

The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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[Continued from last week.]

"He didn't get away," said McNamara. "He's in town yet. Just let me hand him in jail on some excuse! I'll hold him till snow flies." Struve sank into a chair and lit a cigarette with wavering hand.

"This is a hell of a game, ain't it, Mac? If you s'pose we'll win?"

The man overhead picked up his ears.

"Win? Aren't we winning? What do you call this? I only hope we can lay hands on Wheaton. He knows things. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but more is worse. Lord! If only I had a man for judge in place of Sullivan! I don't know why I thought him."

"That's right. Too weak. He hasn't got the backbone of an angleworm. He ain't half the man that his niece is. There's a girl for you! Say, what'd we do without her, eh? She's a pipin'!" Glenister felt a sudden tightening of every muscle. What right had that man's liquor-sodden lips to speak so of her?

"She's a brave little woman all right. Just look how she worked Glenister and his fool partner. It took nerve to bring in those instructions of yours alone, and if it hadn't been for her we'd never have won like this. It makes me laugh to think of those two men stowing her away in their stateroom while they slept between decks with the sheep, and her with the papers in her bosom all the time. Then, when we got ready to do business, why, she up and talks them into giving us possession of their mine without a fight. That's what I call reciprocating a man's affection."

Glenister's nails cut into his flesh, while his face went livid at the words. He could not grasp it at once. It made him sick—physically sick—and for many moments he strove blindly to beat back the hideous suspicion, the horror that the lawyer had aroused. His was not a doubting disposition, and to him the girl had seemed as one pure, mysterious, apart, angelically incapable of deceit. He had loved her, feeling that some day she would return his affection without fail. In her great, unclouded eyes he had found no lurking place for double dealing. Now—God! It couldn't be that all the time she had known!

He had lost a part of the lawyer's speech, but peered through his observation hole again.

McNamara was at the window gazing out into the dark street, his back toward the lawyer, who lolled in the chair, babbling garrulously of the girl. Glenister ground his teeth—a frenzy possessed him to loose his anger, to slip through the frail ceiling with naked hands and fall vindictively upon the two men.

"She looked good to me the first time I saw her," continued Struve. He paused, and when he spoke again a change had come over his features. "Say, I'm crazy about her, Mac. I tell you, I'm crazy—and she likes me—I know she does—or, anyway, she would!"

"Do you mean that you're in love with her?" asked the man at the window without shifting his position. It seemed that utter indifference was in his question, although where the light shone on his hands, tight clinched behind his back, they were bloodless.

"Love her? Well—that depends—ha! You know how it is," he chuckled coarsely. His face was gross and bestial. "I've got the judge where I want him, and I'll have her!"

His niece's words died with a gurgle, for McNamara had silently leaped

his right despite the man's frantic struggles. McNamara's head was thrust forward from his shoulders, peering into the lawyer's face. Struve tore ineffectually at the iron arm which was squeezing his life out, while for endless minutes the other leaned his weight against him, his idle hand behind his back, his legs braced like stone columns as he watched his victim's struggles abate.

Struve fought and wrenched while his breath caught in his throat with horrid, choking sounds, but gradually

his eyes rolled farther and farther back. They stared out of his blackened visage, straight up toward the ceiling, toward the hole through which Glenister peered. His struggles lessened, his chin sagged, and his tongue protruded, then he sat loose and still. The politician lunged into the room so that he fell limply upon his face, then stood watching him. Finally, McNamara passed out of the watcher's vision, returning with a water bucket. With his foot he rolled the unconscious wretch upon his back, then drenched him. Replacing the pail, he seated himself, lit a cigar and watched the return of life into his victim. He made no move, even to drag him from the pool in which he lay.

Struve groaned and shuddered, twisted to his side, and at last sat up weakly. In his eyes there was now a great terror, while in place of his drunkenness was only fear and faintness—abject fear of the great bulk that sat and smoked and stared at him so fishily. He felt uncertainty of his throat and groaned again.

"Why did you do that?" he whispered, but the other made no sign. He tried to rise, but his knees relaxed. He staggered and fell. At last he gained his feet and made for the door. Then, when his hand was on the knob, McNamara spoke through his teeth, without removing his cigar.

"Don't ever talk about her again. She is going to marry me."

When he was alone, he looked curiously up at the ceiling over his head. "The rats are thick in this shack," he mused. "Seems to me I heard a whole swarm of them."

A few moments later a figure crept through the hole in the rafters of the house next door and thence down into the street. A black abey was the slow moving form of Attorney Struve. Had a stranger met them both he would not have known which of the two had felt at his throat the clutch of a strangler, for each was drawn and haggard and swayed as he went.

Glenister unconsciously turned toward his cabin, but at leaving the lighted streets the thought of its darkness and silence made him shudder. Not now! He could not bear that stillness and the company of his thoughts. He dared not be alone. Dextery would be downtown undoubtedly, and he, too, must get into the light and turmoil. He licked his lips and found that they were cracked and dry.

At rare intervals during the past years he had staggered in from a long march where for hours he had waged a bitter war with cold and hunger, his limbs clumsy with fatigue, his garments wet and stiff, his mind slack and sullen. At such extreme seasons he had felt a consuming thirst, a thirst which burned and scorched until his very bones cried out feverishly—not a thirst for water or a thirst which eaten snow could quench, but a savage yearning of his whole exhausted system for some stimulant, for some coursing fiery fluid that would burn and strangle, a thirst for whisky, for brandy! Remembering these occasional ferocious desires, he had become charitable to such unfortunates as were too weak to withstand similar temptations.

Now with a shock he caught himself in the grip of a thirst as insistent as though the cold bore down and the weariness of endless heavy miles wrapped him about. It was no foolish wish to drown his thoughts or to banish the grief that preyed upon him, but only thirst, thirst—a crying, trembling, physical lust to quench the fires that burned inside. He remembered that it had been more than a year since he had tasted whisky. Now the fever of the past few hours had parched his every tissue.



His miserable words died with a gurgle, and throttled him where he sat, pinning him to the wall. Glenister saw the big politician shift his fingers slightly on Struve's throat and then drop his left hand to his side, holding his victim writhing and helpless with

"Well, so she has, but what of it? I'm thirsty. She's going to marry McNamara. I've been a fool." He ground his teeth and reached for the drink with which the boy had returned.

"McNamara is a crook, but he's a man, and he never drank a drop in his life." The girl said it casually, calmly, but the other stopped the glass halfway to his lips.

"Well, what of it? Go on. You're good at W. C. T. U. talk. Virtue becomes you."

She flushed, but continued: "It simply occurred to me that if you aren't strong enough to handle your own throat, you're not strong enough to beat a man who has mastered his."

Glenister looked at the whisky a moment, then set it back on the tray.

"Bring two lemonades," he said, and with a hunch which was half a sob Cherry Malotte leaned forward and kissed him.

"You're too good a man to drink. Now, tell me all about it."

"Oh, it's too long! I've just learned that the girl is in hand and glove, with the judge and McNamara—that's all. She's an advance agent of their lookout. She brought in their instructions to Struve and persuaded Dex and me to let them jump our claim. She got us to trust in the law and in her uncle. Yes, she hypnotized my property out of me and gave it to her lover, this ward politician. Oh, she's smooth, with all her innocence! Why, when she smiles, she makes you feel good and warm, and her eyes are as honest and clear as a mountain pool, but she's wrong—she's wrong—ah!—great God! how I love her!" He dropped his face into his hands.

When she had pleaded with him for himself a moment before Cherry Malotte was genuine and girlish, but now as he spoke thus of the other woman a change came over her which he was too disturbed to note. She took on the subtlety that masked her as a rule, and her eyes were not pleasant.

"I could have told you all that and more."

"More! What more?" he questioned.

"Do you remember when I warned you and Dextery that they were coming



"You're too good a man to drink" to search your cabin for the gold? Well, that girl put them on to you. I found it out afterward. She keeps the keys to McNamara's safety vault where your dust lies, and she's the one who handles the judge. It isn't McNamara at all." The woman lied easily, fluently, and the man believed her.

strangled a madness to tear it from his hands. Instead, he hurried back to the theater and up to a box, where he drew the curtains.

"Whisky!" he said thickly to the waiter. "Bring it to me fast. Don't you hear? Whisky!"

Across the theater Cherry Malotte had seen him enter and jerk the curtains together. She arose and went to him, entering without ceremony.

"What's the matter, boy?" she questioned.

"Ah, I'm glad you came. Talk to me."

"Thank you for your few well chosen remarks," she laughed. "Why don't you ask me to spring some good, original jokes? You look like the finish to a six day go-as-you-please. What's up?"

She talked to him for a moment until the waiter entered. Then, when she saw what he bore, she snatched the glass from the tray and poured the whisky on the floor. Glenister was on his feet and had her by the wrist.

"What do you mean?" he said roughly.

"It's whisky, boy," she cried, "and you don't drink!"

"Of course it's whisky! Bring me another!" he shouted at the attendant.

"What's the matter?" Cherry insisted. "I never saw you act so. You know you don't drink. I won't let you. It's booze—booze, I tell you, fit for fools and brawlers. Don't drink it, Roy. Are you in trouble?"

"I say I'm thirsty—and I will have it! How do you know what it is to smolder inside and feel your veins burn dry?"

"It's something about that girl," the woman said, with quiet conviction. "She's double crossed you."

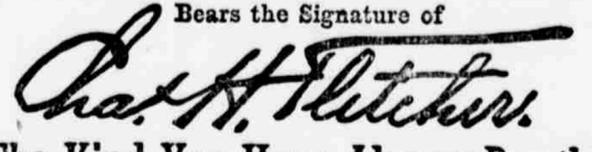
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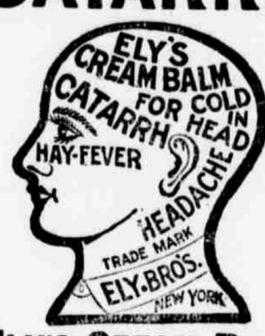
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