

# The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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In fact it is customary for the case keeper to sit on the opposite side of the table from the dealer, with a device before him resembling an abacus, or

business adding machine. When a card is removed from the face box by the dealer, the "brass driver" moves a button opposite a corresponding card in his little machine, in order that the players at a glance may tell what spots have been played or are still in the box. His duties, though simple, are important, for should he make an error and should the position of his counters not tally with the cards in the box on the "last turn," all bets on the table are declared void. When honestly dealt, Faro is the fairest of all gambling games, but it is intricate and may hide much knavery. When the game is crooked it is fatal, for out of the ingenuity of generations of card sharks there have been evolved a multitude of devices with which to confuse the unsuspecting. These are so carefully masked that none but the initiated may know them, while the freemasonry of the craft is strong and discovery almost impossible.

Instead of using a familiar arrangement like the "needle-tell," wherein an invisible needle pricks the dealer's thumb, thus signaling the presence of certain cards, the Bronco Kid had determined to use the "sand-tell." In other words, he would employ a "straight box," but a deck of cards, certain ones of which had been roughened or sandpapered slightly, so that, by pressing more heavily on the top or exposed end, the one beneath would stick to its neighbor above and thus enable him to deal two with one motion if the occasion demanded. This roughness would likewise enable him to detect the hidden presence of a marked card by the faintest scratching sound when he dealt. In this manipulation it would be necessary also to shave the edges of some of the pasteboards a trifle, so that when the deck was forced firmly against one side of the box there would be exposed a fraction of the small figure in the left hand corner of the concealed cards. Long practice in the art of jugglery lends such proficiency as to baffle discovery and rob the game of its uncertainty as surely as the player is robbed of his money. It is, of course, vital that the confederate case keeper be able to interpret the dealer's signs perfectly in order to move the sliding ebony disks to correspond, else trouble will accrue at the completion of the hand when the cases come out wrong.

Having completed his instructions, the proprietor went forward, and Cherry wormed her way toward the roulette wheel. She wished to watch Gleister, but could not get near him because of the crowd. The men would not make room for her. Every eye was glued upon the table as though salvation lurked in its rows of red and black. They were packed behind it until the croupier had barely room to spin the ball, and although he faced them back, they pressed forward again inch by inch, drawn by the song of the ivory, drunk with its worship, modulated by the breath of Chance.

Cherry gathered that Gleister was still waiting for a glimpse of the wheel rack between the shoulders of those ahead showed that the checks were nearly out of it.

Plainly it was but a question of minutes, so she backed out and took her station beside the faro table where the Bronco Kid was dealing. His face wore its colorless mask of indifference; his long white hands moved slowly with the certainty that betokened an absolute mastery of his art. He was waiting. The ex-camp dealer was keeping cases.

The group left the roulette table in a few moments and surrounded her. Gleister among the others. He was not the man she knew. In place of the dreamy languor with which he had left her, his face was flushed and reckless, his collar was open, showing the base of his throat, rounded neck, while the last of the game had covered him till he was again the vibrant, nuttish, primitive man of the frontier. His self-reliance and dignity were gone. He had tried the new ways, and they were not for him. He slipped back, and the past swallowed him.

After leaving Cherry he had sought some mental relief by idly picking the silver in his pocket. He had let the coins he had double, then double again, and again. He had been indifferent whether he won or lost, so absorbed in a reckless disregard for the laws of probability, thinking that he would shortly lose the money he had won and then go home. He did not want it. When his luck remained the same, he raised the stakes, but it did not change—he could not lose. Before he realized it,

other men were betting with him, animated purely by greed and craze of the spot. First one, then another joined till game after game was closed, and each moment the crowd had grown in size and enthusiasm so that its fever crept into him, imperceptibly at first, but ever increasing, till the number numbered him.

He paid no attention to Cherry as he took his seat. He had eyes for nothing but the "layout." She clucked her hands and prayed for his ruin.

"What's your limit, Kid?" he inquired.

"One hundred and two," the Kid answered, which in the voracious means that may sum up to \$200 may be laid on one card save only on the last turn, when the amount is lessened by half.

Without more ado they commenced. The Kid handled his cards smoothly, surely, paying and taking bets with machine-like calm. The onlookers ceased talking and prepared to watch, for now came the crucial test of the evening. Faro is to other games as war is to jackstraws.

For a time Gleister won steadily till there came a moment when many stacks of chips lay on the dence. Cherry saw the Kid "flash" to the case keeper, and the next moment he had "pulled two." The dence lost. It was his first substantial gain, and the players paid no attention. At the end of half an hour the windings were slight-

ly in favor of the "brass driver," as Gleister said: "This is too slow, I want action."

"All right," snuffed the proprietor. "We'll double the dence."

Thus it became possible to bet \$400 on a card, and the Kid began to play. Gleister now bet heavily, not in large amounts, but in small, talking continually, "Change bet," "See cards played this time." The gambler was a superb actor. He was wonderful. His look seemed to fit the crowd's eagerness, while, to add to his impatience, the cases came wrong twice in succession, so that those who would have bet heavily upon the last turn had their money given back.

Cherry saw the confusion of the "brass driver" even quicker than did Bronco. Today was growing rattled. The dealer's work was too fast for him, and yet he could offer no sign of distress for fear of humiliation at the hands of those crowded close to his shoulder. In the same way the owner of the game could make no objection to his helper's incompetence for fear that some bystander would volunteer to fill the man's part. There were many present capable of the trick. He could only glare helplessly across the table at his unfortunate confederate.

They had not gone far on the next game before Cherry's quick eye detected a sign which the man misinterpreted. She addressed him quietly, "You'd better brush up your plumes."

In spite of his anger the Bronco Kid studied. Hummer in him was strangely withered and distorted, yet here was a thrust he would always remember and resent with gloom in years to come. He feared there were other faro dealers present who might understand the hint, but there was none save Moxley Mullins, whose face was a study—merit seemed to be stranger than life. A moment later the girl spoke to the case keeper again.

"Let me take your place; your reins are unbacked."

Today glanced imploringly at the Kid, who caught Cherry's reassuring look and nodded, so he arose and the girl slid into the vacant chair. "This case might make you to error," the dealer knew that her keen words were sharpened to hate—it showed in her face. If Gleister escaped destruction to-night it would be because human means could not accomplish his downfall.

In the mind of the new case keeper there was but one thought—his must be broken. Humiliation, disgrace, ruin, ridicule were to be his. If he should be downed, disgraced and discomfited, then perhaps he would turn to her as he had in the bygone days. He was slipping away from her—this was her last chance. She began her duties easily, and her alertness stimulated Bronco till his senses, too, grew sharper; his observation more acute and behind-the-scenes. Gleister swore beneath his breath that the cards were bewitched. He was like a drunken man, now as truly intoxicated as though the fumes of wine had befogged his brain. He swayed in his seat, the veins of his neck thickened and throbbled, his features were congested. After awhile he spoke.

"I want a brass limit. Is this some boy's game? Throw her open."

The gambler shot a triumphant glance at the girl and acquiesced. "All right, the limit is the blue sky. Play your checks to the roof pole." He began to shuffle.

Within the crowded circle the air was hot and fetid with the breath of men. The sweat trickled down Gleister's brown skin, dripping from his jaw unnoted. He arose and tipped off his coat, while those standing behind shifted and squinted their feet impatiently. Besides Roy, there were but three men playing. They were the ones who had won heaviest at that. Now that luck was against them they were loath to quit.

Cherry was annoyed by Gleister's breathing at her shoulder, and glanced back to find the little man who had been so excited earlier in the evening. His mouth was agape, his eyes wide, the muscles about his lips twitching. He had lost back, long since, the hundreds he had won and more besides. She searched the figures walking her about and saw no women. They had been crowded out long since. It seemed as though the table formed the bottom of a sloping pit of human faces—eager, tense, staring.

It was well she was here, she thought, else this task might fall. She would help to blast Gleister, desolate him, humiliate him. Ah, but wouldn't she!

Roy bet \$100 on the "popular" card. On the third turn he lost. He bet \$200 next and lost. He set out a stack of \$400 and lost for the third time. Fortune had turned her face. He ground his teeth and doubled until the stakes grew enormous, while the dealer dealt monotonously. The spots flashed and disappeared, taking with them wagers after wagers. Gleister became conscious of a ringing, red fury which he had had shift to monster. It was not his money—what if he did lose? He would stay until he won. He would win. This luck would not, could not, last—and yet with diabolic persistence he continued to choose the losing cards. The other men first bettor till he yielded to their judgment, when the dealer took their money also.

Strange to say, the fickle goddess had really shifted her banner at last, and the Bronco Kid was dealing straight faro now. He was too good a player to force a winding hand, and Gleister's ill fortunes became as phenomenal as his winning had been. The girl who figured in this drama was keyed to the highest tension, her eyes now on her counters, now searching the profile of her victim. Gleister continued to lose and lose and lose, while the girl glared at long intervals he won a bet, she shrieked and shivered for fear he might escape. If only he would risk it all—

everything he had. He would have to come to her then!

The end was closer than she realized. The throng hung breathless upon each move of the players, while there was no sound but the noise of shifting chips and the distant jangle of the orchestra. The luckiest set far forward upon his perch, his hands upon his knees, his eyes frozen to the board, a dead glare dimpled his teeth. Crowded upon his platform were officers tense and motionless as statues. When a man spoke or coughed, a score of eyes stared at him accusingly, then dropped to the table again.

Gleister took from his clothes a bundle of banknotes so thick that it required his two hands to compass it. Onlookers saw that the bills were nearly yoked. No one spoke while he counted them rapidly, glanced at the dealer, who nodded, then slid them forward till they rested on the king. He placed a "squeegee" on the pile. A great sigh of broken breaths swept through the crowd. The north had never known a bet like this—it meant a fortune. Here was a tale for one's grandchildren, that a man should win millions in an evening, then lose it in one deal. This final bet represented more than many of them had ever seen at one time before. Its fate lay on a single card.

Cherry Mabette's fingers were like ice and shook till the buttons of her case keeper rattled, her heart raced till she could not breathe, while something rose up and choked her. If Gleister won this bet, he would quit. She felt it. If he lost, all that could the Kid there feel, the man who was playing for a paltry vengeance, compared to her whose hope of happiness, of love, of life lay on this wager!

Evidently the Bronco Kid knew what card lay next below, for he offered her no sign, and as Gleister leaned back he slowly and firmly pushed the top card out of the box. Although this was the biggest turn of his life, he betrayed no honor. His gesture displayed the nine of diamonds, and the crowd breathed heavily. The king had not won. Would it lose? Every gaze was welded to the tiny nicked box. If the face card lay next beneath the nine spot, the heaviest wager in Alaska would have been lost; if it still remained hidden on the next turn, the money would be safe for a moment.

Slowly the white hand of the dealer moved back. His middle finger touched the nine of diamonds. It slid smoothly out of the box, and there in its place frowned the king of clubs. At last the silence was broken.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

—Mrs. Mary Nelson, living northeast of this city, lost a pocketbook containing \$67.50 while coming to town to do shopping.

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