

The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

CHAPTER XXI.

DAY was breaking as Gleister came down the mountain. With the first light he halted and scanned the trail, and having no means of knowing that the fresh tracks he found were not those of the two riders he followed, he urged his fathered horse ahead till he became suddenly conscious that he was very tired and had not slept for two days and nights. The recollection did not reassure the young man, for his body was a weapon which must not fail in the slightest measure now that there was work to do. Even the unwelcome speculation upon his physical handicap offered relief, however, from the agony which fed upon him whenever he thought of Helen in the gambler's hands. Meanwhile the horse, growing at his master's violence, plunged onward toward the roofs of Stone, now growing gray in the first dawn.

It seemed years since Roy had seen the sunlight, for this night, burdened with suspense, had been endlessly long. His body was faint beneath the strain, and yet he rode on and on, tired, dogged, stony, his eyes set toward the sea, his mind a storm of formless, whirling thoughts, beneath which was an unrelenting implacable determination.

He knew now that he had sacrificed all hope of the Midos, and likewise the hope of Helen was gone; in fact, he began to realize dimly that from the beginning he had never had the possibility of winning her, that she had never been destined for him and that his love for her had been sent as a light by which he was to find himself. He had failed everywhere; he had been come an outlaw; he had fought and gone down, certain only of his rectitude and the mastery of his unruly spirit. Now the hour had come when he would perform his last mission, deriving therefrom that satisfaction which the gods could not deny. He would have his vengeance.

The scheme took form without conscious effort on his part and embraced two things—the death of the gambler and a meeting with McNamara. Of the former, he had no more doubt than that the sun rising there would sink in the west. So well confirmed was this belief that the details did not engage his thought; but on the result of the other encounter he calculated with some interest. From the first McNamara had been a riddle to him, and a mystery breeds curiosity. His blind, instinctive hatred of the man had assumed the proportions of a mania; but as to what the outcome would be when they met face to face, fate alone could tell. Anyway, McNamara should never have Helen—Roy believed his mission covered that point as well as her deliverance from the Bronco Kid. When he had finished, he would pay the price. If he had the luck to escape, he would go back to his hills and his solitude; if he did not, his future would be in the hands of his enemies.

He entered the silent streets unobserved, for the mists were heavy and low. Smoke columns ascended thickly in the still air. The rain had ceased, having beaten down the water which rumbled against the beach, filling the streets with their embued thunder. A ship anchored in the offing, had run in from the lee of Sledge Island with the first lull, while midway to the shore a tender was rising and falling, its cars flashing like the silver scales of a sea insect crawling upon the surface of the ocean.

He rode down Front street heedless of danger, heedless of the comment his appearance might create, and, unseen, entered his enemy's stronghold. He passed a gambling hall, through the windows of which came a sickly yellow gleam. A man came out unsteadily and stared at the horseman, then passed on.

Gleister's plan was to go straight to the Northern and from there to track down his owner relentlessly, let in order to reach the place his course led him past the office of Dunham & Struve. This brought back to his mind the man dying on three ten miles at his back. The scantiest humanely demanded that assistance be sent at once. Yet he dared not give word openly, thus betraying his presence, for it was necessary that he maintain his liberty during the next hour at all hazards. He suddenly thought of an expedient and retraced his horse, which

weight would more than offset any superior agility the miner might possess. The longer he looked the more he yielded to his hatred of the man before him and the more eagerly he longed to satisfy it.

"Take off your coat," said Gleister. "Now turn around. All right! I just wanted to see if you were lying about your gun."

"I'll kill you!" cried McNamara. "Gleister laid his six shooter upon the safe and slipped off his own wet garment. The difference was more marked now and the advantage more strongly with the receiver. Though they had avoided attention to it, each knew that this fight had nothing to do with the Midos and each realized whence sprang their fierce enmity. And it was met that they should come together thus. It had been the one certain and logical event which they had felt inevitably approaching from long back. And it was fitting, moreover, that they should fight alone and unwatched, armed only with the weapons of the wilderness, for they were both of the far, free lands, were both of the fighter's type and had both warred for the first great prize. They met ferociously. McNamara aimed a fearful blow, but Gleister met him squarely, beating him off cleverly, stepping in and out, his arms swinging loosely from his shoulders like whiplashes whirled tipped with lead. He moved lightly, his footing made doubly secure by reason of his soft soled moccasins. Recognizing his opponent's greater weight, he undertook merely to stop the headlong rushes and remain out of reach as long as possible. He struck the politician fairly in the mouth so that the man's head snapped back and his feet went wild. Then, before the man could grasp him, the miner had broken on ground and whirled another blow across, but McNamara was a boxer himself, so covered and blocked it. The politician spat through his mashed lips and rushed again, sweeping his opponent from his feet. Again Gleister's fist shot forward like a lump of granite, but the other came on head down and the blow finished too high, landing on the big man's brow. A sudden darting agony paralyzed Roy's hand, and he realized that he had broken the metacarpal bones and that henceforth it would be useless. Before he could recover McNamara had passed under his extended arm and seized him by the middle, then, thrusting his left leg back of Roy's, he whirled him from his balance, flung him clear and with reckless force. It seemed that a fatal fall must follow, but the youth squirmed like a fish in the air, landing with set muscles which rebounded like rubber. Even so, the receiver was upon him before he could rise, reaching for the young man's throat with his heavy hands. Roy recognized the fatal "strangle" hold and, seizing his enemy's wrists, endeavored to tear them apart, but his left hand was useless, so with a mighty wrench he freed himself, and, lighted in each other's arms, the men strained and swayed about the office till their neck veins were bursting, their muscles paralyzed.

Men may fight duels calmly, may shoot or parry or thrust with cold deliberation, but when there comes the clash of body to body, the sweaty contact of skin to skin, the play of muscles, the painful gasp of exhaustion—then the mind goes skittering back into its dark recesses while every venomous passion leaps forth from its hiding place and joins in the horrid war.

They tripped across the floor, crashing into the partition, which split, showering them with glass. They fell and rolled in it, then, by consent, wrenched themselves apart, rose, eye to eye, their jaws hanging, their lungs wheezing, their faces trickling blood and sweat. Roy's left hand pained him excruciatingly, while McNamara's macerated lips had turned outward in a hideous pout. They crouched so for an instant, cruel, bestial, then clinched again. The office fittings were wrecked utterly, and the room became a litter of ruins. The men's garments fell away till their breasts were bare and their arms swelled white and knotted through the rags. They knew no pain, their bodies were insensate mechanisms.

Gradually the older man's face was beaten into a shapeless mass, while Gleister's every bone was wrenched and twisted under his enemy's terrible onslaughts. The miner's chief effort, it is true, was to keep his feet and to break the man's knees. Never had he encountered one whom he could not beat by sheer strength till he met this great, snarling creature who worried him lither and you as though he were a child. Time and again Roy beat upon the man's face with the blows of his sledge. No rules governed this solitary combat; the men were deaf to all but the roaring in their ears, blinded to all but hate, insensible to everything but the blood mania. Their trampling feet caused the building to rattle and shake as though some monster were running amok.

Meanwhile a bareheaded man rushed out of the store beneath, bumping into a pedestrian who had passed on the sidewalk, and together they scurried up the stairs. The dory which Roy had seen at sea had shot the breakers, and now its three passengers were tracking through the wet sand toward Front street, Bill Wheaton in the lead. He was followed by two rawboned men who traveled without baggage. The city was awakening with the sun which reared a copper rim out of the sea. Judge Stillman and Voorhees came down from the hotel and passed to gaze through the mists at a caravan of mule teams which trotted into the other end of the street with jingle and clank. The wagons were blue with soldiers, the early golden rays slanting from their Krags, and they were bound for the Midos.

Out of the fog which clung so thickly to the tundra there came two other horses, distorted and unreal, on one a girl, on the other a figure of pain and tragedy, a grotesque creature that swayed stiffly to the motion of its steed, its face writhing into lines of suffering, its hands clutching canteen and horn.

It was as though fate, with invisible touch, were setting her stage for the last act of this play, assembling the principals close to the golden sands where first they had made entrance. The man and the girl came face to face with the judge and marshal, who cried out upon seeing them, but as they reined in, shot from the stairs beside them a man shot amid clatter and uproar.

"Give me a hand—quick!" he shouted to them. "What's up?" inquired the marshal. "It's murder! McNamara and Gleister!" He dashed back up the steps behind Voorhees, the judge following, while muffled cries came from above. The gambler turned toward the three men who were hurrying from the street, and recognizing Wheaton, called to him: "Untie my feet! Cut the ropes! Quick!"

"What's the trouble?" the lawyer asked, but on hearing Gleister's name bounded after the judge, leaving one of his companions to free the rider. They could hear the fight now and all crowded toward the door, Helen with her brother, in spite of his warning to stay behind. She never remembered how she climbed those stairs, for she was borne along by that hypnotic power which drags one to behold a catastrophe in spite of his will. Reaching the room, she stood appalled; for the group she had joined watched two raging things that rushed at each other with inhuman cries, maged, blowing fighting every notch of strength. It is true, at any rate, that neither was conscious of the filling room, nor the cries of the crowd, even when the marshal forced himself through the wedged door and fell upon the nearest, which was Gleister. He came at an instant when the two had paused at arm's length, glaring with rage drunken eyes, gasping the labored breath back into their lungs.

With a fling of his long arms the young man hurled the intruder aside so violently that his head struck the iron safe and he collapsed insensible. Then without apparent notice of the interruption, the fight went on. It was seen during this respite that McNamara's mouth was running water as though he were deathly sick, while every notch brought forth a groan. Helen heard herself crying, "Stop them! Stop them!" But no one seemed capable of interference. She heard her brother muttering and his breath coming heavily like that of the fighters, his body swaying in time to theirs. The judge was ash, insensible, helpless.

McNamara's distress was patent to his antagonist, who advanced upon him with the hunger of pumiled victory, but the young man's muscles obeyed his commands slyly; his

ris seemed broken, his back was weak, and on the inner side of his legs the flesh was quivering. As they came together the boss reached up his right hand and caught the miner by the face, burying thumb and fingers cracklike into his cheeks, forcing his slack jaws apart, thrusting his air toward the rear, while he centered every ounce of his strength in the effort to maim. Roy felt the flesh giving way and flung himself backward to break the hold, whereupon the other summoned his wasting energy and plunged toward the safe, where lay the revolver. Instantly warned Gleister of treachery, told him that the man had sought this last resource to save himself, and as he saw him turn his back and reach for the weapon the youth leaped like a panther, seizing him about the waist, grasping McNamara's wrist with his right hand. For the first time during the combat they were not face to face, and on the instant Roy realized the advantage given him through the other's perfidy, realized the wrestler's hold that was his and knew that the moment of victory was come.

The telling takes much time, but so quickly had these things happened that the footsteps of the soldiers had not yet reached the door when the men were locked beside the safe. Of what happened next many glib accounts have gone forth, for of all those present none but the Bronco Kid knew its significance and ever recounted the truth concerning it. Some claim that the younger man was seized with a fear of death which multiplied his enormous strength, others that the power died in his adversary as he reared for his trosser, but it was not so.

No sooner had Roy encompassed McNamara's waist from the rear than he slid his damaged hand up past the other's chest and around the back of his neck, thus bringing his own left arm close under his enemy's left armpit, wedging the receiver's head forward, while with his other hand he grasped the politician's right wrist close to the revolver, thus holding him in a grasp which could not be broken. Now came the test. The two bodies set themselves rocklike and rigid. There was no lunging about. Calling up the final atom of his strength, Gleister bore backward with his right arm, and it became a contest for the weapon, which, clutched in the two hands, swung back and forth or darted up and down, the fury of resistance causing it to trace formless patterns in the air with its muzzle. McNamara shook himself, but he was close against the safe and could not escape, his head bowed forward by the lock of the miner's left arm, and so he strained till the breath clogged in his throat. Despite the groans told his right hand moved back slightly. His feet shifted a bit while the blood seemed bursting from his eyes, but he found that the long fingers encircling his wrist were like gyres weighted with the strength of the hills and the irresistible vigor of youth which knew no defeat. Slowly, inch by inch, the great man's arm was dragged back, down past his side, until the straining labor of his breast showed at what awful cost. The muzzle of the gun described a semicircle and the knotted hands began to travel toward the left, more rapidly now, across his broad back. Still he struggled and wrenched, but uselessly. He strove to fire the weapon, but his fingers were woven about it so that the hammer would not swing. Then the miner began forcing upward.

The white skin beneath the men's strips of clothing was stretched over great knots and ridges which sunk and swelled and quivered. Helen, watching in silent terror, felt her brother shaking his fingers into her shoulder and heard him panting, his face ablaze with excitement, while she became conscious that the white sweat of a strong man overcame with agony. McNamara went to his knees and sagged forward on to his face as though every bone in his huge bulk had turned to water, while his master reeled back against the opposite wall, his heels dragging in the litter, bringing up with outflung arms as though fearful of falling away. Blind, exhausted, his face blackened by the explosion of the revolver, yet grim with the light of victory.

Judge Stillman shouted hysterically: "Arrest that man, quick! Don't let him go!"

It was the miner's first realization that others were there. Raising his head he stared at the faces close against the partition, then groaned the words: "I beat the traitor and—and I broke him with my hands!"

[TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.]

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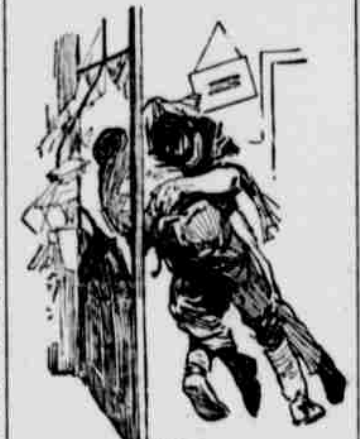
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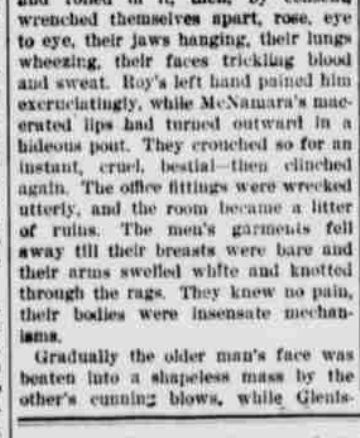
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