



***MAX
BRAND***

***SILVERTIP'S
TRAP***

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Silvertip's Trap

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I. — THE RESCUE

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BILL NAYLOR wanted to make up his mind between two jobs, both of which were open to him. There were always jobs open to Naylor because he had unusual talents. He could use a running iron with wonderful effect. There was hardly a rustler on the entire range more skillful in twisting a bit of heavy wire into shapes required for the altering of staple brands into new ones. He had dealt crooked faro in many places, and he was more than a fair hand at stacking a pack in a poker game. However, there are ups and downs in the gambling profession. The last little brawl had laid him up in hospital for two months. He was still weak in the body, and a little shaky in the nerves. And as for working as a rustler, he felt that a man who has been once cornered by a posse of indignant cattle owners and then turned loose has had warning enough.

So Bill Naylor had come into the country to his home town of Kendal to rest for a few weeks and make up his mind about the next step. Being of a surly and a lonely temper, he went out to watch the moonrise on the Kendal River, not because he appreciated the beauty of the scene, but because it was a good place to find solitude. There he sat on a rock beside the roar of Kendal Falls, smoked and meditated.

If he started to smuggle opium, the wages were high, and there was a fat commission on deliveries. Also, he knew all about how to roast a "pill," and he felt that nothing is

much better than a smoke of opium at night if there can be a stiff shot of whisky as an eye-opener in the morning. On the other hand, there was a good deal to be said for work as a moonshiner.

The profits were by no means as high, but the law punished the crime with a prison term proportionately shorter. To one who, like Bill Naylor, had spent half his life in prison already, the last item was a tidy score in the accounting. Besides, he liked the life of a moonshiner, the free days, the brisk companionship. And it is astonishing how much life will flow into the vicinity of a little still back in the mountains.

It was hard—it was very hard for him to make the choice. Some of the days south of the river were very memorable and delightful. Life in Mexico, flavored with tequila, was not to be sneered at. And the black, tarry liquid itself, with the little taint of red in it, like a stain of mortal red, had a special beauty in his mind. He felt also, that it was a more dignified calling, that of a smuggler. It was worthy of a man's efforts. If he went up for smuggling opium, it was a thing to get space in the newspapers. It was a thing that would make his old associates, wherever they were, exclaim to one another: "Nerve, that's what Bill Naylor has! They can't keep that man down!"

Thrusting out his square jaw, and scowling till a shadow from his brows covered half of his face, Bill Naylor considered the situation and decided that that was a good simile. He was like a furtive, hunted beast that has been driven into the water, and every time he came up for air the law took a kick at his head.

He looked up, still scowling. Opium was beginning to win out, in his mind. And now he saw four riders come out slowly along the flat arch of the wooden bridge that spanned the river not far above the falls. They looked black and huge, for the moon was behind them. The moon threw on the polished face of the river the skeleton shadow of the bridge and even dimly marked out the images of the four riders.

Those four fellows all had their jobs, of course. They were riding in from some distant ranch to celebrate the end of the month by spending all their wages on bad bar whisky. The ordinary run of block-head was what they were, no doubt.

He made another cigarette, and was about to light it when there was a sudden commotion, a jumbling together of the silhouettes that had been advancing across the bridge, and thereafter the figure of a man flipped over the side of the bridge, dropped down, and smote the water. It leaped in a dim flash at the place where the body disappeared from view.

Bill Naylor stood up and stared.

"That ain't so bad," he said aloud.

He had a feeling that in this world one only needs to keep the eyes open in order to see a great many unexpected things.

The men on the bridge remained for a moment, then they proceeded at a casual gait. Of course, it would be folly for them to try to effect a rescue. That fellow had either been killed in striking the water, or else he would be whirled over the roar and ruin of the big falls. He might, to be sure, strike on one of the rocks that projected like so many

shark's teeth at the verge of the falls, but it was hardly better to be impaled at the brink of the falls than to be carried down with the waters.

Now, peering carefully, Naylor saw a shadow come swirling with the currents. It verged toward the brink of the falls. He could distinctly see the gleam of the face and the sweeping shadow of hair worn almost long enough to be the hair of a woman.

One of these backwoods fellows wearing his hair after a frontier fashion that was out of date. Well, he would soon not care whether his hair was long or short!

The body seemed to dally, as though a rope were pulling it back from death. Then the final surge of the current caught hold of it like a spear and hurled it at the brink of the falls.

"Gone for sure!" said Bill Naylor, grinning a little.

But then he distinctly saw the body strike on one of the rocks. It doubled over on the keen tooth. Head and legs streamed out with the downward current. Well, the river would soon work that obstacle clear and carry it down to be pounded to a pulp among the rocks of the lower canyon.

It was a miracle to Bill Naylor, when, as he lighted and smoked another cigarette, he saw the wounded man stir, raise a hand to the top of the rock, and strive to pull himself up the face of it. He had not sufficient strength.

Bill Naylor, without the least excitement, considered the possibilities of effecting a rescue. He cared not a whit whether the man went over the falls or not, but it was also true that a man saved from the brink of death generally feels gratitude, and often this gratitude can be expressed in

terms of hard cash. Bill Naylor looked on the stranger as he might have looked on a big fish in a stream. He decided instantly that to attempt to clamber out over the rocks to the point where the man was clinging would be far too hazardous. So he sat down on his heels and went on smoking.

A good-sized log came spinning down the current, twisting aslant just above the cataract. Now it struck the rocks with a crash that splintered it in several places. The shock of it tossed up a shower of spray on Bill Naylor.

"I sit here and worry about savin' lives like a fool," he said. "I hope he goes—fast!"

He stood up in disgust. The cold of the water bit at his body, which was warm and tender under the shelter of his clothes.

Then he was amazed to see that this man, who already should have been dead, was now at the end of the log, and handing himself along the length of it as far as it went.

This brought him fairly close.

Bill Naylor walked out over the safe rocks near the shore and leaned over. There was a gap of perhaps five feet between the end of the log to which the man clung and the side of the rock where Naylor squatted. That was not much of a span, but the fellow could never make it. Through the narrow chasm the water plunged in a solid crystal, streaked deep down with films of foaming speed. If the stranger tried to cross that chasm, he would be squirted into eternity like a watermelon seed pressed between thumb and forefinger.

The comparison pleased Bill Naylor.

Well, the man would never bridge that narrow gap unaided. Should he make the effort?—Naylor asked himself. There was more than a little peril involved. If he secured a good grip on a projecting pinnacle on his side and extended his hand, it was possible that the rushing force of the water would break his hold.

He put his hand down into the stream. The force of it made his arm tremble, and he stood up again and shook his head.

There was no chance to speak above the thundering of the water. And the stranger, floating there on the verge of death, made no effort to appeal, even with gestures. Naylor, studying the face, saw that it was very handsome, with a capacious, high forehead, a bony, powerful chin, and plenty of refinement in the modeling of all the features.

That was most undoubtedly a fellow of force. He looked like some famous man whose picture had been before the attentive eye of Bill Naylor. But Bill disliked the height of the forehead. His own brow was low and cramped and indented. He felt like snarling when he saw features so godlike.

The man was young, too. He was young, handsome, probably brainy, with the most brilliant future ahead of him. Perhaps he was even a rich man.

"Well," said Naylor to himself, "you can go down for all of me."

He saw the head of the stranger bow a little. He had been trying to pull himself out of the water and get on top of the log: the effort was too great for him. He was smashed up. Perhaps the rock had torn him like the bite of a sea

monster. And now his head dropped a little—not in despair, but in sheer weakness.

"A dead game one," said Naylor to himself. "Sure a dead game one."

He admired gameness. It was practically the only virtue that he himself possessed, but he felt that he never could have found himself in the situation of the stranger without making some frantic efforts to persuade the other fellow to a rescue. The stranger had not lifted a hand.

Somehow Bill Naylor found himself lowering his body over the side of the rock. He had a good grip with his left hand on a projecting fragment of the stone—suppose that fragment should break off?—and now he extended his right hand to the other.

A cold, hard grip locked instantly on his wrist, and a shock of terror spurted through the heart and the veins of Naylor. For he realized that he would never be able to break that grip; it was the bulldog clutch of a strong and desperate man, clinging to his last hope of life.

Now for the great effort! He set his teeth and pulled with all his might. The hand of the stranger burned his flesh, ground it against the bones of his wrist.

Bill Naylor felt his clutch on the rock slipping. If the cursed water only pulled with a steady force it would be all right—he could win. But there were tremors and jerks; the devil was tugging him toward the mouth of hell.

Then in an instant the strain ceased. He found the stranger floating beside him near the rock.

II. — A KING OF CRIME

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WHEN Naylor was a little boy, his father had said to him: "No man needs to do anything except what he wants to do."

Bill Naylor had said: "Suppose he's done in and wants to faint. What can he do to stop that?"

"No man needs to do anything except what he wants to do," repeated the elder Naylor, who was a strong-willed man.

Bill Naylor remembered that speech as he worked the injured stranger toward the shore. The fellow ought to have been dead a thousand times over. He ought to be dying now, to judge by the way the blood kept pouring out of his torn body. But he would not even faint. He simply kept his teeth locked. There was no grinning distortion of Spartan effort about that, either. The will that the stranger was using was not in his muscles, but in his brain. So there was not even a wrinkling of his brow as he staggered at the side of Naylor. He kept his face forward. He wasted no breath in speech, and presently Naylor had him stretched on the ground on the pine needles. The black of the shadow was streaked with moonlight to show his calm face.

"I'll fetch you a doctor," said Naylor, "and—"

"Stay here. Do what I say," said the other. "Take this first." He took a wallet out of his pocket and held it forth. "That's only a beginning," he said.

Naylor opened the wallet and saw a sheaf of bills well compacted. They were sodden with water, but he could read

the denomination of the topmost, and it was a hundred dollars.

Even if the other bills were much smaller, there was between two and three thousand dollars in that wallet. Naylor closed the wallet, shoved the wetness of it into his pocket, and said nothing. He knew that he had come to a great moment. He knew that it was his good luck that had forced him to attempt that rescue.

He heard the other saying: "You can't bring me a doctor. I'm Barry Christian."

The knees of Naylor sagged a little. A great moment? Yes, it was the greatest of his life. Through his brain a thousand memories whirled, each a distinct face, shooting through his mind like the silhouettes of people in a crowded passenger coach when it goes by at full speed. Barry Christian! How many times had that great foeman of the law won mighty prizes? Who in this world had ever gained even the slightest victory over him with the exception of that superman known as "Jim Silver"? And now all of Barry Christian lay there on the pine needles at the feet of Naylor.

Even so, he did not feel the stronger of the two. The brainy fellows who obeyed the law could be damned, for all of him; but this was a great master, a king of the world of crime, and a sort of awe spread over the disturbed spirit of Bill.

"You tell me; I'm your man," he said.

"That's only the first," said Barry Christian. "They've got a reward on me, and it's a big one. But I think you'll make more out of me by giving me a hand. Make up your mind."

In a sudden heat of enthusiasm, Bill Naylor exclaimed: "I wouldn't turn you in if the reward was a million. I don't kiss the foot of anybody to get blood money. My name's Bill Naylor. Maybe you've heard of me?"

"Of course I have. You've worked in Mexico," said the calm, small voice of Christian.

It was the sweetest tribute that Naylor had ever heard. It was more to him than a Congressional Medal.

"Go and spill the beans. Tell me what you want. If you've ever heard anything about me, you know I don't split on a pal."

"I know," said Christian. "Take off your coat and wrap it around me. Twist it hard around me to stop the bleeding as much as you can. Get into town. Buy some needles and some surgical silk. Get a bottle of alcohol for a disinfectant. Get some brandy, too, and something to eat, and bring everything back to me here. Bring a lantern, too."

"That'll take me more'n half an hour," said Naylor, measuring the distance to the town.

"And in the meantime I may be dead. But that's all right," said Christian. "The world is made of chance. Hurry along."

Bill Naylor hurried. He ran himself out of breath, made the purchases, visited his father's house on the verge of the town long enough to borrow a horse, and after saddling it, galloped rapidly back.

When he swung out of the saddle he expected to find the body gone. It was in place.

He expected to find it cold with death. But at once the steady, weak voice said to him:

"Quick work, Naylor. Light that lantern and we'll get to work."

Naylor lighted the lantern. Then he laid bare the side of Christian. There was a great, ragged rent that half sickened him to look at.

"Put my shoulders against the tree," Christian said. "Then dip the needles and the silk in the alcohol."

Naylor gripped Christian under the armpits and heaved on the heavy body until the back of the great outlaw was supported against the tree.

Then he dipped the needles and the silk thread in the bottle of alcohol while Christian held one hand over the lips of his wound. The dark blood kept oozing out rapidly through his fingers. But the man would not even weaken. He would not even sigh. Only now and then came a breath a little longer and deeper than the others, and his nostrils flared out a little. But the man was all steel, cold and perfectly tempered.

Presently he asked for the needles, and threaded the first one.

"I don't know that I'll be able to do a good job," said Naylor, his lips twitching in horror as he saw the rent in the flesh.

"You? I wouldn't ask you to do such dirty work for me," said Christian. "I'll do it myself. I've seen the doctors work."

And he began to work the needle right down into his flesh, turning it inside so that the mouth of the wound yawned open for a moment and the rush of the blood increased. He tied each stitch, driving the needle remorselessly through his own flesh. What was worst to

watch was the drawing of the thread through the hole that the needle had made. All that Naylor could do was to cut the thread after the knot had been tied, drawing one section of the wound together.

It seemed to him that the work would never end. A fine sweat came out on the face of Christian and gathered in beads. He asked for brandy and took a long pull at the bottle. The sweat began to run on his face. Naylor took a handkerchief and wiped the sweat away.

"Thanks, partner," said the great Barry Christian.

The soul of Naylor worked in him.

"Don't thank me," he muttered. "I'm not doing a thing."

Every moment counted, when the blood was running out of him like that, but Christian spared the time to look up from his work with a smile. And as he endured the agony and smiled at Naylor, it seemed to Bill that he had never seen a face so noble, so calm, or so great.

Never had such an emotion disturbed the dark soul of Naylor.

The sewing of the wound ended with Christian asking questions about where they could put up. Naylor offered his father's house, but Christian pointed out that even in the best family in the world there was not apt to be enough honesty to conceal the presence of a man wanted by the law as he was.

"If you can trust one man in a million, you're in luck," said Christian. "I've found you, Naylor, and that's luck enough for me. I don't want to take chances."

There were always deserted shacks in the mountains, and Naylor knew of one of these. So Christian directed him

to cut down or break down two small saplings and make with them a litter which the horse could drag. In that way Christian could be transported to his new home.

Naylor worked hard and fast. He had dressed Christian's wound with a bandage and wrapped him in two thick blankets brought from his house. Now he was soon able to drag the weight of the wounded man onto the litter—for Christian was now too weak to stir his own weight. He could only endure the pain in silence.

On the litter, Naylor lashed him with a lariat; then he raised the litter and tied it into the stirrups of the saddle. After that he led the horse carefully forward, stopping now and then to go back and look at his man. And on each occasion Christian smiled silently at him.

They reached the shack. And there, on a bed of evergreen boughs and saplings, Naylor stretched out the wounded man.

There was one long sigh from Christian. He said: "Leave me like this. Don't offer me anything. Let me lie here till the morning. I'm going to sleep."

Sleep, with those stitches gripping at the rawness of his flesh?

Well, it was true that he was able to do it. When Naylor twice looked in on Christian, he found him each time calmly slumbering. Once he could see by the moonlight. Once he could tell by the count of the evenly measured breathing.

So Naylor, in the gray of the dawn, made another hurried trip to the town of Kendal to make more purchases. He bought plenty of provisions. To the storekeeper, who was curious, he simply said:

"I'm going up and do a little prospecting for myself. There's gold in those mountains."

The storekeeper grinned. But, though he was curious, he was also discreet. He asked no more questions, but went on:

"There's news just come up over the telephone from Crow's Nest. The real Jim Silver's back in town, and he brought the crooked Jim Silver along with him. Seems the fact is that the dumb-bells down there had the real Jim Silver in jail, all right, and the crook who robbed the bank was just a fellow by name of Duff Gregor that happened to look a good bit like Silver."

"Hold on!" said Naylor. "Is that right? I thought that Silver had gone crooked at last. Is that wrong?"

For that was the story—that Jim Silver, the archfoe of Christian, had at last abandoned the ways of the law-abiding to plunder the rich bank of Henry Wilbur, in Crow's Nest. It had been a great comfort to Naylor, who always felt that honesty is merely a matter of policy with most, and that every man has his price.

"He even had Silver's horse, Parade," said Naylor in a complaining voice. "It must 'a' been Silver that robbed the bank and got away with the loot."

The other shook his head. "It was Duff Gregor, riding a hoss that looked considerable like Silver's chestnut. But the real Jim Silver, after Taxi got him out of the jail, climbed on the trail, grabbed Duff Gregor, grabbed Barry Christian, who was behind all Gregor's tricks, and got hold of the loot, too. But the biggest news of all is that Barry Christian, rather than go back to the death house, chucked himself off the bridge up the river and went over the falls!"

III. — A JOB FOR NAYLOR

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THE cabin stood in a secluded corner between two hills, with a thick stand of trees all around it. There was only one drawback, and that was that Bill Naylor had to travel a distance to get water. On the other hand, the absence of water was what secured them from intrusion. For no man looking for a deserted camp was apt to go to a place where water had to be dug for.

So for five days Naylor patiently nursed Barry Christian through a quick, violent fever, and then saw him start to progress toward good health. Every day that brought him closer to normalcy was a day that brought Bill Naylor closer to a golden reward. He could not say how much there would be in it, but legend said that Barry Christian despised money—used it like water, in fact! And how he would pour it forth on a man who had saved his life and then nursed him back to health! It was a subject of day-dreams which soothed the hours for Bill Naylor.

He had plenty to do, what with changing the bandages, and cooking, and washing, and shaving the sick man, and then making trips to town every day in order to pick up news. And of news that was interesting to Christian, there was a great store.

Above all, he wanted to know the fate of Duff Gregor and of the next moves of Jim Silver.

About Gregor, the fact was that the evidence against him was certain to send him to prison. But the trial would not come for a number of days.