

The Last Card

By H. Mortimer Batten

LAST Card Gaspin, the gambler, dusted his patent leather shoes with a silk handkerchief, then strolled to the door of the empty saloon to see what the row was about. The saloon was empty not because the citizens of Pottsville were total abstainers, but because the hour was early—scarcely day-break. Nor was the atmosphere of the saloon exactly that of a Temperance Hall. Torn and crumpled cards littered the floor, amidst a chaos of broken glass, cigar ends, and corks. It looked, indeed, as if Pottsville had been up very late, and had gambled very hard.

Such surroundings did not disturb Last Card Gaspin, even at this early hour. It was the atmosphere of his profession. Himself he never smoked or drank, because such things were not conducive to professional success. Always he was well—almost pedantically—dressed, while his clean-cut aristocratic features and neatly trimmed moustache marked him as a figure apart from the bearded, moccasin, baggy-breeched throng from whom he wrung a living. Newcomers weighed him up as a remittance man, or as a mine owner from across the line, and often they paid dearly for their misjudgment. He was known by the name of "Last Card" because, no matter how utterly he was beaten, Gaspin never lost his coolness nor threw down his hand. Always he played to his last card, and that card had, on many memorable and historic occasions, extracted him from apparently hopeless defeat. But Gaspin was a cool desperate man; he was never the first to draw a gun, but when he did draw it things happened surprisingly quickly, and the sooner the house got out the better for the health of all concerned.

But there was a row outside, so Gaspin stepped into the sweet morning air to investigate. Scarcely had he closed the saloon door when it occurred to him that things were not as they should be. Someone was up against it, and as likely as not that someone was Last Card Gaspin. The fact that two men were stationed at the other side of the avenue, watching the door, perhaps assisted his alert judgment in coming to this decision, so Gaspin calmly stood his ground and awaited developments.

The row drew nearer, then along the avenue came a dozen or more men, led by Calvin, a prominent citizen. Each of the men was heavily armed, and between them they hustled Pottsville Billy, who kept the blind pig joint way down by the landing stage. Billy was a whisky smuggler and a drunkard, his house was known as the lowest and filthiest den in that diseased quarter of the town.

Gaspin shrugged his shoulders. He had spent six months at this camp, and the men couldn't gamble for nuts. Now, he guessed from the look of things, that his time was up. The whole gambling fraternity of Pottsville owed him money, so Pottsville had put its heads together and decided to clear itself of debt. The gambler must go, and while at it they might as well purge the city of one or two other undesirable characters.

"Right-about, Gaspin," Calvin ordered as the gang came up to the gambler. "You got to get out, and it's no use kicking, because all the boys are armed. You and Billy go together. We've had enough of your sort."

Last Card Gaspin made no demur. He turned and walked coolly ahead of the throng, ready to fight any one or half a dozen of them, but not the whole city in a bunch. Seeing him Billy ceased to struggle, and slipped his hand through the gambler's arm as a sign of brotherhood. Gaspin shook him off disdainfully. "It will be time enough to help you along when I've got to," he stated, his black eyes flashing fire, and a laugh went up at the drunkard's expense.

Pottsville Billy glared at Gaspin with eyes that prophesied no good for the future. They were to hit the long trail together as partners, but as friends—never!

They allowed Gaspin to get his pony and to saddle up, but they gave him no time to obtain provisions or to change into his bush gear. When he demurred they informed him that "Your sort can make out anywhere." Billy had no pony, and no one offered to lend him one. He must go out as he came—on foot. They

marched the two to the outskirts of the city, and there solemnly warned them that they returned at the peril of their lives.

II

Gaspin rode slowly about fifty yards ahead of his partner till the city was out of sight, then he drew rein and waited. "Got any grub, Billy?" he asked, gazing along the prairie track ahead. "No," replied the drunkard, "but I got this!" and from his pocket he drew a bottle of firewater.

The gambler quietly dismounted. He wrenched the bottle from Billy's grasp and smashed off its neck against the toe of his boot, then while Billy stood, staring and vindictive, Gaspin pointed to the cayuse.

"Get up!" he roared fiercely.

"What in—"

"Get up!" repeated Gaspin. He caught Billy by the shoulder and shook him. "The sooner you sober up, and realise what we're up against the better," he pursued. "It's three days' ride to Golden City with a good cayuse and proper gear. We've no gear and only one pony between us. It will take the devil's own luck to get us through. Get up!"

He got Billy mounted, then for three solid hours the gambler trotted ahead over the hot sand and in his thin patent leather shoes. The trail led over the prairie foothills for half a day's ride, then it mounted suddenly upwards towards the buttes, and wound its course over the heights to Golden City, in among the hills. It was a dangerous trail at any time, and difficult to find on account of the shifting and drifting of occasional swamps and sand belts. In winter it was impossible, but at this time of the year the ground and the grass that covered it were burnt tinder dry.

Evening found both men played out on the first slope of the foothills. There was a creek here, and a reasonably sheltered camping place. Far in the distance the smoke of Pottsville rose straight skywards, and Billy, tightening his belt, stood and cursed it. He cursed it with an easy flow of blasphemies which might have fired the very grass at his feet, then he turned and silently cursed the gambler.

Pottsville Billy had not forgotten that only a few weeks ago, Gaspin, then popular, had entered his saloon with Calvin and one or two other prominent citizens, and they had fired up the whole show, leaving a wreckage of broken demijohns and benches behind them. They had done this because the house was drawing pretty near the limit, and because Pottsville Billy himself was a "mean swipe and a drunkard." He had not forgotten the second insult of that very morning, and lastly, though perhaps most significant in his memory, was the smashing of the precious bottle for which he stood in such sore need. And so Billy cursed Pottsville, cursed the gambler, and finally cursed the whole landscape from skyline to skyline.

Gaspin's thoughts were somewhat different, but perhaps no less bitter. There was the journey ahead of them. It was, of course, a gamble whether or not they would get through, and it never occurred to Gaspin that the unmistakable shadow of doubt was cast by the unkempt person of Pottsville Billy. Without him Gaspin could have got through easily on his own cayuse, and he was in no way called upon to see Billy through. He merely regarded the drunkard in the same light as he regarded the waterless sand tracks, the glaring autumn sun, and the other elements of discomfort that surrounded him. Billy was one of the natural obstacles in the way, to be dealt with with a stern hand and unwavering determination.

Then there were the men at Pottsville. Pottsville, the gambler felt, had played it very low down on him. It was no fault of his that they couldn't gamble for nuts; and if, occasionally, they had allowed themselves to be cheated, that was their show. It was owing to their own stupidity that their wealth filtered into his spacious pockets, till, realising the inconvenience of paying debts, they had turned him out and forbidden him to return.

"Well," thought Gaspin, as he viewed the far off streaks of smoke, "I reckon I

know who had most to do with it—the men who owed me most! Sooner or later we'll meet again, man to man, not forty to one, and they won't be so blame confident then."

Thus ran the thoughts of two desperate men as they lay at the prairie edge under the glories of sunset—the one a drunken degenerate, who hated the whole world and vainly tried to voice his hatred in the foulest of blasphemies, the other a stoic, a last card fighter, a calmly desperate son of sin, drifting on the outside edge of civilization's seas.

The two slept apart. Gaspin knew that Billy's life depended upon him, but he did not realise that this fact might not have entered his companion's sodden mind. He was awakened by a dull roar and by the blast of flying sand in his face. It was blowing half a hurricane, and the hollow in which he lay was filled with a dull, fitful glow.

No need for the gambler to ponder as to what was afoot. He knew the sound and sight and smell of it. The prairie was on fire, but on the leeward side of him—no need to stir.

Suddenly Gaspin leapt up, wide awake, and tried to estimate the extent of the fire belt. They would blame him for this—the men of Pottsville. The fire had started from his trail—he would have started it! His life was not worth much to them; they would hold it as cheaply as he himself held it, and string him up at the edge of the timber belt without even a trial. Many of them, indeed, would be relieved to see him finally out of action.

Gaspin went to the place where he had seen Billy sleeping. The man was gone! He strolled to the tethering post where they had left the cayuse. There was no cayuse there! The gambler returned to the ridge and lay, his chin on his hands, watching the holocaust, now beyond all human control. Billy had stolen the cayuse and fired the prairie! At that moment he was riding post haste for Golden City, there to describe how Gaspin had, deliberately and maliciously, fired the grass in the hope of destroying Pottsville. Thus Billy would reinstate himself, and incidentally pay off a few old scores.

III

Next morning Gaspin shrugged his shoulders. It was a gamble. He would make the best of his way towards Golden City, and probably the lynching party would meet him en route. If they gave him any sort of a show Billy would have to do some quick thinking, but anyway the world was clean and fresh, with a distinct nip in the atmosphere.

That evening found Gaspin on the long, narrow ascent, where the foothills trail became the pack trail—the mountain track. He thanked his stars to be among the timber again. Here was a wide plateau, the mountain side falling away in a series of steps from the side of it. The breast rose three thousand feet, almost sheer, the trail hugging the cliffs, as though to hide itself from the fierce upland gale.

The man was out of sight where he lay, though he could watch the trail, and he was just pondering whether to risk a fire when the clatter of ponies' hoofs came up wind from the Pottsville direction. Gaspin sat up, ready, but next moment he burst into uncontrollable mirth as the train came in view.

It was led by a young man who possessed an enormous nose. Gaspin recognised him as the Bishop, an occasional—very occasional—visitor to Pottsville. Behind the young man rode two old people—a plump old lady who, seated in a kind of an arm chair saddle, smiled placidly on the landscape, and a very thin, keen-eyed old gentleman, well groomed, but quite as unsuitably attired for his surroundings as his spouse apparent. Finally came two very sleepy old mules, laden sky high with a wonderful assortment of packs, most unskillfully arranged. The whole outfit looked so much like a picnic affair that Gaspin, weak with hunger, perceived no peril in halting them.

"Hi—there—Bishop!" he shouted, and next moment the Bishop was stumbling towards him, a frank smile of greeting on his boyish countenance.

"Gaspin!" he cried. "My stars, Gaspin! Who ever expected seeing you here? But what—" he paused and looked the gambler up and down: "what in thunder are you doing here in city togs and alone?"

The gambler's incredible story filled the young man with admiration. Gaspin had experienced a spell of assorted luck—very assorted! His claims had not panned out as hoped, and he had lost heavily at cards, so he had just cleared out without a cent to try his luck elsewhere. No grub, no pony, no nothing! "Say, Bishop, who's the two old folk you've got along with you?"

"Hush!" whispered the boy, holding up a warning finger. "Father and mother! Not a word to them about that little flutter I had along with you and Calvin and Billy Templeton. It would shock them."

Gaspin did some quick thinking, then he remembered that he had played one night with this boy, and—thank Heavens!—the boy had won. At the end of the game Gaspin had led him aside. "Don't think you're going to win again, my son," he whispered, "cause you're not! Chuck it right now. It's a fool's game."

"Say, Gaspin," whispered the boy as they drew near the old people, "I took your advice. I've never touched a card since. Thanks."

Then suddenly it dawned upon Gaspin that he had at last stumbled across a society where he was not known. He felt the discovery quite refreshing. The Bishop had a ranch somewhere out Lane Dog way, and knew nothing about him. Well, they would find out sooner or later—probably with the devil of a thump! In the meantime—nothing said.

Gaspin was gorgeously presented to the old people. "This is Mr. Gaspin of Pottsville," the Bishop announced. "Mr. Gaspin has experienced a run of bad luck—like I did, at first, you know, Pater—and rather than borrow from his friends, he hit the trail on foot and without grub. What d'you think of that, mother?"

The old lady bowed graciously and smiled approvingly, but made no comment—probably because she was rather deaf. The old gentleman descended from his tame old cayuse, shook hands, and then called—"Mary!"

His wife beamed on him. "Mary," he repeated, "he's hungry! Wants food! Eh—eh—!" and he pointed to his own open mouth.

The old lady slipped from her saddle with an alacrity that was really surprising. "I am sure you must be very hungry!" she told Gaspin, with the same homely smile of approval, then she began to bustle round to prepare a homely meal. "Tired out, I'm sure," she told the Bishop. "Bring that potted chicken and the eggs."

Why did the eyes of the gambler follow her? Why did he, once or twice, turn away and catch his breath, his gaze seeking the distant skyline, but seeing nothing but the emptiness that lay beyond?

As a rule Gaspin merely tolerated women. For many years he had known none but those that drift to the outside edge. His knowledge of these had not endowed him with any special respect for womanhood, yet to-night Last Card Gaspin, the stoic, caught his breath as though suddenly infected with some lung trouble.

That was a meal! Not that there was a huge spread, but it was served in a way that made a fellow hungry, and a white and kindly hand anticipated his requirements. There were rings on that hand—quaint, old-fashioned rings, not particularly beautiful, but at any rate quiet and homely. And when the meal was over the old man pointed towards the great wooden cross at the end of the plateau, standing out grim and bleak, against the fading sunset.

"What's that?" he said. "Teddy couldn't tell us."

"That," said Mr. Gaspin, "marks the burial place of a party of Indians, who were snowed in on this trail, just above there, on—" he paused. He had forgotten the date. "Ten years ago," he added almost apologetically.

"Dear—dear!" said the old gentleman. "And you were here, then?"

"At Golden City, yes. Winter began phenomenally early that year. It caught the Indians unawares. When at last we got to them there was only one—an old squaw—living. We raised the cross in memory of the rest."

"Poor things!" said the old lady. "What they must have suffered!"

A few minutes later, when Gaspin was lending the Bishop a hand with the ponies, he said suddenly—"Say, Bishop, what date is it?"