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The Heritage Of The Desert

Continued from Page Three

The first fellow who bent over Snap happened to be the Nebraska rustler, and he curiously opened the breech of the six-shooter he picked up. "No shells!" he said. He pulled Snap's second Colt from his belt, and unbreeched that. "No shells! Well, d—n me!" He surveyed the group of grim men, not one of whom had any reply. Holder-ness again laughed harshly, and turning to the cabin he fastened the door with a lasso.

It was a long time before Hare recovered from the startling revelation of the plot which had put Mescal into Holder-ness's power. Bad as Snap Naab had been he would have married her, and such a fate was infinitely preferable to the one that now menaced her. Hare changed his position and settled himself to watch and wait out the Every hour Holder-ness and his men tarried at Silver Cup hastened their approaching doom. Hare's strange presence of the fatality that overshadowed these men had received its first verification in the sudden taking off of Snap Naab. The deep-scheming Holder-ness confident that his strong band meant sure protection, sat and smoked and smiled beside the campfire. He had not caught even a hint of Snap Naab's suggested warning. Yet somewhere out on the oasis trail rode a man who, once turned from the saving of life to the lust to kill, would be as immutable as death itself. Behind him waited a troop of Navajos, swift as eagles, merciless as wolves, desert warriors with the sun-heated blood of generations in their veins. As Hare waited and watched with all his inner being cold, he could almost feel pity for Holder-ness. His doom was close. Twice, when the rustler chief had sauntered nearer to the cabin door; as if to enter, Hare had covered him with the rifle, waiting, waiting for the step upon the threshold. But Holder-ness always checked himself in

time, and Hare's finger eased its pressure upon the trigger.

The night closed in black; the clouded sky gave forth no starlight; the wind rose and moaned through the cedars. One by one the rustlers rolled in their blankets and all dropped into slumber while the camp-fire slowly burned down. The night hours wore on to the soft wail of the breeze and the wild-notes of far-off trailing coyotes.

Hare, watching sleeplessly, saw one of the prone figures stir. The man raised himself very cautiously; he glanced at his companions, and looked long at Holder-ness, who lay squarely in the dimming light. Then he softly lowered himself. Hare wondered what the rustler meant to do. Presently he again lifted his head and turned it as if listening intently. His companions were motionless in deep-breathing sleep. Gently he slipped aside his blankets and began to rise. He was slow and guarded of movement; it took him long to stand erect. He stepped between the rustlers with stockinged feet which were as noiseless as an Indian's, and he went toward the cabin door.

He softly edged round the sleeping Holder-ness showing a glinting six-shooter in his hand Hare's resolve to kill him before he reached the door was checked. What did it mean, this rustler's stealthy movements, his passing by Holder-ness with his drawn weapon. Again doom hovered over the rustler chief. If he stirred!—Hare knew instantly that this softly stepping man was a Mormon; he was true to Snap Naab, to the woman pledged in his creed. He meant to free Mescal.

If ever Hare breathed a prayer it was then. What if one of the band awakened! As the rustler turned at the door his dark face gleamed in the flickering light. He unwound the lasso and opened the door without a sound.

Hare whispered: "Heavens! if he goes in she'll scream! that will wake Holder-ness—then I must shoot—I must!"

But the Mormon rustler added wisdom to his cunning and stealth.

"Hist!" he whispered into the cabin. "Hist!"

Mescal must have been awake; she must have guessed instantly the meaning of that low whisper, for silently she held forth her bound hands. The man untied the bonds and pointed into the cedars toward the corral. Swift and soundless as a flitting shadow Mescal vanished in the gloom. The Mormon stole with wary, unhurried steps back to his bed and rolled in his blankets.

Hare rose unsteadily, wavering in the hot grip of a moment that seemed to have but one issue—the killing of Holder-ness. Mescal would soon be upon Silvermane, far away out on the White Sage trail, and this time there would be no sand-strip to trap her. But Hare could not kill the rustler while he was sleeping; and he could not awaken him without revealing to his men the escape of the girl. Hare stood there on the bench, gazing down on the blanketed Holder-ness. Why not kill him now, ending forever his power, and trust for the rest? No, no! Hare flung off the temptation. To ward off pursuit as long as possible to aid Mescal in every way to some safe hiding place, and then to seek Holder-ness—that was the forethought of a man who had learned to wait.

Under the dark projection of the upper cliff Hare felt his way to the cedar slope, and the trail, and then he went swiftly down into the little hollow where he had left Bolly. The darkness of the forest hindered him, but he came at last to the edge of the aspen thicket; he penetrated it, and guided toward Bolly by a suspicious stamp and neigh, he found her, and quieted her with a word. He rode down the hollow out upon the level valley.

The clouds had broken somewhat, letting pale light down through rifts. All about him cattle were lying in a thick gloom. It was penetrable for only a few rods. The ground was like a cushion under Bolly's hoofs, giving forth no sound. The mustang threw up her head, causing Hare to peer into the night-fog. Rapid hoof-beats broke the silence, a vague gray shadow moved into sight. He saw Silvermane and called as loudly as he dared. The stallion melted into the misty curtain the beating of hoofs softened and ceased. Hare had a long, silent chase, but it was futile, and unnecessarily hard on the mustang; so he pulled her in to a trot.

Hare kept Bolly to this gait the remainder of the night, and when the eastern sky lightened he found the trail and reached Sleeping Springs at dawn. Silvermane's tracks were deep in the clay at the drinking trough. He rested a few moments, gave Bolly sparingly of grain and water, and once more took to the trail.

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From the ridge below the spring he saw Silvermane beyond the valley, miles ahead of him. This day seemed shorter than the foregoing one; it passed while he watched Silvermane grow smaller and smaller and disappear on the looming slope of Cocoonia. Hare's fear that Mescal would run into the riders Holder-ness expected from his ranch grew less and less after she reached the cover of the cedars. That she would rest the stallion at the Navajo pool on the mountain he made certain. Late in the night he came to the camping spot and found no trace to prove that she had halted there even to let Silvermane drink. So he tied the tired mustang and slept till daylight.

He crossed the plateau and began the descent. Before he was half-way down the warm bright sun had cleared the valley of vapor and shadow. Far along the winding white trail shone a speck. It was Silvermane almost out of sight.

"Ten miles—fifteen, more maybe," said Hare. "Mescal will soon be in the valley."

Again hours of travel flew by like winged moments. Thoughts of time, distance, monotony, fatigue, purpose, were shut out from his mind. A rushing kaleidoscopic dance of images filled his consciousness, but they were all of Mescal. Safety for her had unsealed the fountain of happiness.

It was near sundown when he rode Bolly into White Sage, and took the back road, and the pasture lane to Bishop Caldwell's cottage. John, one of the Bishop's sons was in the barnyard and ran to open the gate.

"Mescal!" cried Hare.

"Safe," replied the Mormon.

"Have you hidden her?"

"She's in a secret cave, a Mormon hiding-place for women. Only a few men know of its existence. Rest easy, for she's absolutely safe."

"Thank God! . . . then that's settled," Hare drew a long, deep breath.

"Mescal told us what happened, how she got caught at the sand-strip, and escaped from Holder-ness at Silver Cup. Was Dene hurt?"

"Silvermane killed him."

"Good God! How things come about! I saw you run Dene down that time here in White Sage. It must have been written. Did Holder-ness shoot Snap Naab?"

"Yes."

"What of old Naab? Won't he come down here now to lead us Mormons against the rustlers?"

"He called the Navajos across the river. He meant to take the trail alone and kill Holder-ness, keeping the Indians back a few days. If he failed to return then they were to ride out on the rustlers. But his plan must be changed, for I came ahead of him."

"For what? Mescal?"

"No. For Holder-ness."

"You'll kill him!"

"Yes."

"He'll be coming soon?—When?"

"To-morrow, possibly by daylight. He wants Mescal. There's a chance Naab may have reached Silver Cup before Holder-ness left, but I doubt it."

"May I know your plan?" The Mormon hesitated while his strong brown face flashed with daring inspiration.

"I—I've a good reason."

"Plan?—Yes. Hide Bolly and Silvermane in the little arbor down in the orchard. I'll stay outside to-night, sleep a little—for I'm dead tired—and watch in the morning. Holder-ness will come here with his men, perhaps not openly

at first, to drag Mescal away. He'll mean to use strategy. I'll meet him when he comes—that's all."

"It's well. I ask you not to mention this to my father. Come in, now. You need food and rest. Later I'll hide Bolly and Silvermane in the arbor."

Hare met the Bishop and his family with composure, but his arrival following so closely upon Mescal's, increased their alarm. They seemed repelled yet fascinated by his face. Hare ate in silence. John Caldwell did not come in to supper; his brothers mysteriously left the table before finishing the meal. A subdued murmur of voices floated in at the open window.

Darkness found Hare wrapped in a blanket under the trees. He needed sleep that would loose the strange dead-lock of his thoughts, clear the blur from his eyes, ease the pain in his head and weariness of limbs—all these weaknesses of which he had suddenly become conscious. Time and again he had almost dozed slumber to him when soft footsteps on the gravel paths, low voices, the gentle closing of the gate, brought him back to the unreal listening wakefulness. The sounds continued late into the night, and when he did fall asleep he dreamed of them. He awoke to a dawn clearer than the light from the noonday sun. In his ears was the ringing of a bell. He could not stand still, and his movements were subtle and swift. His hands took a peculiar, tenacious hold of everything he chanced to touch. He paced his hidden walk behind the arbor at every turn glancing sharply up and down the road. Thoughts came to him clearly, yet one was dominant. The morning was cur-

iously quiet, the sons of the Bishop had strangely disappeared—a sense of imminent catastrophe was in the air.

A band of horsemen closely grouped turned into the road and trotted forward. Some of the men wore black masks. Holder-ness rode at the front, his red-gold beard shining in the sunlight. The steady clip-clop of hoofs and clinking of iron stirrups broke the morning quiet. Holder-ness, with two of his men, dismounted before the Bishop's gate; the others of the band trotted on down the road. The ring of Holder-ness's laugh preceded the snap of the gate-latch.

Hare stood calm and cold behind his green covert watching the three men stroll up the garden path. Holder-ness took a cigarette from his lips as he neared the porch and blew out circles of white smoke. Bishop Caldwell tottered from the cottage rapping the porch-floor with his cane.

"Good-morning, Bishop," greeted Holder-ness, blandly, baring his head.

"To you, sir," quavered the old man, with his wavering blue eyes fixed on the spurred and belted rustler. Holder-ness stepped out in front of his companions, a superb man, courteous, smiling, entirely at his ease.

"I rode into—"

Hare leaped from his hiding-place. "Holder-ness!"

The rustler pivoted on whirling heels.

"Dene's spy!" he exclaimed, aghast. Swift changes swept his mobile features. Fear flickered in his eyes at he faced his foe; then came wonder, a glint of amusement, dark anger, and the terrible instinct of death impend-

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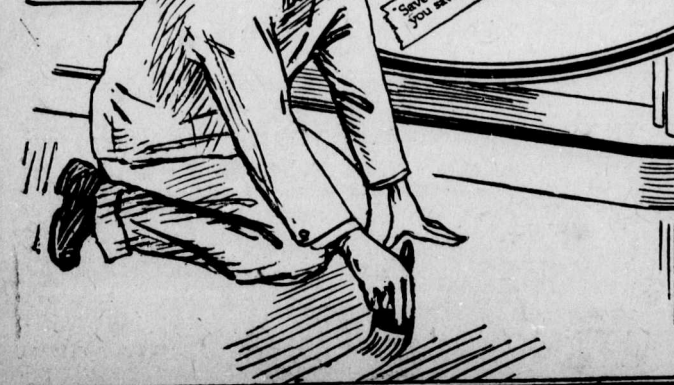
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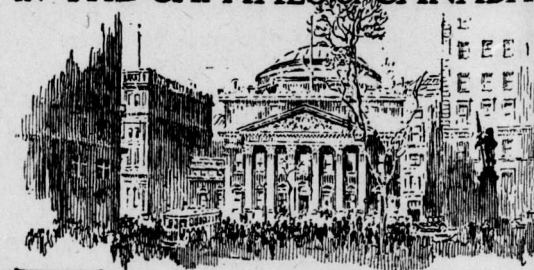


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A MYTH?

The teacher was about to give her class a lesson on some of the most famous myths and legends of the past. Before beginning, however, she thought she would ask the scholars a question or two to see what ideas they had, if any, about the subject.

"Now, can anyone tell me what a myth is?" she asked.

A solitary hand was raised, and a little voice exclaimed: "Please miss, it's a female moth."