

"Well, I came to this ranch properly accredited, with a letter of introduction to Mr. Armstrong. If he had been here, and I had seen that my visit was unwelcome to him, I should instantly have taken my leave, but I refuse to have my liberty restricted by Mr. Armstrong's men."

"That's where you're wrong, Mr. Stranleigh. We're not his men; we're Mr. Armstrong's partners."

"A partner contributes his share to the expenses of the combination. I understand Mr. Armstrong bears the burden alone."

"We contribute our labor, which is cash in another form, therefore whether Mr. Armstrong is here, or whether he is away, we mean to defend our property. When you cross the imaginary line I spoke of, you are trespassing, and no jury will convict a man who shoots a trespasser after he has been fully warned, as we warn you, Mr. Stranleigh."

"I ADMIT, Mr. Dean, that you seem to have right on your side, even if there is not much wisdom back of it. But—why do you treat me as an enemy?"

"We don't like your actions. You're a city man, and we don't trust any such."

"But Mr. Banks, who gave me the letter to Mr. Armstrong, is not only a city man, but a lawyer. He has been here, and spoke highly of his reception."

"That was before the mine was opened, and as for lawyers, we hate 'em like rattlesnakes. The opening of the silver mine opened the rattlesnake season, and that's why this lawyer snake in Bleachers is trying to cheat Armstrong out of his ranch. He came over here with a mining engineer, and learnt the value of the ground. How do we know you're not a mining engineer?"

"I regret to say I'm nothing so useful."

"And didn't you send Miss Armstrong into Bleachers to see that rascal Ricketts? What connection have you with him?"

"None at all, Mr. Dean. I never saw Ricketts in my life, and never heard of him before the day you mistook me for the sheriff."

Dean glanced at his companions, who had taken no part in the colloquy, but who listened with an interest at once critical and suspicious. It was evident their distrust could not be dissipated by stream-of-consciousness talk, and for a moment Stranleigh was tempted to tell them that he had loaned five thousand dollars to Miss Armstrong, in hope that this money would

"There would be no use in my making that promise; never in my life have I attended to my own business. My affairs are all looked after by other men. They live in New York and in London, and although I make a decision now and then, I do that as seldom as possible. It fatigues me."

"So you're a loafer?"

"Exactly, and I freely give you my promise not to loaf about your silver mine."

"Are you so rich as that?"

"You're not consistent, Mr. Dean. How can you ask me to attend to my business if you do not attend to yours? Whether I am rich or poor is none of your affair."

"True," agreed the ring-leader, nonchalantly, "we'll let it go at that."

Stranleigh, with a smile, nodded to the group.

"I wish you a very good day," he said, and, turning, strolled down to the house at a leisurely gait quite in keeping with his self-declared character of loafer. His back offered an excellent target, but no man raised a rifle, and Stranleigh never looked over his shoulder, never hurried a step, but walked as one very sure of himself, and in no fear of attack.

"Stuck-up cuss," said Dean to the others. "I'd like to take him down a peg. Let's get back to the bunkhouse and talk it over."

WHEN the Earl of Stranleigh entered the house, he was accosted by Miss Armstrong, on whose fair face were traces of anxiety, which his lordship thought were easily accounted for by the fact that the ranch was to be sold in less than a fortnight.

"I have been waiting to speak to you, Mr. Stranleigh," she said. "Won't you come into the verandah, where we can talk?"

"With pleasure, Miss Armstrong."

When they were seated, she continued: "You've been talking with the men?"

"We had a little chat together."

"Did they tell you anything of their intentions?"

"No; except that they were determined not to let me examine the mine."

"Ah, they have distrusted you from the first. Did you insist on visiting it?"

"I have visited it."

"Without asking one of them to accompany you?"

"I regarded them as hired men. They say they are your father's partners."

"So they are."

"That being the case, I must apologize to them. I thought when you ordered Dean to bring in my luggage, and he obeyed with such docility, that he was your servant. I intended to offer him money for that service, but I suppose I must not."

"Indeed, you must not do that. They will do anything for a friend, but nothing for one of whom they are suspicious. Their distrust, once aroused, is not easily removed. I am sure, however, you were tactful with them."

Stranleigh smiled ruefully.

"I am not so certain of that myself. I fear I failed in diplomacy."

"I do wish father were here," she said, ignoring his last remark. "I'm worried about the men."

"What do they know of your trouble with the lawyer, Ricketts?"

"They know all about it, and they now threaten to march to Bleachers in a body and, as we say, shoot up the town, including Ricketts, of course."

"When do they mean to do this?"

"The day of the auction sale."

"Don't they understand the futility of such a thing?"

"It would cause an infinite amount of harm; they would be pitting themselves against the United States Government, which is a mere name to them, carrying no authority. All their lives have been spent in camps, where the only law is that of the mob. I have tried to influence them, but

they regard me as merely a woman, and a woman from the east, at that, who has no knowledge of practical affairs; so I have good reason for wishing my father home again."

"I shouldn't trouble too much, if I were you, Miss Armstrong. If the men intended to carry out their resolution tomorrow, or next day, there might be reason for anxiety, but we have, luckily, plenty of time in which to act. The immediate thing is to find

your father. He's travelling somewhere between here and Chicago, on foot. May I see the latest letter he wrote you?"

The girl brought it to him.

"May I take this with me?"

"Yes. What do you intend to do?"

Stranleigh smiled.

"Oh, I never do anything. As I was telling your men, who wished me to mind my own business, I always have people to do that for me. I'm a great believer in the expert. Now, America is the land of experts, and the man to deal with this case is a detective. I shall get into touch by telegraph with a man I know in New York. His men invariably track down anyone they want, and it will be an easy task to find your father, who is tramping the straightest possible line between Chicago and this ranch. I shall give instructions for money to be handed to Mr. Armstrong, with directions to take the next train to Bleachers, as his presence here is desirable. I shall do nothing but send a telegram, and my friend will do the rest. If you will assist me by ordering my horse, I shall be ready to start within ten minutes. I'd order the horse myself, but I don't think your men would obey me."



Not less than the time mentioned Dean brought the horse to the door. The men were standing in front of their cabin, looking on. They quite naturally believed their guest had taken alarm, and was making off to some district where he would be in less danger. When his lordship came out to the front, Dean was overcome with astonishment. His lordship had dressed himself in a riding costume such as an Englishman would wear at home. Dean and his comrades had never seen such an outfit, and they greeted his appearance with a roar of laughter.

Stranleigh sprang into his saddle with the agility of a cowboy, and smiling good-humoredly at his audience, raised his hat to them, and rode off.

As Stranleigh's horse entered the forest, the young man began to ponder the problem that confronted him. When the unfortunate Armstrong borrowed money from Ricketts, he had, of course, fully explained the situation to him. The lender had examined the property in company with a mining engineer, and this expert doubtless took away with him some of the ore to analyze at his leisure. Ricketts, being in possession of the engineer's estimate of the pit's value, had probably formed a syndicate, or perhaps made an arrangement with other capitalists, to see him through the purchase. Undoubtedly Ricketts expected no competition when the property came to auction, but if he was shrewd, as was certain to be the case, events had occurred which might stimulate thought regarding his position.

Miss Armstrong had ridden out to Bleachers having in her possession five thousand dollars, the face value of the note. How had she obtained the money, Ricketts would wonder. Whoever had advanced the money must have known the girl could offer no security for its repayment. Only a rich man could afford to throw away a sum so considerable.

It was likely that such reflections as these had put Ricketts on the alert, and the sudden advent in Bleachers of a smartly-costumed stranger; a stranger coming from the direction of the ranch, would convince Ricketts that here was an opponent. In Bleachers, too, each inhabitant very probably knew every one else's business. That he could elude the astute Ricketts was therefore exceedingly doubtful, and Stranleigh already knew enough about the lawlessness of the district to believe that he might ride into considerable danger. In that sparsely-settled country, people were not too scrupulous in their methods of getting rid of an enemy. He wondered how far down the line the next town was, for he was convinced that any telegraphing from Bleachers would speedily be known to Ricketts. Would it be possible to deflect his course, and make for the next station eastward? He possessed no map of the State, however, and there was little chance of meeting anyone, so there seemed nothing for it but to push on to Bleachers.

At this point his meditations were interrupted by the dimly-heard sound of horse's hoofs on the trail behind him. He pulled up, and listened. Pausing for a few minutes, he heard nothing more, and so went on again, but with an uneasy feeling of being followed. He determined not to camp out when night overtook him, but to hurry on until he reached Bleachers. It had taken two days to reach the ranch, but that was because (Continued on Page 10)



When they were seated she continued: "You have been talking with the men?"



gain some sort of concession from the obdurate lawyer. But he remembered that the girl was in constant communication with these men, and if she had not already informed them of his futile assistance, it was because she did not want them to know.

Dean pondered for a few moments, then pursued: "May I take it you agree hereafter to attend to your own business?"

Stranleigh laughed.