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A FIGHT WITH BARE HANDS

The following chapter from "The Spoilers," by Rex E. Beach, contains the best description of a bare-handed man-to-man fight to be found anywhere in modern fiction:

Day was breaking when Glenister came down the mountain.

It seemed years since he had seen the sunlight for this night, burdened with suspense, had been endlessly long. His body was faint beneath the drag, and yet he rode on and on, tired, dogged, stony, his eyes set towards the sea, his mind a storm of formless, whirling thoughts, beneath which was an unyielding, implacable determination.

He knew now that he had sacrificed all hope of the Midas—the richest gold mine that had yet been struck in Alaska—and likewise the hope of Helen was gone; in fact he began to realize dimly that from the beginning he had never had the possibility of winning her, that she had never been destined for him, and that his love for her had been sent as a light by which he was to find himself. He had failed everywhere, he had become an outlaw, he had fought and gone down, certain only of his rectitude and the mastery of his unruly spirit—and his failure was due at every turn to this political gamester, McNamara, who had robbed the miners of their claims. Now the hour had come when he would perform his last mission, deriving therefrom that satisfaction which the gods could not deny. He would have his vengeance.

The scheme took form without conscious effort on his part. From the first McNamara had been a riddle to him, and mystery breeds curiosity. His blind, instinctive hatred of the man had assumed the proportions of a mania; but as to what the outcome would be when they met face to face fate alone could tell. Anyway, McNamara should never have Helen. When he had finished—he would pay the price. If he had the luck to escape, he would go back to his hills and solitude; if he did not, his future would be in the hands of his enemies.

He rode down front street heedless of danger, heedless of the comment his appearance might create, and unseen, entered his enemy's stronghold. In dressing for the battle at Midas on the previous night he had replaced his leather boots with "mukluks," which are waterproof, light, and pliable footgear made from the skin of seal and walrus. He was thus able to move noiselessly as though in moccasins. Finding neither pencil nor paper in his pocket, he tried the outer door of the office and found it unlocked. He stepped inside and listened, then moved towards a table on which were writing materials, but in doing so heard a rustle in Struve's office. Evidently his soft soles had not disturbed the man inside. Glenister was about

to tiptoe out as he had come when the hidden man cleared his throat. It is in these involuntary sounds that the voice retains its natural quality more distinctly even than in speaking. A strange eagerness grew in Glenister's face and he approached the partition stealthily. It was of wood and glass, the panes clouded and opaque to a height of some six feet; but stepping upon a chair he peered into the room beyond. A man knelt in a litter of papers before the open safe, its drawers and compartments removed and their contents scattered. The watcher lowered himself, drew his gun, and laid soft hand upon the door-knock, turning the latch with firm fingers. His vengeance had come to meet him.

McNamara's astonishment was so genuine that he leaped to his feet, faced about, and prompted by a secretive instinct swung to the safe door as though to guard its contents. He had acted upon the impulse before realizing that his weapon was inside and that now, although the door was not locked, it would require that one dangerous, yes, fatal, second to open it.

The two men stared at each other for a time, silent and malignant, their glances meeting like blades; in the older man's face a look of defiance, in Glenister's a dogged and grim-purposed enmity. McNamara's first perturbation left him calm, alert, dangerous; whereas the continued contemplation of his enemy worked in Glenister to destroy his composure, and his purpose blazed forth unhidden.

"I have come for the last act, McNamara; now we'll have it out, man to man."

The politician shrugged his shoulders.

"You have the drop on me. I am unarmed." At that the miner's face lighted fiercely and he chuckled.

"Ah, that's almost too good to be true. I have dreamed about such a thing and I have been hungry to feel your throat since the first time I saw you. It's grown on me till shooting wouldn't satisfy me. Ever had the feeling? Well, I'm going to choke the life out of you with my bare hands."

McNamara squared himself.

"I wouldn't advise you to try it. I have lived longer than you and I was never beaten, but I know the feeling you speak about. I have it now."

His eyes roved rapidly up and down the other's form, noting the lean thighs and close drawn belt which lent the appearance of spareness, belled only by the neck and shoulders. He had beaten better men, and he reasoned that if it came to a physical test in these cramped quarters his own great weight would more than offset any superior agility the miner might possess. The longer he looked the more he yielded to his hatred of the man before him, and the more cruelly he longed to satisfy it.

"Take off your coat," said Glenister. "Now turn around. All right! I just wanted to see if you were lying about your gun."

"I'll kill you," cried McNamara. Glenister laid his six-shooter upon the safe and slipped off his own wet

garment. It was meet that they should come together thus. It had been the one certain and logical event which they had felt inevitably approaching from long back. And it was fitting, moreover, that they should fight alone and unwitnessed, armed only with the weapons of the wilderness, for they were both of the far, free lands, were both of the fighter's type, and both had warred for the first, great prize.

They met ferociously, McNamara aimed a fearful blow, but Glenister met him squarely, beating him off cleverly, stepping in and out, his arms swinging loosely from his shoulders like whalebone withes tipped with lead. He moved lightly, his footing made doubly secure by reason of his soft soled mukluks. Recognizing his opponent's greater weight, he undertook merely to stop the headlong rushes and remain out of reach as long as possible. He struck the politician fairly in the mouth so that the man's head snapped back and his fists went wild, then, before the arms could grasp him the miner had broken ground and whipped another blow across; but McNamara was a boxer himself, so covered and blocked it. The politician spat through his mashed lips and rushed again, sweeping his opponent from his feet. Again Glenister's fist shot forward like a lump of granite, but the other came on head down and the blow finished too high, landing on the big man's brow. A sudden darting agony paralyzed Roy's hand, and he realized that he had broken the metacarpal bones and that henceforth it would be useless. Before he could recover McNamara had passed under his extended arm and seized him by the middle, then thrusting his left leg back of Glenister's he whirled him from his balance, flinging him clear and with resistless force. It seemed that a fatal fall must follow, but the youth squirmed outlike in the air, landing with set muscles which rebounded like rubber. Even so, the receiver was upon him before he could rise, reaching for the young man's throat with his heavy hands. Glenister recognized the fatal "strangle hold" and flinging his enemy's wrists, endeavored to tear them apart, but his left hand was useless so with a mighty wrench he freed himself, and locked in each other's arms, the men strained and swayed about the office till their neck veins were bursting, their muscles paralyzed.

Men may fight duels calmly, may shoot or parry or thrust with cold deliberation; but when there comes the jar of body to body, the sweaty contact of skin to skin, the play of iron muscles, the painful gasp of exhaustion—then the mind goes skittering back into its dark recesses while every venomous passion leaps forth from its hiding-place and joins in the horrid war.

They tripped across the floor, crashing into the partition, which split, showering them with glass. They fell and rolled in it; then, by consent, wrenched themselves apart and rose, eye to eye, their jaws hanging, their lungs wheezing, their faces trickling blood and sweat. Glenister's left hand pained him excruciatingly, while McNamara's mangled lips had turned outward in a hideous pout. They crouched so for an instant, cruel, hostile—then clinched again. The office-fittings were wrecked utterly and the room became a litter of ruins. The men's garments fell away till their breasts were bare and their arms swelled white and knotted through the rags. They knew no pain, their bodies were insensate mechanisms.

Gradually the older man's face was beaten into a shapeless mass by the other's cunning blows, while Glenister's every bone was wrenched and twisted under his enemy's terrible onslaughts. The miner's chief effort, it is true, was to keep his feet and to break the man's embraces. Never had he encountered one whom he could not beat by sheer strength till he met this great, snarling creature who worried him hither and yon as though he were a child. Time and again Glenister beat upon the man's face with the blows of a sledge. No rules governed this solitary combat; the men were deaf to all but the roaring in their ears, blinded to all but hate, insensible to everything but the blood mania. Their tramping feet caused the building to rattle and shake as though some monster were running amuck.

To this day, from Dawson to the Straits from Unga to the Arctics, men tell of the combat wherever they foregather at flaring camp-fires or in dingy bunk-houses; and although some scout the tale, there are others who saw it and can swear to its truth. These say that the encounter was like the battle of bull moose in the rutting season, though more terrible, averring that two men like these had never been known in the land since the days of Vitus Bering and his crew; for their rancor had swollen till at feel of each other's flesh they ran mad and felt superhuman strength. It is true, at any rate, that neither was conscious of the falling room nor the cries of the crowd, even when the marshal forced himself through the wedged door and fell upon the nearest, which was Glenister. He came at an instant when the two had paused at arm's length, glaring with rage-drunk eyes, gasping the labored breath back into their lungs.

With a fling of his long arms the young man hurled the intruder aside so violently that his head struck the iron safe and he collapsed insensible. Then, without apparent notice of the interruption, the fight went on.

McNamara's distress was patent to his antagonist, who advanced upon him with the hunger of promised victory; but the young man's muscles obeyed his commands sluggishly, his ribs seemed broken, his back was weak, and on the inner side of his legs the flesh was quivering. As they came together the boss reached up his right hand and caught the miner by the face, burying thumb and fingers crablike into his cheeks, forcing his slack jaws apart, thrusting his

head backward, while he centered every ounce of strength in the effort to maim. Glenister felt the flesh giving way and flung himself backward to break the hold, where upon the other summoned his wasting energy and plunged toward the safe where lay the revolver. Instinct warned Glenister of treachery, told him that the man had sought this last recourse to save himself, and as he saw him turn his back and reach for the weapon, the youth leaped like a panther, seizing him about the waist, grasping McNamara's wrist with his right hand. For the first time during the combat they were not face to face, and on the instant Glenister realized the advantage given him through the other's perfidy, realized the wrestler's hold that was his, and knew that the moment of victory was come.

The telling takes much time, but so quickly had these things happened that the footsteps of the soldiers had not yet reached the door when the men were locked beside the safe.

Of what happened next many garbled accounts have gone forth. Some claim that the younger man was seized with a fear of death which multiplied his enormous strength, others that power died in his adversary as reward for his treason, but it was not so.

No sooner had Glenister encompassed McNamara's waist from the rear than he slid his damaged hand up past the other's chest and around the back of his neck, thus bringing his own left arm close under his enemy's left armpit, wedging the receiver's head forward, while with his other hand he grasped the politician's right wrist close to the revolver, thus holding him in a grasp which could not be broken. Now came the test. The two bodies set themselves rocklike and rigid. There was no lunging about.

Calling up the final atom of his strength, Glenister bore backward with his right arm and it became a contest for the weapon which, clutched in the two hands, swayed back and forth and darted up and down, the fury and resistance causing it to trace formless patterns in the air with its muzzle. McNamara shook himself, but he was close against the safe and could not escape, his head bowed forward by the lock of the miner's left arm, and so he strained till the breath clogged in his throat. Despite the grievous toll his right hand moved back slightly. His feet shifted a bit, while the blood seemed bursting from his eyes, but he found that the long fingers encircling his wrist were like gyves weighted with the strength of the hills and the irresistible vigor of youth which knew no defeat. Slowly, inch by inch, the great man's arm was dragged back, down past his side, while the strangling labor of his breath showed at what awful cost. The muzzle of the gun described a semi-circle and the knotted hands began to travel towards the left, more rapidly now, across his broad back. Still he struggled and wrenched, but uselessly. He strove to fire the weapon, but his fingers were woven about it so that the hammer would not work. Then the miner began forcing upward.

The white skin beneath the men's strips of clothing was stretched over great knots and ridges which sunk and swelled and quivered. "It's the hammer-lock—the hammer-lock."

By now McNamara's arm was bent and cramped upon his back, and then they saw Glenister's shoulder dip, his elbow come closer to his side, and his body heave in one final terrific effort as though pushing a heavy weight. In the silence something snapped like a stick. There came a deafening report and the scream of a strong man overcome with agony. McNamara went to his knees and sagged forward on to his face as though every bone in his huge bulk had turned to water, while his master reeled back against the opposite wall, his heels dragging in the litter, bringing up with outflung arms as though fearful of falling, swaying, blind, exhausted, his face blackened by the explosion of the revolver, yet grim with the light of victory.

The Judge shouted hysterically: "Arrest that man, quick, don't let him go!"

It was the miner's first realization that others were there. Raising his head he stared at the faces close against the partition, then groaned the words: "I beat the traitor—and—and—I broke him with—my hands."—From "The Spoilers." Copyright, 1905, by Rex E. Beach.

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