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Author of "The Gold Gleaners: A Story of the Cyanide Tanks," "Wilby's Dan," "His Friend the Enemy," "Rogers of Butte," Etc., Etc.

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CHAPTER III.

DARREL'S GAME AT HAWKBILL'S.

Properly equipped with a stony disregard for human greed and frailty, any observer could have loitered in Hawkbill's on and after ten p. m. and been certain of exciting entertainment. A philosopher of another school might have seen more than enough to point a moral and adorn a tale and perhaps have retreated with a discouraged sense of man's inhumanity to man.

Darrel could be indifferent and hard, or sympathetic and yielding. Deep in his heart was ever a feeling that stirred at another's misfortune and his moods varied with the characters of the players as well as with the play.

He stood close to a table, facing the door and dividing his attention between the fall of the cards and the men who entered. An old, old game familiarly known as "two pluck one" was in progress, wherein a pair of merciless campaigners were taking money from a beardless and rash youth who sat between them.

Cheating, on the part of the gamblers, was constant and flagrant. But the boy had eyes for only his own cards and was playing with absorbed and tremulous intensity.

"They'll have headlines on me in the eastern papers," he recklessly averred, "unless I make a big winning to-night."

"There's no telling when the luck it runs," answered one of the gamblers, "splitting a cut" [illegible]

won, but from this out it may be your turn."

The youth clenched his teeth and whitened, for he had a loser's grudge against a winner's assumed superiority. He wagered the last of his money—a dozen crisp bills marked with a "C" in one corner.

He lost. Rising from the table with the quiet remark, "I'm done, gentlemen," he walked steadily out into the darkness, far beyond the glare of the red lamps.

It was the old story of the moth and the flame. Darrel knew it well, but not so well that familiarity bred anything but deeper and more consuming pity.

He was at the youth's back in time to snatch a six-shooter from his convulsive hand.

"Come, come," he said, as the boy gave a startled cry and turned on him. "Where is your manhood, young fellow?"

"Manhood!" was the bitter response, "ask the red, white and blue chips at Hawkbill's. Give me that, or by—"

With a plunge he sought to catch the weapon and tear it from Darrel's grasp.

"Softly!" warned the other, clutching his hand. "If I get your money back for you will you promise never to touch another card so long as you live?"

"Who are you?" gasped the youth. "My money is gone and I am ruined. How can you get it back for me?"

"Follow me and you will find out. As to who I am, that is beside the question. Have I your promise?"

"Yes; but I should like—"

"Here's your revolver. I'd throw it away, if I were you."

Darrel pushed the weapon into the young man's hand, turned sharply and retraced his steps to Hawkbill's. The two gamblers were still at table.

What Darrel purposed doing called for skill and courage. Both qualities were his and he sought the issue with that airy confidence to which others had often attributed his success.

It was by meddling in a somewhat similar way that he had earned the parent reluctance. "I'm not having much luck to-night, though."

"Three will make it more interesting," observed Darrel, dropping into a chair that placed him so he could still watch the entrance.

Thereupon the playing began, the youth whose battle Darrel was fighting, approaching the table and watching eagerly. Darrel allowed the two harpies to win enough of his money to give them confidence, then carelessly proposed that they play for a stake consisting of all the money they had about them.

Certain of winning, the other two agreed, and from that moment to the end of the game Darrel showed himself the veteran player he was. Sturgis purposely dealt him three aces and himself four queens, the younger man dropped out in feigned despair and Darrel plucked a diamond stud from his shirt and laid it on the heap of gold and silver.

From various parts of the room a general movement of the idly curious had set in towards that particular table, which made it necessary for Darrel to request, in his politest tones, that those between the table and the door should draw aside in order that he might watch for the entrance of "a man he was waiting for."

The request was complied with. Behind his chair Darrel could hear the sharp, tense breathing of the boy.

Sturgis asked how much the diamond [illegible] and when informed, borrowed $500 from Hawkbill Henderson, $200 to meet Darrel's bet and $300 to "raise" him. Darrel took a magnificent watch from his vest pocket, the gold case studded with gems.

"I am a stranger here," said he, quietly, "and this is as far as I can go. What have you?"

Sturgis exultantly spread out his four queens. Darrel laid down four kings and an ace.

"Take your money," said he, turning to the boy.

A growl of rage came from Sturgis. Catching up his opponent's discard he turned the pasteboards over.

"Tricked!" he shouted, springing erect. "He had three aces and discarded two! Hawkbill, I demand the stakes."

Henderson, red-faced, bull-necked and corpulent, swaggered closer.

"This place is on the square," he said wheezingly to Darrel, "and if you've juggled the cards the stakes go to Sturgis."

Leaning forward with a quick movement, Darrel swept his hand under the edge of the table in front of Sturgis. Sturgis tried to stop the hand, but was not quick enough.

The hand reappeared with a small, nickel-plated contrivance known as a table "hold out." A murmur passed through the crowd.

"Sturgis has been using that all evening," remarked Darrel, coolly. "He cheated that boy out of his money and—"

With an imprecation, Sturgis hurled himself towards Darrel, a gleaming object in his mind. Hawkbill threw himself in the way and ordered Sturgis to keep back.

It was evident that the baffled gambler had friends who would rally to his side and Darrel swept the stakes into his hat, clapped the hat on his head and caught the boy by the arm and hurried him out.

At the hotel the young man's money was returned to him. Tears stood in his eyes as he thanked Darrel and the latter, gruffly bidding him remember his promise, went out into the dark street intent on returning to Hawkbill's and waiting for Murgatroyd.



"NOW THEN, MY BUCK," CRIED A VOICE WITH PASSION, "WE'LL SETTLE OUR DIFFERENCES MAN TO MAN."

CHAPTER IV.

DARREL'S ENCOUNTER WITH STURGIS.

As time mellows the perspective of past events, so it blurs and modifies the characters of those who made them. Much of the glory of Anaconda has departed and Sandy Bar has gone the way of the "played out" mining camp, yet tradition deals generously with the exploits of Nate Darrel—often too generously.

The strange features of his feud with Murgatroyd were sufficiently incredible in cold truth; and when the outline of the facts faded with a lapse of years, imagination was drawn upon to sharpen the reminiscences. The added material was not always to Darrel's credit.

Yet no one who now remembers Darrel will ever tell you that he tried to be anything but a gentleman. If the part was beyond him, it was solely the fault of his unfortunate vocation.

In any other walk of life his sterling qualities of mind and heart would have claimed their tribute of respect and social position. A man who believed that his fate was of his own making could hardly have been ignorant of this; but passion for play was too deeply ingrained in his nature. The notoriety he had courted and won, in any other profession would have been the millstone that pulled him under.

The recovery of the boy's money aptly illustrates Darrel's character. He could not see anything wrong in turning the tables on the blacklegs and it was a pleasure for him to be able to do it.

He played an "honorable" game; and he considered it honorable to worst a couple of sharpers at their own tactics.

As he made his way back along the straggling street toward Hawkbill Henderson's he was warily watchful. Recent events had taken his attention somewhat from his main purpose in coming to Sandy Bar and the murderous Murgatroyd might be lurking anywhere in the shadows or dogging his steps.

The wheezy tones of fiddles, guitars and a bass-viol, accompanied by hoarse shouts, laughter and a fall of dancing feet echoed from a building across the way. Other buildings along the street were aglare with light and rife with a clink of glasses, a rattle of poker chips and boisterous cries of drinkers and players.

There were few on the street at that moment and Darrel passed rapidly on in the direction of the gambling place. Abruptly a form hurled itself across his path from a dark space between two shanties on his left.

Instantly a revolver was in his hand. "Now then, my buck," cried a voice sharp with passion, "we'll settle our differences man to man."

"We have no differences to settle, Sturgis," returned Darrel, relieved and not a little surprised. He was looking for Murgatroyd, not Sturgis.

The gambler was in a blind, unreasoning fury. In the light of later events it was patent that Darrel had set a trap for him and beaten him and his confederate at their own game.

When a man like Sturgis has such a grievance there is but one way in which the score can be settled. Sturgis was fiercely determined and Darrel was quick to comprehend his peril.

A flaring lamp in front of the dance hall opposite cast a dim light over the scene. The field was clear for the encounter, no one being abroad in the street apart from the two concerned.

Rigidly erect the two men stood, revolvers ready and swinging at their sides, their eyes alert and watching catlike each other's slightest movement.

"You're either the devil himself or else you're—Nate Darrel of 'Frisco," said Sturgis, between his teeth. "No man could play the game you did without being one or the other. It was Darrel's discard you threw into the deadwood, and you sat between Cliff and me and helped yourself to just what you wanted out of the pack."

Darrel laughed a little at that. It wasn't the first time his phenomenal skill had led a gambler to confound him with the arch fiend.

"You're a bungler, Sturgis," said he, "and have yet to learn the first rudiments of your profession. I have taught you a lesson and if you want to live long enough to profit by it you'll put that gun in your pocket and take yourself off."

An exasperated cry fell from Sturgis' lips. Recklessly he threw himself forward, raising the six-shooter to a level with his eyes.

There was no blood on Nate Darrel's hands. In his whole career he had never found it necessary to protect his life by taking another's.

His ready wit and his wonderful strength—which his slight form in a manner belied—had times out of mind been his bulwarks of self-defense. He had a horror of bloodshed and carried a revolver in humble demonstration of the theory that leads great nations to build great navies—hoping to make the arbitrament of war still more remote.

By coming to Sandy Bar in quest of Murgatroyd he had faced an issue at direct variance with his inclinations. He was well aware that fatalities were almost certain to result; if he were the victim, no aching void would be left in the world, while if Murgatroyd fell the cause of humanity would be advanced.

But he wanted no exchange of shots with Sturgis. He had threatened, but it was with the forlorn hope of avoiding a clash.

As the irate blackleg plunged forward, Darrel threw himself to one side. At that precise moment a shot rang out from some point at Darrel's rear, a bullet fanned his cheek and Sturgis, with an agonized cry, tossed his hands in the air, reeled and fell face downward on the sidewalk.

Darrel was stunned by the suddenness of the tragedy. In a second he had whirled to look back up the street, but saw no one. Then he did the worst thing possible for himself by hastening to the prostrate form and making an examination.

Sturgis was already dead. The bullet had penetrated his heart and a stream of blood flowed from the wound and formed a pool beneath him.

The shot and the tortured cry of the dying man had aroused the people. From the dance hall they came on a run, and from Hawkbill's and other resorts a half-drunken mob charged for the scene.

Darrel was found standing over Sturgis revolver in hand. Sturgis was dead and the habitues of Hawkbill's knew that Sturgis and Darrel had quarreled at cards.

Only one inference was possible. Darrel drew it as quickly as those around him.

"Where's the marshal?" he asked, his voice perfectly steady.

His hand tightened a little on the revolver and he retreated slowly until his back was against the wall of the nearest building, the half circle of threatening faces in front.

"We don't need the marshal," said Cliff, savagely. "Jack Sturgis is dead and you're the one that killed him. Do we need the marshal, boys?"

He appealed to the crowd. A snarling negative passed through the ranks of the crowd and the half circle began to contract.

"You'll need the marshal or the undertaker," returned Darrel. His voice was of velvet but it cut like steel. "When I open my gunplay, what I miss in the original deal I try to make up in the draw. I am Nate Darrel, of San Francisco. Some of you have probably heard of me and may know that my word is as good as my bond. I did not kill that man—"

His declaration was drowned in a derisive jeer. He knew he would not be believed so he was not disappointed.

"I did not kill that man," he repeated with deliberate emphasis, "and if you force me to fight for my life for whatever happens you alone will be responsible. I want the marshal and am willing to be put under lock and key until the coroner has a chance to sift this affair. That's all you can expect of me."

Every man in the rabble carried a revolver and every revolver had leaped from pocket or holster.

"Shooting's too good for him!" shouted some one at the rear of the crowd.

The veiled suggestion was grasped on the instant. It was well for Darrel, since it turned the mob's attention to a rope instead of a bullet and would consume more time in the execution.

Messengers were dispatched here and there, but before anything could be done a burly, broad-shouldered man parted the ranks of the rabble left and right and reached Darrel's side.

"Give me that gun!" he demanded curtly. "I'm the marshal."

Darrel yielded up the weapon without a word.

"Now," cried the marshal, "this fellow goes to the lock-up, without any ifs, nor ands, nor whyevers. There ain't a man of you that packs the nerve to stop me and you know it. Scatter from in front of us and clear the trail!"

There was nothing in the marshal's hands to enforce the order. He was known to be a man of few words and prompt action, however, and the crowd sullenly parted.

Then, with his arm in Darrel's the marshal started his prisoner for the jail. The rabble, muttering wild threats and chafing with baffled rage, tagged at their heels.

CHAPTER V.

DARREL'S ESCAPE.

Eponay creek skirted the confines of Sandy Bar. The left bank was a flat reach of sand which gave the camp its name; but the right bank, on which the settlement had been built, was high and bluff-like and "gophered" with tunnels.

The bar was rich in placer gold. When the sand had been cradled over prospecting for quartz dykes began and many a "stringer" had been followed inward from the face of the right bank.

The stringers had pinched out. The south bank, however, had not been abandoned as worthless until fairly honeycombed with drifts that led to nothing but country rock.

Thus it followed that the camp had under it a sort of catacombs wherein lay buried a thousand hopes of disappointed miners. To this fact, as will be seen, Nate Darrel owed his life.

The Sandy Bar jail was a log structure that had outlived its usefulness as a miner's cabin. It was situated not more than 50 feet from the brink of the steep, brush-covered bank of the Eponay.

In the single room of this makeshift jail Darrel and the marshal presently found themselves, a tallow "dip" spluttering feebly on the table. Outside the mob could be heard scurrying about in ominous silence.

"They're worked up to beat four of a kind," muttered the marshal, listening to the sounds from without, "but you can bet your moccasins they'll think things over pretty careful before tryin' to take the bit in their teeth."



HE TRAMPED THE CREAKING BOARDS FOR AN HOUR.

He looked at the prisoner curiously. Darrel had seated himself in a chair and lighted a cigar with his usual nonchalance.

"For a murderer, in the grip o' the law and with a pack of lawless coyotes only too anxious to get at you, you're taking this plenty cool."

"I'm not a murderer."

"That shot goes as it lays," returned the incredulous marshal, "but it won't help you." He brought out Darrel's revolver, pulled down the barrel and examined the cartridges. "One empty cartridge and five full ones," he added, briefly; "45-caliber."

"I fired that one shot a good many miles from Sandy Bar," said Darrel.

"Stick to it," grinned the marshal; "it's your only hope and it's slim enough."

"When will you hold the inquest?"

"To-morrow morning. And here's something you can spread your blankets and go to sleep on, my friend. Escape ain't to be thought of. When I leave here I draw a cordon of trusty men around this jail, and the guard 'll be kept up until I come to take you to Anacondy with a coroner's verdict holdin' you for the murder of Jack Sturgis stuffed in my pocket."

The marshal walked to the door, Darrel watching him silently.

"Carry another gun beside this 'un?" asked the officer, his hand on the latch.

"No."

"Well, the rest of your belongin's you can keep, for the present. it will be morning before I come for you ag'in."

continued on 4th page

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