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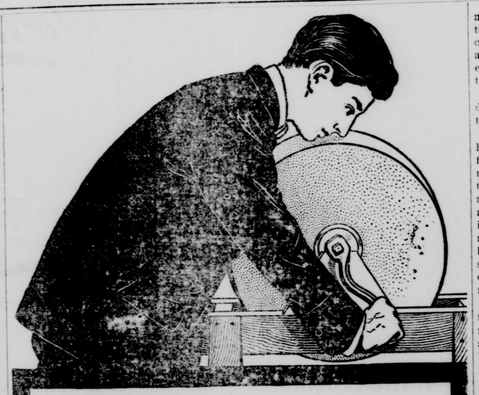
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GAMBLING WITH FATE

By WILLIAM WALLACE COOK

Author of "The Gold Gleaners: A Story of the Cripple Trail," "Wilby's Dare," "His Friend the Enemy," "Regrets of Rosby," Etc., Etc.

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CHAPTER XIX.

DARREL'S INNOCENCE PROVED.

There followed a long pause during which the wild music and hilarious shouts from the dance-hall were wafted to the group in the gambler's office. In the presence of suffering like McCloud's the festive sounds were incongruous and brutal.

"Did you know this all the time, Roy?" asked Payton, in a low tone.

"I did not know he was McCloud," answered the young man. "He was in a stupor, apparently, and we could get little out of him. We thought he was Nate Darrel."

Lenyard ran to Darrel and took him by the hands.

"How wonderfully this has come about, Mr. Darrel," he went on, in a voice full of emotion. "I believed in you all the time and did what I could to establish your innocence, but it was not until this afternoon that the cards were placed in my hands that helped me win this game for you. McCloud walked into camp and Glenn was among the first to see him. Glenn thought he was you, and took him to his own lodgings and made him as comfortable as possible, then came to me, knowing I was about the only friend Nate Darrel had in the camp.

"We could get nothing out of McCloud and I also thought he was yourself. Your arrival on the Anaconda stage—you, whom I thought to be McCloud—all but carried me off my feet. I followed you covertly and arranged for Dr. Payton and the marshal to wait in front of Kaliper's after you and Murgatroyd had come up here.

"Glenn had told me—spurred to remorse at sight of the man we thought to be you—of his discoveries here on the night of the murder. It was our intention to confront you and Murgatroyd with Darrel and do what we could to get the whole truth. God knows, Darrel, how much this moment means to me."

A mist was in the young man's eyes. He averted his face and would have withdrawn his hands had not Darrel clung to them.

"And I know, for the first time," returned Darrel with feeling, "the worth of a true friendship."

He shook the young man's hands and released them. Turning to the doctor and the marshal he added:

"Gentlemen, you have doubted my words—"

"Confine that remark to Merrick," broke in the doctor; "I was more than half convinced all the time."

"Thank you," said Darrel. "There is an opportunity, now, to prove everything I have said. As to the explosion on the War Eagle trail, the mere fact that I am here is evidence that that part of it is true."

Darrel sat down and all eyes were fixed on McCloud. Murgatroyd leaned limply back in his chair and gazed vacantly at the ceiling.

Merrick paid little attention to Darrel. Passing over to McCloud he raised his head and endeavored to press a flask of liquor to his lips.

With sudden strength, McCloud pushed the flash aside.

"I don't want that," he said huskily. "Whisky and cards have been the ruin of me—whisky, and cards and—and Murgatroyd."

Murgatroyd dropped his eyes from the ceiling and fixed them on McCloud with a sneering smile.

"Keep your devilish looks off of me!" muttered McCloud, in a passion. "Take that man away," he went on, addressing the others, his voice quivering with excitement.

Murgatroyd was not taken away but Payton drew his chair in front if him.

"You say that you are Junius McCloud?" said the doctor.

"Yes."

"Do you know Jack Sturgis?"

"No."

"You know he was murdered?"

"It's that that has haunted me and made life a hell for the last month," was the sighing, helpless response.

"You were in these rooms on the night the murder was committed?"

"I was in that private room, there, with Murgatroyd, the night Sturgis was shot." He fluttered one hand toward the other apartment.

"Are you willing to tell us everything, here and now, Mr. McCloud, or would you like to consult a lawyer first?"

"I want no lawyers," said McCloud, decisively, " and if everything is not told now it may never be."

"Get pen and paper, Lenyard," said Merrick, "and sit at the desk."

"That's right," said Payton. "Take down everything, Roy."

In a few moments Lenyard was ready and had jotted down the substance of what had already been said.

"You were talking with Murgatroyd, you say, Mr. McCloud?" resumed Dr. Payton.

"Yes."

"You came here by appointment?"

"I was in Sandy Bar and Murgatroyd sent for me; told the stage driver to tell me that I was to come here at once."

"What was Murgatroyd doing when you entered the room?"

"Walking up and down like a caged animal. He had a letter in his hand."

"Did he tell you anything about the letter?"

"He read it to me. It was from Nate Darrel and said that he—Darrel—was in town awaiting Murgatroyd's pleasure, and could be found at Hawkbill's."

McCloud seemed to gather strength as he proceeded. Excitement was buoying him up for the ordeal.

"You knew there was a feud between Murgatroyd and Darrel?"

"Murgatroyd told me. He said that Darrel was in Sandy Bar and must not get out of the camp alive. He said that I was to help him put Darrel out of the way."

A mild sensation was caused by this announcement.

"Why should Murgatroyd ask you to help him in such a criminal proceeding?" went on Payton.

"Because I had helped in other criminal proceedings, I suppose," was the bitter reply.

"Don't go outside of the Sturgis matter, McCloud," said the doctor, by way of warning. "We only care to know about this."

"I am a wreck and will soon be beyond the pale of any earthly law. What I am I owe to Murgatroyd and I would like to have everything known.

"Where did you first meet Murgatroyd?"

"In Denver. Physicians sent me there for my health. I am the victim of a strange malady and physicians were puzzled and could give me little except advice and suggestions. They sent me to Denver."

Professional curiosity manifested itself in Dr. Payton's manner.

"What sort of a malady, McCloud?" he asked.

"It is nervous, they tell me. Undue excitement throws me into a condition that resembles death—but it is not death, although it has led me close to it. I can see and hear all that goes on around me, but there is no noticeable beating of the heart and all the evidences of death, even to rigor mortis, may be detected."

"Rare, but not unique," muttered the doctor. "The attacks come on at intervals?"

"Excitement brings them on. They have been more frequent of late than formerly." McCloud turned to Darrel. "When I fled from Sandy Bar, that night, I was beside myself with apprehension and remorse. I took refuge in that deserted cabin, and feeling that an attack was upon me, and not knowing but it would be the last, I made a few preparations and stretched myself out in the bunk, covering myself with blankets I carried with me.

"Then you came, Nate Darrel. Up to the time you closed my eyes every move you made inside the cabin was seen by me; every word you spoke i heard."

"What did Darrel do?" asked Payton, bent on proving Darrel's story.

McCloud recited Darrel's actions in detail, substantially as Darrel had already set them forth.

"What were your feelings, McCloud?" continued Payton.

The utter silence of the room was broken only by the low tones of the speakers and an occasional burst of music from the dance hall.

"I was glad," said McCloud, "glad that Darrel could save himself by impersonating me. My hope was that I might die and be found, after a time, and mistaken for Darrel—just as he intended. But fate spared me for this final act of reparation. I recovered and, for the last four weeks, have been living with a prospector in the hills."

Again he addressed Darrel.

"I have what you wrote and placed over me," said he. Taking a Morocco purse from his pocket, he brought from it a ragged slip of brown paper. "Read it, doctor," he added. "It will prove that Nate Darrel is a man of fine feeling."

Payton took the slip and read it. "Is there another paper in the pocketbook?" he asked.

"This."

It was the writing which told of the marked bullet and a deep breath escaped the listeners when its contents were made known to them.

"Let us come back to your relations with Murgatroyd," proceeded Payton. "You say they began in Denver?"

"Yes; in a gambling house in Denver. I played there night after night, forging checks to cover my losses. Murgatroyd took the stolen money and, finding me an apt pupil, taught me how to play with him and help him fleece others. I went from bad to worse. Friends paid the amount of the forged paper, hushing the matter up. From that hour, however, I was lost. The fetters of Murgatroyd's devilish influence were things from which I could not free myself. I did not understand his power then and I do not understand it now—but it was an invincible weapon and he used it mercilessly. For that monster I have renounced everything I hold dear in life and see how I am repaid!"

In the brief, hovering stillness that followed there was not one but looked upon McCloud in pity and upon Murgatroyd with horror and loathing.

"So," said Payton, softly, "you came to Sandy Bar, met Murgatroyd in that private room, heard him read the note from Darrel and was asked to help him commit a murder!"

"Not asked," returned McCloud, hoarsely, "commanded! Perhaps I should have obeyed him but for what happened. Murgatroyd stood at the office window, looking down into the street. He saw Darrel walking slowly in the direction of Hawkbill's. Spinning around, Murgatroyd said to me:

"'There is my man now: he is going to Hawkbill's, but he shall never reach there alive. I will spring out into his path suddenly, from between the buildings. When I leave you take that revolver on the desk, McCloud, step to this window and shoot from it in case I need you. Darrel's back will be toward you and it will be an easy shot.'

"Then Murgatroyd hurried away. I picked up the revolver from the desk and stepped to the window as directed. I could see Darrel plainly and recognized him as a man I had met earlier in the day at the Half Way house, on the trail from Anaconda.

"While I stood watching a form leaped from the buildings and confronted Darrel. I could not make out the form distinctly, owing to the shadow of the buildings, but a revolver gleamed in the man's hand. I could not kill Darrel, but the thought struck me that I could kill Murgatroyd and sweep the incarnate devil forever from my path. I sighted the gun carefully and fired. My God, gentlemen! when I found out later that Darrel had been imprisoned, accused of the murder of Sturgis—when I learned that I had slain the wrong man with such terrible consequences to another, the earth slipped away beneath me and I thought I should die! I thought—"

The words trembled on his lips and faded away to silence. With a wild tossing of the arms McCloud stood up, reeling, his eyes gazing on a point above Payton's head.

"That's a lie, McCloud, and you know it," came the cutting words of Murgatroyd. He had risen behind the doctor and stood like a statue, his manacled hands stretched toward McCloud and his burning gaze fixed on his face. "Tell these men that you have spoken a lie! Tell them you are trying to revenge yourself against me and have—"

A deep oath and a sudden rush of feet interrupted the speaker; then a brawny fist leaped out like lightning and struck him down.

"It's the act of a coward to strike a man in irons," said Merrick, turning blackly from his work, "but that cur deserved it. There, Darrel—McCloud—quick!"

McCloud, with a feeble moan, pitched forward, but Darrel caught him and eased him to the floor. His form became rigid, his eyes staring, and he was again as Darrel had seen him in Kansas Joe's old hut, just off the War Eagle trail.

CHAPTER XX.

DARREL COURTS THE MUSE.

Murgatroyd was taken to jail—not the one in which Darrel had been confined, but another, where escape could not be facilitated by the drifts from Eponay creek—and a man was posted to guard him. Poor McCloud was borne away to a cabin and kept under the constant surveillance of a deputy marshal.

Darrel would not return to the Grand Central. He told Lenyard that he had deceived Mrs. Gorton and Elise by posing as McCloud; also that he was



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not the sort of man such women should know and he would never see them again.

Lenyard fought Darrel's arguments strenuously, but could not shake him. Before they parted, in the early morning hours, Darrel laid a friendly hand on the young man' shoulder.

"You have fought a good battle for me, Lenyard," said he, "and I could be almost happy if you would go to Elise, talk with her and level the barrier that is keeping you apart. She is a prize, my boy, and she loves you—there is no doubt of that. You must tell her of her father's fate, but first let the joy of a reconciliation with you prepare her, in a measure, for the evil news. For years I have been a firm believer in luck, but here there is no luck—it is Providence."

"Where will you go, Darrel?" asked Lenyard, after a short pause.

"Any place where I can be quiet and to myself."

"I board at such a place and will take you there."

The words of the Mexicana at the Half Way house came to him continually. "You may be honest, but you can never be honorable."

These words brought up the rest of her enigmatical prophecy and the twisted sense became clear.

"You are to die and after that you are to live." Had he not died as Darrel and lived as McCloud?

"The second time you live you prove your innocence of a crime by fastening it upon yourself." As McCloud he had fastened the murder of Sturgis upon himself and proven the innocence of Darrel.

And the queen of hearts who was to link her fate with his! Was that not Elise Avery?

But the Mexicana was wrong. The girl's fate and his had not been linked together and never would be.

As this occurred to him, he also remembered how he had curtly cut the fortune-teller short. It is possible she would have qualified that particular utterance if he had given her time.

The Mexicana was right. Cards had made him what he was and it was consistent that cards should tell him what he was to be—and do.

And then the other was saying:

"Beware of three knaves and two red sevens, senor."

"Why?"

"When you hold that hand you never leave the table alive!"

At the Half Way house he had scoffed at the oracular words. Yet here, at Sandy Bar, with a month between him and the fortune-teller, he did not scoff. He believed.

Early in the afternoon he arose, dressed himself with care, had his landlady bring him a light breakfast and then sat at a window, smoking and musing.

His thoughts were tinged with melancholy and took figurative forms. Drawing his chair to a table he put them on paper to the best of his ability.

When he had finished and had lighted another cigar and leaned back with contemplative eyes on his work a rap fell on the door. In answer to his request Roy Lenyard entered.

"Bless you, my lad," murmured Darrel. "You've done it, haven't you?"

"I have made my peace with the dearest girl in the world!" exclaimed Lenyard.

"And you will be happy. Elise Avery is a woman to make any man happy—especially a man as deserving as yourself."

"Please do not overrate me."

"I couldn't do that. Sit down."

"Elise and her aunt want to come," went on Lenyard, seating himself.

"You have told them about—Sturgis?"

"Yes. It was hard, Darrel, to mar her happiness, but Elise is bearing up nobly. She had expected the worst and that prepared her, in a way."

"Yet you did not tell her the worst?"

"That her father had changed his name and had become a gambler? No. I spared her that."

"It was best that you did so."

"I told Elise how you helped me, Darrel; told her how I had come out to this country entrusted with money by some eastern friends who reposed faith in my integrity and was to examine a mine and close a deal for its purchase. She knows that I was false to my trust and lost the money at the gambling table and that you won it back for me. That is why she wants to see you and thank you. We are all leaving to-morrow for Anaconda and the east. Won't you go with me now to the hotel?"

Darrel shook his head.

"Don't urge me, Lenyard. You have repaid me a hundredfold for everything I did for you."

Lenyard leaned forward and laid a friendly hand on Darrel's knee.

"What of the future, Darrel?" he asked.

"Let us not talk of my future, but of yours."

"I must speak what is in my mind and I trust you will take no offense. You are fitted for better things, Darrel, and why not try for them?"

"In other words you think I should reform?"

"So far as card-playing goes, yes."

"No, I will not. My reputation would cling to me. You remember that Old Man of the Sea that fastened himself to Sinbad's neck? That is the sort of a reputation I would have if I tried to reform. I would rather be what I am."

"But a man can live down a reputation."

"Some kinds; not one like mine. Why, my lad, I am the author of a brave play in poker. It is known as 'Darrel's discard.' Every blackleg in the west knows of it." He laughed. "The notoriety pleases me, for it takes nerve to discard aces."

Lenyard tried to argue, but Darrel reached for the written sheets that lay beside him on the table.

"After all," he said, settling back in his chair, the sheets in his hand, "what does it matter? It takes all kinds of men to make a world and I am not so sure that a gambler has not his uses in the great universal scheme. I have some verses here, Lenyard. They are very poor, but sometimes my thoughts come in rhymes and I jot them down to get them out of my head. I am going to call this doggerel 'N'Importe!' and you shall listen to it, for it reflects my mood to-day."

Then, with the smoking cigar between his slender white fingers and the feathery vapor creeping around his handsome face, he read:

A sage I knew once blew and blew
Upon a pipe of clay,
And from that pipe a bubble ripe
And perfect, dropped away.
Then, as I gazed, a rainbow blazed
Across the bubble's face,
And meads were seen, and hills of green,
And life in evry place;
And lo! a play, in brave array,
We saw as we stood by;
And on the stage there stood the sage,
And near the sage, stood I.
What work we made, or how we played,
It boots not here to tell,
Yet hopes and fears, and smiles and tears,
That bubble-world befell.
Then, as we wrought, with sudden thought,
The sage blew out his breath,
And in a mist, ere one could list,
That bubble died the death.

Then spake the sage: "Man's heritage
Of happiness and woe,
Is like the things our fancy brings,
For fancies come and go.
Time wears apace, and into space
A throbbing ball is hurl'd,
And on the ball live motes who call
That throbbing ball a world.
But countless globes in starry robes
Are thrown across the sky,
So what is earth, whose feeble girth
The earthly magnify?
And what the cares of man's affairs,
For better or for worse?
As man to sphere, our sphere's career
Is to the universe.
For like a dream where things but seem,
Or like a house of glass,
Or like a mist the winds have kiss'd,
This bubble-world shall pass!"

Lenyard never forgot that talk with Darrel. When the young man started back to the hotel the gambler shook his hand, bade him remember his promise and said "Good-by."

"Oh," returned Lenyard, quickly, "I shall see you again."

"Perhaps," said Darrel, with a queer smile. He intended leaving early for Anaconda, much earlier than Lenyard could leave with Mrs. Gorton and Elise. He would post a letter to Lawrence Ormsby, in Anaconda, telling him of his friend McCloud, then he would return to the old life in San Francisco.

Lenyard went away, strangely depressed.

CHAPTER XXI.

DARREL YIELDS THE GAME TO FATE.

At ten o'clock that night Nate Darrel was in Hawkbill's, playing. Luck was against him.

He was a pleasant loser, however. Again and again he laughed as he bought the little red, white and blue columns and again and again he laughed as they were taken from him.

"Fate makes or mars us, gentlemen," said he, directly reversing his old philosophy; "we have little voice in the matter. Fortune is a coy goddess and one never can be sure of her."

At last he picked up a hand of three knaves and two aces. Following his time-honored custom he discarded the aces.

What he found in his two-card draw drove the blood from his cheeks and held him rigid in his chair. "What are you doing?" asked the next player. "It's up to you."

Concluded on fourth page.

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