

AN ORIGINAL CHRISTMAS STORY

BRISBIN'S COLD DEAL.

Written for The Republican by Harry B. Iszard.

"I tell you I saw him! He fumbled the cards, then pretended to accidentally drop them. After he had picked them up and put them in the case again, luck turned and the bank won right along. There's a skin game goin' on, boys, bet your life on that. Speak up, Cal! You saw him drop the cards?"

"Yes, I did," admitted Cal, "but don't it strike you, Bluejay, that it really was an accident? Darned if it didn't look to me as though he was rattled."

"Rattled, nothin'!" growled Bluejay. "He's a slick worker, that's what he is, an' the sooner we have an understandin' with the gentleman the better it'll be for all hands. This is a blamed unhealthy climate for tin-horns, as Mr. Brislin and that mysterious female of his will find out before long."

"Look here, Bluejay, you don't intend harmin' the woman, do you?" asked one of the group.

"Don't intend harmin' nobody, at present," returned the other. "I only want to find out if he played us dirt, that's all. As for the woman, I guess it'll be middlin' hard work to find her, as nobody in this gang has ever clapped eyes on her. Well, how many of you are with me?"

"If it's only an investigation, I don't mind chippin' in," said Cal, "but I'll be cussed if I make war on a woman."

The other five, seemingly of the same opinion, walked slowly away, headed by Bluejay and Cal.

It was about 2 o'clock in the morning of Christmas day and the main street of Oro presented a decidedly lively appearance. The variety theatre, saloons and dance halls were still in full blast. From the theatre came sounds of violin, cornet, piano and drums. On the stage, a beefy serio-comic was telling the half-shot audience, in a voice very much out of repair, that she would be true to her sailor

boy. As this was her third appearance during the course of the evening, she was favored with little attention, the main part of the audience occupying itself in smoking rank cigars and buying stale beer, at \$1 per bottle, for the other female artists.

The manager of the establishment stood near the bar at the front of the house, talking to the city marshal, who had just left an upper box, after dispensing liquid refreshments to a few lady friends.

"I hear there was some kick over at the Sapphire, tonight. One of the boys told me Brislin tried a cold deal and made a regular fluke of it. How did it happen?" asked the manager.

"Oh, I don't believe it amount to much," carelessly answered the marshal. "Although, he certainly did drop the deck and turned as white as talque. Then, after the cards were in the box again, he commenced winning like the deuce and kept it up until 1 o'clock, when he closed the game. That's what makes the boys so sore."

"Who is this Brislin, anyhow? You ought to know more about him than anybody in town."

"Perhaps I do; but even that doesn't amount to such an awful lot. Only two people have seen his wife—and I guess she really is his wife. One is Mills, the stage driver, and the other is Pat Gowley's old woman, who washes for them. Mills says she lays over anything that's ever been in this part of the country and mother Gowley says she is an angel. When that old dame puts in a good word for anyone, they must be possessed of extraordinary qualities. Well, as you know, the two struck town four weeks ago last night and went to house keeping in Dick Flynn's shack. The man went over to the Sapphire, gave his name as Burt Brislin, rented a faro layout from Pap Wrayburn and immediately started up in business."

"One thing sure," continued the marshal, "the man deals better faro than half the crack sharps in the state, and as near as I can see, runs a perfectly straight game. Up to a week ago, all the boys that tried to stay with the game, went broke; but after that, luck changed all of a sudden, and if it hadn't been for that little occurrence this evening, the bank itself would have gone broke."

The marshal, in an absent minded way, took a cigar from the manager's vest pocket nibbled off the end, drew a match across the leg of his trousers and commenced smoking. Then said:

"That's about as far as my knowledge extends, except, I know they came from Denver here." Moving in the direction of the door, he continued: "Bluejay and Cal, with a scattering of other disreputables, have organized themselves into a committee of investigation and intend asking a few questions. Think I'll stroll down that way. Tell Cleo to shake that box party and get into her street clothes; I'll come back in a little while."

The members of the committee had arrived at their destination and were now gathered around the door of a small log cabin. A faint light glimmered from the four-paned window, but no sound of life came from within. Somehow, the committee seemed to be nervous and not in its usual spirits. It shuffled its fourteen feet and shoved its fourteen hands into so many pockets. Finally, Cal gave an impatient grunt and turned to Bluejay.

"Go on!" he whispered, in a hoarse voice. "The thing has come to a showdown; as you were so anxious a little while ago to call the hand, you can take the lead now."

Bluejay looked indignantly at his companions, pulled himself together and gave a double knock at the door. As the sound echoed and re-echoed through the still early morning air, every individual man of the seven shivered, then felt like kicking himself for it, afterward. However, they were not kept waiting long, for the door suddenly opened and the gambler presented himself. His face might have been that of a corpse for all the color it had, and his eyes

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seemed to go through every man in front of him.

"Good evening, boys," he said, in a quiet voice. "I don't think I shall have to search very long for the object of your visit, at this time of day, or night, as you will. I am sorry not to be able to invite you all in; but as you know the dimensions of my one room, it is needless to apologize. Bluejay and Cal, you are better known to me than the rest; will you two represent your friends?"

Feeling sure from the man's demeanor, there was no trap, the two entered the cabin and the door was closed. The room was small, plainly furnished and cleaner than the majority of homes in that vicinity. Brislin and his guests were apparently the only ones present, although a calico curtain was strung across one end of the room, concealing a small alcove or corner. The dealer did not offer chairs, but stood looking at them for some time.

"So you thought I tried to wring in a cold deal, eh?" he finally asked, in a low tone.

"That's the way it looked to us, pardner," Bluejay answered. "You've always been so handy with the pasteboards, you know; so when you sprawled all over 'em, like you did, it looked too blamed awkward to be real. So we just thought we'd come over and ask your reason for doing it." Here Bluejay gave a triumphant look at Cal.

"You have asked for the reason and shall have it," replied Brislin, as he started for the other end of the room. The miners showed an inclination to follow, but he turned, with an ugly glitter in his eyes.

"Stay where you are, please."

He then took hold of the curtain and drew it aside. Both men started and involuntarily took their hats off. On a bed, which had been concealed by the curtain, lay the dead body of a young woman, so natural in death, that one could almost imagine her asleep. With a caressing movement, Brislin tenderly placed his hand on the white forehead, then faced his guests again.

"This is my reason," he commenced, almost in a whisper. "I married her six months ago, and swore at the time, never to touch another card; but I got mixed up in a wild-cat mining deal at Granite and went com-

pletely broke. I had to do something; so I took what little she had, came here and opened a faro game, intending to get enough ahead, if possible, to start in some other business. But luck went against me this last week; my wife was growing worse, she had been ill when we arrived, and finally, at supper to-night, this cursed high altitude got in its work and killed her just one hour before I started for the Sapphire saloon. Previous to my dropping those cards, during the deal, it flashed through my mind if the bank lost I would not have enough to pay her funeral expenses. It was then I lost my nerve and let them slip through my fingers. I don't care a continental what you think of me, nor am I afraid of any disasterous results; all I ask for is time enough to place my little dead partner along side of her mother at Denver." Here Brislin dropped on his knees beside the body of his wife and buried his face on the dead bosom.

Something seemed to be the matter with Bluejay's throat. After clearing it repeatedly, he at last blurted out:

"Mr. Brislin, I beg your pardon for cussin' at such a time, but I want to say right here that this committee happens to be a select company of damfools and I'm the biggest one of the lot. What money you've won from the gang is yours to start in somethin' else. The body of your wife will be taken to Denver and buried at the expense of the citizens of Oro. That goes!"

The figure at the bedside trembled, then a muffled, unsteady voice replied:

"Thank you, boys." Bluejay and Cal looked at each other for a moment, nodded, then tiptoed out of the room, softly closing the door behind them.

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