

# The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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[Continued.]

"It's a lie," shouted the young hoarsely. "A damned lie! You wouldn't let me in for fear I'd kick, eh? Well, you were right. I will kick. You've hinted about my feelings for Miss Chester. Let me tell you that she is engaged to marry McNamara and that she's nothing to me. Now, then, let me tell you further that you won't break into her house and hang her uncle, even if he is a reprobate. No, sir! This isn't the time for violence of that sort. We'll win without it. If we can't, let's fight like men and not hunt in a pack like wolves. If you want to do something, put us back on our mines and help us hold them, but, for God's sake, don't descend to assassination and the tactics of the Mafia!"

"We knew you would make that kind of a talk," said the speaker, while the rest murmured grudgingly. One of them spoke up.

"We've talked this over in cold blood, Glenister, and it's a question of their lives or our liberty. The law don't enter into it."

"That's right," echoed another at his elbow. "We can't seize the claims, because McNamara's got soldiers to back him up. They'd shoot us down. You ought to be the last one to object."

He saw that dispute was futile. Determination was stamped on their faces too plain for mistake, and his argument had no more effect on them than had the pale rays of the lantern beside him, yet he continued:

"I don't deny that McNamara deserves lynching, but Stillman doesn't. He's a weak old man—some one laughed derisively—"and there's a woman in the house. He's all she has in the world to depend upon, and you would have to kill her to get at him. If you must follow this course, take the others, but leave him alone."

"They only shook their heads, while several pushed by him even as he spoke. "We're going to distribute our favors equal," said a man as he left. They were actuated by what they called justice, and he could not sway them. The life and welfare of the north were in their hands, as they thought, and there was not one to hesitate. Glenister implored the chairman, but the man answered him:

"It's too late for further discussion, and let me remind you of your promise. You're bound by every obligation that exists for an honorable man."

"Oh, don't think that I'll give the snap away!" said the other; "but I warn you again not to enter Stillman's house."

He followed out into the night to find that Dextery had disappeared, evidently wishing to avoid argument. Roy had seen signs of unrest beneath the prospector's restraint during the past few days, and indications of a fierce hunger to vent his spleen on the men who had robbed him of his most sacred rights. He was of an intolerant, vindictive nature that would go to any length for vengeance. Retribution was part of his creed.

On his way home the young man looked at his watch to find that he had but an hour to determine his course. Instinct prompted him to join his friends and to even the score with the men who had injured him so bitterly, for, measured by standards of the frontier, they were pirates with their lives forfeit. Yet he could not countenance this step. If only the vigilantes would be content with making an example—but he knew they would not. The blood hunger of a mob is easy to whet and hard to hold. McNamara would resist, as would Voorhees and the district attorney, then there would be bloodshed, riot, chaos. The soldiers would be called out and martial law declared, the streets would become skirmish grounds. The vigilantes would rout them without question, for every citizen of the north would rally to their aid, and such men could not be stopped. The judge would go down with the rest of the ring, and what would happen to her?

He took down his Winchester, oiled and cleaned it, then buckled on a belt of cartridges. Still he wrestled with himself. He felt that he was being ground between his loyalty to the vigilantes and his own conscience. The girl was one of the gang, he reasoned—she had schemed with them to betray him through his love, and she was

pledged to the one man in the world whom he hated with fanatical fury. Why should he think of her in this hour? Six months back he would have looked with jealous eyes upon the right to lead the vigilantes, but this change that had mastered him—what was it? Not cowardice, nor caution. No, yet, being intangible, it was none the less marked, as his friends had shown him an hour since.

He slipped out into the night.

mob might do as it pleased elsewhere, but no man should enter her house. He found a light shining from her parlor window, and, noting the shade up a few inches, stole close. Peering through, he discovered Strave and Helen talking. He slunk back into the shadows and remained hidden for a considerable time after the lawyer left, for the dancers were returning from the hotel and passed close by. When the last group had chattered away down the street, he turned to the front of the house, and mounting the steps, knocked sharply. As Helen appeared at the door, he stepped inside and closed it after him.

The girl's hair lay upon her neck and shoulders in tumbled brown masses, while her breast heaved tumultuously at the sudden, grim sight of him. She stepped back against the wall, her wondrous, deep gray eyes wide and troubled, the blush of modesty struggling with the pallor of dismay.

The picture pained him like a knife thrust. This girl was his bitterest enemy—no hope of her was for him. He forgot for a moment that she was false and plotting, then, recalling it, spoke as roughly as he might and stated his errand. Then the old man had appeared on the stairs above, speechless with fright at what he overheard. It was evident that his nerves, so sorely strained by the events of the past week, were now snapped utterly. A human soul naked and panic-stricken is no pleasant sight, so Glenister dropped his eyes and addressed the girl again:

"Don't take anything with you. Just dress and come with me."

The creature on the stairs above stammered and stuttered inquiringly:

"What outrage is this, Mr. Glenister?"

"The people of Nome are up in arms, and I've come to save you. Don't stop to argue." He spoke impatiently.

"Is this some ruse to get me into your power?"

"Uncle Arthur!" exclaimed the girl sharply. Her eyes met Glenister's and begged him to take no offense.

"I don't understand this atrocity. They must be mad!" wailed the judge. "You run over to the jail, Mr. Glenister, and tell Voorhees to hurry guards here to protect me. Helen, phone to the military post and give the alarm. Tell them the soldiers must come at once."

"Hold on!" said Glenister. "There's no use of doing that—the wires are cut; and I won't notify Voorhees—he can take care of himself. I came to help you, and if you want to escape you'll stop talking and hurry up."

"I don't know what to do," said Stillman, torn by terror and indecision. "You wouldn't hurt an old man, would you? Wait! I'll be down in a minute."

He scrambled up the stairs, tripping on his robe, seemingly forgetting his niece till she called up to him sharply:

"Stop, Uncle Arthur! You mustn't run away." She stood erect and determined. "You wouldn't do that, would you? This is our house. You repre-



"Just dress and come with me." sent the law and the dignity of the government. You mustn't fear a mob of ruffians. We will stay here and meet them, of course."

"Good Lord!" said Glenister. "That's madness! These men aren't ruffians. They are the best citizens of Nome. You don't realize that this is Alaska and that they have sworn to wipe out McNamara's gang. Come along."

"Thank you for your good intentions," she said, "but we have done nothing to run away from. We will get ready to meet these cowards. You

will better go or they will find you here."

She moved up the stairs and, taking the judge by the arm, led him with her. Of a sudden she had assumed control of the situation unobtrusively, and both men felt the impossibility of thwarting her. Pausing at the top, she turned and looked down.

"We are grateful for your efforts just the same. Good night."

"Oh, I'm not going," said the young man. "If you stick, I'll do the same." He made the rounds of the first floor rooms, locking doors and windows. As a place of refuge he would have to make his stand upstairs. When sufficient time had elapsed, he called up to Helen:

"May I come?"

"Yes," she replied. So he ascended, to find Stillman in the hall, half clothed and covering, while by the light from the front chamber he saw her finishing her toilet.

"Won't you come with me? It's our last chance." She only shook her head. "Well, then, put out the light. I'll stand at that front window, and when my eyes get used to the darkness I'll be able to see them before they reach the gate."

She did as directed, taking her place beside him at the opening, while the judge crept in and sat upon the bed, his heavy breathing the only sound in the room. The two young people stood so close to each other that the sweet scent of her person awoke in him an almost irresistible longing. He forgot her treachery again, forgot that she was another's, forgot all save that she loved her truly and purely, with a love which was like an agony to him. Her shoulder brushed his arm; he heard the soft rustling of her garment at her breast as she breathed. Some one passed in the street and she laid a hand upon him fearfully. It was very cold, very tiny and very soft, but he made no move to take it. The moments dragged along, still, tense, interminable. Occasionally she leaned toward him, and he stooped to catch her whispered words. At such times her breath beat warm against his cheek, and he closed his teeth stubbornly. Out in the night a wolf dog saddened the air, then came the sound of others wrangling and snarling in a nearby corral. This is a chickless land and no cock crow breaks the midnight peace. The suspense enhanced the judge's perturbation till his chattering teeth sounded like castanets. Now and then he groaned.

The watchers had lost track of time when their strained eyes detected dark blotches materializing out of the shadows. "There they come," whispered Glenister, forcing her back from the aperture; but she would not be denied, and returned to his side. As the foremost figure reached the gate Roy leaped forth and spoke, not loudly, but in tones that sliced through the silence, sharp, clean and without warning.

"Halt! Don't come inside the fence." There was an instant's confusion; then, before the men beneath had time to answer or take action, he continued: "This is Roy Glenister talking. I told you not to molest these people, and I warn you again. We're ready for you."

The leader spoke. "You're a traitor, Glenister."

He winced. "Perhaps I am. You betrayed me first, though; and, traitor or not, you can't come into this house." There was a murmur at this, and some one said:

"Miss Chester is safe. All we want is the judge. We won't hang him, not if he'll wear this suit we brought along. He needn't be afraid. Troy is good for the skin."

"Oh, my God!" groaned the hub of the law. Suddenly a man came running down the plank pavement and into the group.

"McNamara's gone and so's the marshal and the rest," he panted. There was a moment's silence, and then the leader growled to his men, "Scatter out and rush the house, boys." He raised his voice to the man in the window. "This is your work, you damned turncoat." His followers melted away to right and left, vaulted the fence and dodged into the shelter of the walls. The click, click of Glenister's Winchester sounded through the room, while the sweat stood out on him. He wondered if he could do this deed, if he could really fire on these people. He wondered if his muscles would not wither and paralyze before they obeyed his command.

Helen crowded past him and, leaning half out of the opening, called loudly, her voice ringing clear and true:

"Wait! Wait a moment! I have something to say. Mr. Glenister did not warn them. They thought you were going to attack the mines, and so they rode out there before midnight. I am telling you the truth, really. They left hours ago." It was the first sign she had made, and they recognized her to a man.

There were uncertain mutterings below till a new man raised his voice. Both Roy and Helen recognized Dextery.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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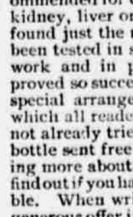
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