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have gone by the doorway—the easiest way out?"

"We didn't want to face the bullets," said Jim, rather shamefacedly, as if he felt disgrace in not wanting to be shot.

Stranleigh laughed; a low sound escaping his lips that no one but Ponderby would have recognized as the result of satisfaction.

"I've been spending my days in fishing, and my nights in sound sleep."

"Hell!" cried Jim, "that patter you let loose about the dynamite held us in a vice."

"You've been as free as air to go where you pleased," returned Stranleigh, nonchalantly.

Dean laughed—at first ruefully, then the others joined him. The joke was on them, and they were beginning to enjoy it hugely.

"You were right about brain and muscle," observed Jim, at last.

Stranleigh ignored the compliment. "I've a proposal to make to you," he went on. "I'm off to Bleachers to do some telegraphing, hoping to learn the whereabouts of Mr. Armstrong. The sale takes place day after tomorrow."

Stranleigh paused in his recital. He noticed a stealthy movement among the bunkers.

"As you know," he went on, "I have no objection to shooting as a settlement of a question, but the inhabitants of Bleachers will regret provoking me to a fusillade."

He took from his pocket the neat little automatic pistol.

"I don't suppose," he went on, "that you have ever seen anything just like this. It will rain bullets, and I can reload before any Bleachers man can get his hand to his hip-pocket. Next to the Maxim gun, it's the most deadly weapon in existence."

CASUALLY he cast his eye along the bunks. Each man had withdrawn the leg that had been quietly reaching for the floor. Stranleigh still held his pistol as he continued:

"Just before I became your prisoner, I sent to New York for a large sum of money, which was to reach me by express. I thought it better to have no dealings with the bank, as I didn't wish Ricketts to learn what I was doing. That sum of money is at this moment in the express office. When the day of the sale arrives, I shall have more money on my person than is quite discreet to carry about. Therefore, I wish to engage you as a bodyguard, if you agree to certain conditions. I shall expect all of you at Bleachers day after tomorrow, and shall pay each man fifty dollars for the day. That there may be no mistake, I will give you the money now," he added, producing a wallet.

"What are your conditions?" asked Jim, cautiously.

"First; you will keep clear of the tavern, and drink no intoxicant whatever."

"That's easy. What next?"

"You will not shoot until I have emptied my own pistol; then you may go in and win."

Jim turned to his comrades for a moment, then to Stranleigh.

"We agree," he said, whereupon Stranleigh returned the pistol to his pocket, and placed six fifty-dollar bills on the table.

"See here!" cried Dean, "we don't want money for this job."

"I'm sure of that, but honest men are entitled to their pay. So good-bye, until I see you at Bleachers—day after tomorrow."

He had accomplished little more than half the distance when he perceived a horseman coming towards him.

"Hello, stranger!" he cried. "Do you come from the ranch?"

"Yes."

"How's everybody?"

"Very well, when I left. Is there a chance that you are Mr. Armstrong?"

two hundred dollars, asking you to get home in a hurry."

"Well, Mr. Stranleigh, all that was done, just as you ordered, and here I am, but as for paying back the money—I'm broke."

"Do you know your ranch is to be sold the day after tomorrow?"

"Yes; they've got me with my hands up."

"I don't think so. I have some money coming by express, and being a rather stupid person, it never struck me until half an hour ago that I'd require identification before I could get my hands on that express package. So if you'll take my word that I am Stranleigh, we'll collect the currency, and attend the sale. I have a letter of introduction to you from Mr. Banks of New York, but I left it at the ranch."

"Well; I'll go surety that you're the man. I'd like to see a little money, even if it belongs to another man."

ARMSTRONG turned his horse in the other direction. As the two men rode together, Stranleigh explained the situation. Armstrong was silent, evidently in deep dejection.

"Well, Mr. Stranleigh," he said at last, "I'm no good as a business man, and the slick way in which those rascals separated me from the cash I had would make you laugh if I told you how it was done."

Arriving at Bleachers, Stranleigh, with Armstrong as his identifier, secured the package from the express office.

The land sale took place in Agricultural Hall, the largest building in town. Armstrong's six armed followers arrived in good time, and quite unobtrusively seated themselves in a row on a bench at the rear of the hall.

Lawyer Ricketts was accompanied by two friends; strangers in Bleachers, who took their places beside him on the chairs provided in the front row.

The auctioneer got down to business without unnecessary loss of time, reading the documents giving the conditions of the sale; the item on which Lord Stranleigh relied being that no cheques would be accepted or credit allowed.

"You all know the property, gentlemen, so I need not detain you by any lengthy description of it. How much am I offered for Armstrong's ranch?"

"Three thousand dollars," said Ricketts.

"Five thousand!" promptly outbid the Earl of Stranleigh.

There was a buzz of interest in the crowd, as if some one had stirred up a nest of bees. They had expected competition. Ricketts stood up and scrutinized the numerous faces turned towards him, endeavoring to discover from whom the bid had come. Then he sat down, and whispered to each of the two men beside him. They nodded, and one of them stole out quietly through the door by which the sheriff had entered.

"He's gone for more money," said Stranleigh softly to Armstrong.

"Five thousand dollars I am bid," went on the sheriff. "Is there any advance on five thousand dollars?"

His gavel hovered over the table.

"Six thousand," said Ricketts.

"Ten thousand!" offered Stranleigh, quickly, realizing his opponent was playing for time.

"Ten thousand dollars!" echoed the sheriff, then, glancing at the lawyer: "It's against you, Mr. Ricketts."

The lawyer hesitated.

"Eleven thousand!" he said at last.

"Fifteen thousand," bid Stranleigh, promptly.

"Fifteen thousand dollars is the last bid. Going—going at fifteen thousand, once; going at fifteen thousand, twice—"

and the gavel hovered over the table.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Sheriff; there's no hurry."

"The sale must go on, Mr. Ricketts."



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