The Spoilers

By Rex E. Beach

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CHAPTER XVIII

Wherein a Trap Is Baited

GLENISTER did not wait long after his visitor's departure, but extinguished the light, locked the door and began the further adventures of this night. The storm welcomed him with suffocating violence, sucking the very breath from his lips, while the rain beat through till his flesh was cold and aching. He thought with a pang of the girl facing this tempest—going out to meet the thousand perils of the night. And it remained for him to bear his part as she bore hers, smilingly.

The last hour had added another and mysterious danger to his full measure. Could the Kid be jealous of Cherry? Surely not. Then what else?

The tornado had driven his trailers to cover, evidently, for the streets were given over to its violence, and Roy encountered no hostile sign as he was buffeted from house to house. He adventured cautiously and yet with haste, finding certain homes where the marshals had been before him peopled now only by frightened wives and children. A scattered few of the vigilantes had been taken thus, while the warring elements had prevented their families from spreading the alarm or venturing out for succor. Those whom he was able to warn dressed hurriedly, took their rifles and went out into the drifting night, leaving empty cabins and weeping women. The great fight was on.

Toward daylight the remnants of the vigilantes straggled into the big blank warehouse on the sandspit, and there beneath the smoking glare of lanterns cursed the name of McNamara. As dawn grayed the ragged eastern skyline, Dextry and Slapjack blew in through the sand drift, bringing word from Cherry and lifting a load from Glenister's mind.

"There's a game girl," said the old miner, as he wrung out his clothes. "She was half gone when she got to us, and now she's waiting for the storm to break so that she can come back."

"It's clearing up to the east," Slapjack chattered. "D'you know, I'm gettin' so rheumatic that ice water don't feel comfortable to me no more."

"Uriatic acid in the blood," said Dextry. "What's our next move?" he asked of his partner. "When do we hang the politician? Seems like we've got enough able bodied piano movers here to tie a can onto the whole outfit, push the townsite of Nome off the map and start afresh."

"I think we had better lie low and watch developments," the other cautioned. "There's no telling what may turn up during the day."

"That's right. Stranglers is like spirits—they work best in the dark."

As the day grew the storm died, leaving ramparts of clouds hanging sullenly above the ocean's rim, while those skilled in weather prophecy foretold the coming of the equinoctial. In McNamara's office there was great stir and the coming of many men. The boss sat in his chair smoking countless cigars, his big face set in grim lines, his hard eyes peering through the pall of blue at those he questioned. He worked the wires of his machine until his dolls doubled and danced and twisted at his touch. After a gusty interview he had dismissed Voorhees with a merciless tongue lashing, raging bitterly at the man's failure.

"You're not fit to herd sheep. Thirty men out all night and what did you get? A dozen mullet headed miners. You bag the mudhens and the big game runs to cover. I wanted Glenister, but you let him slip through your fingers—now it's war. What a mess you've made! If I had even one helper with a brain the size of a flaxseed, this game would be a gift, but you've bungled every move from the start. Bah! Put a spy in the bullpen with those prisoners and make them talk. Offer them anything for information. Now get out!"

He called a certain deputy and questioned him regarding the night's quest, remarking finally:

"There's treachery somewhere. Those men were warned."

"Nobody came near Glenister's house except Miss Chester," the man replied.

"What?"

"The judge's niece. We caught her by mistake in the dark."

Later, one of the men who had been with Voorhees at the Northern, asked to see the receiver and told him:

"The chief won't believe that I saw Miss Chester in the dance hall last night, but she was there with Glenister. She must have put him wise to our game or he wouldn't have known we were after him."

His hearer made no comment, but, when alone, rose and paced the floor with heavy tread while his face grew savage and brutal.

"So that's the game, eh? It's man to man from now on. Very well, Glenister, I'll have your life for that, and then—you'll pay, Miss Helen." He considered carefully. A plot for a plot. If he could not swap intrigue with these miners and beat them badly, he deserved to lose. Now that the girl gave herself to their cause he would use her again and see how well she answered. Public opinion would not stand too great a strain, and, although he had acted within his rights last night, he dared not go much further. Diplomacy, therefore, must serve. He must force his enemies beyond the law and into his trap. She had passed the word once; she would do so again.

He hurried to Stillman's house and stormed into the presence of the judge. He told the story so artfully that the judge's astonished unbelief yielded to rage and cowardice, and he sent for his niece. She came down, white and silent, having heard the loud voices. The old man berated her with shrewish fury, while McNamara stood silent. The girl listened with entire self-control until her uncle made a reference to Glenister that she found intolerable.

"Hush! I will not listen!" she cried, passionately. "I warned him because you would have sacrificed him after he had saved our lives. That is all. He is an honest man, and I am grateful to him. That is the only foundation for your insult."

McNamara, with apparent candor, broke in:

"You thought you were doing right, of course, but your action will have terrible consequences. Now we'll have riot, bloodshed and heaven knows what. It was to save all this that I wanted to break up their organization. A week's imprisonment would have done it, but now they're armed and belligerent and we'll have a battle tonight."

"No, no!" she cried. "There mustn't be any violence."

"There is no use trying to check them. They are rushing to their own destruction. I have learned that they plan to attack the Midas tonight, and I'll have 50 soldiers waiting for them there. It is a shame, for they are decent fellows, blinded by ignorance and misled by that young miner. This will be the blackest night the north has ever seen."

With this McNamara left the house and went in search of Voorhees, remarking to himself: "Now, Miss Helen—send your warning—the sooner the better. If I know those Vigilantes, it will set them crazy, and yet not crazy enough to attack the Midas. They will strike for me, and when they hit my poor, unguarded office, they'll think hell has moved north."

"Mr. Marshal," said he to his tool, "I want you to gather 40 men quietly and to arm them with Winchesters. They must be fellows who won't faint at blood—you know the kind. Assemble them at my office after dark, one at a time, by the back way. It must be done with absolute secrecy. Now, see if you can do this one thing and not get balled up. If you fail, I'll make you answer to me."

"Why don't you get the troops?" ventured Voorhees.

"If there's one thing I want to avoid, it's soldiers, either here or at the mines. When they step in, we step out, and I'm not ready for that just yet." The receiver smiled sinisterly.

Helen meanwhile had fled to her room, and there received Glenister's note through Cherry Malotte's messenger. It rekindled her worse fears and bore out McNamara's prophecy. The more she read of it the more certain she grew that the crisis was only a question of hours, and that with darkness tragedy would walk the streets of Nome. The thought of the wrong already done was lost in the lonely girl's terror of the crime about to happen, for it seemed to her she had been the instrument to set these forces in motion; that she had loosed this swift speeding avalanche of greed, hatred and brutality. And when the crash should come—the girl shuddered. It must not be. She would shriek a warning from the housetops even at cost of her uncle, of McNamara and of herself. And yet she had no proof that a crime existed. Although it all lay clear in her own mind, the certainty of it arose only from her intuition. If only she were able to take a hand—if only she were not a woman. Then Cherry Malotte's words anent Struve recurred to her: "A bottle of wine and a woman's face." They brought back the lawyer's assurance that those documents she had safeguarded all through the long spring time journey really contained the proof. If they did then they held the power to check this impending conflict. Her uncle and the boss would not dare continue if threatened with exposure and prosecution. The more she thought of it the more urgent seemed the necessity to prevent the battle of tonight. There was a chance here, at least, and the only one.

Adding to her mental torment was the constant vision of that face in the curtains at the Northern. It was her brother, yet what mystery shrouded this affair, also? What kept him from her? What caused him to slink away like a thief discovered? She grew dizzy and hysterical.

Struve turned in his chair as the door to his private office opened, then leaped to his feet at sight of the gray eyed girl standing there.

"I came for the papers," she said.

"I knew you would." The blood went out of his cheeks, then surged back up to his eyes. "It's a bargain, then?"

She nodded. "Give them to me first."

He laughed unpleasantly. "What do you take me for? I'll keep my part of the bargain if you'll keep yours. But this is no place nor time. There's riot in the air, and I'm busy preparing for tonight. Come back tomorrow when it's all over."

But it was the terror of tonight's doings that led her into his power.

"I'll never come back," she said. "It's my whim to know today—yes, at once."

He meditated for a time. "Then today it shall be. I'll shirk the fight; I'll sacrifice what shreds of duty have clung to me, because the fever for you is in my bones, and it seems to me I'd do murder for it. That's the kind of man I am, and I have no pride in myself because of it. But I've always been that way. We'll ride to the Sign of the Sled. It's a romantic little roadhouse 10 miles from here, perched high above the Snake river trail. We'll take dinner there together."

"But the papers?"

"I'll have them with me. We'll start in an hour."

"In an hour," she echoed, lifelessly, and left him.

He chuckled grimly and seized the telephone. "Central—call the Sled road house—seven rings on the Snake river branch. Hello! That you, Shortz? This is Struve. Anybody at the house? Good. Turn them away if they come and say that you're closed. None of your business. I'll be out about dark, so have dinner for two. Spread yourself and keep the place clear. Goodby."

Strengthened by Glenister's note, Helen went straight to the other woman and this time was not kept waiting nor greeted with sneers, but found Cherry cloaked in a shy dignity, which she clasped tightly about herself. Under her visitor's incoherence she lost her diffidence, however, and, when Helen had finished, remarked, with decision: "Don't go with him. He's a bad man."

"But I must. The blood of those men will be on me if I don't stop this tragedy. If those papers tell the tale I think they do I can call off my uncle and make McNamara give back the mines. You said Struve told you the whole scheme. Did you see the proof?"

"No, I have only his word, but he spoke of those documents repeatedly, saying they contained instructions to tie up the mines in order to give a foothold for the lawsuits. He bragged that the rest of the gang were in his power and that he could land them in the penitentiary for conspiracy. That's all."

"It's the only chance!" said Helen. "They are sending soldiers to the Midas to lie in ambush, and you must warn the vigilantes." Cherry paled at this and ejaculated:

"Good Lord! Roy said he'd lead an attack tonight!" The two stared at each other.

"If I succeed with Struve I can stop it all—all of this injustice and crime—everything."

"Do you realize what you're risking?" Cherry demanded. "That man is an animal. You'll have to kill him to save yourself, and he'll never give up those proofs."

"Yes, he will," said Helen, fiercely, "and I defy him to harm me. The Sign of the Sled is a public roadhouse with a landlord, a telephone and other guests. Will you warn Mr. Glenister about the troops?"

"I will, and bless you for a brave girl. Wait a moment." Cherry took from the dresser her tiny revolver. "Don't hesitate to use this. I want you to know also that I'm sorry for what I said yesterday."

As she hurried away, Helen realized with a shock the change that the past few months had wrought in her. In truth, it was as Glenister had said, his northland worked strangely with its denizens. What of that shrinking girl who had stepped out of the sheltered life, strong only in her untried honesty, to become a hunted, harried thing, juggling with honor and reputation, in her heart a half formed fear that she might kill a man this night to gain her end? The elements were molding her with irresistible hands. Roy's contact with the primitive had not roughened him more quickly than had hers.

"WHEN DO WE HANG THIS POLITICIAN?"

She met her appointment with Struve and they rode away together, he talkative and elated, she silent and icy.

Late in the afternoon the cloud banks to the eastward assumed alarming proportions. They brought with them an early nightfall, and when they broke let forth a tempest which rivaled that of the previous night. During the first of it armed men came sifting into McNamara's office from the rear and were hidden throughout the building. Whenever he descried a peculiarly desperate ruffian the boss called him aside for private instruction and gave minute description of a wide shouldered, erect youth in white hat and halfboots. Gradually he set his trap with the men Voorhees had raked from the slums, and when it was done smiled to himself. As he thought it over he ceased to regret the miscarriage of last night's plan, for it had served to goad his enemies to the point he desired, to the point where they would rush to their own undoing. He thought with satisfaction of the role he would play in the United States press when the sensational news of this night's adventure came out. A court official who dared to do his duty despite a lawless mob. A receiver who turned a midnight attack into a rout and shambles. That is what they would say. What if he did exceed his authority hereafter? What if there were a scandal? Who would question? As to soldiers—no, decidedly no. He wished no help of soldiers at this time.

The sight of a ship in the offing toward dark caused them some uneasiness, for, notwithstanding the assurance that the course of justice in the San Francisco courts had been clogged, he knew Bill Wheaton to be a resourceful lawyer and a determined man. Therefore, it relieved him to note the rising gale, which precluded the possibility of interference from that source. Let them come tomorrow if they would. By that time some of the mines would be ownerless and his position strengthened a hundredfold.

He telephoned the mines to throw out guards, although he reasoned that none but madmen would think of striking there in the face of the warning which he knew must have been transmitted through Helen. Putting on his raincoat he sought Stillman.

"Bring your niece over to my place tonight. There's trouble in the air and I'm prepared for it."

"She hasn't returned from her ride yet. I'm afraid she's caught in the storm." The judge gazed anxiously into the darkness.

During all the long day the vigilantes lay in hiding, impatient at their idleness and wondering at the lack of effort made toward their discovery, not dreaming that McNamara had more cleverly hidden plans behind. When Cherry's note of warning came they gathered in the back room and gave voice to their opinions.

"There's only one way to clear the atmosphere," said the chairman.

"You bet," chorused the others. "They've garrisoned the mines, so let's go through the town and make a clean job of it. Let's hang the whole outfit to one post."

This met with general approval, Glenister alone demurring. Said he: "I have reasoned it out differently, and I want you to hear me through before deciding. Last night I got word from Wheaton that the California courts are against us. He attributes it to influence, but, whatever the reason, we are cut off from all legal help either in this court or on appeal. Now, suppose we lynch these officials tonight—what do we gain? Martial law in two hours, our mines tied up for another year and who knows what else? Maybe a corrupter court next season. Suppose, on the other hand, we fail—and somehow I feel that we will, for that boss is no fool. What then? Those of us who don't find the morgue will end in jail. You say we can't meet the soldiers. I say we can and must. We must carry this row to them. We must jump it past the courts of Alaska, past the courts of California and up to the White House, where there's one honest man, at least. We must do something to wake up the men in Washington. We must get out of politics, for McNamara can beat us there. Although he's a strong man he can't corrupt the president. We have one shot left and it must reach the Potomac. When Uncle Sam takes a hand we'll get a square deal, so I say let us strike at the Midas tonight and take her if we can. Some of us will go down, but what of it?"

Following this harangue, he outlined a plan which in its unique daring took away their breaths, and as he filled in detail after detail they brightened with excitement and that love of the long chance which makes gamblers of those who thread the silent valleys or tread the edge of things. His boldness stirred them and enthusiasm did the rest.

"All I want for myself," he said, "is the chance to run the big risk. It's mine by right."

Dextry spoke, breathlessly, to Slapjack in the pause which ensued.

"Ain't he a heller?"

"We'll go you," the miners chimed to a man. And the chairman added: "Let's have Glenister lead this forlorn hope. I am willing to stand or fall on his judgment." They acquiesced without a dissenting voice, and with the firm hands of a natural leader the young man took control.

"Let's hurry up," said one. "It's a long 'mush' and the mud is knee deep."

"No walking for us," said Roy. "We'll go by train."

"By train? How can we get a train?"

"Steal it," he answered, at which Dextry grinned delightedly at his loose-jointed companion, and Slapjack showed his toothless gums in answer, saying: "He sure is."

A few more words and Glenister, accompanied by these two, slipped out into the whirling storm, and a half hour later the rest followed. One by one the vigilantes left, the blackness blotting them up an arm's length from the door, till at last the big, bleak warehouse echoed hollowly to the voice of the wind and water.

Over in the eastern end of town, behind dark windows upon which the sheeted rain beat furiously, other armed men lay patiently waiting—waiting some word from the bulky shadow which stood with folded arms close against a square of gray, while over their heads a wretched old man paced back and forth, wringing his hands, pausing at every turn to peer out into the night and to mumble the name of his sister's child.

CHAPTER XIX

Dynamite

EARLY in the evening Cherry Malotte opened her door to find the Bronco Kid on her step. He entered and threw off his rubber coat. Knowing him well, she waited for his disclosure of his errand. His sallow skin was without trace of color, his eyes were strangely tired, deep lines had gathered about his lips, while his hands kept up constant little nervous explorations, as though for days and nights he had not slept and now hovered on the verge of some hysteria. He gave her the impression of a smoldering mine with the fire eating close up to the powder. She judged that his body had been racked by every passion till now it hung jaded and weary, yielding only to the spur of his restless, revengeful spirit.

After a few objectless remarks he began, abruptly:

"Do you love Roy Glenister?" His voice like his manner, was jealously eager, and he watched her carefully as she replied, without quibble or deceit:

"Yes, Kid, and I always shall. He is the only true man I have ever known, and I'm not ashamed of my feelings."

For a long time he studied her and then broke into rapid speech, allowing her no time for interruption.

"I've held back and held back because I'm no talker. I can't be, in my business; but this is my last chance and I want to put myself right with you. I've loved you ever since the Dawson days—not in the way you'd expect from a man of my sort, perhaps, but with the kind of love that a woman wants. I never showed my hand, for what was the use? That man outheld me. I'd have quit faro years back, only I wouldn't leave this country as long as you were a part of it, and up here I'm only a gambler, fit for nothing else. I'd made up my mind to let you have him till something happened a couple of months ago, but now it can't go through. I'll have to down him. It isn't concerning you—I'm not a welcher. No, it's a thing I can't talk about, a thing that's made me into a wolf, made me skulk and walk the alleys like a dago. It's put murder into my heart. I've tried to assassinate him. I tried it here last night—but—I was a gentleman once—till the cards came. He knows the answer now, though, and he's ready for me—so one of us will go out like a candle when we meet. I felt that I had to tell you before I cut him down or before he got me."

"You're talking like a madman, Kid," she replied, "and you mustn't turn against him now. He has troubles enough. I never knew you cared for me. What a tangle it is, to be sure! You love me, I love him, he loves that girl, and she loves a crook. Isn't that tragedy enough without your adding to it? You come at a bad time, too, for I'm half insane. There's something dreadful in the air tonight."

"I'll have to kill him," the man muttered doggedly, and plead or reason as she would, she could get nothing from him except those words, till at last she turned upon him fiercely.

"You say you love me. Very well—let's see if you do. I know the kind of a man you are and I know what this feud will mean to him, coming just at this time. Put it aside and I'll marry you."

The gambler rose slowly to his feet. "You do love him, don't you?" She bowed her face, and he winced, but continued, "I wouldn't make you my wife that way. I didn't mean it that way."

At this she laughed bitterly. "Oh, I see. Of course not. How foolish of me to expect it of a man like you. I understand what you mean now, and the bargain will stand just the same, if that is what you came for. I wanted to leave this life and be good, to go away and start over and play the game square, but I see it's no use. I'll pay. I know how relentless you are, and the price is low enough. You can have me—and that—marriage talk—I'll not speak of again. I'll stay what I am for his sake."

"Stop!" cried the Kid. "You're wrong. I'm not that kind of a sport." His voice broke suddenly, its vehemence shaking his slim body. "Oh, Cherry, I love you the way a man ought to love a woman. It's one of the two good things left in me, and I want to take you away from here where we can both hide from the past, where we can start new, as you say."

"You would marry me?" she said.

"In an hour, and give my heart's blood for the privilege; but I can't stop this thing, not even if your own dear life hung upon it. I must kill that man."

She approached him and laid her arms about his neck, every line of her body pleading, but he refused steadfastly, while the sweat stood out upon his brow.

She begged: "They're all against him, Kid. He's fighting a hopeless fight. He laid all he had at that girl's feet, and I'll do the same for you."

The man growled savagely. "He got his reward. He took all she had—"

"Don't be a fool. I guess I know. You're a faro dealer, but you haven't any right to talk like that about a good woman, even to a bad one like me."

Into his dark eyes slowly crept a hungry look, and she felt him begin to tremble the least bit. He undertook to speak, paused, wet his lips, then carefully chose these words:

"Do you mean—that he did not—that she is—a good girl?"

"Absolutely."

He sat down weakly and passed a shaking hand over his face, which had begun to twitch and jerk again as it had on the night when his vengeance was thwarted.

"I may as well tell you that I know she's more than that. She's honest and high principled. I don't know why I'm saying this, but it was on my mind and I was half distracted when you came. She's in danger tonight, though—at this minute. I don't dare to think of what may have happened, for she's risked everything to make reparation to Roy and his friends."

"What?"

"She's gone to the Sign of the Sled alone with Struve."

"Struve!" shouted the gambler, leaping to his feet. "Alone with Struve on a night like this?" He shook her fiercely, crying, "What for? Tell me quick!"

She recounted the reasons for Helen's adventure, while the man's face became terrible.

"Oh, Kid, I am to blame for letting her go. Why did I do it? I'm afraid—afraid."

"The Sign of the Sled belongs to Struve, and the fellow who runs it is a rogue." The Bronco looked at the clock, his eyes bloodshot and dull like those of a goaded, fly maddened bull. "It's 8 o'clock now—ten miles—two hours. Too late!"

"What ails you?" she questioned, baffled by his strange demeanor. "You called me the one woman just now, and yet—"

He swung toward her heavily. "She's my sister."

"Your—sister? Oh, I—I'm glad. I'm glad—but don't stand there like a wooden man, for you've work to do. Wake up. Can't you hear? She's in peril!" Her words whipped him out of his stupor so that he drew himself somewhat under control. "Get into your coat. Hurry! Hurry! My pony will take you there." She snatched his garment from the chair and held it for him while the life ran back into his veins. Together they dashed out into the storm as she and Roy had done, and as she flung the saddle on the buckskin she said:

"I understand it all now. You heard the talk about her and Glenister, but it's wrong. I lied and schemed and intrigued against her, but it's over now. I guess there's a little streak of good in me somewhere, after all."

He spoke to her from the saddle. "It's more than a streak, Cherry, and you're my kind of people." She smiled wanly back at him under the lantern light.

"That's left handed, Kid. I don't want to be your kind. I want to be his kind—or your sister's kind."

* * * * * *

Upon leaving the rendezvous, Glenister and his two friends slunk through the night, avoiding the life and lights of the town, while the wind surged out of the voids to seaward, driving its wet burden through their flapping slickers, pelting their faces as though enraged at its failure to wash away the purposes written there. Their course brought them to a cabin at the western outskirts of the city, where they paused long enough to adjust something beneath the brims of their hats.

Past them ran the iron rails of the narrow gauge road which led out across the quaking tundra to the mountains and the mines. Upon this slender trail of steel there rolled one small, ungainly teapot of an engine which daily creaked and clanked back and forth at a snail's pace, screaming and wailing its complaint of two high loaded flatcars behind. The ties beneath it were spiked to planks and laid lengthwise over the semiliquid roadbed, in places sagging beneath the surface till the hump-backed, short waisted locomotive yawed and reeled and squealed like a drunken fishwife. At night it panted wearily into the board station and there sighed and coughed and hissed away its fatigue as the coals died and the breath relaxed in its lungs.

Early to bed and early to rise was perforce the motto of its grimy crew, who lived near by. Tonight they were just retiring when stayed by a summons at their door. The engineer opened it to admit what appeared to his astonished eyes to be a Krupp cannon propelled by a man in yellow oiled clothes and white cotton mask. This weapon assumed the proportions of a great, one eyed monster, which stared with baleful fixity at his vitals, giving him a cold and empty feeling. Away back beyond this Cyclops of the Sightless Orb were two other strangers likewise equipped.

The fireman arose from his chair, dropping an empty shoe with a thump, but, being of the west, without cavil or waste of wind, he stretched his hands above his head, balancing on one foot to keep his unshod member from the damp floor. He had unbuckled his belt, and now, loosened by the movement, his overalls seemed bent on sinking floorward in an ecstasy of abashment at the intrusion, whereupon with convulsive grip he hugged them to their duty, one hand and foot still elevated as though in the grand hailing sign of some secret order. The other man was new to the ways of the north, so backed to the limit of his quarters, laid both hands protectingly upon his middle and doubled up, remarking fervidly:

"Dont point that — thing at my stomach."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the fireman, with unnatural loudness. "Have your joke, boys."

"This ain't no joke," said the foremost figure, its breath bellying out the mask at its mouth.

"Sure it is," insisted the shoeless one. "Must be—we ain't got anything worth stealing."

"Get into your clothes and come along. We won't hurt you." The two obeyed and were taken to the sleeping engine and there instructed to produce a full head of steam in 30 minutes or suffer a premature taking off and a prompt elision from the realms of applied mechanics. As stimulus to their efforts two of the men stood over them till the engine began to sob and sigh reluctantly. Through the gloom that curtained the cab they saw other dim forms materializing and climbing silently on the cars behind; then as the steam gauge touched the mark, the word was given and the train rumbled out from its shelter, its shrill plaint at curb and crossing whipped away and drowned in the storm.

Slapjack remained in the cab, gun in lap, while Dextry climbed back to Glenister. He found the young man in good spirits despite the discomfort of his exposed position, and striving to light his pipe behind the shelter of his coat.

"Is the dynamite aboard?" the old man questioned.

"Sure. Enough to ballast a battleship."

As the train crept out of the camp and across the river bridge, its only light or glimmer the sparks that were snatched and harried by the blast, the partners seated themselves on the powder cases and conversed guardedly, while about them sounded the low murmur of the men who risked their all upon this cry to duty, who staked their lives and futures upon this hazard of the hills, because they thought it right.

"We've made a good fight, whether we win or lose tonight," said Dextry.

Roy replied, "My fight is made and won."

"What does that mean?"

"My hardest battle had nothing to do with the Midas or the mines of Anvil. I fought and conquered myself."

"Awful wet night for philosophy," the first remarked. "It's apt to sour on you like milk in a thunder storm. S'pose you put overalls an' gum boots on some of them Boston ideas an' lead 'em out where I can look 'em over an' find out what they're up to."

"I mean that I was a savage till I met Helen Chester, and she made a man of me. It took 60 days, but I think she did a good job. I love the wild things just as much as ever, but I've learned that there are duties a fellow owes himself, and to other people, if he'll only stop and think them out. I've found out, too, that the right thing is usually the hardest to do. Oh, I've improved a lot."

"Gee! but you're popular with yourself. I don't see as it helps your looks any. You're as homely as ever—an' what good does it do you after all? She'll marry that big guy."

"I know. That's what rankles, for he's no more worthy of her than I am. She'll do what's right, however, you may depend upon that, and perhaps she'll change him the way she did me. Why, she worked a miracle in my attitude toward life—my manner—"

"Oh, your manners are good enough as they lay," interrupted the other. "You never did eat with your knife."

"I don't believe in harakiri," Glenister laughed.

"No, when it comes to intimacies with decorum, you're right on the job along with any of them easterners. I watched you close at them Frisco hotels last winter, and, say—you know as much as a horse. Why, you was wise to them tablewares and pickle forks equal to a head waiter, and it give me confidence just to be with you. I remember putting milk and sugar in my consomme the first time. It was pale and in a cup and looked like tea—but not you. No, sir! You savvied plenty and squeezed a lemon into yours—to clean your fingers, I reckon."

Roy slapped his partner's wet back, for he was buoyant and elated. The sense of nearing danger pulsed through him like wine.

"That wasn't just what I meant, but it goes. Say, if we win back our mine, we'll hit for New York next—eh?"

"No, I don't aim to mingle with no higher civilization than I got in Frisco. I used that word 'higher' like it was applied to meat. Not that I wouldn't seem apropos. I'm stylish enough for Fifth avenue or anywheres, but I like the west. Speakin' of modes an' styles, when I get all lit up in that gray woosted suit of mine I guess I make the jaded sightseers set up an' take notice, eh? Somethin' doin' every minute in the cranin' of necks—what? Nothin' gaudy, but the acme of neatness an' form, as the feller said who sold it to me."

Their common peril brought the friends together again, into that close bond which had been theirs without interruption until this recent change in the younger had led him to choose paths at variance with the old man's ideas; and now they spoke, heart to heart, in the half serious, half jesting ways of old, while beneath each whimsical irony was that mutual love and understanding which had consecrated their partnership.

Arriving at the end of the road, the vigilantes debouched and went into the darkness of the canyon behind their leader, to whom the trails were familiar. He bade them pause finally and gave his last instructions.

"They are on the alert, so you want to be careful. Divide into two parties and close in from both sides, creeping as near to the pickets as possible without discovery. Remember to wait for the last blast. When it comes, cut loose and charge like Sioux. Don't shoot to kill at first, for they're only soldiers and under orders, but if they stand—well, every man must do his work."

Dextry appealed to the dim figures forming the circle.

"I leave it to you, gents, if it ain't better for me to go inside than for the boy. I've had more experience with giant powder, an' I'm so blamed used up an' near gone it wouldn't hurt if they did get me, while he's right in his prime—"

Glenister stopped him. "I won't yield the privilege. Come now—to your places, men."

They melted away to each side while the old prospector paused to wring his partner's hand.

"I'd ruther it was me, lad, but if they get you—God help 'em!" He stumbled after the departing shadows, leaving Roy alone. With his naked fingers Glenister ripped open the powder cases and secreted the contents upon his person. Each cartridge held dynamite enough to devastate a village, and he loaded them inside his pockets, inside his shirt and everywhere that he had room, till he was burdened and cased in an armor one-hundredth part of which could have blown him from the face of the earth so utterly as to leave no trace except perhaps a pit ripped out of the mountainside. He looked to his fuses and saw that they were wrapped in oiled paper, then placed them in his hat. Having finished he set out, walking with difficulty under the weight he carried.

That his choice of location had been well made was evidenced by the fact that the ground beneath his feet sloped away to a basin, out of which bubbled a spring. It furnished the drinking supply of the Midas, and he knew every inch of the crevice it had worn down the mountain, so felt has way cautiously along. At the bottom of the hill where it ran out upon the level it had worn a considerable ditch through the soil, and into this he crawled on hands and knees. His bulging clothes handicapped him so that his gait was slow and awkward, while the rain had swelled the streamlet till it trickled over his calves and up to his wrists, chilling him so that his muscles cramped and his very bones cried out with it. The sharp schist cut into his palms till they were shredded and bleeding, while his knees found every jagged bit of bedrock over which he dragged himself. He could not see an arm's length ahead without rising, and having removed his slicker for greater freedom of movement the rain beat upon his back till he was soaked and sodden and felt streamlets cleaving downward between his ribs. Now and again he squatted upon his haunches, straining his eyes to either side. The banks were barely high enough to shield him. At last he came to a bridge of planks spanning the ditch, and was about to rear himself for another look when he suddenly flattened into the stream bed, half damming the waters with his body. It was for this he had so carefully wrapped his fuses. A man passed over him so close above that he might have touched him. The sentry paused a few paces beyond and accosted another, then retraced his steps over the bridge. Evidently this was the picket line, so Roy wormed his way forward till he saw the blacker blackness of the mine buildings, then drew himself dripping out from the bank. He had run the gauntlet safely.

Since evicting the owners the receiver had erected substantial houses in place of the tents he had found on the mine. They were of frame and corrugated iron, sheathed within and suited to withstand a moderate exposure. The partners had witnessed the operation from a distance, but knew nothing about the buildings from close examination.

A thrill of affection for this place warmed the young man. He loved this old mine. It had realized the dream of his boyhood, and had answered the hope he had clung to during his long fight against the Northland. It had come to him when he was disheartened, bringing cheer and happiness, and had yielded itself like a bride. Now it seemed a crime to ravage it.

He crept toward the nearest wall and listened. Within was the sound of voices, though the windows were dark, showing that the inhabitants were on the alert. Beneath the foundations he made mysterious preparations, then sought out the office building and cook house, doing likewise. He found that back of the seeming repose of the Midas there was a strained expectancy.

(To Be Continued.)