THE BUNK HOUSE PRISONER

Lord Stranleigh, on an Errand, Comes to Grief

By Robert Barr

Illustrations by J. N. Marchand

SYNOPSIS—Lord Stranleigh, in quest of health and recreation, is persuaded to journey to the Armstrong ranch in Wyoming. On approaching the ranch, after a two-day horseback ride from the nearest railway station, he is shot through the shoulder by an ambushed marksman. Deserted by his hired companions, he is permitted to proceed to the ranch-house, where his wound is dressed by the charming and capable daughter of the house. He learns that Armstrong is absent in the east trying to raise money to save his property from a rapacious lawyer, Ricketts, who covets a silver mine on it.

AS THE WOUND in his shoulder healed, Stranleigh began to enjoy himself on the ranch. He was experiencing a life entirely new to him, and being always a lover of waving woods and rushing waters, even in the tamed state which England presents, he keenly appreciated these natural beauties of the wilderness, where so-called improvements had not interfered with them. Without attempting to indulge in the sport for which he had come, he wandered about the ranch, studying its features, and at the same time developing an appetite that did justice to the excellent meals prepared for him. He visited Jim Dean, the man who had shot him, and tried to scrape acquaintance with the five aiders and abettors in that drastic act, but they met his advances with suspicion.

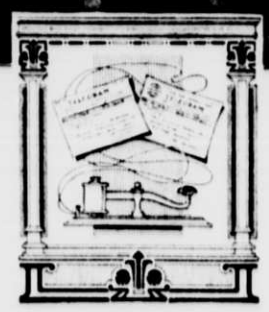
The men resided in a huge bunk house, which consisted of one room, with a shack outside where the cooking was done. In the large room were a dozen bunks, half of which were used by the men, while the other half were ready in case of more workmen, should the mine prosper.

THE house was built securely as a fortress, of the rugged stone that had been blasted from the rocks in opening the mine. The mine itself was situated about five hundred yards south, but instead of being dug downward, as Stranleigh expected, it extended westward on the level toward the heart of the mountain, so that a rudely built truck could carry out the debris, and dump it down the steep hill. To his aesthetic fancy this seemed a pity, because a short distance from the opening of the mine the river formed a cascade descending a hundred feet or more; a cascade of entrancing beauty, whose loveliness would be more or less destroyed as the mining operations progressed.

The rising sun illumined the interior of the tunnel, and Stranleigh found no difficulty in exploring it to the remotest corner. He passed the abandoned truck partly turned over beside an assortment of picks, shovels, hand-drills and the like. To his unpracticed eye there was no sign of silver in walls, floor or ceiling. At the extreme end was piled up a quantity of what appeared to be huge cartridges.

Before entering the cavern he had noticed three or four of the miners standing in front of the bunk house, evidently watching him, but he paid no attention to them, and while he was inside the roar of the cataract prevented him from hearing approaching footsteps. As he came out to the lip of the mine, he found Dean and three others waiting for him. Each had a rifle on his shoulder.

Suddenly and stealthily he found himself surrounded by armed men and the voice of Jim Dean broke the stillness.



"Inspecting the property?" inquired Dean, casually.

"Yes," replied Stranleigh.

"What do you think of it?"

"My opinion would be of very little value. I know nothing of mining."

"The deuce you don't!" said Jim. "What are you doing with that lump of rock in your hand?"

"Oh, that," said Stranleigh, "I happened to pick up. I wanted to examine it more closely. Is there silver in it?"

"How should I know?" replied the other gruffly. "I'm not a mining engineer. I only take a hand at the drill or the pick, as the case may be. But when you throw that back where you got it, throw it carefully, and not too far."

"I don't intend to throw it," said Stranleigh. "I'm going to take it down to the house."

"Oh, you think you're not going to throw it, but you are. We've just come up to explain that to you."

"I see. If it is compulsory, why shouldn't I throw it as far as I can?"

"Because," explained Dean, politely, "there's a lot of dynamite stored in the end of that hole, and dynamite isn't a thing to fool with, you know."

Stranleigh laughed.

"I rather fancy you're right, though I know as little about dynamite as mining. But to be sure of being on the right side, I'll leave the tossing of the stone to you. Here it is," he handed the lump of rock to Dean, who flung it carelessly into the mine again, but did not join Stranleigh in laughing.

"You seem to regard me as a dangerous person."

"Oh, not at all, but we like a man who attends to his own business. We understand you came here for shooting and fishing."

"So I did, but other people were out shooting, too, and a man who's had a bullet through his shoulder neither hunts nor fishes."

"THAT'S SO," admitted Dean, with the suavity of one who recognizes a reasonable statement, "but now that you're better, what do you come nosing round the mine for? Why don't you go on with your shooting and fishing?"

"Because Mr. Armstrong was to be my guide, and he has not yet returned home."

"Well, Mr. Stranleigh, we are just ordinary backwoods folk that have no reason for trusting people that come from the city. You say shooting is *your* game, but I tell you plainly that if a stranger was found prowling around here, he'd have got a bullet in a more vital spot than you did. You understand?"

"Your meaning is perfectly plain," returned Stranleigh, coolly. "Do you want me to go away before Mr. Armstrong returns?"

"We don't say that, but we draw an imaginary line past this end of the farm house, and we ask you not to cross it westward. There's all the fishing down stream you can want. There's none up here by the waterfall, neither is there any game to shoot, so you see we're not proposing any hardship if your intentions are what you say they are."

"You're not what I should call hospitable, but your meaning is clear. May I ask your name?"

"I'm called Jim Dean."

"You're leader of this — this band of brothers?"

"In a manner of speaking — yes."

"Are they unanimous in restricting my liberty on the ranch?"

"You bet!"