentration of the riffles at this point. Standing directly beneath the cataract, most of it had dived fairly into his inviting waistband, following down the lines of least resistance into his boot legs and boiling out at the knees.

"Was that," he said. "You're apt to get a prospect."

With artful passes Dextrly settled it in the pan bottom and washed away the gravel, leaving a yellow glittering pile which raised a yell from the men, who had lingered curiously.

"He pans \$40 to the boot leg," one shouted.

"How much do you run to the foot, Slapjack?"

"He's a reg'lar free milling lodge."

"No, he ain't; he's too thin. He's nothing but a stringer, but he'll pay to work."

The old miner grinned toothlessly.

"Gentlemen, there ain't no better way to save fine gold than with undercurrents an' blanket riffles. I'll have to wash these garments of mine an' clean up the soapuds 'cause there's a hundred dollars in gold dust clingin' to my person this minute." He went dripping to the bank, while the men returned to their work singing.

After lunch Dextrly saddled his broncho.

"I'm goin' to town for a pair of gold scales, but I'll be back by supper; then we'll clean up between shifts. She'd ought to give us a thousand ounces the way that ground prospects." He loped down the gulch, while his partner returned to the pit, the flashing shovel blades and the rumbling undertone of the big workings that so fascinated him.

It was perhaps 4 o'clock when he was aroused from his labors by a shout from the bunk tent, where a group of horsemen had clustered. As Glenister drew near he saw among them Wilton Struve, the lawyer, and the big, well dressed tenderfoot of the Northern, McNamara, the man of the heavy hand. Struve straightway engaged him.

"Say, Glenister, we've come out to see about the title to this claim."

"What about it?"

"Well, it was relocated about a month ago," he puffed.

"Yes, what of that?"

"Galloway has commenced suit."

"The ground belongs to Dextrly and me."

"We discovered it, we opened it up, we're complied with the law, and we're going to hold it," Glenister spoke with such conviction, and heat as to nonplus Struve, but McNamara, who had sat his horse silently until now, answered:

"Certainly, sir; if your title is good you will be protected, but the law has arrived in Alaska and we've got to let it take its course. There's no need of violence—none whatever—but, briefly, the situation is this: Mr. Galloway has commenced action against you, the court has enjoined you from working and has appointed me as receiver to operate the mine until the suit is settled. It's an extraordinary procedure, of course, but the conditions are extraordinary in this country. The season is so short that it would be unjust to the rightful owner if the claim lay idle all summer, so to avoid that I've been put in charge, with instructions to operate it and preserve the proceeds subject to the court's order. Mr. Voorhes here is the United States marshal. He will serve the papers."

Glenister threw up his hand in a gesture of restraint.

"Hold on! Do you mean to tell me that any court would recognize such a claim as Galloway's?"

"The law recognizes everything. If his grounds are no good, so much the better for you."

"You can't put in a receiver without notice to us. Why, good Lord, we never heard of a suit being commenced. We've never even been served with a summons, and we haven't had a chance to argue in our own defense."

"I have just said that this is a remarkable state of affairs and unusual action had to be taken," McNamara replied, but the young miner grew excited.

"Look here, this gold won't get away! It's safe in the ground. We'll knock off work and let the claim lie idle till the thing is settled. You can't really expect us to surrender possession of our mine on the mere allegation of some unknown man. That's ridiculous. We won't do it. Why, we'll have to let us argue our case

at least before you try to put us off."

Voorhes shook his head. "We'll have to follow instructions. The thing for you to do is to appear before the court tomorrow and have the receiver dismissed. If your title is as good as you say it is, you won't have any trouble."

"You're not the only ones to suffer," added McNamara. "We've taken possession of all the mines below here." He nodded down the gulch. "I'm an officer of the court and under bond."

"How much?"

"Five thousand dollars for each claim."

"What? Why, heavens, man, the poorest of these mines is producing that much every day?"

While he spoke Glenister was rapidly debating what course to follow.

"The judge stillman," said Struve, but with little notion of the conflict going on in Glenister's mind. The youth yearned to fight, not with words nor squibbles nor legal phrases, but with steel and blows. And he felt that the impulse was as righteous as it was natural, for he knew this process was unjust, an outrage. Mexico Mullins' warning returned to him. And yet—He shifted slowly as he talked till his back was to the door of the big tent. They were watching him carefully, for all their apparent languor and looseness in saddle; then, as he started to leap within and rally his horsemen, his mind went back to the words of Judge Stillman and his niece. Surely that old man was on the square. He couldn't be otherwise with her beside him, believing in him, and a suspicion of deeper plots behind these actions was groundless. So far all was legal, he supposed, with his scant knowledge of law, though the methods seemed unreasonable. The men might be doing what they thought to be right. Why be the first to resist? The men on the mines below had not done so. The title to this ground was capable of such easy proof that he and Dextrly need have no uneasiness. Courts do not rob honest people nowadays, he argued, and, moreover, perhaps the judge's words were true; perhaps she would think more of him if he gave up the old fighting ways for her sake. Certainly armed resistance to her niece's first edict would not please her. She had said he was too violent, so he would show her he could lay his savagery aside. She might smile on him approvingly, and that was worth taking a chance for. Anyway it would mean but a few days' delay in the mine's run. As he reasoned he heard a low voice speaking within the open door. It was Slapjack Simms.

"Step aside, lad. I've got the big un covered."

Glenister saw the men on horseback snatch at their holsters and just in time leaped at his foreman, for the old man had moved out into the open, a Winchester at shoulder, his cheek cutting the stock, his eyes cold and narrow. The young man flung the barrel up and wrenched the weapon from his hands.

"None of that, Hank!" he cried sharply. "I'll say when to shoot." He turned to look into the muzzle of guns held in the hands of every horseman—every horseman save one, for Alec McNamara sat unmoved, his handsome features, nonchalant and amused, nodding approval. It was at him that Hank's weapon had been leveled.

"This is bad enough at the best. Don't let's make it any worse," said Slapjack inhaled deeply, spat with disgust and looked over his boss incredulously.

"Well, of all the different kinds of blame fools," he snorted, "you are the kindest!" He marched past the marshal and his deputies down to the cut, put on his coat and vanished down the trail toward town, not deigning a backward glance either at the mine or at the man unfit to fight for.

CHAPTER VII.

LATE IN July it grows dark as midnight approaches, so that the many lights from doorway and window seem less garish and strange than they do a month earlier. In the Northern there was good business doing. The new bar fixtures, which had cost a king's ransom or represented the one night's losses of a Klondike millionaire, shone rich, dark and enticing, while the cut glass sparked with iridescent hues, reflecting in a measure the prismatic moods, the dancing spirits of the crowd that crushed past, halting at the gambling games or patronizing the theater in the rear. The old bar furniture, brought down by dog team from "up river," was established at the rear extremity of the long building, just inside the entrance to the dance hall, where patrons of the drama might, with a modicum of delay and inconvenience, quaff as deeply of the beaker as of the ballet.

Now, however, the show had closed, the hall had been cleared of chairs and canvas, exposing a glossy, tempting surface, and the orchestra had moved to the stage. They played a rollicking, blood stirring waltz, while the floor swam with dancers.

At certain intervals the musicians worked feverishly up to a crashing crescendo, supported by the voices of the dancers, until all joined at the top note in a yell, while the drummer fed a forty-four Colt into a box of wet sawdust beside his chair—all in time, all in the springing spirit of the

tune. The men, who were mostly young, danced like college boys, while the women, who were all young and good dancers, floated through the measures with the ease of rose leaves on a summer stream. Faces were flushed, eyes were bright, and but rarely a voice sounded that was not glad. Most of the noise came from the men, and, although one caught here and there a hint of haggard lines about the girls' faces and glimpsed occasional eyes that did not smile, yet as a whole the scene was one of genuine enjoyment.

Suddenly the music ceased, and the couples crowded to the bar. The women took harmless drinks, the men mostly whisky. Rarely was the choice of potatoes criticized, though occasionally some ruddy eschewer of sobriety insisted that his lady "take the same," avowing that "hooch," having been demonstrated beneficial in his case, was good for her also. Invariably the lady accepted without dispute, and invariably the man failed to note her glance at the bartender or the silent substitution for whisky or of plain water for gin. In turn the mixers collected \$1 from each man, flipping to the girl a metal percentage check, which she added to her store. In the curtained boxes overhead men bought bottles with full about the corks, and then sutured on the lady's part was idle, but, on the other hand, she was able to pocket for each bottle a check redeemable at \$5.

A stranger straight from the east would have remarked first upon the good music, next upon the good looks of the women and then upon the shabby clothes of the men, for some of them were in "mukluk," others in sweaters with huge initials and winged emblems, and all were collarless.

Outside in the main gambling room there were but few women. Men crowded in dense masses about the faro layout, the wheel, cards and the Klondike game, pangling and card tables. They talked of business, of home, of women, bought and sold mines and bartered all things from hams to honor. The groomed and clean, the unkempt and filthy jostled shoulder to shoulder, equally affected by the license of the gold fields and the exhilaration of the new. "The mystery of the north had touched them all. The glad, bright wine of adventure filled their veins, and they spoke mightily of things they had resolved to do, or recounted with simple diffidence the strange stories of their accomplishment.

The Bronco Kid, familiar from Atlin to Nome as the best "bank" dealer on the Yukon, worked the shift from 8 till 2. He was a slender man of thirty, dexterous in movement, slow to smile, soft of voice and known as a living flame among women. He had dealt the biggest games of the early days and had no enemies. Yet, though many called him friend, they wondered inwardly.

It was a strong play the Kid had tonight, for Swede Sam of Dawson ventured many stacks of yellow chips, and he was a quick, aggressive gambler. A Jew sat at the king end with ten neatly creased \$1,000 bills before him, together with piles of smaller currency. He adventured viciously and without system, while outsiders to the number of four or five cut in sporadically with small bets. The game was difficult to follow, consequently the lookout, from his raised dais, was leaning forward, chin in hand, while the group was hedged about by eager on-lookers.

Faro is a closed book to most people, for its intricacies are confusing. Lucky is he who has never persevered in solving its mysteries nor speculated upon the "systems" of beating it. From those who have learned it, the game demands practice, dexterity and coolness. The dealer must run the cards, watch the many shifting bets, handle the neatly piled chips, figure lightninglike the profits and losses. It was his unerring, clocklike regularity in this that had won the Kid his reputation. This night his powers were taxed. He dealt silently, coolingly, his long white fingers nervously caressing the cards.

This preoccupation prevented his noticing the rustle and stir of a newcomer who had crowded up behind him until he caught the wondering glances of those in front and saw that the Israelite was staring past him, his way forgotten, his eyes bely and sharp, his rattle teeth showing in a grin of admiration. Swede Sam glared from under his unkempt shock and felt uncertainly toward the open collar of his flannel shirt where a kerchief should have been. The men who were standing gazed at the newcomer, some with surprise, others with a half smile of recognition.

Bronco glanced quickly over his shoulder, and as he did so the breath caught in his throat, but for only an instant. A girl stood so close beside him that the lace of her gown brushed his sleeve. He was shuffling at the moment and dropped a card, then nodded to her, speaking quietly as he stooped to regain the pastecard:

"Howdy, Cherry?"

She did not answer, only continued to look at the "layout." "What a woman!" he thought. She was not too tall, with smoothly rounded bust and hips and long wavy, all well displayed by her perfectly fitting garments. Her face was oval, the mouth rather large, the eyes of dark, dark blue, prominently outlined under thin, silken lids. Her dull gold hair was combed low over the ears, and her smile showed rows of sparkling teeth before it dived into twin dimples. Stranger of all, it was an innocent face, the face and smile of a schoolgirl.

The Kid finished his shuffling awkwardly and slid the cards into the box. Then the woman spoke:

"Let me have your place, Bronco."

The man gasped, the Jew snickered, the lookout straightened in his chair.

"Better not. It's a hard game," said the Kid, but her voice was imperious as she commanded him:

"Hurry up. Give me your place."

Bronco arose, whereupon she settled in his chair, tucked in her skirts, removed her gloves and twisted into place the diamonds on her hands.

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"What the devil's this?" said the lookout roughly. "Are you drunk, Bronco? Get out of that chair, miss!"

She turned to him slowly. The innocence had fled from her features, and the big eyes flashed warningly. A puff of air on a still pool. Then, while she stared at him, her lids drooped dangerously and her lip curled.

"Throw him out, Bronco," she said, and her tones held the hardness of a mistress to her slave.

"That's all right," the Kid reassured the lookout. "She's a better dealer than I am. This is Cherry Malotte."

Without noticing the stares this evoked, the girl commenced. Her



"This is Cherry Malotte."

hands, beautifully soft and white, flashed over the board. She dealt rapidly, unflinchingly, with the finish of one bred to the cards, handling chips and coppers with the peculiar mannerisms that spring from long practice. It was seen that she never looked at her check rack, but when a bet required paying picked up a stack without turning her head, and they saw further that she never reached twice nor took a large pile and sized it up against its mate, removing the extra disks, as is the custom. When she stretched forth her hand, she grasped the right number unerringly. This is considered the acme of professional finish, and the Bronco Kid smiled down from the lookout to the spectators and heard the speech of the men who stood on chairs and tables for sight of the woman dealer.

For twenty minutes she continued, until the place became congested, and never once did the lookout detect an error.

While she was busy Glenister entered the front door and pushed his way back toward the theater. He was worried and distraught, his manner perturbed and unnatural. Silently and without apparent notice he passed friends who greeted him.

"What alls Glenister tonight?" asked a bystander. "He acts funny."

"Ain't you heard? Why, the Midas has been jumped. He's in a bad way—all broke up."

The girl suddenly ceased without finishing the deck and arose.

"Don't stop," said the Kid, while a murmur of dismay came from the spectators. She only shook her head and drew on her gloves with a show of ennui.

Gliding through the crowd, she threaded about aimlessly, the recipient of many stares though but few greetings, speaking with no one, a certain dexterity serving her as a barrier even here. She stopped a waiter and questioned him.

"He's upstairs in a gallery box."

"Alone?"

"Yes'm. Anyhow, he was a minute ago, unless some of the rustlers has broke in on him."

A moment later Glenister, watching the scene below, was aroused from his gloomy absorption by the click of the box door and the rustle of silken skirts.

"Go out, please," he said, without turning. "I don't want company."

Hearing no answer, he began again. "I came here to be alone"—but there he ceased, for the girl had come forward and laid her two hot hands upon his cheeks.

"Boy," she breathed, and he arose swiftly.

"Cherry! When did you come?"

"Oh, days ago," she said, impatiently, "from Dawson. They told me you had struck it. I stood it as long as I could—then I came to you. Now, tell me about yourself. Let me see you first, quick!"

She pulled him towards the light and gazed upward, devouring him hungrily with her great, languorous eyes. She held to his coat lapels, standing close beside him, her warm breath beating up to his face.

"Well," she said, "this mo'"

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