

Rex Beach Adventure Stories

The Shyness of Shorty

By REX BEACH

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PROLOGUE.

As a teller of adventure tales Rex Beach is without an equal in America. Years of experience as a miner in Alaska made him familiar with a little known quarter of the globe where life flows at full tide; consequently his stories are not only intensely interesting, but they are absolutely true to nature. Most of his characters are real people, changed somewhat to suit the motives of the particular story in which they appear. He has been in many an Alaskan gold rush and has had many narrow escapes. One of the stories in this series describes a frightful experience in a blizzard in an Alaskan pass. Beach participated in a trip of this very character and barely escaped being frozen to death. One of the Indians who accompanied him died of exposure. Beach made his first great hit with "The Spoilers," a remarkably interesting tale of life near the arctic circle, and this was followed by "The Barrier" and "The Silver Horde." His Adventure Stories are varied in character and full of thrilling incidents and humorous episodes. In appearance he resembles a college football player, being six feet two inches tall and weighing 200 pounds.

BAILEY smoked morosely as he scanned the dusty trail leading down across the "bottom" and away over the dry, gray prairie, toward the hazy mountains in the west.

He called gruffly into the silence of the house, and his speech held the surliness of his attitude:

"Hot Joy! Bar X outfit coming. Git supper."

A Chinaman appeared in the door and gazed at the six mule team descending the distant gully to the ford.

"Jesse one man, hey? All right," and he slid quietly back to the kitchen.

Whatever might be said, or rather, whatever might be suspected, of Bailey's roadhouse—for people did not run to wordy conjecture in this country—it was known that it boasted a good cook, and this atoned for a catalogue of shortcomings. So it waxed popular among the hands of the big cattle ranges near by. Those given to idle talk held that Bailey acted strangely at times, and rumor painted occasional black doings at the

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Titan, the body of a whisky barrel, rolling ludicrously on the tiny limbs of a big, presented so startling a sight that even Hot Joy, appearing around the corner, cackled shrilly. His laughter rose to a shriek of dismay, however, as the little man made at him with the rush and roar of a cannon ball. In Bailey's amazed eyes he seemed to bounce galvanically, landing on Joy's back with such vicious suddenness that the breath fled from him in a squawk of terror. Then, seizing his cue, he kicked and belabored the prostrate Celestial in feverish silence. He desisted and rolled across the porch to Bailey. Staring truculently up at the landlord, he spoke for the first time.

"Was I right in supposing that something amused ye?"

"No, sir; I reckon you're mistaken. I ain't observed anything frivolous yet."

"Glad of it," said the little man. "I don't like a feller to bog a joke all by himself. Some of the Bar X boys took to absorbing humor out of my shape when I first went to work, but they're sort of educated out of it now. I got an eye from the last one and a finger off of another. The first one donated a ear."

Bailey readily conceived this man as a bad antagonist, for the heavy corded neck and split buttons from the blue shirt, and he glimpsed a chest hairy and round as a drum, while the brown arms showed knotty and hardened.

"Let's liquor," he said and led the way into the big, low room serving as bar, dining and living room. From the rear came vicious clatterings and samplings of pots, mingled with oriental lamentations, indicating an aching body rather than a chastened spirit.

"I don't see ye often," he continued, with a touch of implied curiosity.

"No, the old man don't lemme get away much. He knows that dwelling close to the ground, as I do, I pine for spiritual elevation," with a melting glance at the bottles behind the bar, doing much to explain the size of his first drink.

"Like it, do ye?" questioned Bailey, indicating the shelf.

"Well, not exactly. Booze is like air—I need it. It makes a new man out of me and usually ends by getting both me and the new one laid off."

"Didn't hear nothing of the wedding over at Los Huecos, did ye?"

"No. Whose wedding?"

"Ross Turney, the new sheriff."

"Ye, don't say! Him that's been elected on purpose to round up the Tremper gang, hey? Who's his antagonist?"

"Old man Miller's gal. He's celebrating his election by getting spliced. I been expecting 'em across this way tonight, but I guess they took the Black Butte trail. Ye heard what he said, didn't ye? Claims that inside of ninety days he'll rid the county of the Tremper and give the reward to his wife for a bridal present. Five thousand dollars on 'em, ye know." Bailey grinned evilly and continued: "Say, Marsh Tremper 'll ride up to his house some night and make him eat his own gun in front of his bride, see if he don't. Then there'll be cause for an inquest and an execution." He spoke with what struck the teamster as unnecessary heat.

"Dunno," said the other. "Turney's a brash young feller, I hear, but he's game. Tain't any of my business, though, and I don't want none of his contrab." I'm violently addicted to peace and quiet, I am. Guess I'll un-bitch."

As the saddened Joy lit candles in the front room there came the rattle of wheels without, and a hackboard stopped in the bar of light from the floor. Bailey's anxiety was replaced by a mask of listless surprise as the voice of Ross Turney called to him:

"Hello, there, Bailey! Are we in time for supper? If not, I'll start an insurrection with that boxer of yours. He's got to turn out the smothering supper of the season tonight. It ain't every day your shack is honored by

a bride. Mr. Bailey, this is my wife, since 10 o'clock a. m." He introduced a blushing, happy girl, evidently in the grasp of many emotions. "We'll stay all night, I guess."

"Sure," said Bailey. "I'll show ye a room," and he led them up beneath the low roof where an unusual cleanliness betrayed the industry of Joy.

The two men returned and drank to the bride. Turney with the reckless lightness that distinguished him, Bailey sullen and watchful.

"Got another outfit here, haven't you?" questioned the bridegroom. "Who is it?"

Before answer could be made, from the kitchen arose a tortured howl and the smashing of dishes, mingled with stormy rumblings. The door burst inward, and an agonized Joy fled, dapping out into the night, while behind him rolled the caricature from Bar X.

"I just stopped for a drink of water," boomed the dwarf, then paused at the twitching face of the sheriff.

He swelled ominously, like a great pecten, purple and congested with rage. Strutting to the newcomer, he glared insolently up into his smiling face.

"What are ye laughing at, ye share-tail?" His hands were clinched till his arms showed tense and rigid, and the cords in his neck were thickly swollen.

"Lemme in on it; I'm strong on humor. What in t—! ails ye?" he yelled, in a fury, as the tall young man gazed fixedly, and the glasses rattled at the below from the barred-up jungs.

"I'm not laughing at you," said the sheriff.

"Oh, ain't ye?" mocked the man of peace. "Well, take care that ye don't, ye big wart, or I'll trample them new clothes and browse around on some of your features. I'll take ye apart till ye look like cut feed. Guess ye don't know who I am, do ye? I'm—"

"Who is this man, Ross?" came the anxious voice of the bride, descending the stairs.

The little man spun like a dancer and, spying the girl, blushed to the color of a prickly pear, then stammered painfully, while the sweat stood out under the labor of his discomfort:

"Just 'Shorty,' miss," he finally quavered. "Plin 'Shorty' of the Bar X—er—a miserable, crawling worm for disturbing of ye." He rolled his eyes helplessly at Bailey while he sopped with his crumpled sombrero at the glistening perspiration.

"Why didn't ye tell me?" he whispered ferociously at the host, and the volume of his query carried to Joy hiding out in the night.

"Mr. Shorty," said the sheriff gravely, "let me introduce my wife, Mrs. Turney."

The bride smiled sweetly at the tremulous little man, who broke and fled to a high perch in the darkest corner, where he dangled his short legs in a silent ecstasy of bashfulness.

"I reckon I'll have to rope that Chink, then blindfold and back him into the kitchen, if we git any supper," said Bailey, disappearing.

Later the Chinaman stole in to set the table, but he worked with nettled and fitful energy, a fearful eye always upon the dim bulk in the corner, and at a fancied move he shook with an ague of apprehension. Backing and sidling, he finally announced the meal prepared to stamped madly at notice.

During the supper Shorty ate ravenously of whatever lay to his hand, but asked no favors. The agony of his shyness paralyzed his huge vocal muscles till speech became a labor quite impossible.

To a pleasant remark of the bride he responded, but no sound issued; then, breathing heavily into his larynx, the reply roared upon them like a burst of thunder, seriously threatening the gravity of the meal. He retired abruptly into moist and self-conscious silence, fearful of feasting his eyes on this disturbing loveliness.

As soon as compatible with decency he slipped back to his bunk in the shed behind and lay staring into the darkness, picturing the amazing occurrences of the evening. At the memory of her level glances he felt a tremble and sighed ecstatically, prickling with a new, strange emotion. He lay till far into the night, wakeful and absorbed. He was able to grasp the last but dimly that all this amazing perfection was for one man. Were it not manifestly impossible he supposed other men in other lands knew other ladies as beautiful, and it furthermore grew upon him darkly, in the thick gloom, that in all this world of womanly sweetness and beauty no medium of it was for the misshapen dwarf of the Bar X outfit. All his life he had fought, furiously to uphold the empty shell of his dignity in the eyes of his comrades, yet always morbidly conscious of the difference in his body. Whisky had been his solace, his sweet heart. It changed him, raised and attituded him into the likeness of other men, and now as he pondered he was aware of a consuming thirst engendered by the heat of his earlier emotions. Undoubtedly it must be quenched.

He rose and stole quietly out into the big front room. Perhaps the years of free life in the open had bred a suspicion of walls; perhaps he felt a conduct would not brook discovery, perhaps habit prompted him to tap the two heavy Colts from their holster, and thrust them inside his trousers-band.

He slipped across the room, slow and cavern-like, its blackness broken by the window squares of starry sky till he felt the paucity of glasswork behind the bar.

"Here's to her." It burned delightfully.

"Here's to the groom." It tingled more alluringly.

"I'll drink what I can and get back to the bunk before it works," he thought, and the darkness veiled the measure of his potations.

He started at a noise on the stairway. His senses, not yet dulled, detected a stealthy tread—not the careless step of a man unafraid, but the cautious rustle and halt of a marauder. Every nerve bristled to keenest alertness as the faint occasional sounds approached, passed the open end of the bar where he crouched, leading on to the window. Then a match flared, and the darkness rushed out as a candle-wick spluttered.

Shorty stretched on tiptoe, brought his eye to the level of the bar and gazed upon the horrid head of Bailey. He sighed thankfully, but watched with interest his strange behavior.

Bailey moved the light across the window from left to right three times, paused, then zigzagged some code out into the night.

"He's signaling," mused Shorty. "Hope he gets through quick. I'm getting full." The fumes of the liquor were beating at his senses, and he knew that soon he would move with difficulty.

The man, however, showed no intention of leaving, for his signals completed, he blew out the light, first listening for any sound from above; then his figureoomed black and immobile against the dim starlight of the window.

"Oh, Lord, I got to set down!" and the watcher squatted upon the floor, bracing against the wall. His dulling perceptions were sufficiently acute to detect snuffling footsteps on the porch and the cautious unbarring of the door.

"Getting late for visitors," he thought as he entered a blissful doze. "When they're abed I'll turn in."

It seemed much later that a shot startled him. To his dizzy hearing came the sound of curses overhead, the stamp and shift of feet, the crash—

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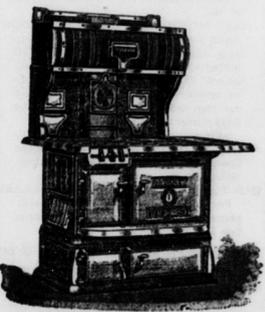
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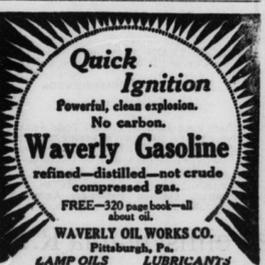
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