

# Nan of Music Mountain

By  
**FRANK H. SPEARMAN**  
Author of "WHISPERING SMITH"

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They were breaking when the night boss, standing in the doorway at the Calabasas barn, saw a horseman riding at a leisurely pace up the Chief River road. The burman scrutinized the approaching stranger closely. There was something strange and something familiar in the outlines of the figure. But when the night rider had dismounted in front of the barn-door, turned his horse loose, and, stepping stiffly forward on foot, the man rubbed his eyes hard before he could believe them. They had uttered an incredulous greeting and led Henry de Spain into the barn office.

"There's friends of yours in your room upstairs right now," he declared, bawling with shock. De Spain, sitting down, forbade the burman to disturb them, only asking who they were.

When he had asked half a dozen more leisurely questions and avoided answering twice as many, the burman at De Spain's request helped him upstairs. Beside himself with excitement, as he laid one hand on the doorknob and the other on De Spain's shoulder, "You couldn't have come," he whispered loudly, "at a better time."

The entryway was dark, and from the silence within the room one might have thought its occupants, if there were such, wrapped in slumber. But at intervals a faint clicking sound could be heard. The night man threw open the door. By the light of two stage-lamps, one set on the dresser and the other on a window ledge, four men sat about a rickety table in a life-and-death struggle at cards. No voice broke the tense silence, not even when the door was thrown broadly open.

No one—neither Lefever, Scott, Frank Elpasso nor McAlpin—looked up when De Spain walked into the room and, with the night man tiptoeing behind, advanced composedly toward the group. Even then his presence would have passed unnoticed, but that Bob Scott's ear mechanically recorded the limping step and transmitted to his trained intelligence merely notice of something unusual.

Scott, picking up his cards one at a

time as Lefever dealt, threw his eyes. Starting as the sight of the man given up for dead must have been, no words of Bob Scott's body moved. His expression of surprise slowly dissolved into a grin that mutely invited the others, as he had found out for himself, to find out for themselves.

Lefever finished his deal, threw down the pack, and picked up his hand. His suspicious eyes never rose above the level of the faces at the table; but when he had thumbed his cards and looked from one to the other of the remaining players to read the weather signals, he perceived on Scott's face an unvoiced expression, and looked to where the scout's gaze was turned for an explanation of it. Lefever's own eyes, at the sight of the thinned, familiar face behind Elpasso's chair, starting opened like full moons. The big fellow spread one hand out, his cards hidden within it, and with the other hand prudently drew down his pile of chips. "Gentlemen," he said lightly, "this game is intermed." He rose and put a silent hand across the table over Elpasso's shoulder. "Henry," he exclaimed impassively, "some question, if you please—and only one: How in thunder did you do it?"

## CHAPTER XV.

### Strategy.

One week went to repairs. To a man of action such a week is longer than ten years of service. But chained to a bed in the Sleepy Cat hospital, De Spain had to escape from one week of thinking, and for that week he thought about Nan Morgan. And the impulse that urged him the first moment he could get out of bed and into a saddle was to spur his way hard and fast to her; to make her, against a score of lusty cousins, his own; and never to release her from his sudden arms again.

With De Spain to think was to do; at least to do something, but not without further careful thinking, and not without anticipating every chance of failure. And his manner was to cast up all difficulties and obstacles in a similitude, brush them aside, and have his will if the heavens fell; and he now set himself, while doing his routine work every day, to do one particular thing—to see, talk to, plead with, struggle with the woman, or girl, rather—child, even, to his thoughts, so fragile she was—this girl who had given him back his life against her own tormenting relatives.

His friends saw that something was absorbing him in an unusual, even an extraordinary way, yet none could arrive at a certain conclusion as to what it was. The one man in the country who could have surmised the situation between the two—the barn boss, McAlpin—if he entertained suspicions, was far too pawky to share them with anyone.

When two weeks had passed without De Spain's having seen Nan or having heard of her being won, the excha-

tion would itself on him that she was either ill or in trouble—perhaps in trouble for helping him; a moment later he was taking pains to get into the gap to find out.

Nothing in the way of a venture could be more foolhardy—this he admitted to himself—than he considered himself by proceeding, but something stronger than danger could justify it. All the money Morgan following within the mountain fastness he could count on but one man to help him in the slightest degree—this was the doctor, Bull Pitt. There was no chance but to see him, and he was easily enticed for the Calabasas affair had made a heroic figure of De Spain in the barnhouse. De Spain, accordingly, lay in wait for the old man and intercepted him one day on the road to Sleepy Cat, walking the twenty miles patiently for his whisky.

"You must be the only man in the gap, Bull, that can't borrow or steal a horse to ride," remarked De Spain, stopping him near the river bridge.

Page pushed back the broken brim of his hat and looked up. "You wouldn't believe it," he said, imparting a cheerful confidence. "But ten years ago I had horses to lend to every man 'twixen here and Tiber river." He nodded toward Sleepy Cat with a wicked smile, and by a dramatic chance the broken hat brim fell with

the words: "They've got 'em all."

"Your fault, Bull?"

"Sure?" He went the broken brim, and the winded hat lighted with a shining smile. "You turned some trick on that Calabasas crew—some right?"

"Speak to old Deas Morgan a Republican?"

Bull looked surprised at the turn of De Spain's question, but answered in good faith: "Duke votes 'most any ticket that's near the railroad."

"How about putting a couple of good horses over to the gap, Bull?"

"What kind of a job you got?"

"See McAlpin the next time you're over at Calabasas. How about that girl that lives with Duke?"

Bull's face lighted. "Nan! Say! she's a little hammer!"

"I hear she's gone down to Thief river, teaching school."

"Come by Duke's less'n three hours next. Show her in the kitchen makin' bread?"

Continued Next Week

### Had His Hands In.

Bull—"Well, do you think the doctor has helped you?" Jill, displaying an empty pocketbook: "Looks more as if he'd helped himself."

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