

Youth Rides West

(Continued.)

And the bowl below reverberated with explosion. From the cabin from some place near the dump, from the woodpile, streaks of red flame leaped the dawn. One of the leading pair went down with the slow motion of a toppling building; he fell across the box as limply as a bag of old clothes. The other dropped his handle and spun half way round before he pitched onto his face. Behind him, a man was flopping on the ground. A scattering burst of fire from the right to my right, where my fellows of the posse lay concealed, and he was still; I could even hear between reverberations the hollow sound of the bullets striking his flesh. * * *

It was over, and I had not acted, only stood aside, an inert spectator. * * * Or was it over? Only three bodies lay down there by the stream. And the posse was charging. They came scrambling down the ridge, weapons at ready. Two or three stopped by the fallen men, turned them over. The rest crashed uphill through the bushes. One of the trailing pair must have acted more quickly than the others—hopping into the bushes at the sound of the first shot, got away. * * *



I Dove at Him in a High Tackle, Into Which I Put All My Desire of Violence Engendered by That Night.

And still I crouched under the spruce tree, shame and self-pity added to my inner hell. With all the rest, she had sapped my manhood from me * * * the moment of action had come and I had not even drawn my pistol to fire. * * * Others had taken my revenge.

Footsteps—quick, stealthy—were coming along the trail to my left. As by reflex motion, I leaped suddenly through the branches; leaped face to face with—the man I had come for, the young, spruce man whom I had shadowed to my misery last night. It was still the dusky dawn there among the trees, but I

knew him. His wide black hat shaded his face, but I knew him. Recognition and action came together in the instant while his hand was starting toward his hip. Only, I acted not according to

gled in desperate silence. Then I felt him wilt in my grasp, go limp. I raised my head, looked into his face. He was my man—but I knew him already. His eyes closed. I began to relax my hold, and his hand whipped like a striking snake at my belt. He had my gun—with the quickness of fear, of excitement, of hate, I got his wrist, threw my body across him to hold him down, twisted his hand backward until he dropped it. But he was struggling like a tied cat now, and what with the timberline altitude, the sleepless night, my hours of emotion, the false energy that had electrified my first attack was going fast. I managed, however, to grip his left hand as it began struggling toward his own belt; and so, with him spread-eagled under me, I put all the breath I had left into a yell for help. Welcome footsteps pattered from both directions. He quit struggling and:

"Murder! He's killing me!" he cried.

"He lies—don't let him get away—grab him!" I panted.

That member of the posse who came first up the trail I did not know and to this day I have never identified him. But whoever he was, he had discretion and experience. He kicked away the fallen revolver, drew his weapon from its holster, stood covering us both. Gasping, as I gave ground, a demand that they secure my adversary also, I was hauled upright. A dizzy rush of blood blinded and dazed me for a moment. When my faculties cleared, I heard the voice of Shorty exploding in tones of admiration.

"Bully for you, kid! You sure got him!" I was aware that I stood supported on either side, that I was facing my captive.

The nostrils of his fine, firm nose were distending as he fought for breath, his complexion was changing momentarily from a flush of exertion to a pallor yet his carriage was debonair, his green-gray eyes even challengingly insolent. Then he spoke and though the breath puffed between words, his voice gave an effort of poise, of calm.

"What is this all about?" he asked. "Haven't you gentlemen made a mistake?"

There came a growl of indignant muttering from the posse. Shorty was first to find consecutive speech.

"Two d—d bad mistakes," he said. "It was necessary to do a little shootin' just when you fellows came out in front of the cabin or we'd have got you all alive. And somebody missed you."

"You've captured the wrong man, gentlemen," replied my unknown enemy. "I was coming down the road when I heard the shooting and—"

"You can tell all that to the judge!" snapped Shorty.

"Ah, these proceedings are legal, then!" exclaimed the stranger, with what appeared to be an air of genuine relief. "In that case—"

"Miner's law. Best law that is. But you'll get a trial," cut in Shorty; and the captive's eyelid flickered. "That will be all from you just now. Tie his arms, boys, and bring him along." Back toward the clearing we started, led by the group conveying the captive. He had an easy, athletic walk. Everything about him, in fact—the accent, the precise speech, the cool, formal manner—suggested the gentleman. Perhaps almost too much the gentleman.

We were well out in the clearing before I looked ahead; so much did this man whom I had captured for death hold my insane attention. Out of the woods came the cowboy, leading that little black horse on which the posse had mounted the gagged and helpless Charlie Meek. The saddle was empty. I saw then that the figure lay shrunken and huddled across our path. The leading group stopped beside it. The whole frame of the captive gave a jerk and then settled back, as if by effort of the will, into a pose of easy nonchalance. I hurried forward.

Charlie Meek. He was bleeding from a hole in the chest; the side of his head was all asmeared with another wound. The gag still stretched his jaws; over it ran a bloody foam. But his wounded torso heaved; and there was a pleading intelligence in his eyes.

"Better git that thing out of his mouth," said Shorty with a touch of softness. "Tain't needed no more."

Some one untied the gag. His eyes rolled until they showed only the whites; the muscles of his face drew; his jaws moved as though the last instinct in him, the talkative, was for speech. Then his throat rattled and:

"He's gone!" said Shorty. I looked up at the captive. And other eyes, now that the curtain had fallen on Charlie's tragedy, followed mine. He was perhaps a trifle pale; but so, I suppose, were we all.

"Would one of you gentlemen mind slipping that rope a little further up my right arm?" he asked. "It will hold me just as securely and won't chafe me so much—thank you."

They led him on; seated him by the clump of trees. But Shorty, looking down at the body, vouchsafed unasked a word of explanation.

(To be continued.)

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Another Kick.

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By J. E. Fields

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