

not citizens of the United States. Now wait! I've not finished! I'm looking to you to go out there and protect our claims!"

"Well—the dirty—thief!" rumbled Rimrock, in his throat. "I didn't think he had the nerve. But say," he went on, suddenly struck with an idea, "how come you're telling me all this? I thought you and McBain——"

"We won't discuss that, if you please," she broke in, blushing painfully. "There are some things you don't understand. But I think, under the circumstances, I have the right to take steps to protect my own interests. Now, will you go out to the claims and keep them from being jumped, or——"

"Leave it to me," he said, the fighting light in his eyes. "Where's McBain? He's the man I've got to stop."

"No, now let's not have any violence. I know something of the law. All you need to do is to stay on the ground. If you're in possession——"

"That's got nothing to do with it!" he burst out, impatiently. "This has gone beyond the law. I've warned this man McBain before all kinds of witnesses not to set his foot on my ground; and if he does it—I'll make him pay for it."

He started for the door, hitching up his belt, and she caught at his pistol as he passed.

"No," she said, "I don't want you to shoot him. I'd rather we'd lose the mine."

"You don't understand," he answered. "This has got nothing to do with a mine." He took both her hands in one of his and put them firmly away. "It's between me and him," he said, and went off without looking back.

CHAPTER X.

The Fight for the Old Juan.

WHEN a man's honour is questioned—his honour as a fighting man—it is the dictum of centuries of chivalry that he shall not seek to avoid the combat. A great fortune was at stake, many millions of dollars and the possession of a valuable mine, and yet Rimrock Jones did not move. He walked around the town and held conferences with his friends until word came at last that he was jumped.

"All right," he said, and with Hassayamp and L. W. he started across the desert to his mine. Red-handed as he was from a former treachery, L. W. did not fail Rimrock in this crisis and his cactus-proof automobile took them swiftly over the trail that led to the high-cliffed Tecolotes. He went under protest as the friend of both parties, but all the same he went. And Hassayamp Hicks, who came from Texas, where men held their honour above their lives; he went along as a friend in arms, to stand off the gunmen of McBain.

The news had come in that Andrew McBain had left Geronimo under cover of the night, with an automobile load of guards, and the next day at dawn some belated stampedees had seen them climbing up to the dome. There lay the apex of the Tecolote claims, fifteen hundred lateral feet that covered the main body of the lode; and with the instinct of a mine pirate McBain had sought the high ground. If he could hold the Old Juan claim he could cloud the title to all the rich ground on both sides; and at the end of litigation, if he won his suit, all the improvements that might be built below would be of value only to him. Always providing he won; for his game was desperate and he knew that Rimrock would fight.

He had flung down the challenge and, knowing well how it would end, he had had his gunmen barricade the trail. They were picked-up men of that peculiar class found in every Western town, the men who live by their nerve. There were some who had been officers and others outlaws; and others, if the truth were known, both. And as neither officers nor outlaws are prone to question too closely the ethics of their particular trade, so they asked no questions of the close-mouthed McBain, except what he paid by the day. Now, like any hired fighters, they looked well to their own safety and let McBain do the worrying for the crowd. He was a lawyer, they knew that, and it stood to reason he was acting within the law.

L. W.'s auto reached Ironwood Springs, where Rimrock had made his old camp, while the sun was

still two hours high. From the Springs to the dome, that great "bust-up" of porphyry which stood square-topped and sheer against the sky, there was a single trail full of loose, shaly rocks that mounted up through a notch in the rim. They started up in silence, Rimrock leading the way and Hassayamp puffing along behind; but as they neared the heights, where the shattered base of the butte rose up from the mass of fallen debris, Rimrock forged on and left them behind.

"HEY, wait!" called Hassayamp, with the last of his breath, but neither Rimrock nor L. W. looked back. It was a race to the top, Rimrock to get his revenge and L. W. to stop his mad rush; but in this race, as always, youth took the lead and L. W. lagged far behind. Like a mountain sheep on some familiar trail Rimrock bounded on until his breath came in whistling gasps; but, while the blood pounded against his brain-pan and his muscles quivered and twitched, the strength of ten men pulsed through his iron limbs, and he kept his face to the heights.

He was all of a tremble when, in the notch of the trail, he was challenged by a ringing:

"Halt!"

He stopped, sucked in a great breath and dashed the stinging sweat from his eyes; and then, hardly seeing the barricade before him or the rifles that thrust out between the rocks, he put down his head and toiled on. Right on the rim, where the narrow trail nicked it, the gunmen had built a low wall and as he came on unheeding they rose up from behind it and threw down on him with their rifles.

"Stop right where you are!" a guard called out harshly, and Rimrock halted—and then he came on.

"Get back or we'll shoot!" shouted a grizzled gunman who now suddenly seemed to take charge. "This claim is held by Andrew McBain and the first man that trespasses gets killed!"

"Well, shoot, then," panted Rimrock, still struggling up the pathway. "Go ahead—it's nothing to me."

"Hey, you stop!" commanded the gunman as Rimrock gained the barricade, and he struck him back with the muzzle of his gun. Rimrock staggered and caught himself and then held on weakly as his breath came in quivering sobs.

"That's all right," he gasped. "I've got no quarrel with you. I came to get Andrew McBain."

"Well, stay where you are," ordered the gunman, sternly, "or I'll kill you, sure as hell."

RIMROCK swayed back and forth as he clung to a bush that he had clutched in his first lurching fall, and as he laboured for breath he gazed about wildly at the unfamiliar faces of the men.

"Who are you boys?" he asked at last, and as nobody answered him he glanced swiftly back down the trail.

"It's no use to try that," said the gunman, shortly, "you can't rush us, behind the wall."

"Oh, I've got no men," answered Rimrock, quickly, "those fellows are just coming along. I'm Henry Jones, and I came to warn you gentlemen you're trespassing on one of my claims."

"Can't help it," said the guard, "we're here under orders to kill you if you come over this line."

He indicated the wall which barred the way to the location notice of the claim and Rimrock hitched

his belt to the left.

"Show me your papers," he said. "You've got no right to kill any man until you prove that this claim is yours."

That hitch of the belt had brought his heavy six-shooter well around on the side of his leg, and as the gunmen watched him he looked them over, still struggling to get back his breath. Then as no one moved he advanced deliberately and put his hand on the wall.

"Now," he said, "you show me your authority or I'll come over there and put you off."

There was a stir in the ranks of the grim-faced gun-fighters and their captain looked behind. Not forty feet away on the flat floor of the mesa was the shaft of the Old Juan claim and, tacked to the post that rose up from its rockpile was a new, unweathered notice.

"That's the notice," said the captain, "but you stay where you are. You knock down that wall and you'll get killed!"

"Killed nothing!" burst out Rimrock, contemptuously, "you're afraid to shoot me!" And looking him straight in the eyes, he pushed the top rock off the wall.

"Now!" he said, after a moment's silence, as the gunmen moved uneasily about, "I'll do that again, and I'll keep on doing it until you show me that this ain't my claim."

"Mr. McBain!" called the captain, and as Rimrock clutched at his pistol he found a gun thrust against his stomach.

"You make a crooked move," warned the captain, sharply, "and——"

HE stopped, for up from the mouth of the Old Juan shaft came the head of Andrew McBain.

"Ah, hiding in a hole," spoke up Rimrock, sneeringly, as McBain opened his mouth to talk. "I'd like to work for a man like you. Say, boys, take on with me—I'll double your money; and what's more I'll stand up for my rights!" He looked around at the line of gun-fighters, but their set lips did not answer his smile. Only in their eyes, those subtle mirrors of the mind, did he read the passing reflex of their scorn. "You're scared, you coward," went on Rimrock, scathingly, as McBain looked warily about. "Come out, if you're a man, and prove your title, or by grab, I'll come in there and get you!"

He stopped with a grunt for the hard-eyed captain had jabbed him with the muzzle of his gun.

"None of that," he said, but Rimrock took no notice—his eyes were fixed on McBain.

He came out of the hole with a waspish swiftness, though there was a wild, frightened look in his eyes; and as he advanced towards the barricade he drew out a bulldog pistol and held it awkwardly in his hand.

"Mr. Jones," he began, in his harsh lawyer's voice, "don't think for a moment you can bluff me. These men have their orders and at the first show of violence I have told them to shoot you dead. Now, regarding this claim, formerly known as the Old Juan, you have no legal right to the same. In the first place, Juan Soto, whom you hired to locate it, is not an American citizen, and therefore his claim is void. In the second place, the transfer for the nominal sum of ten dollars proves collusion to perpetrate a fraud. And in the third place——"

