

# The Spoilers.

By REX E. BEACH.

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might hushed its thousand voices. He found his lower jaw set so stiffly that the muscles ached. Leveling his weapon at the eaves of the bunk house, he pulled trigger rapidly, the bang, bang, six times repeated, sounding dull and dead beneath the blanket of mist that overhung. A shout sounded behind him, and then the shriek of a Winchester ball close over his head. He turned in time to see another shot stream out of the darkness, where a sentry was firing at the flash of his gun, then bent himself double and plunged down the ditch.

With the first impact overhead the men poured forth from their quarters armed and bristling, to be greeted by a volley of gunshots, the thud of bullets and the dwindling whine of spent lead. They leaped from shelter to find themselves girt with a flitting hoop of fire, for the "stranglers" had spread in the arc of a circle and now emptied their rifles toward the center. The defenders, however, maintained surprising order considering the suddenness of their attack and ran to join the sentries, whose positions could be determined by the nearer flashes. The voice of a man in authority shouted loud commands. No demonstration came from the outer voids, nothing but the wicked streaks that stabbed the darkness. Then suddenly behind McNamara's men the night glared luridly as though a great furnace door had opened and then changed shut, while with it came a hoarse thudding roar that silenced the rifle play. They saw the cook house disintegrate and disintegrate into a thousand flying timbers and twisted sheets of tin which soared upward and outward over their heads and into the night. As the rocking hills ceased echoing the sound of the vigilantes' rifles recurred like the cracking of dry sticks, then everywhere about the defenders the earth was lashed by falling debris, while the iron roof rang at the fusillade.

The blast had come at their very elbows, and they were too dazed and shaken by it to grasp its significance. Then, before they could realize what it boded, the depths lit up again till the rainedrops were outlined distinct and glistening like a gossamer veil of silver, while the office building to their left was ripped and reared and the adjoining walls leaped out into sudden relief, their shattered windows looking like ghostly, sightless eyes. The curtain of darkness closed heavier than velvet, and the men cowered in their tracks, shielding themselves behind the nearest objects or behind one another's bodies, waiting for the sky to vomit over them its rain of missiles. Their backs were to the vigilantes now, their faces to the center. Many had dropped their rifles. The thunder of hoofs and the scream of terrified horses came from the stables. The cry of a maddened beast is wailed and calculated to curdle the blood at best, but with it arose a human voice, shrieking from pain and fear of death.

A wrenched and doubled mass of zinc had hurtled out of the heavens and struck some one down. The choking hoarseness of the man's appeal told the story, and those about him broke into flight to escape what might follow, to escape this danger they could not see but which swooped out of the blackness above and against which there was no defense. They fled only to witness another and greater light behind them by which they saw themselves running, falling, groveling. This time they were hurled from their balance by a concussion which dwarfed the two preceding ones. Some few stood still, staring at the rolling smoke bank as it was revealed by the explosion, their eyes gleaming white, while others buried their faces in their hollowed arms as if to shut out the hellish glare, or to shield themselves from a blow.

Out in the heart of the chaos came a voice loud and clear:

"Beware the next blast!"

At the same instant the girle of sharpshooters rose up sniting the air with their cries and charged in like madmen through the rain of detritus. They fired as they came, but it was unnecessary, for there was no longer a fight. It was a rout. The defenders, feeling they had escaped destruction only by a happy chance in leaving the bunk house the instant they did, were not minded to tarry here where the heavens fell upon their heads. To augment their consternation, the horses had broken from their stalls and were plunging through the confusion. Fear swept over the men, blind, unreasoning, contagious, and they rushed out into the night, colliding with their enemies, overrunning them in the panic to quit this spot. Some dashed off the bluff and fell among the pits and sluices. Others

ran up the mountain side, and cowered in the brush like quail.

As the "stranglers" assembled their prisoners near the ruins, they heard wounded men moaning in the darkness, so lit torches and searched out the stricken ones. Glenister came running through the smoke pall, revolver in hand, crying:

"Has any one seen McNamara?" No one had, and when they were later assembled to take stock of their injuries he was greeted by Dexty's gleeful announcement:

"That's the deuce of a fight. We ain't got so much as a cold sore among us."

"We have captured fourteen," another announced, "and there may be more out yonder in the brush."

Glenister noted with growing surprise that not one of the pris-



"Beware the next blast!"

oners lined up beneath the glaring torches wore the army blue. They were miners all, or thugs and ruffians gathered from the camp. Where, he wondered, were the soldiers.

"Didn't you have troops from the barracks to help you?" he asked.

"Not a troop. We haven't seen a soldier since we went to work."

At this the young leader became alarmed. Had this whole attack miscarried? Had this been no clash with the United States forces, after all? If so, the news would never reach Washington, and instead of accomplishing his end, he and his friends had thrust themselves into the realms of outlawry, where the soldiers could be employed against them with impunity, where prices would rest upon their heads. Innocent blood had been shed, court property destroyed. McNamara had them where he wanted them at last. They were at bay.

The unwounded prisoners were taken to the boundaries of the Midas and released with such warnings as the imagination of Dexty could conjure up. Then Glenister assembled his men, speaking to them plainly:

"Boys, this is no victory. In fact, we're worse off than we were before,

and our biggest fight is coming. There's a chance to get away now before daylight and before we're recognized, but if we're seen here at sunup we'll have to stay and fight. Soldiers will be sent against us, but if we hold out, and the struggle is fierce enough, it may reach to Washington. This will be a different kind of fighting now, though. It will be warfare pure and simple. How many of you will stick?"

"All of us," said they in unison, and, accordingly, preparations for a siege were begun. Barricades were built, ruins removed, buildings transformed into blockhouses, and all through the turbulent night the tired men labored till ready to drop, led always by the young giant, who seemed without fatigue.

It was perhaps four hours after midnight when a man sought him out.

"Somebody's callin' you on the assay office telephone—says it's life or death."

Glenister hurried to the building, which had escaped the shock of the explosions, and, taking down the receiver, was answered by Cherry Malotte.

"Thank God, you're safe!" she began. "The men have just come in and the whole town is awake over the riot. They say you've killed ten people in the fight. Is it true?"

He explained to her briefly that all was well, but she broke in:

"Wait, wait! McNamara has called for troops and you'll all be shot. Oh, what a terrible night it has been! I haven't been to bed. I'm going mad. Now, listen carefully: Yesterday Helen went with Struve to the Sign of the Sled and she hasn't come back."

The man at the end of the wire cried out at this, then choked back his words to hear what followed. His free hand began making strange, futile motions as though he traced patterns in the air. "I can't raise the roadhouse on the wire and—something dreadful has happened I know."

"What made her go?" he shouted.

"To save you," came Cherry's faint reply. "If you love her, ride fast to the Sign of the Sled or you'll be too late. The Bronco Kid has gone there!"

At that name Roy crashed the instrument to its hook and burst out of the shanty, calling loudly to his men.

"What's up?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the Sign of the Sled," he panted.

"We've stood by you, Glenister, and

you can't quit us like this!" said angrily. "The trail to town is good and we'll take it if you do." Roy saw they feared he was deserting, feared that he had heard some alarming rumor of which they did not know.

"We'll let the mine go, boys, for I can't ask you to do what I refuse to do myself, and get it's not fear that's sending me. There's a woman hanging, and I must go. She counted on me to save us all, risked her honor to try and right a wrong—and I'm afraid of what has happened while we were fighting here. I don't ask you to stay till I come back—it wouldn't be square, and you'd better go while you have a chance. As for me—I gave up the old claim once—I can do it again." He swung himself to the horse's back, settled into the saddle and rode out through the lane of belted men.

## CHAPTER XX

AS Helen and her companion ascended the mountain, scared and swept by the tempest of the previous night, they heard, far below, the swollen torrent brawling in its boulder ridden bed, while behind them the angry ocean spread southward to a blood red horizon. Ahead, the bleak mountains brooded over forbidding valleys; to the west a suffused sun glared sullenly, painting the high piled clouds with the gorgeous hues of a stormy sunset. To Helen the wild scene seemed dyed with the colors of flame and blood and steel.

"That rain raised the deuce with the trails," said Struve, as they picked their way past an unsightly "slip" whence a part of the overhanging mountain, loosened by the deluge, had slid into the gulch. "Another storm like that would wash out these roads completely."

Even in the daylight it was no easy task to avoid these danger spots, for the horses floundered on the muddy soil. Vaguely the girl wondered how she would find her way back in the darkness, as she had planned. She said little as they approached the roadhouse, for the thoughts within her brain had begun to clamor too wildly, but Struve, more arrogant than ever before, more terrifyingly sure of himself, was loudly garrulous. As they drew nearer and nearer, the dread that possessed the girl became of paralyzing intensity. If she should fail—but she vowed she would not, could not, fail.

They rounded a bend and saw the Sign of the Sled cradled below them where the trail dipped to a stream which tumbled from the comb above into the river twisting like a silver thread through the distant valley. A peeled flagpole topped by a spruce bough stood in front of the tavern, while over the door hung a sled suspended from a beam. The house itself was a quaint structure, rambling and amorphous, from whose sod roof sprang blooming flowers and whose high banked walls were pierced here and there with sleepy windows. It had been built by a homesick foreigner of unknown nationality whom the army of "mushers" who paid for his clean and orderly hospitality had dubbed duly and as a matter of course a "Swede." When travel had changed to the river trail, leaving the house lonesome and high as though left by a receding wave, Struve had taken it over on a debt and now ran it for the convenience of a slender traffic, mainly stampedees, who chose the higher route toward the interior. His hiring spent the idle hours in prospecting a hungry quartz lead and in doing assessment work on nearby claims.

Shortz took the horses and answered his employer's questions curtly, flashing a curious look at Helen. Under other conditions the girl would have been delighted with the place, for this was the quaintest spot she had found in the north country. The main room held bar and gold scales, a rude table and a huge iron heater, while its walls and ceiling were sheeted with white cloth so cunningly stitched and tacked that it seemed a cavern hollowed from chalk. It was filled with trophies of the hills—stuffed birds and animals, skins and antlers—from which depended in careless confusion dog harness, snowshoes, guns and articles of clothing. A door to the left led into the bunk room, where travelers had been wont to sleep in tiers three deep. To the rear was a kitchen and cache, to the right a compartment which Struve called the art gallery. Here free reign had been allowed the original owner's artistic fancies, and he had covered the place with pictures clipped from gazettes of questionable repute till it was a bewildering arrangement of pink ladies in tights, pugilists in scanty trunks, prize bulldogs and other less moral characters of the sporting world.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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