

Cheats

HONESTY, LIKE ANY OTHER HABIT, IS HARD TO BREAK AFTER
A LIFETIME OF INDULGENCE IN THIS LUXURY
OF THE CONSCIENCE

By William E. Kerry

WHEN Henry Okey found a gold globule at the bottom of the crucible which he had used in assaying a sample of old Pete Cartier's quartz, he exhibited no sign of elation.

There was no trembling of his withered hand as he adjusted his delicately balanced, glass-inclosed scale, and manipulated the rider until the gold on one pan and the tiny weights on the other were in perfect alignment.

Quartz which has a value of about four hundred dollars a ton is high grade; but if old Cartier had struck a bonanza, and evidently he had, Okey wasn't going to jabber about it to anybody—not even to Cartier himself, in fact.

Henry Okey had been preparing for this exact circumstance through a very long period.

Thirty years before, the hurrying feet of men gone mad with the lust of gold had trampled through the gulches and over the mountains of Sundial. With brawny arms the fortune seekers had assaulted the flinty hills; they had torn away the surface in a thousand places, and driven their steel to the shank in the living rock.

Friable porphyry and iron-mailed granite, mixed with a sprinkling of glittering quartz, had been spewed forth by the go-phering toilers; much yellow gold had been riven from the resisting rocks. And then the hectic flame of Sundial had died down to darkness, for the golden fuel that fed it was mostly spent.

Once in awhile, however, through the years that followed, some of the grizzled ones who lingered in Sundial would make a new strike. For a time the flame would flare again; an ember would glow among the ashes.

It was such a discovery that old Pete Cartier had made somewhere out in the eternal mountains which had watched, with immobile visage, the sweeping drama of Sundial.

Okey had carefully pocketed the little button of gold, and was making preparations to close his littered office for the day, when the door opened and an old man came into the room. His face was as wrinkled as the hills, as brown as weathered porphyry; his back was bent as though, like outworn timbers that give under the pressure of heavy ground, he was shouldering a burden too great for him.

Yet there was an expectant, hopeful look in his faded blue eyes as they viewed the glowing furnace. He looked at Okey, asking a mute question.

"Nothin' doin', Pete," the assayer said, turning his back to the old man. "Nary a trace."

The disappointment of Cartier was apparent. His brow furrowed. Only the note of impatience in his voice saved it from a tone of discouragement, if not downright tragedy.

"An' I thought I hed it shore this time," he remarked. "It was thet rose quartz, all rotten like, thet they found on the surface o' the Murphy. I shore thought thet this time—" He shook his head, and his voice faded away.

"Jes' 'cause it was rose quartz don't prove an' thing," Okey argued. "Sometimes it's rich, an' sometimes it don't carry no more values than ole tomato cans."

"Thet's so—thet's so. Ye never kin tell 'bout it," Cartier admitted, dolefully. "Wal, they's no use stayin' round hyar any longer. I reckon I'll run 'long home."

Okey, however, sought to delay him.

"Course it's funny," he said; "findin' a new croppin' o' that kind o' quartz round this camp when people's a been huntin' it fer over thirty year, now. Where'd ye run across it, Pete?"

He kept his back turned to hide the avaricious gleam in his eyes. It would be important—highly important—to learn where Pete Cartier had found the gold.

"Okey," the older man replied, "I'm so plumb busted up that I don't never keer to talk 'bout it. I thought shore I hed struck it at last. I jes' don't keer to talk 'bout it, never; no, sir."

He pulled his dusty cap down over his discouraged eyes and shuffled out of the office.

II

HEN OKEY watched the bent figure move slowly up the wooden walk and turn down the trail that led to his cabin, and from the dusty window he saw the door of the shack open and the slim figure of a girl come out into the late afternoon sunlight.

"Wonder ef he'll mention it to her," he said, half aloud. "Don't ever want to talk about it, eh?"

He fingered in his pocket and brought forth the little globule of gold, and looked it over as it rested in the palm of his hand. It had happened at last. He knew it would, if he waited long enough.

But where did it come from? Well, he could wait a little longer to find out, if necessary. Like most folks, Pete Cartier had his garrulous moments.

For nearly half a century Henry Okey had spent his energy in seeking a fortune about mining camps. He had known Virginia City, Leadville, the Black Hills, Cripple Creek, and Goldfield. He had toiled beside men who had made fortunes overnight, but Okey himself had never made a strike.

He and Pete Cartier had been partners for years. They had come to Sundial together when the camp was in its heyday, and together they had hung on through the dragging decades.

Okey had been something of a chemist before fortune had lured him away from the cities, and when Sundial was in its petering out stage, and he felt too old to take up the trail again, he had opened a little assay office. By means of it he had eked out a living—an existence that never satisfied him.

Once in a great while he would fare forth into the hills on a prospecting trip; the old flame still burned intermittently. And it was fanned when every now and then some old crony uncovered a cropping overlooked in the old days—a prospect that meant a quick and easy fortune.

Life had been disappointing to Okey. In the loneliness of his little office he had long brooded over the injustice of the dispensations of fortune. Of late he had become more bitter, and something of a recluse.

With monotonous regularity one or another of the old-timers in Sundial would make a strike, and the mountains would see the last of him. Chris Carlson had gone back to his beloved Sweden. Nick Capriano had returned to Italy to live in the sunshine for the rest of his life. Old Tom Spencer was in Denver, enjoying comfort and plenty.

And he, Okey, had assayed their samples, had told them the value of the ore they had stumbled upon so stupidly. If he had not told them that their samples carried gold, or—better still—if he had been emphatic in stating that they did *not* carry even a trace of value, they would have abandoned their claims.

They would have forgotten them, likely, and Okey, after the proper lapse of time, could have learned their location and staked them for himself. Of course there might have been some trouble over such an affair; but more and more, as he grew old, Henry Okey was noticing that money exerted an almost unbelievable influence on human turbulence.

Such, then, were the thoughts of Okey, the recluse—thoughts engendered by a lifetime of failure and disappointment. And three years before he had arrived at a decision: The very next time he assayed bonanza ore he would keep the secret to himself, and eventually profit by it.

Why not? Riches came usually by luck or sharp practice. A life of toil had netted him little.

Too bad, of course, that his old partner, Pete Cartier, had to be the one to make the strike. He felt qualms that would have been totally absent if it had been any one else; but, then, he and Pete had drifted away from each other during the last few years.

Pete's granddaughter had been as big a cause as any other, inspiring the aged for-

tune seeker to go on prospecting, keeping him optimistic, furnishing an incentive. The soul of Okey had shriveled while that of old Pete flourished.

Okey and Cartier had become unsympathetic toward each other, restless and irritable when they were together. No real trouble happened between them, just different points of view, beckoning along different paths.

Okey, his mind full of scheming, had the greater animus. In fact, Cartier felt merely a futile sorrow as he reached his cabin to be greeted by the slender girl.

"Supper's all ready, granddad," she told him. "Just sit right down and start eating while I put the coffee on."

"Thar wa'n't a trace in them samples, Myrtle," he said. "Not a trace."

"Well, cheer up, granddad," the girl urged. "We're no worse off to-day than we were yesterday. I wish you wouldn't be always trying to strike it rich, and then being disappointed when you don't do it. I don't need money to be happy, and I'll bet if it weren't for me, you'd never bother one bit about hunting for gold."

The old man did not reply for a moment, but then he asserted himself almost fiercely.

"Don't ye worry, honey. I'll strike it yet."

"But I'm not worrying," his granddaughter argued. "Honest, I don't care whether you strike it or not."

III

DEEP down in her heart, though, Myrtle Cartier was disappointed. She was bored with teaching in the little Arapahoe school-house.

She felt now that her words lacked conviction. Perhaps Pete Cartier felt it—maybe her words rang as false to him as they did to her own ears.

"Money wouldn't make any difference to me," she repeated. "We would go on living here exactly the same in this little old cabin. Do you think I would ever leave these mountains and you just because we happened to get a little money? I'm afraid you don't quite know me, granddad."

Old Pete looked at her affectionately. He did not believe her, but his heart glowed at her loyalty.

"Why, if you struck a vein six feet wide of solid sylvanite, like you have in your collection, it wouldn't make a bit of

difference," the girl went on. She believed that argumentative points should be made emphatic to the aged.

Pete poured his coffee into his saucer. For a moment there was no sound except the windy suspirations as he drew the steaming beverage into his mouth. He sucked at his mustache, and looked up.

"Sylvanite?" he said. "Myrt, thet reminds me, honey. 'Member me a tellin' ye o' thet dude feller I met down to Hen Okey's office?"

Myrtle Cartier blushed faintly. "I—I think so," she replied.

Old Pete drew in another mouthful of coffee, and turned to look reminiscently at his specimen case against the wall.

"What about that—that dude fellow, granddad?" Myrtle asked.

"He's from Tin Cup," Pete explained. "Thet is, he don't hail from thar reg'lar, but he's been workin' thar. Been at one o' them newfangled schools o' minin'," he added, with mild contempt. "Yore mentionin' sylvanite reminded me. We was talkin', him an' me, an' he was wantin' to come up an' see my specimens."

"Oh, yes! I should think they would be educational for him."

The girl's gentian blue eyes were bright with interest. She had seen the "dude feller" in the general store a couple of times. She smiled to herself.

He would be adroit enough, probably, to make the proper inquiries, to scrape acquaintance with her credulous grandfather, and use the specimens as an excuse for coming up to the cabin and meeting her. She smiled again.

"Was he coming to-night?" she asked.

"Aye, to-night." The "credulous" Pete hid a flash of amusement in his own age-dimmed eyes. He surmised that the girl had already seen this likely looking lad.

They sat there, youth and age, seeking harmlessly to fool each other; youth, as usual, confident of its guile; age, more experienced, and hence more humble, willing to pose as none too keen.

"I'll just slick up the cabin a little," Myrtle said.

"Aye, thar'll be time enough, I reckon. At eight, he sez, he'll be droppin' in."

IV

It was a full half hour before eight, however, when Kenneth Marvin dropped in.

His interest in the specimens lagged when he met the old prospector's granddaughter. Yet there was subtlety about him. He turned with an appearance of real concentration to the ores displayed in the old-fashioned glass-doored china closet.

Myrtle stood near him as old Pete proudly displayed piece after piece. There was a refreshed interest for her in the collection.

Together, she and young Mr. Marvin bent over and peered at the odd-looking minerals. Once their hands touched.

And despite his thrill at being beside the girl, Marvin was gradually fascinated by the collection. Here were samples of ores, rich in treasures of nature, for which men had laid down their lives, for which women had bartered their souls. Here was luxury, glory, debasement, in the first crude state of evolution.

There was sylvanite from Cripple Creek—an argentiferous ore which, heated over a hot flame, would bubble with golden globules. There was black carbonate of lead from Virginia City and Leadville—lead that was rich in silver—and white quartz from Goldfield, which, when broken, would reveal little wires and leaves of native gold.

There were great pieces of green malachite and blue azurite, copper specimens prized chiefly for their iridescent beauty. Here was a piece of wood as hard as steel. It was two inches thick, but before the pressure had started, it had been a fourteen inch cap on a timber set.

Kenneth Marvin appeared to appreciate the display. The West was epitomized in this rickety cabinet.

Of real interest, too, were the willing tales of the old man—recitals of riotous days in Virginia City, where there was a cemetery, a plot of unconsecrated ground, for those stormy souls who “died with their boots on.”

Marvin heard of the great day when General Grant passed through Leadville; he heard of Cripple Creek, Aspen, Creed, Deadwood, and other camps where the reckless spirits of the Old West had gathered; tales of the Cœur d'Alenes, California, Oregon.

And through it all he sensed the indomitable spirit of old Pete Cartier, and felt the presence of the girl. It was an evening of high romance for Kenneth Marvin.

“I like it up here, Mr. Cartier,” he said, naively.

“Mister! Eh?” The old prospector's scraggy white mustache curled. “Pete, my boy—Pete Cartier. It's a name thet's been called in many's a gold camp, lad.”

“And yet he thinks I want to get out of the mountains with that heritage behind me,” Myrtle offered. “Granddad's determined to make a strike so that I can go. I don't think it's nice of him to want me to leave him.”

“It's poor judgment, anyhow,” was Kenneth's gallant return. “And I don't know any place you would find more interesting. They call me, too, somehow, these mountains. I'm not native here. I'm more than that. Being born here would have been just an accident. I came to the mountains. It was choice on my part.”

“Ye ain't a lunger?” Old Pete was unschooled in tactful conversation.

Marvin smiled tolerantly, conscious of the girl's embarrassment.

“No, I've got a strong pair of lungs. It's work with me, the same as you, Mr.—well, Pete. I happen to have connections with people who have money to invest. If you hear of any promising property open for a figure—well, we might get together.”

“Thet's the way it goes,” the old man sighed, after Marvin had left. “Here's a man a-tryin' to hand me money, an' I ain't got a claim thet's worth an ole tomato can. I was a-hopin' when I toted them specimens into Hen Okey's office—”

“Come, granddad,” the girl urged. “Don't worry about it. It's bedtime.”

“Aye,” was the weary answer. “Bedtime. But I was shore a-thinkin'—”

“Good night, granddad,” the girl soothed.

She lit the bracket lamp in the old man's room, and, kissing him fondly, glided into her own crude little chamber. Somehow there was a queer tenderness in her heart to-night.

She found slumber unattractive, arose, and silently slipped out on the little gallery of the cabin, to gaze with strange thoughts at the blaze of sidereal fire overhead. “Asleep, granddad?” she called softly. There was no answer.

V

OLD PETE CARTIER was not asleep. Temptation was whispering to him this night.

He lay in his narrow bed, while his thoughts raced wildly through a dozen boom camps of the irretrievable past.

Gamblers had cleaned up, so had thieves and tricksters. Himself— It would not be long now before the earth that had been his plaything would possess him forever. And the girl?

This young Easterner, now. Nice enough fellow, but a little too fine spoken, too dudish, according to Virginia City standards.

Now, if he could salt one of his properties and sell it to the Easterner. After all, it would not be the lad's money. "Connections with people who had money to invest," the stranger had said.

Pete's old eyes stared into the wall of darkness. Couldn't he take some of that Goldfield quartz in the cabinet and plant it in the worthless claim upon which he had based hopes so great?

The ore already had the appearance of being rich. A little free gold judiciously introduced into it would make him rich himself. The young fellow would buy the claim, and then, too late, find out that it was not worth anything.

Nothing could be proved against him. And young Marvin was no particular friend of his, and Boston, or wherever he hailed from, had more than its share of money, anyhow.

Why not? There was something coming to him for the long years of toil he had done in the hills. There should be something left for Myrtle.

He was ashamed of his thoughts when, next morning, he glimpsed the sun peeking up over the crest of Old Baldy. The shame gave place to further scheming thoughts again that night.

Some strange poison had seeped into the soul of old Pete Cartier. Corrosion was gradually taking place as the weeks slid by, and in the interim Kenneth Marvin manufactured many excuses to ride over from Tin Cup and spend the evening in Sundial.

Myrtle Cartier liked him, and gradually confessed her yearning to see the world; to go somewhere, anywhere, that held new faces, new scenes. Old Pete often dozed by the fireplace, or so it seemed to the young folks.

What he heard convinced him that now he was justified in salting his claim. He would make the bait tempting for the bite that was sure to come.

"It's coming to you, to see the wide world," Marvin told Myrtle one evening as

the veteran slumped in his chair before the whitening coals. "Now, if your grandfather should strike it rich one of these days, or if I—"

He halted uncertainly. A tide of color arose in Myrtle's face.

Old Pete looked up sleepily, took the pipe out of his mouth, stroked his snowy mustache with the stem of it, opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again. Then, with a do-or-die gleam in the faded old eyes, he announced:

"I've plumb struck it, boy! Been keepin' it a secret a few days. Some folks a comin' up hyar to look it over, to buy it, I reckon."

"But how about my people?" Marvin demanded. "Don't you remember that I asked for a look-in the first night I was up here? Folks I'm in with have money— plenty of it."

Myrtle's face was radiant. A strike at last! Her heart thumped. Her grandfather would be secure in his final years, and Kenneth in a position to coöperate with him.

"Oh, when can he see it, granddad?" she asked.

"I'll show it to ye to-morrer," Pete replied. He directed his conversation to Marvin. No use hauling Myrtle into a deal like this, making her a party to it.

"Ef it proves up," he continued, "I reckon ye kin make an offer ef ye've a mind to. No forcin' o' ye," he added, almost fiercely. "Ye don't look to me like a feller as 'ud squawk ef ye made a mistake."

He took his lamp and shuffled to the protecting walls of his own room. Fifty years and more on the square, and now a salter of mines!

He slept fitfully that night.

VI

PETE CARTIER and Kenneth Marvin rode out to the claim next day. Old Pete wished that Marvin wouldn't talk so hopefully. It hurt him. He wished, also, that the whole business was over with.

"Reckon we can't make it back to-night," he fretted. "Ye used to makin' camp?"

Kenneth smiled boyishly. "Don't worry about me, Pete," he said in his friendly manner. "I've camped out quite a good deal. It gives me a thrill to think I'm going to be out here to-night, under the stars,

with a man that's known the trail as you have. We'll be buddies, Pete.

"The last buddy I had—he's still over in France," he added, gently. "I haven't had a buddy since he went West, Pete."

Old Cartier refused to be sentimental, although his soft old nature cried out for friendship. He felt like a sheep-killing dog. But there was Myrtle to consider.

"Make yer tests," he ordered, sullenly. "Then make yer offer—er don't—after ye have the stuff assayed over at Hen Okey's."

Kenneth Marvin looked over the claim with a keen eye. If it had been rich before, it was more so now.

Old Pete watched the young man fur-tively. Several days before, he had taken some of his Goldfield quartz, broken it into fragments, and scattered it over the cut he had made on the ledge.

"It looks real to me," Kenneth said. "I'll tell you, Pete. It's the gamble in this business that appeals to me as much as anything. The folks back of me have plenty of money. They can afford to take a chance, and furthermore, I think I know real stuff when I see it. I think I told you about my course at the School of Mines?"

"Yep," Pete replied. "Wal, hyar's a chanst to gamble all that eddication. What's yer gamble?"

Marvin squinted at the piece of quartz cupped in his hand. "If I had this assayed first," he explained, "it might cost me more than I had planned to pay. If it turned out real high grade, we'd only be haggling back and forth. Maybe I'd try to cheat you, Pete," he added, flippantly.

Old Pete winced.

"I'll tell you what I'm willing to do," Marvin continued. "The whole game's a gamble. Suppose I offer you right now five thousand dollars for a half interest."

"I'd take seven fer the hull thing."

"Then I offer it. Seven thousand dollars in cash as soon as we double back to Sundial. It's a deal, and it goes. For better or worse. Shake, Pete."

Old Cartier's handclasp was woefully flabby. He felt that he was earning his money, after all, in mental anguish.

"I'd a leetle ruther ye'd take the sample over to Hen Okey's office," he said, virtuously, "an' git a report on't. Howsom-ever, do as ye've a mind to."

"I've a mind to go through with my original proposition," was Marvin's prompt reply. "And now I'll show you what a

cook I am. How'd bacon and eggs go? And I'll beat up some biscuits, and you can put on the coffee pot, and my pouch is full of good tobacco, that kind from Denver that you said you liked. This experience makes me feel like a real old prospector, Pete."

The odd pair slept under the stars—old Pete restlessly—made a satisfactory breakfast of bacon, flapjacks, and coffee, and were back in Sundial by the middle of the afternoon, and in Henry Okey's office before it closed.

"I'd feel better," Pete had said. "I want my own opinion sorter backed up with a reg'lar test."

"Suits me," had been Marvin's perfunctory consent. "Here's a check for seven thousand. Take that to the Sundial Bank in the morning. You'll find they'll pay out the money without a whimper. I'd keep the cash in the bank, though, Pete. That cabin could be broken into easily. There's still some rough ones around—and there's Myrtle, you know."

Pete merely nodded his head. He was thinking. On Hen Okey's report, Marvin and his backers would lose far more than seven thousand. Believing themselves to have a bonanza, they would go to considerable expense in developing the mine. It was a raw deal all around.

VII

MARVIN seemed jubilant that he was finally in possession of a claim that appeared a good one.

"Tell you what we'll do, Pete," he suggested. "I've been your guest a good deal. Why not return the compliment? The Sundial Hotel puts up a fair meal—sometimes. How about you and Myrtle joining me there for dinner—that is, for supper—this evening? I'll be leaving early. Riding over to Tin Cup to-night."

Old Pete looked up guiltily.

"I'm a leetle off'n my feed," he parried. "Some other time, mebbe."

"Sorry. Hope you feel better when I see you again. I'll be back in a day or two, and I'll tell you, Pete—if I strike it rich with that claim I'll treat you right."

"I been treated right enough," old Pete returned. "What ye paid me is right enough. I don't want no more—whether ye make a fortune or whether ye don't make a cent. As ye say, thar's risk in this business. 'Tain't yer fault ef ye make a

fortune. 'Tain't my fault ef ye make nothin'—now, is it?"

"Of course not."

"Then good night to ye, boy."

He trod wearily along the trail to his cabin, to find that Myrtle had not returned from her visit to a neighbor's home, where she had spent the night in the absence of her grandfather.

Old Pete planned to wait for her, then decided that he was very tired, and dragged himself off to bed. He would be awake when she came in—no doubt about that. Old Pete Cartier was paying for his perfidy.

He remained in bed most of the next day, the first morning in years that he had not seen the rising sun topping Old Baldy.

"You ought to stay there if you don't feel well, granddad," Myrtle had cautioned. "Why not let me make some nice soup, and bring it in?"

"I been off'n my feed, thet's all," Pete protested. "I expect it 'ud be better I waited fer supper. I'll jes' step down to Hen Okey's office meantime."

"Evenin', Hen," he greeted the assayer, a few minutes later.

"Evenin'," Henry responded.

"Hen," old Cartier quavered, "what all's been the matter o' ye the pas' few months? Ye been actin' onfrien'ly, like."

"I be all right," Henry replied, coldly.

"But we was pardners, long ago," Pete insisted. "Lor', Hen, we're gittin' along—gittin' along a mighty ways. I remembers the time we was in Cripple Creek together. Coupla young bulls we was then, eh, Hen?"

"We was, all right," Henry conceded.

"I was a thinkin' t'other day o' the time the gas got me. An' ye got me to the level o' the shaft, Hen. I swore then thet if good luck ever came my way it 'ud be good luck fer my pardner, too. Didn't I say that, Hen?"

"I disremember," said Henry, who refused to reminisce along sentimental lines. "Ye don't owe me nuthin' fer that little turn. It was only a-payin' ye back fer that trick ye turned in Creed—the time ye come back an' dragged me out o' the head-in' when the rock stuffed on me after I teched off'n the fuses."

He brought himself up with a jerk. Damn sentiment!

"But them times is all past, Pete," he concluded. "Them things don't mean much—now."

Unlike Pete, he did not reaffirm his own declaration of years before to share and share alike after the big strike that seemed sure to come—some day. Selfishness had claimed him.

He wanted no half interest in any claim. Old Pete had never come through with the location of the property that had been pronounced valueless; but he, Okey, would keep pumping him from time to time.

He had been deprived of what he believed his just dues for so long that he wanted everything or nothing. Misfortune molds some men into this cast of mind.

"But I was a leadin' up to somethin'," Pete argued. "Say, Hen, ye assayed thet sample o' young Marvin's, I reckon?"

"Aye," Okey replied. "Thar was nary a trace, Pete. Nary a trace. Didn't say whar he located them samples, did he?"

But Pete was on his feet. Okey's report had fairly nonplused him.

"Nary a trace!" he repeated. "*Nary a trace!* Why, I— Why, thar must be. I tells ye, I—"

He remembered just in time before he betrayed himself. Something was mighty wrong somewhere.

VIII

THE shaky old door rattled.

"Howdy, folks," rang the cheery voice of Kenneth Marvin. "Myrtle and I thought we'd walk over for the report on those samples."

"I just feel that it's going to be a sensation in this country," Myrtle declared excitedly.

Old Okey turned toward Marvin.

"I was jes' a tellin' Pete," he said, "thet thar was nary a trace in them samples. They was interestin' lookin', though."

"What a pity!" Myrtle exclaimed forlornly. "But remember, Ken, you're not doing business with any stranger, but with my honest old granddad, Pete Cartier. In that case you'll return the money, won't you, granddad?"

Old Pete was silent. In his breast were several conflicting emotions. "Honest old granddad!"

Well, he had been honest all his life. Even now he was not cheating for himself; he would not touch the seven thousand dollars.

But it might be best to return the money, to get out from under this all-around crooked deal. How it had shocked him

when he found that Hen Okey had stooped to dishonesty in his assay! Maybe Hen, too, had been weakened by misfortune, years of dreariness.

This Marvin fellow was a manly lad; he should not have taken his money. And yet there was Myrtle—but would she want money that was tainted?

He weighed all the conflicting values in his mind, and honesty won. He would admit his perfidy—but not in front of Myrtle.

"Myrt," he said, "would ye mind a steppin' outside fer a minnit er so? I wanta talk over a leetle private bus'ness with these men."

Myrtle obediently turned and walked from the office.

"Now," old Pete said bravely, when she had gone, "I gotta announcement to make. I'll hev to confess—"

Kenneth Marvin strode suddenly to the middle of the little assay office.

"Wait a minute," he commanded. "Okey, you made a 'mistaken' report on the samples from Pete's claim. You two old codgers thought I went to Tin Cup last night, but I went to Denver, instead, for an assay. My original belief was confirmed—the ore is high grade. The trouble with you, Okey, is that you've lived straight for half a century! When folks your age—and Pete's—try to turn crooked, they only cheat themselves."

Old Cartier had a hangdog air. The young fellow had said: "—and Pete's—" Did he know that Cartier also had stooped to trickery?

"I'll tell ye, Ken—" he stammered.

"Keep quiet, Pete," Marvin commanded, in an affectionate severity. "Have you anything to say, Okey?"

"Ye can't take no legal action," was Hen Okey's defense. "I was puzzled like with the last samples. Seemed thar was free gold in 'em somehow, an' it put me off the track."

Old Pete once more felt a flush of shame over his reckless attempt at mine salting.

"Can't take action?" Kenneth Marvin repeated, sternly. "I can—and I will! Pete Cartier, you are going to suffer a severe loss for being so stupid."

He smiled tolerantly, then; but the aged schemers identified this as a sardonic grin, and began to shake in their boots.

"You have had Myrtle for nineteen years," the young man resumed, "and now I'm going to take her away from you!"

"Why—why—" Cartier began stumbly.

"And you will be compelled to accept a half interest in the mining claim!" Marvin calmly interrupted. "It 'll make you rich."

Old Pete rocked back and forth for a few moments, getting his bearings. Then he turned triumphantly to Hen Okey, and exclaimed:

"Ye wall-eyed horned toad! Take one-half o' my half, er I'll never cuss ye out agin as long as I live! Thet's final!"

"D'ye m-mean—" Okey stammered.

"Get out of here, both of you!" Kenneth commanded. "And tell Myrtle to come in."

IX

PETE and Hen, dazed by the forcefulness of this young dude, shuffled out.

"My granddad tells me you—you have very bad news for—for me, personally!" the girl said, falteringly, as she entered the office.

It was Marvin's turn to teeter uncertainly on his feet, but he swiftly recovered from the sly blow that the aged joker had dealt him. He managed a laugh that sounded light-hearted, and stepped closer to the unsuspecting new heiress.

"Things have been a bit irregular," he explained, vaguely. "Something mysterious happened to your granddad's samples, but those that I took from another part of the claim tested high grade. By a series of chance happenings he and Okey own half the mine."

"Then where's the bad news?" Myrtle Cartier inquired, smiling back relievedly as he grinned down at her.

"It's this!" the young man announced, nervously. "I'm afraid you'll think I'm after Pete's money if I ask you to—to marry me!"

The girl continued to gaze up into his eyes. A flicker of amusement made dimples about her mouth.

"If I should say 'Yes,'" she countered, "you might suspect that I was mercenary, too! You own half the claim, you know."

"There's only one way to settle this problem," Kenneth declared, and suddenly drew her into his arms. She tried to hide her face on his shoulder, but he found her lips.

"Am I after Pete's money?" he demanded, smilingly.

"N-no!" she gasped, and snuggled closer. Then she kissed him.

"Am I mercenary?" Myrtle inquired in a whisper.

"Sweetheart!" Kenneth murmured, and it appeared to be a satisfactory reply.

Outside could be heard the drone of aged

voices, the sound of a slap on the back, the cackle of toothless laughter.

Pete Cartier and Hen Okey, known in many a boom camp of the old West as "pardners," were reunited. They knew, moreover, that another life partnership was being formed inside the office door.

A Knight of the Wild

HERE IS THAT BLITHE WARRIOR, THE GREAT GRAY BOAR,
WHOSE HOME IS THE JUNGLE FASTNESSES OF INDIA

By Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Casserly

ON a narrow bamboo platform, lifted high on its four spidery posts out of the field of green growing crops, lay a huddled bundle of rags. It stirred uneasily when, as the dawn whitened the sky, from a similar platform in the next field came a cry.

At a louder call the bundle heaved, and from under a torn and dirty blanket the tousled head of a young Hindu boy poked out. He blinked and yawned, and as the light grew stronger, and the shouts from the more wakeful watchers of the cultivation around rang louder, he sat up reluctantly and looked about him.

The blades of the growing grain were agitated wildly in one corner of his field, although there was no breath of air to stir them. This caught the lad's eye, and he sprang to his feet, shrieking as shrilly as his neighbors. From a sling he sent several hard clay balls hurtling into the waving green.

Then out of the cover wherein they had been feasting royally burst a half dozen squat, dark-hided animals which, with the stiff action of nursery rocking horses, bounded off on short legs over the stubby yellow grass of an untilled stretch. It was a sounder, that is, a family group of wild pigs.

They had come down in the night from the low, rocky hill to which they were now retreating, to steal the scanty crops of the poor cultivators who tilled the stony soil

around this Central Indian village which now was becoming visible as the pale sky turned to rose at the coming of the sun.

To the wild chorus of the night watchers the little band of thieves disappeared in the scattered thorny scrub. At their head lumbered a stout old gray boar, well over three feet high at the shoulder, with long, sharp tusks curving up from his jaws to his wicked little eyes. Behind him came three heavy old sows, a young one light and active, and a male not half grown toiling wearily behind its elders, its young strength nearly exhausted.

In and out among the big rocks on the hillside they went, the leader setting a slower pace to enable the tired youngster to catch up. There was no need to hurry, now, for the unarmed peasants could not pursue or harm these robbers of their fields, and were forced to be content with driving them away.

And so, at their leisure, the whole sounder returned to their fastness on the stony hill, where they were greeted by the rest of their family group, nursing mothers with their offspring, quaint piglets of a dirty, whitish brown color. And from other directions several parties, coming back from undisturbed raids on other fields, climbed up at their ease.

On this hilltop there was a small colony of wild boars and their families. Down in the villages of the plain below, their domesticated cousins lived in squalor, rooted