

meaner, as it were. Then, too, in addition to the question of my right to do it, there would be the certainty of making enemies of your people, old 'No Creek' and the rest, and I can't afford that now."

All arguments and pleading were in vain. He remained obdurate and insisted on her locating two other claims for herself, one on each of the smaller creeks where they came together above the house.

"But nobody ever stakes more than one claim on a gulch," objected the girl. "It's a custom of the miners."

"Then we'll call each one of these branches a different and separate creek," he said. "The gold was carried down one of those smaller streams, and we won't take any chances on which one it was."

CHAPTER VII
THE MAGIC OF BEN STARK.

BEFORE the party came in sight the sound of their voices reached the cabin, and Burrell rose nervously and sauntered to the door. Uncertain how this affair might terminate, he chose to get first a look at his enemies, if they should prove to be such, realizing the advantage that goes to a man who stands squarely on both feet. Then he heard Lee say:

"Well, I'll be d—d! Somebody's here ahead of us."

"We've been beaten!" growled Stark angrily, pushing past him and coming around the corner, an ugly look in his eyes.

"Good afternoon," Burrell nodded pleasantly.

Lee answered him unintelligibly. Stark said nothing, but Runnion's exclamation was plain.

"It's that cursed blue belly!"

"When did you get here?" said Stark after a pause.

"A few hours ago."

"How did you come?" asked Lee.

"Black Bear creek," said the soldier curtly, at which Runnion broke into profanity.

"Better hush," Burrell admonished him. "There's a lady inside." And at that instant Necia showed her laughing face under his arm, while the trader uttered her name in amazement.

"Lunch is ready," she said. "We've been expecting you for quite awhile."

"Ba gar! Dat's funny t'ing for sure," said Poleon. "Who tol' you 'bout dis strike, eh?"

"Mother. I made her," the girl answered.

"Take off your packs and come in," Burrell invited, but Stark strode forward.

"Hold on a minute. This don't look good to me. You say your mother told you I suppose you're Old Man Gale's other daughter, eh?"

Necia nodded.

"What time of day was it when you learned about this?"

"Cut that out!" roughly interjected Lee. "Do you think I double crossed you?"

The other turned upon him.

"It looks that way, and I intend to find out. You said yesterday you hadn't told nobody."

"I didn't think about the woman," said the trader, a trifle disconcerted, whereupon Runnion gave vent to an ironical sneer.

"But here's your girl and this man ahead of us. I suppose there's others on the way too."

"Nonsense!" Burrell cut in.

"I call it sleek work," chuckled the Canadian, slipping out of his straps. "De nex' t'm' I go stampeidin' I tak' you 'long, Necia."

"Me, too," said Lee. "And now I'm goin' to tar into some of them beans I smell a-billin' in yonder."

The others followed, although Stark and Runnion looked black and had little to say. It was an uncomfortable meal. Every one was ill at ease. Gale in particular was quiet and ate less than any of them. His eyes sought Stark's face frequently, and once the blood left his cheeks and his eyes balled as he observed the gambler boldly eying Necia.

"You are a mighty good looking girl for a blood," remarked Stark at last.

"Thank you," she replied simply, and the soldier's dislike of the man crystallized into hate on the instant. There was a tone back of his words that seemed aimed at the trader, Meade thought, but Gale showed no sign of it, so the meal was finished in silence, after which the five belated prospectors went out to make their locations, for the fear of interruption was upon them now.

First they went downstream, and, according to their agreement, the trader staked first, followed by Poleon and Stark, thus throwing Runnion's claim more than a mile distant from Lee's discovery. From here they went up the creek to find the girl's other locations, one on each branch, at which Stark sneeringly remarked that she had pre-empted enough ground for a full grown white woman.

Runnion's displeasure was even more open, and he fell into foul mouthed ranting, addressing himself to Poleon and Stark while the trader was out of earshot.

"This affair don't smell right, and I still think it's a frame-up."

"Bah!" exclaimed Poleon.

"The old man sent the girl on ahead of us to blanket all the good ground. That's what he did."

"Wait wain't," interrupted Poleon, his voice as soft as a woman's. "I tol' you dat I know all 'bout dis Black Bear creek too. You 'member, eh? Wain't, mebbe you tink I'm traitor too? Wain't? Any den' you spik out?"

"The three of them were alone, and only the sound of Gale's ax came to them, but at the light in the Canadian's face Runnion hastily disclaimed any such thought on his part, and

Stark shrugged his denial.

There are men quite devoid of the ability to read the human face, and Runnion was of this species. Moreover, malice was so bitter in his mouth that he must have it out. So when they paused to blaze the next stake he addressed himself to Stark loud enough for Poleon to hear.

"The lieutenant is more of a man than I thought he was."

"How so?" inquired the older man.

"Well, it takes nerve to steal a girl for one night and then face the father, but the old man don't seem to mind it any more than she does. I guess he knows what it means, all right."

Stark laughed raucously.

"That's probably how Gale got his squaw," concluded Runnion, with a sneer.

It seemed a full minute before the Froelcherman gave sign that he had heard; then a strange cry broke from his throat, and he began to tremble as if with cold. He was no longer the singer of songs or the man who was forever a boy. The mocking anger of a moment ago was gone. In its place was a consuming fury that sucked the blood from beneath his tan, leaving him the pallor of ashes, while his mouth twitched and his head rolled slightly from side to side like a palsied old man's. But evidently Poleon meant no violence, for he allowed the passion to run from him freely and he spent his vigor, then said to Runnion:

"Somebody got die for w'at you say just now. Mebbe it's goin' be you, n'skin; mebbe it's goin' 'o be him. I can't tell yet, but I'm hope an' pray it's goin' be you, because I tink w'at you say is a lie, an' nobody can spik cose kin' of 'bout Necia Gale."

He went crashing blindly through the underbrush, his head wagging, his shoulders slumped loosely forward like those of a drunken man, his lips framing words they could not understand.

When he had disappeared Runnion drew a deep breath.

"I guess I've framed something for Mr. Burrell this time."

"You go about it queer," said Stark.

"I'll rather tackle a gang saw than a man like Poleon Dore. Your frame-up may work double."

"Tuh! No chance. The soldier was out all night alone with that half breed girl, and anybody can see she's crazy about him. What's the answer?"

"Have you got your eye on her too?"

"Sure! Do you blame me?"

"No, but she's too good for you. Better stay out," the gambler advised.

As a matter of fact, I don't like her father any better than you like her lovers."

"Well, it's mutual. I can see Gale hates you like poison."

"And I don't intend to see him and his tribe hog all the best ground hereabouts."

"They're already done it. You can't stop them."

"Yes, I can stop them," said Stark.

"I want the ground that girl has staked, and I'm going to get it. It lies next to Lee's, and it's sure to be rich. Ours is so far away it may not be worth the recorder's fees. This creek may be as spotted as a coach dog, so I don't intend to take any chances."

"She made her locations legally," said Runnion.

"You leave that to me. When will the other boys be here?"

"Tomorrow morning. I told them to follow about four hours behind and not to run in on us till we had finished. They'll camp a few miles down the creek and be in early."

"You couldn't get but three, eh?"

"That's all I could find who would agree to give up half."

"Can we count on them?"

"Tuh! No," the other grunted. "They worked with me and Soapy Smith on the Skagway trail."

"Good-five against three, not counting the girl and the lieutenant," Stark mused. "Well, that will do it." He outlined his plan; then the two returned to the cabin to find Lee cooking supper.

Poleon had finished several pipes and after supper sat in the shadows in the open doorway apparently tired and dejected, though his eyes shone like diamonds and roved from one to the other, half unconsciously he heard Stark say:

"This girl was about your size, but not so dark. However, you remind me of her in some ways. That's why it puts her in my mind, I suppose. She was about your age at the time—nineteen."

"Oh, I'm not eighteen yet," said Necia.

"Well, she was a fine woman anyhow, the best that ever set foot in Chandon, and there was a great deal of talk when she chose young Bennett over the Gaylord man, for Bennett had been running second best from the start, and everybody thought it was settled between her and the other one. However, they were married quietly."

The story did not interest the Canadian. His mind was in too great agitation to care for dead tales. His heart burned within him too fiercely, and he felt too great a desire to put his hands to work. As he watched Burrell and Runnion bend over the table looking at a little van of gold dust that Lee had taken from under his bunk his eyes grew red and bloodshot beneath his fat lids. Which one of the two would it be? he wondered. From the corner of his eye he saw One rise from Lee's bed, where he had stretched himself to smoke, and take his six-shooter from his belt, then remove the knotted bandanna from his neck and begin to clean the gun, his hand moved over it earnestly, his face in the shadow. He had ever been a diligent man.

(To be continued.)