

# A GAME OF WITS

## WHEREIN LORD STRANLEIGH BREAKS HIS BONDS

By Robert Barr.

Illustrations by J.N. Marchand

**S**YNOPSIS—Lord Stranleigh, in quest of health and recreation, journeys to the Armstrong ranch in Wyoming. Approaching the ranch, he is shot by one of the ranchmen, who suspects him of having designs on a silver mine being developed on the property. His wound is dressed by the charming and capable daughter of the house, whose father is absent trying to raise money to save his property from a rapacious lawyer, Ricketts. Stranleigh joins forces with Miss Armstrong against the lawyer, but his motives are misconstrued by the ranch men, who secretly take him prisoner.



**W**HEN Lord Stranleigh sat down to supper, he regretted the civilized fare of the farm house. The menu was rough, but plentiful, and they all ate together at the long table. A meal was a serious event, and they partook of it in silence. It was evident that the men meant to adopt full precautions, for while they supped one of them sat by the door, a rifle over his knee. After the table was cleared, they all sat round the big fire, and smoked.

The aroma of the weed they had chosen was not as grateful to their captive as might have been expected, so he presented each man with a choice Havana cigar, such as would be welcomed at a London club, where pipes are not permitted. The men amiably accepted his contribution, but each put the cigar in his pocket against a future occasion, and went on with his pipe. Cheap as was the tobacco they were using, it was naturally scarce among men who had received no money for some months.

"I don't wish to appear inquisitive," began their guest, "but now that we have all night before us, would you mind telling me why I am thus taken charge of by strangers on whom I have no claim?"

"There are several reasons," replied Jim, acting as spokesman, "and we are quite willing to mention them. You appear to be a person of some intelligence—"

"Thanks!"

Jim went on, ignoring the interruption: "—and so perhaps you know that we suspect you of being in cahoots with Ricketts."

"Does 'cahoots' mean co-partnership?"

"**S**OMETHING of the sort. You partly persuaded us that wasn't so, but I followed you, to make sure. Perhaps you remember that I caught you coming from Ricketts' office. You made for that office the moment you reached Bleachers."

"Pardon me, but I went first to the hotel."

"Yes, and there you inquired where Ricketts hung out."

"But that was in my favor. It showed that I didn't even know where the lawyer lived."

"It was a good bluff."

"It's circumstantial evidence of my innocence. But for the sake of argument I will admit that I am in cahoots, as you call it, with the estimable Ricketts. What next?"

"The next thing is that you learnt from Miss Armstrong that we intended to go into Bleachers and shoot up the town, including Ricketts."

"That is true."

"You didn't like the plan, and said so. You said it should be stopped, not

knowing the ways of the people of this country."

"Well, desirable as may be the shooting up of Bleachers, the odds are too strongly against you."

"We'll chance that. But the next thing you do is to put on your funny clothes, get out your horse, and ride directly to Mr. Ricketts. You are an informer."

"An informer is always a despicable character, Mr. Dean. What's the next item in the indictment?"

"Don't you think that's enough? Men have been hanged for less. An informer is the most poisonous creature in the world, always excepting a horse thief."

"Then am I in danger of being hanged?"

"You sure are!"

"**I**SN'T there any way in which I can compound my felony?"

"I don't know what confounding a felony is, but you're the slickest chap I ever met. If you think you can palaver us to let you go, you've made the mistake of your life."

"I shouldn't attempt such a thing. I'm merely endeavoring to learn your state of mind. You're strong on muscle, Jim, and I admire your build, but

I'm beginning to doubt whether your brain equals your frame. There was a time when your equipment would have been victorious, but nowadays it's brain that wins. Jimmy, my boy, you're out of date."

"Brain isn't going to help you any," said Dean, evidently annoyed by these strictures on his mentality.

"Perhaps it won't, but if there was a corresponding brain in your head, I'd appeal to it, and probably win. Are all your men here as stupid as you are, Jim?"

Dean rose up from his chair, a forbidding frown on his brow.

"Look here, Mr. Stranleigh," he called out, "I've had about enough of that line of talk."

"Oh, no, you haven't. This line is only beginning. And I say, Dean, put aside that pipe, and smoke the Havana cigar. It will put reason into your head, if anything will."

Some of the company laughed, and Jim sat down, seeing that his opponent failed to show any fear at the threatening situation. He tried to change the course of the conversation into a less personal channel.

"You see, Mr. Stranleigh, we're short on tobacco, and I want to keep this cigar until tomorrow. I can tell by the smell it's a good one."

"That's all right," said Stranleigh. "I have plenty more of them down at the house, and when they are finished, I'll telegraph east for a fresh supply. If you will let me know your favorite tobacco, I'll order a ton of it at the same time."

For a moment Jim's eyes brightened, then they narrowed into their usual caution.

"Bribery doesn't go here, Mr. Stranleigh. We ain't to be bought, even by a ton of tobacco."

"**I** HADN'T thought of either buying or bribing you," said Stranleigh, "therefore we will get back to our original subject, the difference between brain and muscle. I see here on the table a pack of cards in a deplorably greasy condition. If you were playing a game with an opponent who was beating you, would you shoot him?"

"Yes," promptly replied Jim, "if I found he was cheating."

"Whereupon his friends would lynch you?"

"A cheater hasn't any friends."

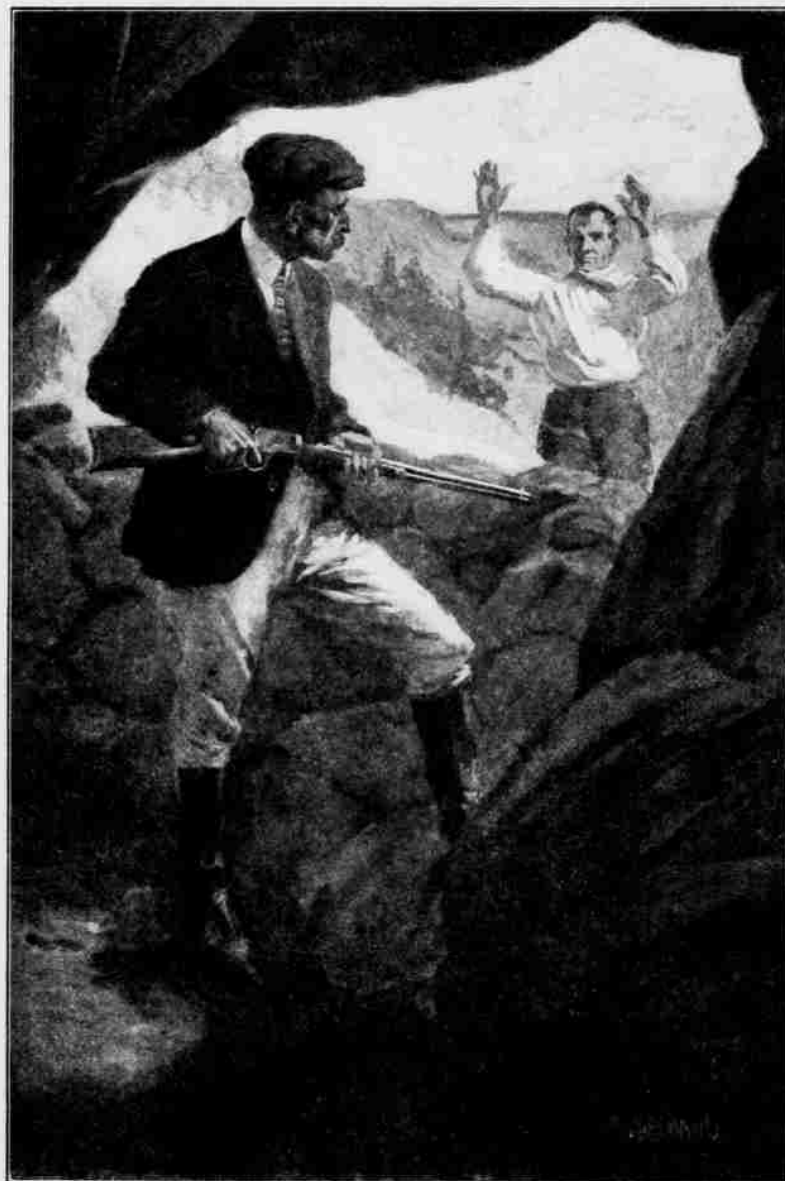
"I shouldn't care to sit down to a game with you, Jim. You would shoot first, and think afterwards. That, indeed, is just what you're doing now. If you hold me here you will spoil my game. What I propose to do is not to attack Ricketts with a gun, but to learn his style of play, and beat him at his own game. Any fool can shoot off a gun; there's no credit in that. It's a coward's trick."

"You say we'll spoil your game. You bet we will. You daren't tell us what it is."

"I do dare, because I have a trick that will quite delude you."

"I know you'll try to do that."

"Precisely. Well, my trick is to tell the truth. The situation is very simple. That morning when you warned



Raising his hands, Dean approached, "Have you got a revolver?" shouted Stranleigh