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The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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"Let's hurry up," said one. "It's a long 'mud' and the mud is knee deep."
 "No walking for me," said Roy.
 "We'll go by train."
 "By train? How can we get a train?"
 "Steal it," he answered, at which Dexty grinned delightedly at his loose jointed companion, and Slapjack showed his toothless gums in answer, saying:
 "He sure is."

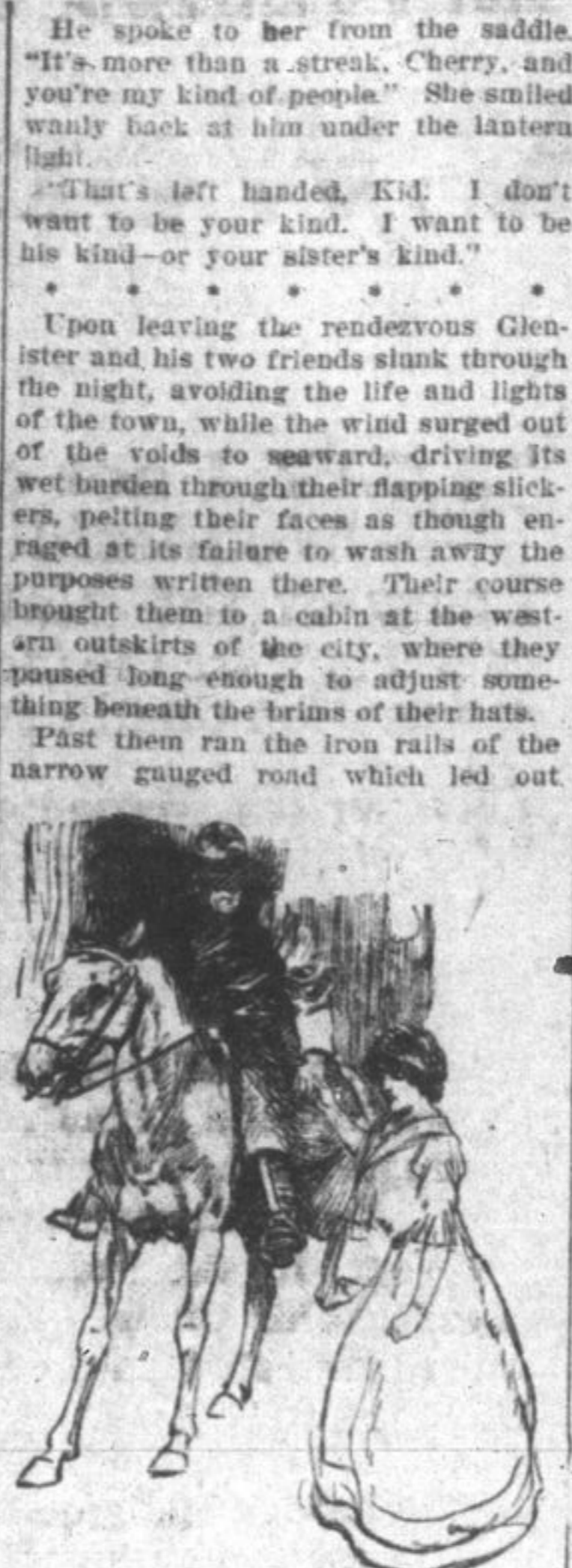
A few more words and Glenister, accompanied by these two, slipped out into the whirling storm, and a half hour later the rest followed. One by one the vigilantes left, the blackness blotting them up an arm's length from the door, till at last the big, bleak warehouse echoed hollowly to the voice of the wind and water.

O'er in the eastern end of the town, behind dark windows upon which the sheeted rain beat furiously, other armed men lay patiently waiting—waiting some word from the bulky shadow which stood with folded arms close against a square of gray, while over their heads a wretched old man paced back and forth, wringing his hands, pausing at every turn to peer out into the night and to mumble the name of his sister's child.

"I love you the way a man ought to love a woman. It's one of the two good things left to me, and I want to take you away from here where we can both hide from the past, where we can start new, as you say."
 "You would marry me?" she asked.
 "In an hour and give my heart's blood for the privilege, but I can't stop this thing, not even if your own dear life hung upon it. I must kill that man."
 She approached him and laid her arms about his neck, every line of her body pleading, but he refused steadfastly, while the sweat stood out upon his brow.

She begged: "They're all against him, Kid. He's fighting a hopeless fight. He laid all he had at that girl's feet, and I'll do the same for you."
 The man growled savagely. "He got his reward. He took all she had—"
 "Don't be a fool. I guess I know. You're a faro dealer, but you haven't any right to talk like that about a good woman, even to a bad one like me."
 Into his dark eyes slowly crept a hungry look, and she felt him begin to tremble the least bit. He undertook to speak, paused, wet his lips, then carefully chose these words:
 "Do you mean—that he did not—that she is—a good girl?"
 "Absolutely."
 He sat down wearily and passed a shaking hand over his face, which had begun to twitch and jerk again as it had on that night when his vengeance was thwarted.

"I may as well tell you that I know she's more than that. She's honest and high principled. I don't know why I'm saying this, but it was on my mind and I was half-distracted when you came. She's in danger tonight, though—at this minute, I don't dare to think of what may have happened, for she's risked everything to make reparation to Roy and his friends."
 "What?"
 "She's gone to the Sign of the Sled alone with Struve."
 "Struve?" shouted the gambler, leaping to his feet. "Alone with Struve on a night like this?" He shook her fiercely, crying: "What for? Tell me quick!"
 "She recounted the reasons for Helen's adventure, while the man's face became terrible."
 "Oh, Kid, I am to blame for letting her go. Why did I do it? I'm afraid—afraid."
 "The Sign of the Sled belongs to Struve, and the fellow who runs it is a rogue." The Bronco looked at the clock, his eyes bloodshot and dull like those of a goaded, maddened bull. "It's 8 o'clock now—ten miles—two hours. Too late."
 "What ails you?" she questioned, baffled by his strange demeanor. "You called me the one woman just now, and you—"
 "I swung toward her heavily."
 "Your sister? Oh, I—I'm glad, I'm glad—but don't stand there like a wooden man, for you've work to do. Wake up. Can't you hear? She's in peril!" Her words whipped him out of his stupor so that he drew himself somewhat under control. "Get into your coat. Hurry! Hurry! My pay will take you there." She snatched his garment from the chair and held it for him while the life ran back into his veins. Together they dashed out into the storm as she and Roy had done, and as he flung the saddle on the black skin, she said:
 "I understand it all now. You hear the talk about her and Glenister; but it's wrong. I lied and schemed and intrigued against her, but it's over now. I guess there's a little streak of good in me somewhere, after all."



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CHAPTER XIX.

EADLY in the evening Cherry Malotte opened her door to find the Bronco Kid on her step. He entered and threw off his rubber coat. Knowing him well, she waited for his disclosure of his errand. His yellow skin was without a trace of color, his eyes were strangely fixed, deep lines had gathered about his lips, while his hands kept up constant little nervous explorations as though for days and nights he had not slept and now hovered on the verge of some hysteria. He gave her the impression of a smoldering mine with the fire eating close up to the powder. She judged that his body had been racked by every passion till now it hung fated and weary, yielding only to the spur of his restless, unregarding spirit.

After a few objectless remarks he began abruptly:
 "Do you love Roy Glenister?" His voice, like his manner, was jealously eager, and he watched her carefully as she replied without quibble or deceit:
 "Yes, Kid, and I always shall. He is the only true man I have ever known, and I'm not ashamed of my feelings."
 For a long time he studied her and then broke into rapid speech, allowing her no time for interruption.
 "I've held back and held back because I'm no talker. I can't lie in my business. But this is my last chance, and I want to put myself right with you. I've loved you ever since the Dawson days, not in the way you'd expect from a man of my sort perhaps, but with the kind of love that a woman wants. I never showed my hand, for what was the use? That man out-held me. I'd have quit this country as long as you were part of it and up here I'm only a gambler. It's for nothing else. I'd made up my mind to let you have him till something happened a couple of months ago, but now it can't go through. I'll have to down him. It isn't concerning you, I'm not a wretch. No, it's a thing I can't talk about—a thing that's made me into a wolf, made me skulk and walk the alleys like a dog. It's put murder into my heart. I've tried to assassinate him. I tried it here last night—but I was a gentleman once—till the cards came. He knows the answer now, though, and he's ready for me, so one of us will go out like a candle when we meet. I felt that I had to tell you before I cut him down or before he got me."

"You're talking like a madman, Kid," she replied, "and you mustn't turn against him now. He has troubles enough. I never knew you cared for me. What a tangle it is, to be sure. You love me, I love him, he loves that girl, and she loves a crook. Isn't that tragedy enough without your adding to it? You come at a bad time, too, for I'm half insane. There's something dreadful in the air tonight!"

"I'll have to kill him," the man muttered doggedly, and, plead or reason as she would, she could get nothing from him except those words till at last she turned upon him fiercely.
 "You say you love me. Very well, let's see if you do. I know the kind of a man you are, and I know what this feud will mean to him, coming just at this time. Put it aside and I'll marry you."
 The gambler rose slowly to his feet. "You do love him, don't you?" She bowed her face, and he winced, but continued: "I wouldn't make you my wife that way. I didn't mean it that way."
 At this she laughed bitterly. "Oh, I see. Of course not. How foolish of me to expect it of a man like you. I understand what you mean now, and the bargain will stand just the same, if that is what you came for. I wanted to leave this life and be good, to go away and start over and play the game square, but I see it's no use. I'll pay. I know how relentless you are, and the price is low enough. You can have me—and that—marriage talk—I'll not speak of again. I'll stay what I am for his sake."
 "Stop!" cried the Kid. "You're wrong. I'm not that kind of a sport." His voice broke suddenly, its vehemence shaking his slim body. "Oh, Cher-

"I don't want to be your kind. I want to be his kind,"
 across the quaking tundra to the mountains and the mines. Upon this slender trail of steel there rolled one small, ungainly tempo of an engine which daily creaked and clanked back and forth at a snail's pace, screaming and wailing its complaint of the two high loaded flatcars behind. The ties beneath it were spiked to planks laid lengthwise over the semi-liquid road-bed, in places sagging beneath the surface till the humpbacked, short waisted locomotive yawed and reeled and squealed like a drunken fishwife. At night it panted wearily into the board station and there sighed and coughed and hissed away its fatigue as the coals died and the breath relaxed in its lungs.

Early to bed and early to rise was the motto of its grimy crew, who lived near by. Tonight they were just retiring when stayed by a summons at their door. The engineer opened it to admit what appeared to his astonished eyes to be a Krupp cannon propelled by a man in yellow oiled clothes and white cotton mask. This weapon assumed the proportions of a great one-eyed monster, which stared with hateful fixity at his vitals, giving him a cold and empty feeling. Away back beyond the two Cyclops of the Sightless Orb were two other strangers likewise equipped.

The fireman arose from his chair, dropping an empty shoe with a thump; but, being of the west, without camp or waste of wind he stretched his hands above his head, balancing on one foot to keep his unshod member from the damp floor. He had unbuckled his belt, and now, loosened by the movement, his overalls seemed bent on sinking forward in an ecstasy of abashment at the intrusion, whereupon with convulsive grip he hugged them to their duty, one hand and foot still elevated as though in the grand halling sign of some secret order. The other man was new to the ways of the north, so backed to the limit of his quarters, laid both hands protectively upon his middle and doubled up, remarking fervidly:
 "Don't point that damned thing at my stomach."
 "He ha!" laughed the fireman, with unmannered loudness. "Have your joke, boys."
 "This ain't no joke," said the foremost figure, its breath bellying out the mask at its mouth.
 "Sure it is," insisted the shoeless one. "Must be. We ain't got anything worth stealing."
 "Get into your clothes and come along. We won't hurt you." The two obeyed and were taken to the sleeping engine and there instructed to produce a full head of steam in thirty minutes or suffer a premature taking off and a prompt ejection from the realm of applied mechanics. As stimulants to their efforts two of the men stood over them till the engine began to sob and sigh reluctantly. Through the gloom that curtains the cab they saw other dim forms materializing and climbing silently on to the cars behind. Then, as the steam gauge touched the mark, the word was given, and the train rumbled out from its shelter, its shell plained at curb and crossing whipped away and drowned in the storm.

Slapjack remained in the cab, gun in lap, while Dexty climbed back to Glenister. He found the young man in good spirits, despite the discomfort of his exposed position, and striving to light his pipe behind the shelter of his coat.
 "Is the dynamite aboard?" the old man questioned.
 "Sure. Enough to ballast a battleship."
 As the train went out of the camp and across the river bridge, its only light or glimmer the sparks that were snatched and hurled by the blast, the partners settled themselves on the powder cases and conversed guardedly, while about them sounded the low murmur of the men who risked their all upon this cry to duty, who staked their lives and futures upon this hazard of the hills, because they thought it right.
 "We've made a good fight, whether we win or lose tonight," said Dexty.
 For replied, "My fight is made and won."
 "What does that mean?"
 (Continued Next Saturday.)



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