

# THE WARRANT FOR WILMER.

HOW THE SHERIFF OF ALMEDA COUNTY PURSUED AN ABSCONDER.

BY FRANK N. STRATTON.

## I.

AS the clock in the tower of the Alameda court-house struck eight, the blinds on the doors of the Alameda Bank rolled upward, the bolts snapped backward, and the dark, wiry man who had been impatiently waiting outside stalked in and confronted the cashier.

"What d'ye mean by sendin' me that notice, Wilson?" he demanded. "I hain't signed a note in ten year. What kind of a game you runnin' here, anyhow?"

The cashier gracefully dipped his long fingers into a file of papers.

"Probably you've forgotten about signing this, Mr. Randall," he answered quietly. "Look at it; you're surety for John R. Wilmer, you see."

"Surety! Not me! It's a forge——" The dark, wiry man bit the last word short, dropped the note to the counter, and stared at it with angry, glittering eyes. "Wilmer!" he ejaculated. "Why, that's Jack Wilmer—the young fellow that bagged them Jackson City bank-robbers four year ago!"

The cashier nodded.

"Same man, Mr. Sheriff," he observed. "Bagged the game and the reward while you were floundering about at the other end of the county!"

The sheriff's eyes snapped.

"What'd you take the paper for?" he snarled. "You know I don't borrow nor indorse. Why didn't you ask me?"

"Wilmer's reputation has always been good; he told a straight story, and you were out of town. The signature appeared genuine."

"Notified him?"

"Twice. He doesn't respond. He's running a little general store among the miners down at Nugget Bend."

The sheriff plucked thoughtfully at his short, grizzly beard.

"Twenty mile down the river," he murmured. "Guess I'll lope down there now. Don't need a warrant in this kind of a case. You can swear one out this evenin', after I fetch him. The game won't get away from me this time!"

"All right, Randall. Sorry for Wil-

mer, but we can't countenance anything of this kind. We'll hear from you this evening without fail?"

"You'll hear from me this evenin' without fail," the sheriff responded grimly. "Don't you worry about that, Wilson!"

He strode to the street, sprang lightly to the back of his waiting horse, and cantered swiftly southward.

"Signin' my name to notes, eh, after buttin' in an' beatin' me out of that reward!" he growled. "Well, I reckon he'll go out of business now—sudden an' permanent!"

## II.

As the sheriff of Alameda County approached the only store of Nugget Bend, he heard a man's voice, half growl, half bellow, raised within:

"What ye goin' to do 'bout it, my lady? I've got the bacon. You'll take two dollars or nuthin'!"

"Really, Mr. Doty," protested a woman's youthful voice, "bacon has advanced. That piece you have is worth three dollars, and——"

"You're wrong, ma'am," interrupted the harsh voice of the sheriff. "It's worth six dollars—an' risin' every minute!"

The burly miner with the bull-like voice whirled toward the doorway with an oath. The sheriff's right hand caressed a revolver-butt.

"Six is what I said, Tom Doty—it'll be seven next jump. Ah; that's right. Now git, an' don't never dispute with a woman, Thomas, about the price of grub. They know!"

He lifted his sombrero to the sweet-faced little woman behind the counter.

"Doty an' me has met before, an' he's been willin' to oblige me ever since," he explained with a chuckle.

"Thank you," said the little woman shyly. "That brute isn't the only one I've had trouble with since Jack left."

"Jack's gone, eh?" asked the sheriff sharply. "How long?"

The little woman pushed back a rebellious lock of glossy brown hair with a white, thin hand, and sighed wearily.

"Four months yesterday."

"You're his—sister, I reckon, ma'am?"

"His wife," laughed the little woman, blushing faintly.

"Yes? Hadn't heard of it. Quite lately, wasn't it, ma'am?"

"Almost a year now," the little woman answered proudly.

"Good for Jack! You ain't used to these parts an' this business, I take it?" ventured the sheriff, glancing at the delicate hands.

"No; it's all new and strange. I knew nothing of such people—nor of work—before Jack brought me here."

"An' where'd you say he'd gone, ma'am?" purred the sheriff.

The little woman looked up sharply.

"I didn't say. He went away—on important business. I—I don't think he'll return soon."

"Now that's bad for me, ma'am. I might lose some money because he forgot to finish up a little transaction we was mutually interested in."

"Oh, I'm sure Jack wouldn't want that to happen," cried the little woman anxiously. "Can't it be prevented?"

"Why, yes; it can if I can see him for jest a minute. We're old friends, ma'am. Hain't you heard from him since he left?"

"I've had one letter," answered the little woman hesitatingly, "but it was mailed, Jack said, by a friend a hundred miles from where Jack was. Maybe he'll send for me before long; and if you care to tell me—" She paused as a customer appeared at the door. "If you'd step back into our living-rooms," she suggested timidly, "I could talk with you soon—without listeners."

The sheriff nodded, passed through the door at the rear of the store, closed it behind him, and surveyed the little room curiously.

"Not a blamed cheer to set in with-out spoilin' a shiny cushion or a bunch of ribbon!" he growled. "Wimmin is th' blamedest critters—specially young uns. Mebbe there's a comfort'ble cheer in the next room."

He tiptoed gingerly over the bright rag carpet, and thrust his head into a tiny bed-room. His inquisitive eyes roamed rapidly over the cheap pine bureau with its diminutive mirror, the neat bed with its varicolored "log-cabin" quilt, and rested on the contents of the sewing-basket at the side of the cane-seated rocking-chair.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "An' her havin'

to scrap with that scum out there in that store! That's one more mark again you, Jack Wilmer!"

He was reverently withdrawing his head when he saw an envelope through the meshes of the basket. He glided forward, lifted the letter from its hiding-place, and thrust it into his pocket. Then he hastily retraced his steps, and perched precariously on the edge of a beribboned chair when the little woman entered and faced him with flashing eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me, like a man, that you're the sheriff?" she demanded. "Because I was grateful, and thought you were a friend of Jack's, I was tempted to help you. You know the bank can't make you pay that note!"

"So you know what I want with Jack, eh?"

She interlocked her slender fingers and gave a quick sob.

"He told me the night he left," she said brokenly. "It's the only wrong thing he ever did. He was half crazed when he did it. We should have lost everything, and he wanted money to go where he thought he could make enough to pay up the note before it came due. And now—of course he daren't come back again!"

"Reckon you want to see your husband, as well as me an' the bank," the sheriff remarked.

"Want to see Jack?" her eyes shone like stars. "Oh, if you only knew! And I believe I can pay that note within a month. Since the rich strike here last week the people are flocking in, and the store's making money. If I could pay, you'd let Jack come home, wouldn't you?"

The sheriff turned his hard, bronzed face from appealing eyes.

"An' if you did pay," he asked, "how'd you get word to him?"

"I don't know," she answered helplessly. "I've never known just where he was. And he dare not write again, he said. I'll have to wait until he sends for me—how long? Oh, how long?"

The sheriff lifted his sombrero from the floor and rose to his feet.

"I don't think the bank would take your money," he said sternly. "They want the man."

"Then he can't come back?" she faltered.

The sheriff frowned and turned to the door.

"Oh, I rather guess he'll come back," he answered, with an inflection whose significance made the little woman gasp.

"Yes, ma'am! I think he'll come back, all right."

He hurried through the store and swung into the saddle.

### III.

In the deepest, eastward-pointing shadows of the pines that clothed the rocky slope, the sheriff of Alameda County slipped from his saddle, loosened the revolver at his side, and peered downward toward the fire that twinkled at the foot of the ravine.

"If that's him he'll 'most sure put up a fight before I can——"

The sheriff's soliloquy ended in a choking expletive as he crashed, sprawling, among the pine-cones that littered the slope. He writhed vainly against the crushing weight that pinned him down, against the powerful hand that wrenched his weapon from his grasp; then the weight was lifted, and the sheriff sprang to his feet and faced the dim form that towered over him.

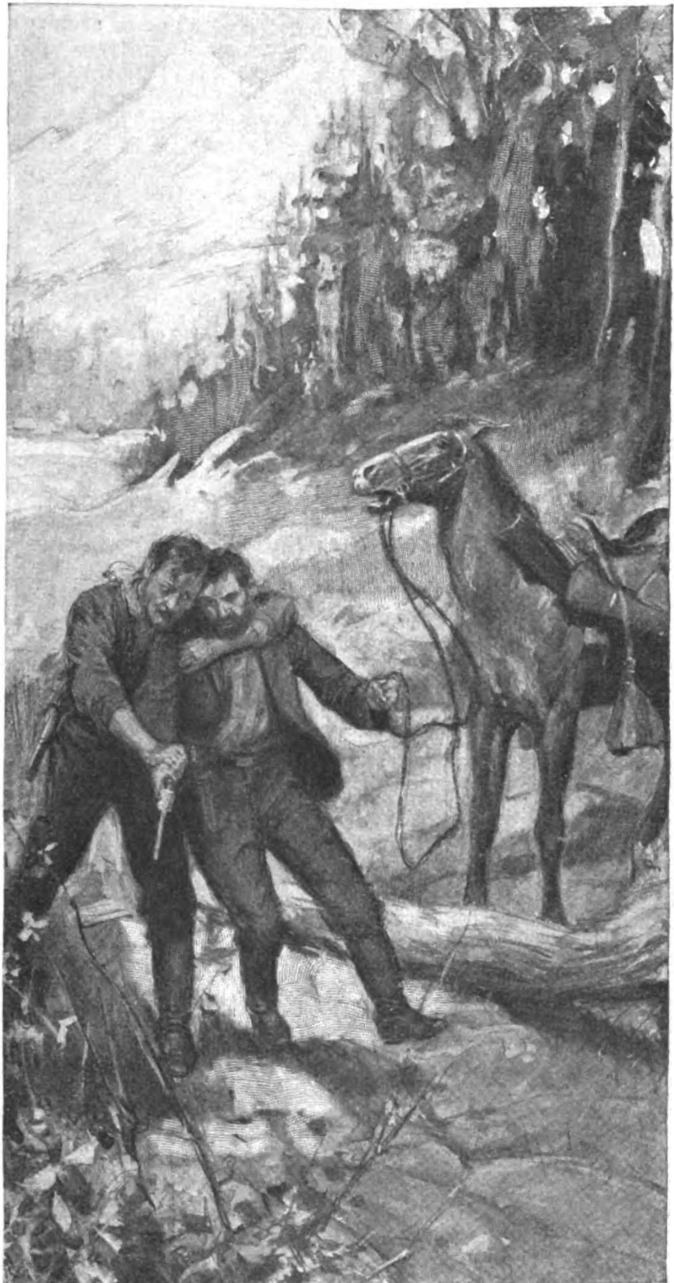
"Hunting Jack Wilmer, aren't you?" asked a deep bass voice.

"I was; guess I've found him!"

The voice laughed softly and melodiously.

"Guess you have, Josh! Now, just step down to my fire below there, and we'll talk this matter over together. No, you go first, Joshua—I know your tricks!"

Sullenly the sheriff marched down the slope and seated himself near the fire. The young giant threw an armful of dead pine-branches upon the smoldering embers, and the flames crackled and



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leaped upward, casting dancing shadows along the steep defile. Then he leaned against a huge boulder and fished a pipe from his pocket.

"Awfully glad you came, Josh," he said, blowing through the stem and tapping the bowl upon the rock. "Haven't smelt the divine weed for two months."

The sheriff grunted and tossed a grimy pouch into the outstretched hand.

"What put you wise, Jack?" he growled.

The giant tossed the pouch to its owner and stooped to pluck a blazing twig from the fire.

"Been expecting a visit ever since the note came due. You've had it in for me ever since I beat you to those bank-robbers. And, Josh"—he grinned genially as he applied the twig—"when you mounted the rise up there on that horse you loomed up like the Bartholdi statue!"

"Thought you was ten mile farther down," explained the sheriff sheepishly.

"I was, yesterday. Moved up here this morning. Signs looked better."

"Prospectin'?"

Wilmer nodded.

"Any luck?"

"None worth mentioning," the giant answered moodily.

The sheriff slowly filled a pipe, then glanced furtively above the little blaze that he held to the bowl.

"They've struck it rich at Nugget Bend," he observed carelessly. "Folks is pourin' into camp, an' the store's coinin' money."

Wilmer took the pipe from his lips, leaned slightly forward, and peered down into the sheriff's impassive face.

"Been there lately, Randall?" he asked eagerly.

"Sure. Lookin' for you."

"See—her?"

The sheriff nodded.

"Didn't let her know you had a warrant for me, did you?"

There was a menace in the deep bass voice. The sheriff looked up defiantly.

"What if I did?" he challenged.

The giant's right hand dropped to the weapon at his side.

"As if she hadn't trouble enough without that!" he exclaimed savagely. "I think I'll end your career right now, Mr. Sheriff!"

The sheriff's hand stole from his pipe toward the handle of the bowie just within the collar of his flannel shirt; his eyes measured the distance to Wilmer's broad breast.

"I think not, Jack," he said coolly. "You're goin' back with me, you know. I've got a warrant."

A gleam of admiration shone in the giant's handsome dark eyes.

"You've got the same old nerve with you," he said. "Go back? Do you think I'd go back with that cursed note against

me—and a devil like you for sheriff? There aren't enough men in Alameda County to take me back—alive!"

"Is that the only note you've—forged, Wilmer?"

"The only one; and I'd give half my life if I hadn't—"

"It won't cost you that much, Jack. Here it is."

The giant clutched at the oblong slip of paper that the sheriff was holding toward him.

"Why, it's stamped 'paid'!" he gasped.

The sheriff smiled and rose to his feet.

"Sure. I paid it—after I'd seen the little woman. Remembered all about signin' it, then. Ugly-lookin' piece of paper, ain't it? Hadn't you better light your pipe, Jack? It's gone out."

Wilmer lighted the note at the fire and held it to the pipe. Its charred fragments fell from his fingers, as the smoke from the pipe wreathed lazily upward and floated away on the soft night-wind.

"Let it be the pipe of peace, Josh," said the giant, a faint tremolo in the deep voice.

"Not unless you obey my warrant," answered the sheriff sternly.

"And have the bank prosecute me on oral evidence? Why did they swear out a warrant, when you—"

"The bank didn't swear out no warrant. A little woman drew this one up—a little woman that's pinin' her life out for an ornery pup that hadn't grit enough to stay by her an' fight poverty like a man, but sneaked off, nobody knowed where till I found him. Here's the warrant; I stole it from the little woman's basket. Read what it says, Jack Wilmer!"

He laid something across the young giant's trembling palm—something fluffy and soft and white, with two tiny sleeves, and a little neck-band of cheap ribbon, yet unfinished, whose wavering stitches told of unskilful but patient and loving fingers.

Wilmer's chin dropped upon his chest; his deep breathing sounded above the crackling of the fire.

"You said all the men in Alameda County couldn't take you back alive," the sheriff went on. "Perhaps they couldn't. But in a Book I've read somewhere it says, 'A little child shall lead them.' Is the warrant good, Jack Wilmer?"

The giant slowly raised his head; tears were in the handsome dark eyes.

"Get your horse," he said gently. "Mine's close by. The warrant's good!"