

# The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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(Continued from Page Three.)

laces and, with a pick, ripped out the rills. This was a matter of only a few seconds; then, seizing a shovel, he transferred the concentrates which lay to the bottom of the boxes into canvas sacks which his companion held. As each bag was filled it was tied and dumped into the cut. They counted but four boxes in this way, leaving the lower two-thirds of the mine untouched, for Anvil creek gold is coarse and the heart of the clean-up lies where it is thrown in. Gathering the sacks together, they lashed them upon the pack animals, then mounted the second string of sledges and began as before. Throughout it all they worked with feverish haste and in unbroken silence, every moment flashing quick glances at the figure of the lookout who stood on the crest above, half dimmed in the shadow of a willow clump. Judging by their rapidity and sureness, they were expert miners.

From the tent came the voices of the night shift at table and the faint rattle of dishes, while the canvas walls glowed from the lights within like great fireflies hidden in the grass. The foreman, flashing his meal, appeared at the door of the mess tent and, pausing to accustom his eyes to the gloom, peered perfunctorily toward the creek. The watchman detached himself from the shadow, moving out into plain sight, and the boss turned back. The two men below were now working on the sledges which lay close under the bank and were thus hidden from the tent.

McNamara's description of Anvil creek's riches had fired Helen Chester with the desire to witness a cleanup, and they had ridden out from town in time for supper at the claim. She had not known whether he led her, only understanding that provision for her entertainment would be made with the superintendent's wife. Upon recognizing the Midas she had endeavored to question him as to why her friends had been dispossessed, and he had answered, as it seemed, straight and true.

The ground was in dispute, he said—the other man claimed it—and while the litigation pending he was in charge for the court, to see that neither party received injury. He spoke adroitly, and it satisfied her to have the proposition resolved into such simplicity.

She had come prepared to spend the night and witness the early morning operation, so the receiver made the most of his opportunity. He showed her over the workings, explaining the sunny things that were strange to her, but only was he in himself a fascinating figure to any woman, but wherever he went men regarded him deferentially, and nothing affects a woman's judgment more promptly than this obvious sign of power. He spent the evening with her, talking of his early days and the things he had done in the west, his story matching the picturesqueness of her canvas walled quarters with their rough furnishings of skins and blankets. Being a keen observer as well as a finished raconteur, he had woven a spell of words about the girl, leaving her in a state of tumult and indecision when at last, toward midnight, he retired to his own tent. She knew to what end all this was working and yet knew not what her answer would be when the question came which lay behind it all. At moments she felt the wonderful attraction of the man, and still there was some distrust of him which she could not fathom. Again her thoughts reverted to Glenister, the impetuous, and she compared the two, so similar in some ways, so utterly opposed in others.

It was when she heard the night shift at their meal that she threw a silken shawl about her head, stepped into the cool night and picked her way down toward the roar of the creek. "A breath of air and then to bed," she thought. She saw the tall figure of the watchman and made for him. He seemed oddly interested in her approach, watching her very closely, almost as though alarmed. It was doubtless because there were so few women out here, or possibly on account of the lateness of the hour. Away with contentions! This was the land of instinct and impulse. She would talk to him. The man drew his hat more closely about his face and moved off as she came up. Glenister had been in her thoughts a moment since, and she now noted that here was another with the same great, square shoulders and erect head. Then she saw with a start that this one was a negro. He carried a Winchester and seemed to watch her carefully, yet with indifference.

To express her interest and to break

the silence, she questioned him, but at the sound of her voice he stepped toward her and spoke roughly:

"What?"

Then he paused and stammered in a strangely altered and unnatural voice: "Yass'm, I'm the watchman." She noted two other darkies at work below and was vaguely surprised, not so much at their presence, as at the manner in which they moved, for they seemed under stress of some great haste, running hither and yon. She saw horses standing in the trail and sensed something indefinitely odd and alarming in the air. Turning to the man she opened her mouth to speak, when from the rank grass under her feet came a noise which set her a-tingle and at which her suspicious leaped full to the solution. It was the groan of a man. Again he gave voice to his pain, and she knew that she stood face to face with something sinister. Tales of sluice robbers had come to her and rumors of the daring raids into which men were lured by the yellow

low sheen, and yet this was incredible. A hundred men lay within sound of her voice. She could hear their laughter. One was whistling a popular refrain. A quarter mile away on every hand were other camps. A scream from her would bring them all. Nonsense, this was no sluice robbery, and then the man in the bushes below moaned for the third time.

"What is that?" she said.

Without reply the negro lowered the muzzle of his rifle till it covered her breast, and at the same time she heard the double click of the hammer.

"Keep still and don't move," he warned. "We're desperate, and we can't take any chances, miss."

"Oh, you are stealing the gold?"

She was wildly frightened, yet stood still while the lookout anxiously divided his attention between her and the tents above until his companions signaled him that they were through and the horses were loaded. Then he spoke:

"I don't know what to do with you, but I guess I'll tie you up."

"What?" she said.

"I'm going to tie and gag you so you can't holler."

"Oh, don't you dare!" she cried fiercely. "I'll stand right here till you're gone, and I won't scream. I promise."

She looked up at him appealingly, at which he dipped his head, so that she caught only a glimpse of his face, and then backed away.

"All right! Don't try it because I'll be hidden in those bushes yonder at the bend, and I'll keep you covered till the others are gone." He leaped down the bank, ran to the cavalcade, mounted quickly, and the three lashed their horses into a run, disappearing up the trail around the sharp curve. She heard the blows of their whips as they whipped the pack horses.

They were long out of sight before the girl moved or made sound, although she knew that none of the three had paused at the bend. She only stood and gazed, for as they galloped off she had heard the serap of a broken sentence. It was but one excited word sounding through the rattle of hoofs—her own name—"Helen!" and yet because of it she did not voice the alarm, but rather began to piece together bit by bit the strange points of this adventure. She recalled the outlines of her captor with a wrinkle of perplexity. Her fright disappeared entirely, giving place to intense excitement. "No, no; it can't be! And yet I wonder if it is!" she cried. "Oh, I wonder if it could be!"

She opened her lips to cry aloud, then hesitated. She started toward the tents, then paused, and for many moments after the hoof beats had died out she stayed undecided. Surely she wished to give the signal to force the fierce pursuit. What meant this robbery, this defiance of the law, of her uncle's edicts and of McNamara? They were common thieves, criminals, outlaws, these men, deserving punishment, and yet she recalled a darker night, when she herself had sobbed and quivered with the terrors of pursuit and two men had shielded her with their bodies.

She turned and sped toward the tents, bursting in through the canvas door. Instantly every man rose to his feet at sight of her pallid face, her flashing eyes and ruffled hair.

"Sluice robbers!" she cried breathlessly. "Quick! A holdup! The watchman is hurt!"

A roar shook the night air, and the men poured out past her, while the day shift came tumbling forth from every quarter in various stages of undress.

"Where? Who did it? Where did they go?"

McNamara appeared among them, fierce and commanding, seeming to grasp the situation intuitively without explanation from her.

"Come on, men. We'll run 'em down. Get out the horses. Quick!"

He was mounted even as he spoke and other joined him. Then, turning, he waved his long arm up the valley toward the mountains. "Divide into squads of five and cover the hills! Run down to Discovery, one of you, and telephone to town for Voorhees and a posse."

As they made ready to ride away the girl cried:

"Stop! Not that way. They went down the gulch—three negroes."

the dim glow on the southern horizon, and the cavalcade rode away into the gloom.

## CHAPTER X.

UP creek the three negroes fled, past other camps, to where the stream branched. Here they took to the right and urged their horses along a forsaken trail to the headwaters of the little tributary and over the low saddle. They had endeavored to reach unfrequented paths as soon as possible in order that they might pass unnoticed. Before quitting the valley they halted their heaving horses and, selecting a stagnant pool, scoured the grease paint from their features as best they could. Their ears were strained for sounds of pursuit, but as the moments passed and none came the tension eased somewhat, and they conversed guardedly. As the morning light spread they crossed the moss capped summit of the range, but paused again, and, removing two saddles, hid them among the rocks. Starjack left the others here and rode southward down the Dry Creek trail toward town, while the partners shifted part of the weight from the overloaded pack mules to the remaining saddle animals and continued eastward along the barren comb of hills on foot, leading the five horses.

"It don't seem like we'll get away this easy," said Dextery, scanning the back trail. "If we do, I'll be tempted to follow the business regular. This grease paint on my face makes me

smell like a minstrel man. I bet we'll get some bully press notices tomorrow."

"I wonder what Helen was doing there," Glenister answered irrelevantly, for he had been more shaken by his encounter with her than at his part in the rest of the enterprise, and his mind, which should have been busied with the flight, held nothing but pictures of her as she stood in the half darkness under the fear of his Winchester. "What if she ever learned who that black ruffian was?" He quailed at the thought.

"Say, Dex, I am going to marry that girl."

"I dunno if you be or not," said Dextery. "Better watch McNamara."

"What?" The younger man stopped and stared. "What do you mean?"

"Go on. Don't stop the horses. I ain't blind. I kin put two an' two together."

"You'll never put those two together. Nonsense! Why, the man's a rascal. I wouldn't let him have her. Besides, it couldn't be. She'll find him out. I love her so much that—oh, my feelings are too big to talk about." He moved his hands eloquently. "You can't understand."

"Um-m! I s'pose not," grunted Dextery, but his eyes were level and held the light of the past.

"He may be a rascal," the old man continued, after a little. "I'll put in with you on that, but he's a handsome devil, and as for manners he makes you look like a logger. He's a brave man too. Them three qualities are trump cards and warranted to take most any queen in the human deck—red, white or yellow."

"If he dares," growled Glenister, while his thick brows came forward, and ugly lines hardened in his face.

In the gray of the early morning they descended the foothills into the wide valley of the Nome river and filed out across the rolling country to the river bluffs where, cleverly concealed among the willows, was a rocker. This they set up, then proceeded to wash the dirt from the sacks carefully, yet with the utmost speed, for there was serious danger of discovery. It was wonderful, this treasure of the richest ground since the days of '49, and the men worked with shining eyes and hands a-tremble. The gold was coarse, and many ragged, yellow lumps, too large to pass through the screen, rolled in the hopper, while the aprons belled with its weight. In the pans which they had provided there grew a gleaming heap of wet, raw gold.

Shortly, by divergent routes, the partners rode unnoticed into town and into the excitement of the holdup news, while the tardy still lingered over their breakfasts. Far out in the roadstead lay the Roanoke, black smoke pouring from her stack. A tug was returning from its last trip to her.

Glenister forced his lathered horse down to the beach and questioned the longshoremen who hung about.

"No. It's too late to get aboard—the last tender is on its way back," they informed him. "If you want to go to the 'outside,' you'll have to wait for the fleet. That only means another week, and—there she blows now."

A ribbon of white mingled with the velvet from the steamer's funnel, and there came a slow, throbbing, farewell blast.

Glenister's jaw clicked and squared. "Quick, you men!" he cried to the sailors. "I want the lightest dory on the beach and the strongest oarsmen in the crowd. I'll be back in five minutes. There's a hundred dollars in it for you if we catch that ship."

He whirled and spurred up through the mud of the streets. Bill Wheaton was snoring luxuriously when wrenched from his bed by a disheveled man who shook him into wakefulness and

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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