

The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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lowering the net, the night enfolded him without sign or trace. As he ran he considered what course to follow—whether to carry the call to his comrades in town or to make for the creek and Dextery. The vigilantes might distrust him, and yet he owed them warning. McNamara's men were moving so swiftly that action must be speedy to forestall them. Another hour and the net would be closed, while it seemed that whichever course he chose they would snare one or the other—either the friends who remained in town or Dex and Slapjack out in the hills. With daylight those two would return and walk unheeding into the trap, while if he bore the word to them first then the vigilantes would be jailed before dawn. As he drew near Cherry Malotte's house he saw a light through the drawn curtains. A heavy raindrop plashed upon his face, another followed, and then he heard the patter of falling water increasing swiftly. Before he could gain the door the storm had broken. It swept up the street with tropical violence, while a breath sighed out of the night, lifting the litter from underfoot and pelting him with flying particles. Over the roofs the wind rushed with the rising moan of a hurricane, while the night grew suddenly noisy ahead of the tempest.

He entered the door without knocking to find the girl removing her coat. Her face gladdened at sight of him, but he checked her with quick and cautious words, his speech almost drowned by the roar outside.

"Are you alone?" She nodded, and he slipped the bolt behind him, saying: "The marshals are after me. We just had a 'run in' at the Northern, and I'm on the go. No—nothing serious yet, but they want the vigilantes, and I must get them word. Will you help me?" He rapidly recounted the row of the last ten minutes, while she nodded her quick understanding.

"You're safe here for a little while," she told him, "for the storm will check them. If they should come, there's a back door leading out from the kitchen and a side entrance yonder. In my room you'll find a French window. They can't corner you very well."

"Slapjack and Dex are out at the shafthouse—you know—that quartz claim on the mountain above the Meadows." He hesitated. "Will you lend me your saddle horse? It's a black night, and I may kill him."

"What about these men in town?" "I'll warn them first, then hit for the hills."

She shook her head. "You can't do it. You can't get out there before daylight if you wait to rouse these people, and McNamara has probably telephoned the mines to send a party up to the quartz claim after Dex. He knows where the old man is as well as you do, and they'll raid him before dawn."

"I'm afraid so, but it's all I can offer. Will you give me the horse?"

"No! He's only a pony, and you'd founder him in the tundra. The mud is knee deep. I'll go myself."

"Good heavens, girl, in such a night! Why, it's worth your life! Listen to it! The creeks will be up and you'll have to swim. No, I can't let you."

"He's a good little horse, and he'll take me through." Then coming close she continued: "Oh, boy! Can't you see that I want to help? Can't you see that I—I'd die for you if it would do any good?" He gazed gravely into her wide blue eyes and said awkwardly: "Yes, I know, I'm sorry things are as they are—but you wouldn't have me lie to you, little woman?"

"No. You're the only true man I ever knew. I guess that's why I love you. And I do love you, oh, so much! I want to be good and worthy to love you too."

She laid her face against his arm and caressed him with clinging tenderness, while the wind yelled loudly about the eaves and the windows drummed beneath the rain. His heavy brows knit themselves together as she whispered: "I love you! I love you! I love you!" with such an agony of longing in her voice that her soft accents were sharply distinguishable above the turmoil. The growing wildness seemed a part of the woman's passion, which whipped and hurried her like a willow in a blast.

"Things are fearfully jumbled," he said finally. "And this is a bad time to talk about them. I wish they might be different. No other girl would do what you have offered tonight."

"Then why do you think of that woman?" she broke in fiercely. "She's bad and false. She betrayed you once; she's in the play now; you've told me so yourself. Why don't you be a man and forget her?"

"I can't," he said simply. "You're wrong, though, when you think she's

she's a better girl than she is. She's bold and brave and honest. The part she played was played innocently. I'm sure of that, in spite of the fact that she'll marry McNamara. It was she who heard them plotting and risked her reputation to warn me."

Cherry's face whitened, while the shadowy eagerness that had rested there died utterly. "She came into that dive alone? She did that?" He nodded, at which she stood thinking for some time, then continued: "You're honest with me, Roy, and I'll be the same with you. I'm tired of deceit, tired of everything. I tried to make you think she was bad, but in my own heart I knew differently all the time. She came here today and humbled herself to get the truth, humbled herself to me, and I sent her away. She suspected, but she didn't know, and when she asked for information I insulted her. That's the kind of a creature I am. I sent her back to Struve, who offered to tell her the whole story."

"What does that renegade want?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Why, I'd rather— The young man ground his teeth, but Cherry hastened.

"You needn't worry; she won't see him again. She loathes the ground he walks on."

"And yet he's no worse than that other scoundrel. Come, girl, we have work to do; we must act, and act quickly." He gave her his message to Dextery, then she went to her room and slipped into a riding habit. When she came out he asked: "Where is your raincoat? You'll be drenched in no time."

"I can't ride with it. I'll be thrown, anyway, and I don't want to be all bound up. Water won't hurt me."

She thrust her tiny revolver into her dress, but he took it and upon examination shook his head.

"If you need a gun you'll need a good one." He removed the belt from his own waist and buckled his Colts about her.

"Put you?" she objected.

"I'll get another in ten minutes."

Then as they were leaving, he said: "One other request, Cherry. I'll be in hiding for a time, and I must get word to M— Chester to keep watch of her uncle, for the big fight is on at last and the boys will hang him sure if they catch him. I owe her this last warning. Will you send it to her?"

"I'll do it for your sake, not for her, no, no; I don't mean that. I'll do the right thing all round. Leave it here and I'll see that she gets it tomorrow. And, Roy, be careful of yourself." Her eyes were stary and in their depths lurked neither selfishness nor jealousy now, only that mysterious glory of a woman who makes sacrifice.

Together they scurried back to the stable, and yet, in that short distance, she would have been swept from her feet had he not seized her. They blew in through the barn door, streaming and soaked by the blinding sheets that drove scythe-like ahead of the wind. He struck a light, and the pony whinnied at recognition of his mistress. She stroked the little fellow's muzzle while Glenister cinched on her saddle. Then when she was at last mounted, she leaned forward:

"Will you kiss me once, Roy, for the last time?"

He took her rain wet face between his hands and kissed her upon the lips as he would have saluted a little maid. As he did so, unseen by both of them, a face was pressed for an instant against the pane of glass in the stable wall.

"You're a brave girl and may God bless you," he said, extinguishing the light. He flung the door wide and she rode out into the storm. Looking the portal, he plunged back toward the house to write his hurried note, for there was much to do and scant time for his accomplishment, despite the helping hand of the hurricane. He

heard the voice of Berling as it thundered on the golden sands, and knew that the first great storm of the fall had come. Henceforth he saw that the violence of men would rival the rising elements, for the deeds of this night would stir their passions as Aedius was rousing the huts of the sea.

He neglected to bolt the house door as he entered, but flung off his dripping coat and, seizing pad and pencil, scrawled his message. The wind screamed about the cabin, the lamp flared smokily and Glenister felt a draft suck past him as though from an open door at his back as he wrote:

"I can't do anything more. The end has come, and it has brought the hatred and bloodshed that I have been trying to prevent. I played the game according to your rules, but they forced me back to first principles in spite of myself, and now I don't know what the finish will be. Tomorrow will tell. Take care of your uncle, and if you should wish to communicate with me, go to Cherry Malotte. She is a friend to both of us. Always your servant, ROY GLENISTER."

As he sealed this he paused, while he felt the hair on his neck rise and bristle and a chill race up his spine. His heart fluttered, then pounded onward till the blood thumped audibly at his ear drums and he found himself swaying in rhythm to its beat. The muscles of his back cringed and rippled at the proximity of some hovering peril, and yet an irresistible feeling forbade him to turn. A sound came from close behind his chair—the drip, drip, drip of water. It was not from the eaves, nor yet from a faulty shingle. His back was to the kitchen door, through which

he had come, and, although there were no mirrors before him, he felt a menacing presence as surely as though it had touched him. His ears were tuned to the finest pin pricks of sound, so that he heard the faint, sibilant "squish" of a sodden shoe upon which a weight had shifted. Still something chained him to his seat. It was as though his soul laid a restraining hand upon his body, waiting for the instant.

He let his hand seek his hip carelessly, but remembered where his gun was. Mechanically he addressed the note in shaking characters, while behind him sounded the constant drip, drip, drip that he knew came from saturated garments. For a long moment he sat, till he heard the stealthy click of a gunlock muffled by finger pressure. Then he set his face and slowly turned to find the Bronco Kid standing behind him as though risen from the sea, his light clothes wet and clinging, his feet centered in a spreading puddle. The dim light showed the convulsive fury of his features above the leveled weapon, whose hammer was curled back like the head of a striking adder, his eyes gleaming with frenzy. Glenister's mouth was powder dry, but his mind was leaping riotously like dust before a gale, for he divined himself to be in the deadliest peril of his life. When he spoke the calmness of his voice surprised himself.

"What's the matter, Bronco?" The Kid made no reply, and Roy repeated, "What do you want?"

"That's a hell of a question," the gambler said hoarsely. "I want you, of course, and I've got you."

"Hold up! I am unarmed. This is my third try, and I want to know what's back of it."

"Damn the talk!" cried the fero dealer, moving closer till the light shone on his features, which commenced to twitch. He raised the revolver he had half lowered. "Figure's reason enough, and you know it."

Glenister looked him fairly between the eyes, gripping himself with firm hands to stop the tremor he felt in his bones. "You can't kill me," he said. "I am too good a man to murder. You might shoot a crook, but you can't kill



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a brave man when he's unarmed. You're no assassin." He remained rigid in his chair, however, moving nothing but his lips, meeting the other's look unflinchingly. The Kid hesitated an instant, while his eyes, which had been fixed with the glare of hatred, wavered a moment, betraying the faintest sign of indecision. Glenister cried out exultantly:

"Ha! I knew it. Your neck cords quiver."

The gambler grimaced. "I can't do it. If I could, I'd have shot you before you turned. But you'll have to fight, you dog. Get up and draw."

Roy refused. "I gave Cherry my gun."

"Yes, and more, too," the man gritted. "I saw it all." Even yet Glenister had made no slightest move, realizing that a feather's weight might snap the gambler's nervous tension and bring the involuntary twitch that would put him out swifter than a whip is cracked.

"I have tried it before, but murder isn't my game." The Kid's eye caught the glint of Cherry's revolver where she had discarded it. "There's a gun. Get it!"

"It's no good. You'd carry the six bullets and never feed them. I don't know what this is all about, but I'll fight you whenever I'm loaded right."

"Oh, you black hearted hound!" snarled the Kid. "I want to shoot, but I'm afraid. I used to be a gentleman,

and I haven't lost it all, I guess. But I won't wait the next time. I'll down you on sight, so you'd better get ironed in a hurry." He backed out of the room into the semidarkness of the kitchen, watching with lynxlike closeness the man who sat so quietly under the shaded light. He felt behind him for the outer doorknob and turned it to let in a white sheet of rain, then vanished like a storm writh, leaving a parched, flipped man and a zigzag trail of water, which gleamed in the lamplight like a pool of blood.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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