

The Secret of Saddle Gap

By Edith G. Bayne

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was a man much older and of heavier build, with a reddish beard and wearing regulation riding clothes of a superior cut. In fact he looked like what her father would have called "an English swell."

"Good morning," he said, as wheeling suddenly he beheld her. "Is nobody at home?"

"Why, I left them all here little more than an hour ago," she exclaimed. "They must have gone up to the lake."

"I want to see Mark Menary," he said in a very delightfully direct way and with a smile that she liked in spite of her disappointment.

He was almost as nice as Bestwood she thought.

"Come right in," she said, passing him and opening the door. "Have you waited long?"

"Half an hour or so. You, I suppose, are Mrs. Menary?"

Gail smiled, although she was piqued, too.

"No, I'm not," she said emphatically,

before the cabin, sauntering idly and switching now and then at the shrubs with a riding crop. He seemed to be waiting for somebody. But it was not Bestwood. It

as she indicated a chair. "And I'm really awfully tired of being taken for an old married woman. You see I'm free, white and twenty-one yet. Can show my birth certificate."

"Oh, so sorry. I'd heard that Mark Menary married a second time," apologized the stranger at once.

"The second wife died four years ago. I'm Mark Menary's oldest child. We are seven, as in the poem."

The visitor leaned forward suddenly and bent a very keen glance on her. She heard a rapid, in-drawn breath. Then he put out both hands.

"Is it possible that you are little Gail?" he cried in pleased astonishment. "Bless you, child, I've held you on my knee a score of times. You were, let me see, seven or eight years old then. Why, I'd never have known you."

He was shaking both her hands at once. "Who-are you?" she asked, wonderingly.

"One of your daddy's old friends," he replied. "Perhaps you've heard him mention me. My name is—"

Bang. A gun-shot cut in on the words, bringing both to their feet. It sounded near at hand. They stood a moment, looking questioningly at each other, then went to the door. A second bang occurred.

"Daddy must be shooting ducks," said the girl. "I forgot that the open season began to-day."

"Sounds more like a revolver," said the visitor.

The next moment a strange group rounded the turn in the trail some thirty yards away. Three men came walking, followed by a large cream-colored buckskin pinto which was led by the tallest. The man in the centre was Dan Comox. On one side of him strode an Indian, on the other the engineer Bestwood, the same grave, keen, stern-lipped man whom Comox was supposed to have scared out of the country less than a month before. At sight of him Gail utterly forgot her visitor. At sight of her Bestwood's aquiline features relaxed in a smile, the smile that displayed his excellent teeth, the smile she liked. He gave a brief nod to the red-bearded man, threw his pinto's reins over a post and took both her hands in a quick, eager grasp.

"Where's your father?" he asked, at once.

"Shooting, I think. We just heard—"

"You just heard Dan's gat go off twice! Accidentally on purpose," said Bestwood, grinning. "Take a slant at the old chap. He's as mad as a March hare!"

"Was he—did he shoot at—"

"He had two weapons on him. We took one but he had the other cleverly concealed. He tried to wing me. If I hadn't been quick enough to knock his aim away I'd have—looked like an exhibit from the morgue about now!"

She had had no eyes for any but the speaker so far but now she looked at Old Comox. The Indian was in charge of him, and he was glaring about him and muttering dire things as he tried vainly to wrench the red man's grip off. Suddenly his eye rested a moment on the fashionably attired stranger who had been regarding him quietly from a spot about six feet away. Old Comox's gaze became fixed. He blinked several times. At last he shot out a trembling forefinger.

"Who," he demanded harshly, pointing at the red-bearded man, "who is that?"

He lurched forward but the Indian was on the job.

"That's a friend of Mark Menary's," explained the engineer. "He rode up from Crowder's Crossing with me but came on to see Mark while White Eagle and I crossed the river to pay our respects to you. Take a good look at him, Comox. Perhaps you'll recognize him. At poker once you won a nice tract of land from him. Remember? Yours was the luck eternal, in those days it seems."

The old man passed a shaking hand over his beard. He breathed heavily and stared at the stranger as one stares who thinks he sees a ghost. Bestwood stood by Gail holding one of her hands which was trembling slightly. Both seemed careless of the onlookers. For the girl the whole scene swam in obscurity, was half unreal. She was only partly interested. Far off on the Ramparts a glint of sun breaking through the clouds blazed goldenly on the snowy peaks. Her little hillside world was a place of enchantment. Her own true knight had come back to her. Bestwood appeared to take it for granted that she already knew the stranger. So he went on speaking in a cool, even tone to Comox.

"Do you remember the night of the fifteenth of September just ten years ago? There was a certain saloon at Nugget Bay called 'The Hot Poker'. On this night every man in the place was drunk. A big vein on the Lode Mountain had been struck and you were all celebrating. 'The Hot Poker' was en fete with a vengeance. To it came one Charles Frear who owned the Saddle Gap claim. He, too, was drunk. He was all swelled up like a poisoned pup because his claim was next the Lode Mountain one and gold had been found here and there on it. But Frear wasn't ugly when drunk, as so many of the rest of you were. Frear was one of those men who have a host of friends, make them without half trying. He was honest, generous-souled, witty and good humored. He was given to recklessness though and known to play high stakes. He sat in to a poker game with you, Comox, and some others and you cleaned him up. He staked his claim—and lost. You and he and Mark Menary had been partners but not of Saddle Gap. That was a claim of Frear's that he held on the side. It had never seemed very promising up to this. Well, poor Frear suggested that he try to win back his claim but you all balked. A free fight ensued. It spread like an epidemic and many heads were cracked. Two men, a red-headed Swede and a half-breed, were murdered outright. When the Mounted Police arrived—"

"It wasn't me. I'll take my oath—" began Comox in a high screech, his whole body shaking.

"You're right. They probably killed each other. No one ever knew for certain. Before the police lit, both corpses had been hustled away. Charles Frear was knocked out, too—over the head with a whisky bottle—but only for a short time. You, Comox, had struck the blow, but you blamed poor muddled Menary. All these years he has felt himself Frear's murderer. Let Comox go now, White Eagle. I don't pretend to be his judge. He can settle with Menary and Charles Frear himself who stands yonder, for the piece of hokum that worked so well. Come forward, Frear."

"Then Charlie Frear isn't dead at all," cried Gail, and running across to the stranger, she seized his hands and laughed in sheer delight. "My! Won't dad be tickled?"

"No, I never was dead," admitted Frear. "And I must shoulder part of the blame for this hoax, because when I cleared

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