

The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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This is a story of that great north country of which it has been said, "There's never a law of God or man runs north of fifty-three;" a tale of impetuous emotion, of brute strength and courage, of swift and passionate love and hate; a tale vigorous, forceful and absorbing, which tells itself without fine words; a story of the hunger for gold and the hunger of man for woman, brooking no interference or rivalry, going straight for its object, as did the primitive man before the time of laws and conventionalities; of civilized man turned back to savagery and losing no manhood in the turning. Tarry awhile, O reader, with these rugged men of Nome, and you shall be refreshed and strengthened in their company.

CHAPTER I.

GLENISTER gazed out over the harbor agleam with the lights of anchored ships, then up at the crenelated mountains, black against the sky. He drank the cool air burdened with its taints of the sea, while the blood of his boyhood leaped within him.

"Oh, it's fine—fine," he murmured, "and this is my country—my country, after all, Dex. It's in my veins, this hunger for the north. I grow. I expand."

"Careful you don't bust," warned Dexty. "I've seen men get plumb drunk on mountain air. Don't expand too strong in one spot." He went back abruptly to his pipe, its villainous fumes promptly averting any danger of the air's too tonic quality.

"Gad, what a smudge!" sniffed the younger man. "You ought to be in quarantine."

"I'd rather smell like a man than talk like a kid. You desecrate the hour of meditation with rhapsodies on nature when your aesthetics ain't honed up to the beauties of good tobacco."

The other laughed, inflating his deep chest. In the gloom he stretched his muscles restlessly, as though an excess of vigor filled him.

They were lounging upon the dock, while before them lay the Santa Maria ready for her midnight sailing. Behind slept Unalaska, quaint, antique and Russian, resting amid the fogs of Bering sea. Where a week before mild eyed natives had dried their cod among the old bronze cannon now a frenzied horde of gold seekers paused in their rush to the new El Dorado. They had come like a locust cloud, thousands strong, settling on the edge of the Smoky sea, waiting the going of the ice that barred them from their golden fleece—from Nome the new, where men found fortune in a night.

The mossy hills back of the village were ridged with graves of those who had died on the trip the fall before, when a plague had gripped the land, but what of that? Gold glittered in the sands, so said the survivors. Therefore men came in armies. Glenister and Dexty had left Nome the autumn previous, the young man raving with fever. Now they returned to their own land.

"This air whets every animal instinct in me," Glenister broke out again. "Away from the cities I turn savage. I feel the old primitive passions, the fret for fighting."

"Mebbe you'll have a chance."

"How so?"

"Well, it's this way. I met Mexico Mullins this mornin'. You mind old Mexico, don't you—the feller that relocated Discovery claim on Anvil creek last summer?"

"You don't mean that 'tinhorn' the boys were going to lynch for 'claim jumping'?"

"Listen here," says he, an' seein' he was in earnest, I let him run on. "How much do you value that claim o' yours at?"

"Hard tellin'," says I. "If she holds out like she run last fall, there'd ought to be a million clear in her."

"How much 'll you clean up this summer?"

"'Bout four hundred thousand, with luck."

"'Bill,' says he, 'there's hell a-poppin', an' you've got to watch that ground like you'd watch a rattlesnake."

Don't never leave 'em get a grip on it or you're down an' out."

"He was so plumb in earnest it scared me up, 'cause Mexico ain't a gabby man."

"What do you mean?" says I. "I can't tell you nothin' more. I'm puttin' a string on my own neck sayin' this much. You're a square man, Bill, an' I'm a gambler, but you saved my life once, an' I wouldn't steer you wrong. For God's sake, don't let 'em jump your ground, that's all."

"Let who jump it? Congress has give us judges an' courts an' marshals—I begins."

"That's just it. How you goin' to buck that hand? Them's the best cards in the deck. There's a man comin' by the name of McNamara. Watch him close. I can't tell you no more. But don't never let 'em get a grip on you ground! That's all he'd say."

"Bah! He's crazy! I wish somebody would try to jump the Midas. We'd enjoy the exercise."

The siren of the Santa Maria interrupted, its hoarse warning throbbing up the mountain.

"We'll have to get aboard," said Dexty.

"Sh-h! What's that?" the other whispered.

At first the only sound they heard was a stir from the deck of the steamer. Then from the water below them came the rattle of rowlocks and a voice cautiously muffled.

"Stop! Stop there!"

A skiff burst from the darkness grounding on the beach beneath. A figure scrambled out and up the ladder leading to the wharf. Immediately a second boat, plainly in pursuit of the first one, struck on the beach behind it.

As the escaping figure mounted to their level the watchers perceived with amazement that it was a young woman. Breath sobbed from her lungs, and, stumbling, she would have fallen but for Glenister, who ran forward and helped her to her feet.

"Don't let them get me," she panted. He turned to his partner in puzzled inquiry, but found that the old man had crossed to the head of the landing ladder up which the pursuers were climbing.

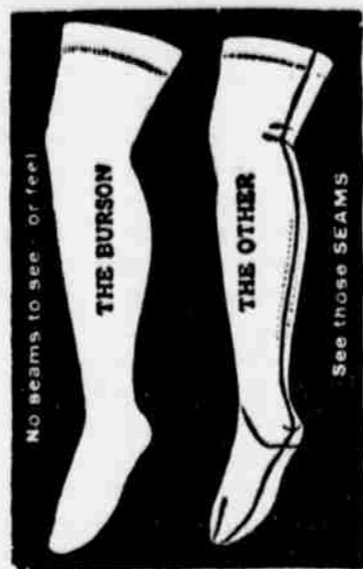
"Just a minute, you there! Back up or I'll kick your face in!" Dexty's voice was sharp and unexpected, and in the darkness he loomed tall and menacing to those below.

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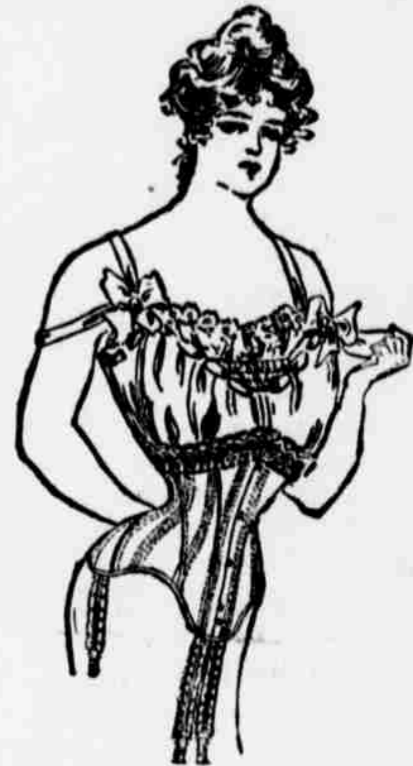
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