The Spoilers

By Rex E. Beach

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CHAPTER XV—Continued

"LORD!" ejaculated Glenister. "Do you think he's after me?"

"He ain't after nobody else, an' take my word for it, it's got nothin' to do with McNamara nor that gamblin' row. He's too game for that. There's some other reason."

This was the first mention Dextry had made of the night at the Northern.

"I don't know why he should have it in for me—I never did him any favors," Glenister remarked, cynically.

"Well, you watch out, anyhow. I'd sooner face McNamara an' all the crooks he can hire than that gambler."

During the next few days Roy undertook to meet the proprietor of the Northern face to face, but the Kid had vanished completely from his haunts. He was not in his gambling hall at night nor on the street by day. The young man was still looking for him on the evening of the dance at the hotel, when he chanced to meet one of the vigilantes, who inquired of him:

"Aren't you late for the meeting?"

"What meeting?"

After seeing that they were alone, the other stated:

"There's an assembly tonight at 11 o'clock. Something important, I think. I supposed, of course, you knew about it."

"It's strange I wasn't notified," said Roy. "It's probably an oversight. I'll go along with you."

Together they crossed the river to the less frequented part of town and knocked at the door of a large, unlighted warehouse, flanked by a high board fence. The building faced the street, but was inclosed on the other three sides by this ten foot wall, inside of which were stored large quantities of coal and lumber. After some delay they were admitted, and, passing down through the dim lit, high banked lanes of merchandise, came to the rear room, where they were admitted again. This compartment had been fitted up for the warm storage of perishable goods during the cold weather, and, being without windows, made an ideal place for clandestine gatherings.

Glenister was astonished to find every man of the organization present, including Dextry, whom he supposed to have gone home an hour since. Evidently a discussion had been in progress, for a chairman was presiding, and the boxes, kegs, and bales of goods had been shoved back against the walls for seats. On these were ranged the threescore men of the "Stranglers," their serious faces lighted imperfectly by scattered lanterns. A certain constraint seized them upon Glenister's entrance; the chairman was embarrassed. It was but momentary, however. Glenister himself felt that tragedy was in the air, for it showed in the men's attitudes and spoke eloquently from their strained faces. He was about to question the man next to him when the presiding officer continued:

"We will assemble here quietly with our arms at 1 o'clock. And let me caution you again not to talk or do anything to scare the birds away."

Glenister arose. "I came late, Mr. Chairman, so I missed hearing your plan. I gather that you're out for business, however, and I want to be in it. May I ask what is on foot?"

"Certainly. Things have reached such a pass that moderate means are useless. We have decided to act, and act quickly. We have exhausted every legal resource and now we're going to stamp out this gang of robbers in our own way. We will get together in an hour, divide into three groups of 20 men, each with a leader, then go to the houses of McNamara, Stillman and Voorhees, take them prisoners, and—" He waived his hand in a large gesture.

Glenister made no answer for a moment, while the crowd watched him intently.

"You have discussed this fully?" he asked.

"We have. It has been voted on, and we're unanimous."

"My friends, when I stepped into this room just now I felt that I wasn't wanted. Why, I don't know, because I have had more to do with organizing this movement than any of you, and because I have suffered just as much as the rest. I want to know if I was omitted from this meeting intentionally."

"This is an embarrassing position to put me in," said the chairman, gravely. "But I shall answer as spokesman for these men if they wish."

"Yes. Go ahead," said those around the room.

"We don't question your loyalty, Mr. Glenister, but we didn't ask you to this meeting because we know your attitude—perhaps I'd better say sentiment—regarding Judge Stillman's niece—er—family. It has come to us from various sources that you have been affected to the prejudice of your own and your partner's interest. Now, there isn't going to be any sentiment in the affairs of the Vigilantes. We are going to do justice, and we thought the simplest way was to ignore you in this matter and spare all discussion and hard feeling in every quarter."

"It's a lie!" shouted the young man, hoarsely. "A —— lie! You wouldn't let me in for fear I'd kick, eh? Well, you were right. I will kick. You've hinted about my feelings for Miss Chester. Let me tell you that she is engaged to marry McNamara, and that she's nothing to me. Now, then, let me tell you, further, that you won't break into her house and hang her uncle, even if he is a reprobate. No, sir! This isn't the time for violence of that sort—we'll win without it. If we can't, let's fight like men and not hunt in a pack like wolves. If you want to do something, put us back on our mines and help us hold them, but, for God's sake, don't descend to assassination and the tactics of the Mafia!"

"We knew you would make that kind of a talk," said the speaker, while the rest murmured grudgingly. One of them spoke up.

"We've talked this over in cold blood, Glenister, and it's a question of their lives or our liberty. The law don't enter into it."

"That's right," echoed another at his elbow. "We can't seize the claims, because McNamara's got soldiers to back him up. They'd shoot us down. You ought to be the last one to object."

He saw that dispute was futile. Determination was stamped on their faces too plainly for mistake, and his argument had no more effect on them than had the pale rays of the lantern beside him, yet he continued:

"I don't deny that McNamara deserves lynching, but Stillman doesn't. He's a weak old man"—some one laughed derisively—"and there's a woman in the house. He's all she has in the world to depend upon, and you would have to kill her to get at him. If you must follow this course, take the others, but leave him alone."

They only shook their heads, while several pushed by him even as he spoke. "We're going to distribute our favors equal," said a man as he left. They were actuated by what they called justice and he could not sway them. The life and welfare of the north were in their hands, as they thought, and there was not one to hesitate. Glenister implored the chairman, but the man answered him:

"It's too late for further discussion, and let me remind you of your promise. You're bound by every obligation that exists for an honorable man—"

"Oh, don't think that I'll give the snap away!" said the other; "but I warn you again not to enter Stillman's house."

He followed out into the night to find that Dextry had disappeared, evidently wishing to avoid argument. Roy had seen signs of unrest beneath the prospector's restraint during the last few days and indications of a fierce hunger to vent his spleen on the men who had robbed him of his most sacred rights. He was of an intolerant, vindictive nature that would go to any length for vengeance. Retribution was part of his creed.

On his way home the young man looked at his watch, to find that he had but an hour to determine his course. Instinct prompted him to join his friends and to even the score with the men who had injured him so bitterly, for, measured by standards of the frontier, they were pirates with their lives forfeit. Yet, he could not countenance this step. If only the vigilantes would be content with making an example—but he knew they would not. The blood hunger of a mob is easy to whet and hard to hold. McNamara would resist, as would also Voorhees and the district attorney; then there would be bloodshed, riot, chaos. The soldiers would be called out and martial law declared; the streets would become skirmish grounds. The vigilantes would rout them without question, for every citizen of the north would rally to their aid, and such men could not be stopped. The judge would go down with the rest of the ring, and what would happen to—her?

He took down his Winchester, oiled and cleaned it, then buckled on a belt of cartridges. Still he wrestled with himself. He felt that he was being ground between his loyalty to the vigilantes and his own conscience. The girl was one of the gang, he reasoned—she had schemed with them to betray him through his love, and she was pledged to the one man in the world whom he hated with fanatical fury. Why should he think of her in this hour? Six months back he would have looked with jealous eyes upon the right to lead the vigilantes, but this change that had mastered him—what was it? Not cowardice, nor caution. No. Yet, being intangible, it was none the less marked, as his friends had shown him an hour since.

He slipped out into the night. The mob might do as it pleased elsewhere, but no man should enter her house. He found a light shining from her parlor window, and, noting the shade up a few inches, stole close. Peering through, he discovered Struve and Helen talking. He slunk back into the shadows and remained hidden for a considerable time after the lawyer left, for the dancers were returning from the hotel and passed close by. When the last group had chattered down the street he returned to the front of the house and, mounting the steps, knocked sharply. As Helen appeared at the door he stepped inside and closed it after him.

The girl's hair lay upon her neck and shoulders in tumbled brown masses, while her breast heaved tumultuously at the sudden, grim sight of him. She stepped back against the wall, her wondrous, deep, gray eyes wide and troubled, the blush of modesty struggling with the pallor of dismay.

The picture pained him like a knife thrust. This girl was for his bitterest enemy—no hope of her was for him. He forgot for a moment that she was false and plotting, then, recalling it, spoke as roughly as he might and stated his errand. Then the old man had appeared on the stairs above, speechless with fright at what he overheard. It was evident that his nerves, so sorely strained by the events of the last week, were now snapped utterly. A human soul naked and panic stricken is no pleasant sight, so Glenister dropped his eyes and addressed the girl again:

"Don't take anything with you. Just dress and come with me."

The creature on the stairs above stammered and stuttered, inquiringly:

"What outrage is this, Mr. Glenister?"

"The people of Nome are up in arms, and I've come to save you. Don't stop to argue." He spoke impatiently.

"Is this some r-ruse to get me into your power?"

"Uncle Arthur!" exclaimed the girl, sharply. Her eyes met Glenister's and begged him to take no offense.

"I don't understand this atrocity. They must be mad!" wailed the judge. "You run over to the jail, Mr. Glenister, and tell Voorhees to hurry guards here to protect me. Helen, phone to the military post and give the alarm. Tell them the soldiers must come at once."

"Hold on!" said Glenister. "There's no use of doing that—the wires are cut, and I won't notify Voorhees—he can take care of himself. I came to help you, and if you want to escape you'll stop talking and hurry up."

"I don't know what to do," said Stillman, torn by terror and indecision. "You wouldn't hurt an old man, would you? Wait! I'll be down in a minute."

He scrambled up the stairs, tripping on his robe, seemingly forgetting his niece till she called up to him, sharply:

"Stop, Uncle Arthur! You mustn't run away." She stood erect and determined. "You wouldn't do that, would you? This is our house. You represent the law and the dignity of the government. You mustn't fear a mob of ruffians. We will stay here and meet them, of course."

"Good Lord!" said Glenister. "That's madness. These men aren't ruffians; they are the best citizens of Nome. You don't realize that this is Alaska and that they have sworn to wipe out McNamara's gang. Come along."

"Thank you for your good intentions," she said, "but we have done nothing to run away from. We will get ready to meet these cowards. You had better go or they will find you here."

"NOW, DON'T YOU TRY TO KEEP ME IN SHORT DRESSES, TOO."

She moved up the stairs, and, taking the judge by the arm, led him with her. Of a sudden she had assumed control of the situation unfalteringly, and both men felt the impossibility of thwarting her. Pausing at the top, she turned and looked down.

"We are grateful for your efforts just the same. Good night."

"Oh, I'm not going," said the young man. "If you stick, I'll do the same." He made the rounds of the first floor rooms, locking doors and windows. As a place of defense it was hopeless, and he saw that he would have to make his stand upstairs. When sufficient time had elapsed he called up to Helen:

"May I come?"

"Yes," she replied. So he ascended, to find Stillman in the hall, half clothed and cowering, while by the light from the front chamber he saw her finishing her toilet.

"Won't you come with me—it's our last chance?" She only shook her head. "Well, then, put out the light. I'll stand at that front window, and when my eyes get used to the darkness I'll be able to see them before they reach the gate."

She did as directed, taking her place beside him at the opening, while the judge crept in and sat upon the bed, his heavy breathing the only sound in the room. The two young people stood so close beside each other that the sweet scent of her person awoke in him an almost irresistible longing. He forgot her treachery again, forgot that she was another's, forgot all save that he loved her truly and purely, with a love which was like an agony to him. Her shoulder brushed his arm; he heard the soft rustling of her garment at her breast as she breathed. Some one passed in the street, and she laid a hand upon him fearfully. It was very cold, very tiny and very soft, but he made no move to take it. The moments dragged along, still, tense, interminable. Occasionally she leaned toward him, and he stooped to catch her whispered words. At such times her breath beat warm against his cheek, and he closed his teeth stubbornly. Out in the night a wolf-dog saddened the air, then came the sound of others wrangling and snarling in a nearby corral. This is a chickless land and no cockcrow breaks the midnight peace. The suspense enhanced the judge's perturbation till his chattering teeth sounded like castanets. Now and then he groaned.

The watchers had lost track of time when their strained eyes detected dark blots materializing out of the shadows.

"There they come," whispered Glenister, forcing her back from the aperture, but she would not be denied, and returned to his side.

As the foremost figures reached the gate, Roy leaned forth and spoke, not loudly, but in tones that sliced through the silence, sharp, clean and without warning.

"Halt! Don't come inside the fence." There was an instant's confusion; then, before the men beneath had time to answer or take action, he continued: "This is Roy Glenister talking. I told you not to molest these people and I warn you again. We're ready for you."

The leader spoke. "You're a traitor, Glenister."

He winced. "Perhaps I am. You betrayed me first, though; and, traitor or not, you can't come into this house."

There was a murmur at this and some one said:

"Miss Chester is safe. All we want is the judge. We won't hang him, not if he'll wear this suit we brought along. He needn't be afraid. Tar is good for the skin."

"Oh, my God!" groaned the limb of the law.

Suddenly a man came running down the planked pavement and into the group.

"McNamara's gone, and so's the marshal and the rest," he panted. There was a moment's silence, and then the leader growled to his men, "Scatter out and rush the house, boys." He raised his voice to the man in the window. "This is your work—you —— turncoat." His followers melted away to right and left, vaulted the fence and dodged into the shelter of the walls. The click, click of Glenister's Winchester sounded through the room while the sweat stood out on him. He wondered if he could do this deed, if he could really fire on these people. He wondered if his muscles would not wither and paralyze before they obeyed his command.

Helen crowded past him and, leaning half out of the opening, called loudly, her voice ringing clear and true:

"Wait! Wait a moment. I have something to say. Mr. Glenister didn't warn them. They thought you were going to attack the mines and so they rode out there before midnight. I am telling you the truth, really. They left hours ago." It was the first sign she had made, and they recognized her to a man.

There were uncertain mutterings below till a new man raised his voice. Both Roy and Helen recognized Dextry.

"Boys, we've overplayed. We don't want these people—McNamara's our meat. Old bald face up yonder has to do what he's told, and I'm ag'in' this 20 to 1 midnight work. I'm goin' home." There were some whisperings, then the original spokesman called for Judge Stillman. The old man tottered to the window, a palsied, terror stricken object. The girl was glad he could not be seen from below.

"We won't hurt you this time, judge, but you've gone far enough. We'll give you another chance; then, if you don't make good, we'll stretch you to a lamp-post. Take this as a warning."

"I—s-shall do my d-d-duty," said the judge.

The men disappeared into the darkness, and when they had gone Glenister closed the window, pulled down the shades, and lighted a lamp. He knew by how narrow a margin a tragedy had been averted. It he had fired on these men his shot would have kindled a feud which would have consumed every vestige of the court crowd and himself among them. He would have fallen under a false banner, and his life would not have reached to the next sunset. Perhaps it was forfeit now—he could not tell. The vigilantes would probably look upon his part as traitorous; and, at the very least, he had cut himself off from their support, the only support the northland offered him. Henceforth he was a renegade, a pariah, hated alike by both factions. He purposely avoided sight of Stillman and turned his back when the judge extended his hand with expressions of gratitude. His work was done and he wished to leave this house. Helen followed him down to the door and, as he opened it, laid her hand upon his sleeve.

"Words are feeble things, and I can never make amends for all you've done for us."

"For us!" cried Roy, with a break in his voice. "Do you think I sacrificed my honor, betrayed my friends, killed my last hope, ostracized myself, for us? This is the last time I'll trouble you. Perhaps the last time I'll see you. No matter what else you've done, however, you've taught me a lesson, and I thank you for it. I have found myself at last. I'm not an Eskimo any longer—I'm a man!"

"You've always been that," she said. "I don't understand as much about this affair as I want to, and it seems to me that no one will explain it. I'm very stupid, I guess; but won't you come back tomorrow and tell it to me?"

"No," he said roughly. "You're not of my people. McNamara and his are no friends of mine, and I'm no friend of theirs." He was half down the steps before she said, softly:

"Good night, and God bless you—friend!"

She returned to the judge, who was in a pitiable state, and for a long time she labored to soothe him as though he were a child. She undertook to question him about the things which lay uppermost in her mind and which this night had half revealed, but he became fretful and irritated at the mention of mines and mining. She sat beside his bed till he dozed off, puzzling to discover what lay behind the hints she had heard, till her brain and body matched in absolute weariness. The reflex of the day's excitement sapped her strength till she could barely creep to her own couch, where she rolled and sighed—too tired to sleep at once. She awoke finally, with one last nervous flicker, before complete oblivion took her. A sentence was on her mind—it almost seemed as though she had spoken it aloud:

"The handsomest woman in the north . . . but Glenister ran away."

CHAPTER XVI

In Which the Truth Begins to Have Itself

IT was nearly noon of the next day when Helen awoke to find that McNamara had ridden in from the creek and stopped for breakfast with the judge. He had asked for her, but on hearing the tale of the night's adventure would not allow her to be disturbed. Later, he and the judge had gone away together.

Although her judgment approved the step she had contemplated the night before, still the girl now felt a strange reluctance to meet McNamara. It is true that she knew no ill of him, except that implied in the accusations of certain embittered men; and she was aware that every strong and aggressive character makes enemies in direct proportion to the qualities which lend him greatness. Nevertheless, she was aware of an inner conflict that she had not foreseen. This man who so confidently believed that she would marry him did not dominate her consciousness.

She had ridden much of late, taking long, solitary gallops beside the shimmering sea that she loved so well, or up the winding valleys into the foothills where echoed the roar of swift waters or glinted the flash of shovel blades. This morning her horse was lame, so she determined to walk. In her early rambles she had looked timidly askance at the rough men she met till she discovered their genuine respect and courtesy. The most unkempt among them were often college bred, although, for that matter, the roughest of the miners showed abundant consideration for a woman. So she was glad to allow the men to talk to her with the fine freedom inspired by the new country and its wide spaces. The wilderness breeds a chivalry all its own.

Thus there seemed to be no danger abroad, though they had told the girl of mad dogs which roamed the city, explaining that the hot weather affects powerfully the thick coated, shaggy, "malamoots." This is the land of the dog, and whereas in winter his lot is to labor and shiver and starve, in summer he loafs, fights, grows fat and runs mad with the heat.

Helen walked far and, returning, chose an unfamiliar course through the outskirts of the town to avoid meeting any of the women she knew, because of that vivid memory of the night before. As she walked swiftly along she thought that she heard faint cries far behind her. Looking up, she noted that it was a lonely, barren quarter and that the only figure in sight was a woman some distance away. A few paces farther on the shouts recurred—more plainly this time, and a gunshot resounded. Glancing back, she saw several men running, one bearing a smoking revolver, and heard, nearer still, the snarling hubbub of fighting dogs. In a flash the girl's curiosity became horror, for, as she watched, one of the dogs made a sudden dash through the now subdued group of animals and ran swiftly along the planking on which she stood. It was a handsome specimen of the Eskimo malamoot—tall, gray, and coated like a wolf, with the speed, strength and cunning of its cousin. Its head hung low and swung from side to side as it trotted, the motion flecking foam and slaver. The creature had scattered the pack, and now, swift, menacing, relentless, was coming toward Helen. There was no shelter near, no fence, no house, save the distant one toward which the other woman was making her way. The men, too far away to protect her, shouted hoarse warnings.

Helen did not scream nor hesitate—she turned and ran, terror stricken, toward the distant cottage. She was blind with fright and felt an utter certainty that the dog would attack her before she could reach safety. Yes—there was the quick patter of his pads close up behind her; her knees weakened; the sheltering door was yet some yards away. But a horse, tethered near the walk, reared and snorted as the flying pair drew near. The mad creature swerved, leaped at the horse's legs and snapped in fury. Badly frightened at this attack, the horse lunged at his halter, broke it and galloped away; but the delay had served for Helen, weak and faint, to reach the door. She wrenched at the knob. It was locked. As she turned hopelessly away she saw that the other woman was directly behind her and was, in her turn, awaiting the mad animal's onslaught, but calmly, a tiny revolver in her hand.

"Shoot!" screamed Helen. "Why don't you shoot?" The little gun spoke and the dog spun around, snarling and yelping. The woman fired several times more before it lay still, and then remarked calmly as she "broke" the weapon and ejected the shells:

"The caliber is too small to be good for much."

Helen sank down upon the steps.

"How well you shoot!" she gasped. Her eyes were on the gray bundle whose death agonies had thrust it almost to her feet. The men had run up and were talking excitedly, but after a word with them the woman turned to Helen.

"You must come in for a moment and recover yourself," she said, and led her inside.

It was a cozy room in which the girl found herself—more than that—luxurious. There was a piano with scattered music and many of the pretty feminine things that Helen had not seen since leaving home. The hostess had stepped behind some curtains for an instant and was talking to her from the next room.

"That is the third mad dog I have seen this month. Hydrophobia is becoming a habit in this neighborhood." She returned, bearing a tiny silver tray with decanter and glasses.

"You're all unstrung, but this brandy will help you—if you don't object to a swallow of it. Then come right in here and lie down for a moment and you'll be all right." She spoke with such genuine kindness and sympathy that Helen flashed a grateful glance at her. She was tall, slender and with a peculiar undulating suggestion in her movements, as though she had been bred to the clinging folds of silken garments. Helen watched the charm of her smile, the friendly solicitude of her expression, and felt her heart warm toward this one kind woman in Nome.

"You're very good," she answered; "but I'm all right now. I was badly frightened. It was wonderful, your saving me." She followed the other's graceful motion as she placed her burden on the table, and in doing so gazed squarely at a photograph of Roy Glenister.

"Oh—!" Helen exclaimed, then paused as it flashed over her who this girl was. She looked at her quickly. Yes, probably men would consider the woman beautiful, with that smile. The revelation came with a shock, and she arose, trying to mask her confusion.

"Thank you so much for your kindness. I'm quite myself now and I must go."

Her change of face could not escape the quick perceptions of one schooled by experience in the slights of her sex. Times without number Cherry Malotte had marked that subtle, scornful change in other women, and reviled herself for heeding it. But in some way this girl's manner hurt her worst of all. She betrayed no sign, however, save a widening of the eyes and a certain fixity of smile as she answered:

"I wish you would stay until you are rested, Miss——" She paused with outstretched hand.

"Chester. My name is Helen Chester. I'm Judge Stillman's niece," hurried the other, in embarrassment.

Cherry Malotte withdrew her proffered hand and her face grew hard and hateful.

"Oh! So you are Miss Chester—and I—saved you!" She laughed harshly.

Helen strove for calmness. "I'm sorry you feel that way," she said, coolly. "I appreciate your service to me." She moved toward the door.

"Wait a moment. I want to talk to you." Then, as Helen paid no heed, the woman burst out, bitterly: "Oh, don't be afraid! I know you are committing an unpardonable sin by talking to me, but no one will see you, and in your code the crime lies in being discovered. Therefore, you're quite safe. That's what makes me an outcast—I was found out. I want you to know, however, that, bad as I am, I'm better than you, for I'm loyal to those that like me, and I don't betray my friends."

"I don't pretend to understand you," said Helen, coldly.

"Oh, yes, you do! Don't assume such innocence. Of course, it's your role, but you can't play it with me." She stepped in front of her visitor, placing her back against the door, while her face was bitter and mocking. "The little service I did you just now entitles me to a privilege, I suppose, and I'm going to take advantage of it to tell you how badly your mask fits. Deuedfully rude of me, isn't it? You're in with a fine lot of crooks, and I admire the way you've done your share of the dirty work, but when you assume these scandalized, supervirtuous airs it offends me."

"Let me out!"

"I've done bad things," Cherry continued, unheedingly, "but I was forced into them, usually, and I never, deliberately, tried to wreck a man's life just for his money."

"What do you mean by saying that I have betrayed my friends and wrecked anybody's life?" Helen demanded, hotly.

"Bah! I had you sized up at the start, but Roy couldn't see it. Then Struve told me what I hadn't guessed. A bottle of wine, a woman, and that fool will tell all he knows. It's a great game McNamara's playing and he did well to get you in on it, for you're clever, your nerve is good, and your makeup is great for the part. I ought to know, for I've turned a few tricks myself. You'll pardon this little burst of feeling—professional pique. I'm jealous of your ability, that's all. However, now that you realize we're in the same class, don't look down on me hereafter." She opened the door and bowed her guest out with elaborate mockery.

Helen was too bewildered and humiliated to make much out of this vicious and incoherent attack except the fact that Cherry Malotte accused her of a part in this conspiracy which every one seemed to believe existed. Here again was that hint of corruption which she encountered on all sides. This might be merely a woman's jealousy—and yet she said Struve had told her all about it—that a bottle of wine and a pretty face would make the lawyer disclose everything. She could believe it from what she knew and had heard of him. The feeling that she was groping in the dark, that she was wrapped in a mysterious woof of secrecy, came over her again as it had so often of late. If Struve talked to that other woman, why wouldn't he talk to her? She paused, changing her direction toward Front street, revolving rapidly in her mind as she went her course of action. Cherry Malotte believed her to be an actress. Very well—she would prove her judgment right.

She found Struve busy in his private office, but he leaped to his feet on her entrance and came forward, offering her a chair.

"Good morning, Miss Helen. You have a fine color, considering the night you passed. The judge told me all about the affair; and let me state that you're the pluckiest girl I know."

She smiled grimly at the thought of what made her cheeks glow, and languidly loosened the buttons of her jacket.

"I suppose you're very busy, you lawyer man?" she inquired.

"Yes—but not too busy to attend to anything you want."

"Oh, I didn't come on business," she said lightly. "I was out walking and merely sauntered in."

"Well, I appreciate that all the more," he said in an altered tone, twisting his chair about. "I'm more than delighted." She judged she was getting on well from the way his professionalism had dropped off.

"Yes, I get tired of talking to uncle and Mr. McNamara. They treat me as though I were a little girl."

"When do you take the fatal step?"

"What step do you mean?"

"Your marriage. When does it occur? You needn't hesitate," he added. "McNamara told be about it a month ago."

He felt his throat gingerly at the thought, but his eyes brightened when she answered lightly:

"I think you are mistaken. He must have been joking."

For some time she led him on adroitly, talking on many things in a way to make him wonder at her new and flippant humor. He had never dreamed she could be like this, so tantalizingly close to familiarity, and then so maddeningly aloof and distant. He grew bolder in his speech.

"How are things going with us?" she questioned as his warmth grew pronounced. "Uncle won't talk and Mr. McNamara is as close mouthed as can be lately."

He looked at her quickly. "In what respect?"

She summoned up her courage and walked past the ragged edge of uncertainty.

"Now, don't you try to keep me in short dresses, too. It's getting wearisome. I've done my part and I want to know what the rest of you are doing." She was prepared for any answer.

"What do you want to know?" he asked cautiously.

"Everything. Don't you think I can hear what people are saying?"

"Oh, that's it! Well, don't you pay any attention to what people say."

She recognized her mistake, and continued hurriedly:

"Why shouldn't I? Aren't we all in this together? I object to being used and then discarded. I think I'm entitled to know how the scheme is working. Don't you think I can keep my mouth shut?"

"Of course," he laughed, trying to change the subject of their talk; but she arose and leaned against the desk near him, vowing that she would not leave the office without piercing some part of the mystery. His manner strengthened her suspicion that there was something behind it all. This dissipated, brilliant creature knew the situation thoroughly, and yet, though swayed by her efforts, he remained chained by caution. She leaned forward and smiled at him.

"You're just like the others, aren't you? You won't give me any satisfaction at all."

"Give, give, give," said Struve cynically. "That's always the woman's cry. Give me this, give me that. Selfish sex! Why don't you offer something in return? Men are traders, women usurers. You are curious, hence miserable. I can help you, therefore I should do it for a smile. You ask me to break my promises and risk my honor on your caprice. Well, that's womanlike, and I'll do it. I'll put myself in your power, but I won't do it gratis. No, we'll trade."

"It isn't curiosity," she denied indignantly. "It is my due."

"No; you've heard the common talk and grown suspicious, that's all. You think I know something that will throw a new light or a new shadow on everything you have in the world, and you're worked up to such a condition that you can't take your own people's word; and, on the other hand, you can't go to strangers, so you come to me. Suppose I told you I had the papers you brought me last spring in that safe and that they told the whole story—whether your uncle is unimpeachable or whether he deserved hanging by that mob. What would you do, eh? What would you give to see them? Well, they're there and ready to speak for themselves. If you're a woman you won't rest till you've seen them. Will you trade?"

"Yes, yes! Give them to me," she cried eagerly, at which a wave of crimson rushed up to his eyes and he rose abruptly from his chair. He made toward her, but she retreated to the wall, pale and wide eyed.

"Can't you see," she flung at him, "that I must know?"

He paused. "Of course I can, but I want a kiss to bind the bargain—to apply on account." He reached for her hand with his own hot one, but she pushed him away and slipped past him toward the door.

"Suit yourself," said he, "but if I'm not mistaken, you'll never rest till you've seen those papers. I've studied you, and I'll place a bet that you can't marry McNamara nor look your uncle in the eye till you know the truth. You might do either if you knew them to be crooks, but you couldn't if you only suspected it—that's the woman. When you get ready, come back; I'll show you proof, because I don't claim to be anything but what I am—Wilton Struve, bargainer of some mean abilities. When they come to inscribe my headstone I hope they can carve thereon with truth, 'He got value received.'"

"You're a panther," she said, loathingly.

"Graceful and elegant brute, that," he laughed. "Affectionate and full of play, but with sharp teeth and sharper claws. To follow out the idea, which pleases me, I believe the creature owes no loyalty to its fellows and hunts alone. Now, when you've followed this conspiracy out and placed the blame where it belongs, won't you come and tell me about it? That door leads into an outer hall which opens into the street. No one will see you come or go."

(To Be Continued.)