

The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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[Continued from last week.]

There he lay like a dead man till late in the afternoon, when Dextr and Slapjack came in from the hills, answering Wheaton's call, and fell upon him hungrily. They shook Roy into consciousness with joyous riot, pomping him with affectionate roughness till he rose and joined with them stiffly. He bathed and rubbed the soreness from his muscles, emerging physically fit. They made him recount his adventures to the tiniest detail, following his description of the fight with absorbed interest till Dextr broke into mournful complaint:

"I'd have given my half of the Midas to see you bust him. Lord, I'd have screamed with soopreme delight at that."

"Why didn't you gouge his eyes out when you had him crippled?" questioned Slapjack vindictively. "I'd 'a' done it."

Dextr continued: "They tell me that when he was arrested he swore in eighteen different languages, each one more refreshingly repulsive an' vigorous than the precedin'. Oh, I have sure missed a plenty today, partic'lar because my own diction is gettin' run down an' skim milky of late, showin' sad lack of new ideas, which I might have assimilated somethin' robustly original an' expressive if I'd been here. No, sir; a nose bag full of nuggets wouldn't have kept me away."

"How did it sound when she busted?" insisted the morbid Simms, but Glenster refused to discuss the combat.

"Come on, Slap," said the old prospector; "let's go downtown. I'm so hot up I can't set still, an', besides, mebbe we can get the story the way it really happened from somebody who ain't bound an' gagged an' chloroformed by such unbecom'n' modesties. Roy, don't never go into vawdville with them personal episodés, because they read about as thrillin' as a cook-book. Why, say, I've had the story of that fight from four different fellers already, none of which was within four blocks of the scrimmage, an' they're all different an' all better'n' your account."

Now that Glenster's mind had recovered some of its poise he realized what he had done.

"I was a beast, an animal," he groaned, "and that after all my striving. I wanted to leave that part behind. I wanted to be worthy of her love and trust even though I never won it, but at the first test I am found lacking. I have lost her confidence. Yes, and what is worse, infinitely worse, I have lost my own. She's always seen me at my worst," he went on, "but I'm not that kind at bottom—not that kind. I want to do what's right, and if I have another chance I will—I know I will. I've been tried too hard, that's all."

Some one knocked, and he opened the door to admit the Bronco Kid and Helen.

"Wait a minute, old man," said the Kid. "I'm here as a friend." The gambler handled himself with difficulty, offering in explanation:

"I'm all sewed up in bandages of one kind or another."

"He ought to be in bed now, but he wouldn't let me come alone, and I could not wait," the girl supplemented, while her eyes avoided Glenster's in strange hesitation.

"He wouldn't let you. I don't understand."

"I'm her brother," announced the Bronco Kid. "I've known it for a long time, but I—I—well, you understand, I couldn't let her know. All I can say is, I've gambled square till the night I played you, and I was as mad as a dervish then, blaming you for the talk I'd heard. Last night I learned by chance about Struve and Helen and got to the roadhouse in time to save her. I'm sorry I didn't kill him." His long white fingers writhed about the arm of his chair at the memory.

"Isn't he dead?" Glenster inquired.

"No. The doctors have brought him in, and he'll get well. He's like half the men in Alaska—here because the sheriffs back home couldn't shoot straight. There's something else. I'm not a good talker, but give me time and I'll manage it so you'll understand. I tried to keep Helen from coming on this errand, but she said it was the square thing and she knows better than I. It's about those papers she brought in last spring. She was afraid you might consider her a party to the deal, but you don't, do you?" He glared belligerently, and Roy replied with fervor:

"Certainly not. Go on."

"Well, she learned the other day that those documents told the whole story and contained enough proof to break up this conspiracy and convict the judge and McNamara and all the rest, but Struve kept the bundle in his safe and wouldn't give it up without a price. That's why she went away with him. She thought it was right, and—that's all. But it seems Wheaton had succeeded in another way. Now, I'm coming to the point. The judge and McNamara are arrested for contempt of court and they're as good as convicted; you have recovered your mine, and these men are disgraced. They will go to jail—"

"Yes, for six months, perhaps," broke in the other hotty, "but what does that

mean? There never was a bolder criminal committed nor one more audacious. They robbed a realm and defiled its people, they defied a court and made justice a wanton, they jailed good men and sent others to ruin; and for this they are to suffer—how? By a paltry fine or a short imprisonment, perhaps, by an ephemeral disgrace and the loss of their stolen goods. Contempt of court is the accusation, but you might as well convict a murderer for breach of the peace. We've thrown them off, it's true, and they won't trouble us again, but they'll never have to answer for their real felony. That will go unpunished while their lawyers quibble over technicalities and rules of court. I guess it's true that there isn't any law of God or man north of fifty-three; but if there is justice south of that mark, those people will answer for conspiracy and go to the penitentiary."

"You make it hard for me to say what I want to. I am almost sorry we came, for I am not cunning with words, and I don't know that you'll understand," said the Bronco Kid gravely. "We looked at it this way: you have had your victory, you have beaten your enemies against odds, you have recovered your mine, and they are disgraced. To men like them that last will outlive and outweigh all the rest; but the judge is our uncle and our blood runs in his veins. He took Helen when she was a baby and was a father to her in his selfish way, loving her as best he knew how. And she loves him."

"I don't quite understand you," said Roy.

And then Helen spoke for the first time eagerly, taking a packet from her bosom as she began:

"This will tell the whole wretched story. Mr. Glenster, and show the plot in all its villainess. It's hard for me to betray my uncle, but this proof is yours by right to use as you see fit, and I can't keep it."

"Do you mean that this evidence will show all that? And you're going to give it to me because you think it is your duty?"

"It belongs to you. I have no choice. But what I came for was to plead and ask a little mercy for my uncle, who is an old, old man, and very weak. This will kill him."

He saw that her eyes were swimming, while the little chin quivered ever so slightly and her pale cheeks were flushed. There rose in him the old wild desire to take her in his arms, a yearning to pillow her head on his shoulder and kiss away the tears, to smooth with tender caress the wavy hair and bury his face deep in it till he grew drunk with the madness of her. But he knew at last for whom she really pleaded.

So he was to forswear this vengeance, which was no vengeance after all, but in verity a just punishment. They asked him—a man—a man's man—a northman—to do this, and for what? For no reward, but on the contrary to insure himself lasting bitterness. He strove to look at the proposition calmly, clearly, but it was difficult. If only by freeing this other villain as well as her uncle he would do a good to her, then he would not hesitate. Love was not the only thing. He marveled at his own attitude. This could not be his old self debating thus. He had asked for another chance to show that he was not the old Roy Glenster. Well, it had come, and he was ready.

Roy dared not look at Helen any more, for this was the hardest moment he had ever lived.

"You ask this for your uncle, but what of—the other fellow? You must know that if one goes free so will they both. They can't be separated."

"It's almost too much to ask," the Kid took up, uncertainly. "But don't you think the work is done? I can't help but admire McNamara, and neither can you—he's been too good an enemy to you for that—and—and—he loves Helen."

"I know—I know," said Glenster hastily, at the same time stopping an unintelligible protest from the girl. "You're said enough." He straightened his slightly stooping shoulders and looked at the unopened package wearily, then slipped the rubber band from it, and separating the contents, tore them up—one by one—tore them into fine bits without hurry or ostentation and tossed the fragments away, while the woman began to sob softly, the sound of her relief alone disturbing the silence. And so he gave her his enemy, making his offer gamely, according to his code.

"You're right—the work is done. And now I'm very tired."

They left him standing there, the glory of the dying day illumining his lean, brown features, the vision of a great loneliness in his weary eyes.

He did not rouse himself till the sky before him was only a curtain of steel, penciled with streaks of soot that lay close down above the darker sea. Then he sighed and said aloud:

"So this is the end, and I gave him to her with these hands." He held them out before him curiously, becoming conscious for the first time that the left one was swollen and discolored and fearfully painful. He noted it

with unexpressed interest, realizing its need of medical attention—so left the cabin and walked down into the city. He encountered Dextr and Simms of the way, and they went with him, both flowing with the gossip of the camp.

"Lord, but you're the talk of the town," they began. "The curio brokers have commenced to pull Stru office apart for souvenirs, and Swedes want to run you for congress as soon as ever we get admitted as state. They say that at collar an' elbow bolts you could lick any of them eastern senators and thereby rattle out a lot of good legislation for us cripples up here."

"Speakin' of laws goes to show me that this here country is gettin' blamed civilized for a white man." Simms pessimistically, "and now this fight is ended up it don't look there would be anything doin' claim the interest of a growed up son for a long while. I'm goin' west!"

"West! Why, you can throw a s into Bering strait from here," said I smiling.

"Oh, well, the world's round. They a schooner outfit for Sibeery—years' cruise. Me an' Dex is figger on gettin' out toward the frontier for a spell."

"Sure!" said Dextr. "I'm beginnin' to feel all cramped up hereabouts owing to these fillymonarch orchestras an' French restarants and such discrepancies of scenery. They're puttin' a pavement on Front street, and there's a shoe shinin' parlor opened up. Why, I'd like to get where I could stretch an' boiler without disturbin' the pensiveness of some dude in a dress suit. Better come along, Roy; we can sell out the Midas."

"I'll think it over," said the young man.

The night was bright with a full moon when they left the doctor's office. Roy, in no mood for the exuberance of his companions, parted from them, but had not gone far before he met Cherry Malotte. His head was low, and he did not see her till she spoke.

"Well, boy, so it's over at last." Her words chimed so perfectly with his thoughts that he replied, "Yes; it's all over, little girl."

"You don't mind my congratulations—you know me too well for that. How does it feel to be a winner?"

"I don't know. I've lost."

"Lost what?"

"Everything—except the gold."

"Everything except—I mean that she—that you her, and she won't?"

"The cost at which she held steady."

"More than that. It's so new that it hurts yet, and it will continue to hurt for a long time, I suppose. But tomorrow I am going back to my hills and my valleys, back to the Midas and my work, and try to begin all over. For a time I've wandered in strange paths, seeking new gods, as it were, but the dazzle has died out of my eyes and I can see true again. She isn't for me, although I shall always love her. I'm sorry I can't forget easily, as some do. It's hard to look ahead and take an interest in things. But what about you? Where shall you go?"

"I don't know. It doesn't really matter now." The dusk hid her white, set face, and she spoke monotonously.

"I am going to see the Bronco Kid. He sent for me. He's ill."

"He's not a bad sort," said Roy. "And I suppose he'll make a new start too."

"Perhaps," said she, gazing far out over the gloomy ocean. "It all depends." After a moment she added, "What a pity that we can't all sponge off the slate and begin afresh and—forget!"

"It's part of the game," said he. "I don't know why it's so, but it is. I'll see you sometimes, won't I?"

"No, boy; I think not."

"I believe I understand," he murmured, "and perhaps it's better so." He took her two soft hands in his one good right and kissed them. "God bless you and keep you, dear, brave little Cherry."

She stood straight and still as he melted into the shadows, and only the moonlight heard her pitiful sob and her hopeless whisper:

"Goodby, my boy, my boy."

He wandered down beside the sea, for his battle was not yet won, and until he was surer of himself he could not endure the ribaldry and rejoicing of his fellows. A welcome lay waiting for him in every public place, but no one there could know the mockery of it, no one could gauge the desolation that was his.

The sand, wet, packed and hard as a pavement, gave no sound to his careless steps, and thus it was that he came silently upon the one woman as she stood beside the silver surf. Had he seen her first he would have slunk past in the landward shadows, but recognizing his tall form, she called and he came, while it seemed that his lungs grew suddenly constricted, as though bound about with steel hoops. The very pleasure of her sight pained him. He advanced eagerly, and yet with hesitation, standing stiffly aloof while his heart fluttered and his tongue grew dumb. At last she saw his bandages and her manner changed abruptly. Coming closer she touched them with caressing fingers.

"It's nothing—nothing at all," he said while his voice jumped out of all control. "When are you—going away?"

"I do not know—not for some time." He had supposed she would go tomorrow with her uncle and—the other, to be with them through their travail.

"With warm impetuosity she began: "It was a noble thing you did today. Oh, I am glad and proud."

"I prefer you to think of me in that way, rather than as the wild beast you saw this morning, for I was mad, perfectly mad with hatred and revenge, and every wild impulse that comes to a defeated man. You see, I had played and lost, played and lost, again and

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