

THE END OF THE CONTEST

Lord Stranleigh Makes a Gift and Takes His Leave

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They stopped their horses and made the transfer of money where they stood

SYNOPSIS—Lord Stranleigh, in quest of health and recreation, journeys to the Armstrong ranch in Wyoming. Approaching the ranch, he is shot by one of the ranch men, who suspects him of having designs on a silver mine being developed on the property. His wound is dressed by the charming and capable daughter of the house, whose father is absent trying to raise money to save his property from a rapacious lawyer, Ricketts. Stranleigh joins forces with Miss Armstrong against the lawyer, but his motives are misconstrued by the ranch men, who secretly take him prisoner. He escapes, holds the men at bay, and rejoins the astonished girl at the ranch house.

I THOUGHT you had gone to New York," she said.

"I merely traveled to the station east of Bleachers."

"You've not been stopping at that wretched tavern in Bleachers ever since?"

"Oh no, no. I received a pressing invitation from friends, with a prospect of some shooting, so I've been staying with them."

"I hope you have had a pleasant time."

"Yes; I heard more entertaining stories than ever I listened to in a similar period."

"Good shooting?"

"Well; limited in quantity, but of fine quality. Indeed, I may boast a record: I hit everything I aimed at. Camp fare, however, left much to be

desired, so you may imagine how glad I am to return."

"I shall be pleased to offer you something better. How would broiled trout, caught this morning, suit you?"

"Excellent!" cried Stranleigh. "Who caught the trout?"

"I did. I must have had a premonition that you would return, famished for trout, and I had quite an adventure, or rather, plunged into a mystery which I have not yet solved. I heard the sound of firing; first a single shot, then a fusillade. I could not tell from whence the sound came. I hurried home with my basket, but there was no one in sight. After a time Jim came in, very crestfallen, it seemed to me, his ear tied up clumsily in a handkerchief. He had been shot through the ear. I asked him how the accident happened, but Jim tells the truth only when it suits his convenience."

"Many of us are like that," said Stranleigh.

"Well, this time it didn't suit his convenience."

"What did he say?"

"THAT the boys were having a shooting match. I told him I had heard the firing. He said it was the first shot that 'did for him.' They had some bet on, he said, as to who could fire quickest at a flying mark. In his hurry to get ready he had mishandled his gun, and sent a bullet through his ear. The others had then fired almost simultaneously."

"I fear you are too skeptical, Miss Armstrong. Why shouldn't that be a true story?"

"You underestimate my intelligence, Mr. Stranleigh," said the girl, banteringly. "The wound in Jim's ear was not caused by any gun he held. His ear would have been blackened with gunpowder, and in all likelihood would have been partly torn away. Then, too, a mishandled gun would have fired upwards. The bullet that wounded Jim was fired from a distance, by some one higher up. The wound was clean cut, slightly inclining downwards, while Jim's bullet, coming from an old-fashioned rifle, would have made a bigger hole."

"By Jove! Miss Armstrong, you have worked it out logically and cleverly. Did you note anything else?"

"Yes; the handkerchief in which he had bound his ear was of a finer cambrie than we have hereabouts, and the corner was embroidered with a very delicately worked crest."

"A crest?" echoed Stranleigh, rather taken aback.

"I asked Jim where he had got the handkerchief. He seemed confused, and said he had always had it. Bought it at a five-cent store in Denver."

"You think it cost more than five cents?"

"It cost more than twenty-five cents."

"Perhaps he stole it?"

"Jim might shoot a man, but he'd never steal."

"When you discover the owner of the handkerchief, you will have solved the mystery," remarked Stranleigh, calmly.

"I think so, too," said the girl. "Now I'm going to cook your trout."

The three following days were among the most enjoyable Stranleigh had ever spent. He asked Miss Armstrong to show him that part of the river where she had caught the trout. Heretofore, she had used a baited hook when fishing, landing her spoil with a stout pole; now, she was to be initiated in the delicate mysteries of fly fishing. Stranleigh remembered the story told of an English official sent to view the debatable land adjoining the far western boundary of Canada, who reported the territory useless, because the fish wouldn't rise to the fly. He wondered what lure the official used, for here they rose readily enough, and fought like demons until Miss Armstrong deftly lifted them from the water in Stranleigh's landing net, the like of which she had never seen before.

BUT in spite of the excellent sport he was enjoying, Stranleigh became more and more anxious as time went on. Nothing had been heard from Stanley Armstrong. His lordship began to fear that the detective had failed in his search. On the morning of the fourth day he donned an ordinary tweed suit, and put in his pocket an automatic revolver of the latest construction—light, accurate and deadly.

The day of the auction was drawing uncomfortably near. He was determined that his journey should not be interrupted, as his former ride had been. Aside from this, he expected to carry with him a large amount of money, and if word of that got abroad a hold-up was within the range of possibility. The coterie confided in the bunk house would doubtless learn that they were their own jailors, and with the gang once free upon the landscape, he anticipated interruption which, if successful, would completely upset his plans.

"Do you mean to fish today?" asked Miss Armstrong, when he came in to breakfast. He had appeared unexpectedly early that morning.

"To fish?" echoed Stranleigh. "Yes, in a manner of speaking. Isn't there a text which speaks about being fishers of men? I'm going fishing for your father. We should have had him here before this, but now the need of him becomes imperative. I think a telegram must await me in Bleachers. If not, I shall communicate again with New York and wait for a reply."

Stranleigh walked up the hill to the bunk house, and rapped at the door with the butt of his riding whip. Dean himself threw open the door, and he could not conceal his astonishment at seeing the young man standing there, apparently unarmed.

"Good morning, Jim," said Stranleigh, cordially. "I want a few minutes' conversation with you and your comrades before I leave for Bleachers."

"They're all in their bunks yet, except myself; but I guess they're wide enough awake to hear what you say. Won't you come inside?"

"Thank you," said Stranleigh, stepping across the threshold; then, to the "bunkers": "The top of the morning to you! Has wisdom come to you since I left you? Do you still intend to 'shoot up' Bleachers on auction day?"

"You bet!" said Dean.

Stranleigh seated himself in the chair he had occupied when a prisoner.

"How did you propose to get out?"

"By the same way you did," responded Dean, with determination.

"An inconvenient exit!" said Stranleigh. "I speak from my own sooty experience. Why not