

THE BARRIER

BY REX BEACH

CHAPTER I.—John Gale is a trader at Flambeau, a rough outpost of civilization in Alaska. His daughter Necla is a beautiful young girl, generally believed to be a half breed, daughter of Gale and the Indian squaw Alluna, with whom he lives. Some hidden burden weighs continually on the trader's mind, and he views with apprehension the arrival of a squad of soldiers at Flambeau. "That means the law," he says uneasily to Necla, who has become acquainted with and admired by Lieutenant Burrell, commander of the soldiers. II.—It becomes known that Napoleon Doret, an honest, faithful French Canadian employed by Gale, is deeply in love with Necla. One Runnion, a dissolute gambler and "bad man," arrives at Flambeau by steamer and in a fight with Burrell is worsted and forced to leave the town. On the departing steamer's deck he menacingly says, "I will return to take a hand in the game." III.—Doret gives Necla a handsome silk gown brought by him from Dawson City for her. Arrayed in this, she meets Lieutenant Burrell, who falls madly in love with her, and he wonders if her blood is really tainted. Gale reasserts that she is the illegitimate daughter of himself and the squaw. IV.—Runnion returns with Ben Stark, a professional gambler and man killer with plenty of money. Stark builds a saloon and dance hall at Flambeau. "No Creek" Lee discovers gold in a valley some miles distant, and Necla persuades Burrell to take her there and locate a claim for her, their trip requiring a day and a night in the forest. V., VI. and VII.—Gale, Lee, Runnion and Stark have gone together to the site of Lee's discovery to locate claims. They are met by Necla and Burrell

and a bitter quarrel ensues. Runnion and Stark conspire to rob Necla of her claims. Runnion wants the girl, and Stark finds that Necla has a strange, unexplainable fascination for him. His baby daughter had been stolen years before. Burrell becomes the declared enemy of both Stark and Runnion. A gun held by Gale is discharged, the bullet accidentally, he claims, narrowly missing Stark. VIII.—Gale knows Stark to be an old enemy of his and father of Necla, and Alluna, his squaw, says "Kill Stark. Take the knife of my father. To kill is the law." IX., X., XI., XII. and XIII.—Necla, believing herself a half breed, fears she cannot marry Burrell, whom she loves, as she learns that her tainted blood will bar her from meeting the people he naturally associates with, and she overhears Burrell say he may not marry her after all. Stark persuades her to leave Flambeau after he discovers her to be his daughter. XIV.—Gale tells Burrell of Necla's past and that Stark has hounded him from one section of the country to another and that Stark does not now recognize him as Gale. XV. and XVI.—Stark sends Necla away in a boat with a man she later discovers to be the villain Runnion, and Stark, learning Gale's identity, wants Burrell to arrest him. Stark goes to his own house and there, meeting Gale, engages in a fearful duel in the dark and is nearly killed by the trader. XVII.—Napoleon Doret rescues Necla from Runnion and leaves the latter to die a horrible death. XVIII.—Father Barnum arrives and marries Necla and Burrell. XIX.—Doret, "the man with the big heart," sails away alone to forget his sorrows in the wilderness.



"Say, are these people kiddin' me?" he inquired.

He set adrift on a log with his shirt off.

"Either would mean certain death," said a stranger—"frost in winter, mosquitoes in summer!"

"That's all right," another bystander declared. "A man's life depends on his grub up here, and I'd be in favor of enforcing that punishment to the letter."

"All the same, I take no chances," said Stark. "There's too many strangers here. Just to show you how I stand, I've put Runnion on guard over my pile of stuff, and I'll be glad when it's under cover. It isn't the severity of punishment that keeps a man from going wrong; it's the certainty of it."

"Well, he'd sure get it, and get it proper, in this camp," declared Lee, and at that moment, as if his words had been a challenge, the flaps of the great tent were thrust aside, and Runnion half led, half threw a man into the open space before the bar.

"Let's have a look at you," he panted. "Well, if it ain't a nigger!"

"What's up?" cried the men crowding about the prisoner, who crouched, terror stricken, in the trampled mud and moss, while those playing roulette and "bank" left the tables, followed by the dealers.

"He's a thief," said Runnion, mopping the sweat from his brow. "I caught him after your grub pile, Stark. He dropped a crate of hams when I came upon him and tried to run, but I dropped him." A trickle of blood from the negro's head showed how he had been felled.

"Why didn't you shoot?" growled Stark angrily, at which the negro half arose and broke into excited denials of his guilt. Runnion kicked him savagely, while the crowd murmured approval.

"Let me see him," said Lee, elbowing his way through the others. Fixing his one eye upon the wretch, he spoke impressively.

"You're the first downright thief I ever seen. Was you hungry?"

"No; he's got plenty," answered one of the tenderfeet. "He's got a bigger outfit than I have."

"Then I reckon it's a divine manifestation," said "No Creek" Lee tearfully. "This black party is goin' to furnish an example as will elevate the moral tone of our community for a year."

"What y'all aim to do?" whined the thief.

"We're goin' to try you," announced the one eyed miner, "and if you're found guilty, as you certainly are goin' to be, you'll be flogged, after which perdition you'll have a nice ride downstream on a saw log without your laundry."

"But the mosquitoes!"

"Too bad you didn't think of them before. Let's get at this, boys, and have it over with."

A miners' meeting was called on the spot and a messenger sent hurrying to the post for the book in which was recorded the laws of the men who had made the camp. The crowd was determined that this should be done legally and as prescribed by ancient custom up and down the river. There was no defense for the culprit, and he offered none, being too scared to do more than plead. The proceedings were quiet and grim and were well nigh over when Lieutenant Burrell walked into the saloon. He had been in his quarters all day, fighting a fight with himself, and in the late evening, rebelling against his war with his conscience, he had sallied out and, drawn by the crowd in Stark's place, had entered.

A man replied to his whispered question, giving him the story, for the meeting was under Lee's domination, and the miners maintained an orderly and businesslike procedure. The matter of fact, relentless expedition of the affair shocked Burrell inexpressibly, and, seeing Poleon and Gale near by, he edged toward them, thinking that they surely could not be in sympathy with this barbarous procedure.

"You don't understand, lieutenant," said Gale in a low voice. "This nigger is a thief!"

"Gentlemen," announced Burrell, standing near the ashen gray wretch and facing the tentful of men, "this man is a thief, but you can't kill him!"

Stark leaned across the bar, his eyes blazing, and touched the lieutenant on the shoulder.

"Do you mean to take a hand in all of my affairs?"

"This isn't your affair. It's mine," said the officer. "This is what I was sent here for, and it's my particular business. You seem to have overlooked that important fact."

"He stole my stuff, and he'll take his medicine."

"I say he won't!" For the second time in their brief acquaintance these two men looked fair into each other's eyes. Few men had dared to look at Stark thus and live, for when a man has once shed the blood of his fellow a mania obsesses him, a disease obtains that is incurable.

The two men battled with their eyes for an opening. Lee and the others mastered their surprise at the interruption and then began to babble until Burrell turned from the gambler and threw up his arm for silence.

"There's no use arguing," he told the mob. "You can't do it. I'll hold him till the next boat comes; then I'll send him down river to St. Michael's."

He laid his hand upon the negro and made for the door, with face set and eyes watchful and alert, knowing that a hair's weight might shift the balance and cause these men to rive him like wolves.

Lee's indignation at this miscarriage of justice had him so by the throat as to strangle expostulation for a moment till he saw the soldier actually bearing off his quarry.

"Stop that!" he bellowed. "To h—l with your law! We're goin' accordin' to our own!"

An ominous echo arose, and in the midst of it the miner in his blind fury, forgetting this exalted position, took a step too near the edge of the bar and fell off into the body of the meeting. With him fell the dignity of the assemblage. Some one laughed, another took it up, the nervous tension broke, and a man cried:

"The soldier is right! You can't blame a dinge for stealing!" And another: "Sure! Hogs and chickens are legitimate prey!"

Lee was helped back to his stand and called for order, but the crowd poked fun at him and began moving about restlessly till some one shouted a motion to adjourn and there arose a chorus of seconds.

As Poleon and Gale walked home the Frenchman said, "Dat was nerry t'ing to do."

The trader made no answer, and the other continued, "Stark is goin' for kill 'im sure."

"It's a cinch," agreed Gale, "unless somebody gets Stark first."

When they were come to his door the trader paused and, looking back over the glowing tents and up at the star sprinkled heavens, remarked, as if concluding some train of thought, "If that boy has got the nerve to take a nigger thief out of a miners' meeting and hold him against this whole town he wouldn't hesitate much at taking a white man, would he?"

"Waal," hesitated the other, "mebbe dat would depen' on de crime."

"Suppose it was—murder?"

"Ha! We ain' got no men lak dat in Flambeau."

They said good night, and the old man entered his house to find Alluna waiting for him.

Burrell took his prisoner to the barracks, where he placed him under guard, giving instructions to hold him at any cost, not knowing what wild and reckless humor the new citizens of Flambeau might develop during the night, for it is men who have always lived with the halter of the law tight upon their necks who run wildest when it is removed.

After he had taken every precaution he went out into the night again and fought with himself as he had fought all that day and all the night before—in fact, ever since old Thomas had come to him after leaving Necla and had so cunningly shaped his talk that Burrell never suspected his object until he perceived his position in such a clear light that the young man looked back upon his work with startled eyes. The corporal had spoken garrulously of his officer's family, of their pride and of their love for his profession; had dwelt enthusiastically upon the lieutenant's future and the length he was sure to go and finally drifted into the same story he had told Necla. Burrell at last sensed the meaning of the crafty old soldier's strategy and dismissed him, but not before his work had been accomplished.

When Burrell drove his reason with firm hands he saw but one course to follow, but when his mind went slack for a moment the old desire to have her returned more strongly than ever, and he heard voices arguing, pleading, persuading. She was the equal of any woman in the world, they said, in mind, in purity and in innocence. He hated himself for hesitating, he called at his own indecision, and then when he had justified his love and persuaded himself that he was right in seeking this union there would rise again the picture of his people, their chagrin and what would result from such a marriage.

He had wandered far during this debate, clear past the town and out through the Indian village, but now that he believed he had come to an understanding with himself he turned back toward his quarters. He knew it would be hard to give her up, but he had irrevocably decided, and his path began to unfold itself so clear and straight that he marveled how he could have failed to see it. He was glad he had conquered, although the pain was still sharp. He felt a better man for it, and, wrapped in this complacent optimism, he passed close by the front of the trader's store, where Necla had crept to be alone with her misery.



"Let's have a look at you," he panted.

Burrell had almost passed her when he was startled by the sound of his name breathed softly; then, to his amazement, he saw her come forth like a spirit into the silver sheen.

"Necla," he cried, "what are you doing here at this hour?" She looked up at him sadly. He saw that her cheeks were wet, and something inside him snapped and broke. Without a word he took her in his arms, meeting her lips in a long kiss, while she, trembling with the joy of his strong embrace, drew closer and closer and rested her body wearily against his.

"Little girl, little girl!" he whispered over and over, his tone conveying every shade of sympathy, love and understanding she had craved. He knew what had made her sad, and she knew that he knew. There was no need for words. The anguish of this long day had whetted the edge of their desire, and they were too deeply, too utterly lost in the ecstasy of meeting to care for speech.

"Your lips cling so that I can't get free," sighed the girl at last. "You never shall," he whispered. But when she smiled up at him piteously, her eyes swimming, and said, "I must," he wrenched himself away and let her go.

(Continued)

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CHAPTER X.
MEADE BURRELL FINDS A PATH IN THE MOONLIGHT.

"NO CREEK" LEE had come into his own at last and was a hero, for the story of his long ill luck was common gossip now, and men praised him for his courage. He had never been praised for anything before and was uncertain just how to take it.

"Say, are these people kiddin' me?" he inquired confidentially of Poleon.

"Why? What you mean?"

"Well, there's a feller makin' a speech about me down by the landin'."

"What he say?"

"It ain't nothin' to fight over. He says I'm another Dan'l Boom, leadin' the march of empire westward. Certainly sounds good, but is it on the level?"

"Waal, I guess so," admitted Poleon. The prospector swelled with indignation. "Then why in h—l didn't you fellers tell me long ago?"

The scanty ounce or two of gold from his claim lay in the scales at the post, where every newcomer might examine it, and, realizing that he was a never ending source of information, they fawned on him for his tips, bribing him with newspapers worth \$1 each or with cigars, which he wrapped up carefully and placed in his mackinaw till every pocket of the rusty garment bulged so that he could not sit without losing them. They dwelt upon his lightest word and stood him up beside the bar, where they filled him with proofs of friendliness until he shed tears from his one good eye.

Cautiously at first he let out his wit, which was logy from long disuse and as heavy on its feet as the jumping frog of Calaveras, but when they laughed at its labored leaps and sallies his confidence grew. With the regularity of a clock he planted cigars and ordered "a little more hard stuff," while his roving eye rejoiced in lachrymose profusion, its overburden losing itself in the tangle of his careless beard. By and by he wandered through the town, trailed by a troop of tenderfeet, till the women marked him, whereupon he fled back to the post and hugged the bar, for he was a bashful man. When Stark's new place opened it offered him another retreat, of which he availed himself for some time. But late in the evening he reappeared at Old Man Gale's store, walking a bit unsteadily, and as he mounted the flight of logs to the door he stepped once too often.

"What's become of that fourth step?" he demanded sharply of Poleon.

"Dere she is," said the Frenchman.

"I'm blamed if it is. You moved it since I was here."

"I'll have 'im put back," laughed the other.

"Say, it's a grand thing to be rich, ain't it?"

"I don't know. I ain't never try it."

"Well, it is, and now that I've arrived I'm goin' to change my ways complete. No more extravagance in mine. I'll never lend another cent."

"What's dat?" ejaculated Doret in amazement.

"No more hard luck stories and 'hurry ups' for mine. I'm the stony hearted jaller, I am, from now, henceforth, world 'thout end, amen! No busted miners need apply. I've been a good thing, but tonight I turn on the time lock."

"Ba gosh! You're fonna feller," laughed Poleon, who had lent the one eyed man much money in the past and, like others, regarded him not merely as a bad risk, but as a total loss. "Mebbe you t'ink you've been a spen'trif' all dese year."

Doret took the hero of the day by the arm and led him to the rear of the store, where he bedded him on a pile of flour sacks, but he had hardly returned to the bar when Lee came veering out of the dimness, making for the light like a ship tacking toward a beacon.

"What kind of flour is that?" he spluttered.

"Dat's just plain w'eat flour."

"Not on your life," said the miner, with the firmness of a great conviction. "It's full of yeast powders. Why, it's farina' and risin' like a buckin' boss. I'm plumb seasick." He laid a zigzag course for the door.

"Were you goin'?" asked Poleon.

"I'm goin' to get somethin' for this stomach trouble. It's fierce." He descended into the darkness boldly and stepped off with confidence—this time too soon. Poleon heard him floundering about, his indignant voice raised irascibly, albeit with a note of triumph.

"Wha'd I tell you? You put that step back while I was ashleep." Then, whistling blithely, if somewhat out of tune, he steered for the new saloon to get something for his "stomach trouble."

At Stark's he found a large crowd of the new men, who welcomed him heartily, plying him with countless questions and harking to his maudlin tales of this new country which to him was old. He had followed the muddy river from Crater lake to the delta, searching the bars and creek beds in a tireless quest till he knew each stream and tributary, and, like Gale, he had lived these many years ahead of the law, where each man was his own court of appeals and where crime was unknown.

"Oh, there's lots of countries worse'n this," he declared. "We may not be very han'some to the naked eye, and we may not wear our handkerchiefs in our shirt cuffs, but dere ain't no wid'ers and orphans doin' our washin', and a man can walk away from his house, stay a month and find it there when he comes back."

"Those days are past," said Stark. "There's too many new people coming in for all to be honest."

"They'd better be," said Lee aggressively. "We ain't got no room for stealers. Why, I had a hand in makin' the bylaws of this camp myself, 'long with John Gale, and they stipulates that any person caught robbin' a cache is to be publicly whipped in front of the tradin' post; then, if it's winter time, he's to be turned loose on the ice barefooted, or, if it's summer, he's to