

The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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[CONTINUED.]

Judge and the entire mechanism of justice. They had fought with the fury of men who battle for life and had grown to hate the lines of Stillman's vacillating face, the lawyer of the district attorney and the staggering confidence of the clerks, for it seemed that they all worked mechanically, like toys, at the dictates of Alec McNamara. At last when they had ceased, beaten and exhausted, they were too confused with technical phrases to grasp anything except the fact that relief was denied them, that their claims were to be worked by the receiver and, as a crowning defeat, they learned that the judge would move his court to St. Michael's and hear no cases until he returned, a month later.

Meanwhile, McNamara hired every idle man he could lay hand upon and ripped the placers open with double shifts. Every day a stream of yellow dust poured into the bank and was locked in his vaults, while those mine owners who attempted to witness the cleanups were ejected from their claims. The politician had worked with incredible swiftness and system, and a fortnight after landing he had made good his boast to Struve and was in charge of every good claim in the district, the owners were ousted, their appeals argued and denied and the court gone for thirty days, leaving him a clear field for his operations. He felt a contempt for most of his victims, who were slow witted Swedes, grasping neither the purport nor the magnitude of his operation, and to those litigants who were discerning enough to see its enormity he trusted to his organization to thwart them.

The two partners had come to feel that they were beating against a wall and had also come squarely to face the proposition that they were without funds wherewith to continue their battle. It was maddening for them to think of the daily robbery that they suffered, for the Midas turned out many ounces of gold at every shift, and more maddening to realize the receiver's shrewdness in crippling them by his theft of the gold in their safe. That had been his crowning stroke.

"We must get money quick," said Glenister. "Do you think we can borrow?"

"Borrow?" sniffed Dextery. "Folks don't lend money in Alaska."

They relapsed into a moody silence. "I met a feller this mornin' that's workin' on the Midas," the old man resumed. "He came in town for a pair of gum boots, an' he says they've run into awful rich ground—so rich that they have to clean up every mornin' when the night shift goes off cause the riffles clog with gold."

"Think of it!" Glenister growled. "If we had even a part of one of those cleanups we could send Wheaton outside."

In the midst of his bitterness a thought struck him. He made as though to speak, then closed his mouth, but his partner's eyes were on him, filled with a suppressed but growing fire. Dextery lowered his voice cautiously:

"There'll be \$20,000 in them sluices tonight at midnight."

Glenister stared back, while his pulse pounded at something that lay in the other's words.

"It belongs to us," the young man said. "There wouldn't be anything wrong about it, would there?"

Dextery sneered. "Wrong! Right! Them is fine an' soundin' titles in a mess like this. What do they mean? I tell you at midnight tonight Alec McNamara will have \$20,000 of our money."

"God! What would happen if they caught us?" whispered the younger, following out his thought. "They'd never let us get off the claim alive. He couldn't find a better excuse to shoot us down and get rid of us. If we came up before this judge for trial, we'd go to Sitka for twenty years."

"Sure! But it's our only chance. I'd rather die on the Midas in a fair fight than set here bitin' my hangnails. I'm growin' old, an' I won't never make another strike. As to bein' caught—them's our chances. I won't be took alive, I promise you that, and before I go I'll get my satisfy. Castin' things up, that's about all a man gets in this vale of tears, jest satisfaction of one kind or another. It'll be a fight in the open, under the stars, with the clean, wet moss to lie down on, and not a scrapplin' match of freak phrases and jaw hooks inside of a stinkin' courtroom. The cards is shuffled and in the box, pardner, and the game is started. If we're due to win, we'll win. If we're due to lose, we'll lose. Things is all figgered out a

years back. Come on, boy!

"Am I game?" Glenister's nostrils dilated, and his voice rose a tone. "Am I game? I'm with you till the big cash in, and Lord have mercy on any man that blocks our game tonight."

"We'll need another hand to help us," said Dextery. "Who can we get?"

At that moment, as though in answer, the door opened with the seant

ceremony that friends of the frontier are wont to observe, admitting the at-tendant, flapping, dome-crowned figure of Slapjack Stumps, and Dextery fell upon him with the hanger of a wolf.

It was midnight, and over the dark walls of the valley peered a multitude of stars, while away on the southern horizon there glowed a subdued effulgence as though from hidden fires beneath the Gold God's cauldron or as though the phosphorescence of Bering had spread upward into the skies. Although each night grew longer, it was not yet necessary to light the men at work in the cuts. There were perhaps two hours in which it was difficult to see at a distance, but the dawn came early; hence no provision had been made for torches.

Five minutes before the hour the night shift boss lowered the gates in the dam, and as the rush from the sluices subsided his men quit work and climbed the bluff to the mess tent. The dwellings of the Midas, as has already been explained, sat back from the creek at a distance of a city block, the workings being thus partially hidden under the brow of the steep bank.

It is customary to leave a watchman in the pit during the noon and midnight hours, not only to see that strangers preserve a neutral attitude, but also to



The watchman sank with a faint cry.

watch the waste gates and water supply. The night man of the Midas had been warned of his responsibility and, knowing that much gold lay in his keeping, was disposed to gaze on the curious minded with the sourness of suspicion. Therefore, as a man leading a packhorse approached out of the gloom of the creek trail, his eyes were on him from the moment he appeared. The road wound along the gravel of the bars and passed in proximity to the flumes. However, the wayfarer paid no attention to them, and the watchman detected an explanatory weariness in his slow gait.

"Some prospector getting in from a trip," he thought.

The stranger stopped, scratched a match, and as he undertook to light his pipe, the observer caught the mahogany shine of a negro's face. The match sputtered out and then came impatient blasphemy as he searched for another.

"Evenin', sah! You-all oblige me with a match?" He addressed the watcher on the bank above and, without waiting a reply, began to climb upward.

No smoker on the trail will deny the luxury of a light to the most humble, so as the negro gained his level the man reached forth to accommodate him. Without warning the black man leaped forward with the ferocity of an animal and struck the other a fearful blow. The watchman sank with a faint, startled cry, and the African dragged him out of sight over the brow of the bank, where he rapidly tied him hand and foot, stuffing a gag into his mouth. At the same moment two other figures rounded the bend below and approached. They were

mounted and leading a third saddle horse as well as other pack animals. Reaching the workings, they dismounted. Then began a strange procedure, for one man clambered upon the

(Continued on Page Six.)

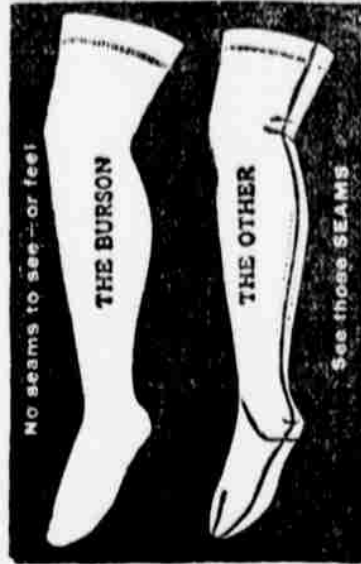
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