

The Finish

As the Bridegroom Told It. By Rex E. Beach

"KINK" Martin's Odyssey is neither epical nor of record, yet the snatches I had gleaned at camp-fire and round-up interested me demoralizingly. Now, after two years, I came upon him again, crowding the edge of the frontier, pioneer by habit, pirate by instinct; lax of morals, lusty of heart.

I had walked the eight miles from camp, hoping, yet doubting, that this Diogenes Martin, Paragon, was my old pal of the vagabond days. Reminiscence is dear to my heart, however, and I spoke of the past.

"Say, do you remember that salted mine in Sonora, that time we took—"

He interrupted me hastily, flushing a painful red, and shifting uneasy glances at the Jap cook.

"Come on outside in the sun," he said awkwardly; "I can talk better in the open," and I followed him, marvelling, to a seat where below us stretched the gravelly creek-bed, ripped and furrowed by the sluices. There floated to us softly the rush of waters, the rattle of the pick and shovel, and the bountiful language of men in a tail-race.

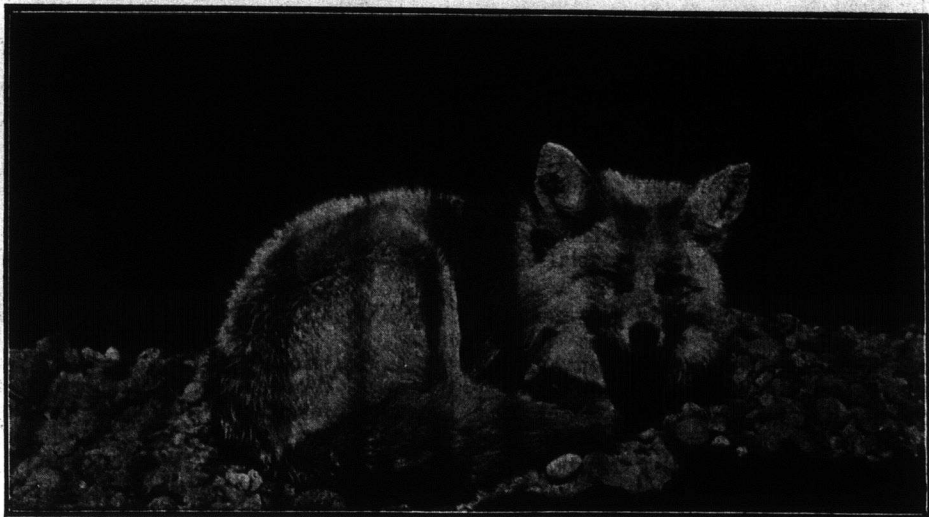
"Say, don't mention them old days in company," he began. "You know I'm respectable now." He paused, and I knew that within him was the telling of a strange tale—removed, perhaps, from

five volumes, includin' one ladies' solid chased gold watch—that is, the watches was solid, clean through, and Pillie was chased quite frequent.

"Here was our Moody-operandus: Pill travelled on schedule. At a foreordained spot our routes intersected, so 'bout dark I'd drive up in my prairie-schooner to the farmhouse where he stabled his sample-case, and you camp in the road out front. After supper Perty and the farmer would wander forth and into conversations with me, during which symposium Pillie would make sarcastic allusions at my rat-traps.

"I would claim it was an invention that seduced sick rats out of bed and into captivity; no matter what strength of character they had my trap would go out an' get 'em. Such statements connived to aggravate acute incredulities in Pillie, complicated with controversy, and infectious to the hay-digger.

"I'd offer demonstration, also the laying on of wagers; the farmer would claim a foul, because he'd never seen a rat on the ranch, and didn't like me to get the worst of a bet. I'd state that absence made the trap work stronger, and if there wasn't any rats on hand it would breed 'em. I assured 'em, however, that rats was omnipresent, like mortgages.



The Captive

the paths of propriety, but true, and as I listened it grew upon me that morals are mainly a matter of latitude and longitude, anyway.

I felt that he lacked the ancient rippling depravity, seeming burdened by a shamed and hesitating rectitude.

"I was run out by rats," said he. "Yes, sir, they run me from Kansas to Frisco, and then off the map—so I came to Alaska."

"You're safe here," I remarked; "there aren't any in this country."

"There wasn't any back there, either: that was the trouble. You see, me and a man misdesignified by the appellation of Percival Pillie evolved something unique in the way of procuring the 'panga.'

"What?"

"Mazuma, money. This here Pillie don't act like he sounds—not largely. He's been affiliated with colleges, horse-racin' and patent-medicine shows till he's infested and overrun with poetry, politeness and peculiar modes of gettin' the goods. He's united to the idea that the Pillie family lost all the money in the world and folks are forcin' it back on him as legatee. His gray pulp ain't never curdled on him yet, and he realized about this date that rats afforded a virgin field of profit, unsullied by the touch of commerce; hence the Pillie Patent Rat Eradicator.

"It comprised a piece of atmosphere surrounded by wire in such proportions that once havin' blindfolded and backed a rat into it he'd stay there; otherwise, its ingenuities wasn't much. We made up a wagonload of 'em, also a zinc tank that fitted the bed of my covered wagon, and hit the trail out into the ruralities—at least, I did. Pillie was a week ahead sellin' cologne, lightnin' rods, and Happy Hints to the Housewife, in calf,

"We'd place some traps in the barn and go to sleep, with the money in the old man's hands.

"It was a nickel-plated scheme, all right—all I kicked on was havin' my rest broke by gettin' up at midnight to fill the traps with nice live rats out of the zinc tank in the wagon.

"We had no trouble sellin' all the eradicators we cared about on a small margin—say five hundred per cent; but that was too measly slow, so we put the patent on the market.

"Pillie would conspire with the farmer to take advantage of my ignorance and 'job' me out of the patent; they'd go in on halves. Patents brought from two hundred up, accordin' to Pillie's idea of what the man had—we let her go once for twenty dollars, as a mark of affection for a friend. We didn't care much what we got as long as we sold enough of 'em; there was patents for everybody.

"Other drawbacks was the long drives after a deal, and our inability to work the same territory twice. We did good, legitimate business, though, gettin' ahead slowly, till we sold a man whose brother, back at Fort Scott, had bought the patent a month before.

"It transpired that Pillie's Patent Rat Eradicator had a patentee in seventeen adjoining counties, and so, as I stated, I came West. The rat odor stuck to me, however. I was ratified so thorough I found it advisable to keep moving.

"One day I recognized the sheriff of Fort Scott on the street, and as there was only one steamer leaving Frisco that afternoon I happened into Alaska. I'd have preferred Honolulu. There's inspiring openings for high-class Christian graft among the Kanakas."

Kink's eyes gleamed with the fire of rhapsody.



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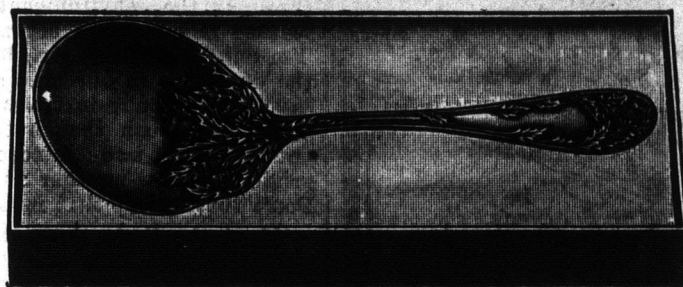
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