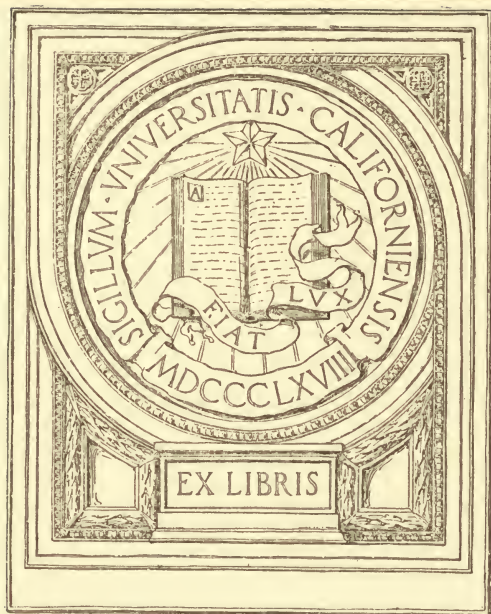


BLACK BOULDER — CLAIM —



• PERRY NEWBERRY •



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I LIFTED MY HEAD TO GET A CLEARER VIEW

THE
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PUBLISHING
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BLACK BOULDER CLAIM

By PERRY NEWBERRY



*Illustrated by
Henry Pitz*

THE PENN PUBLISHING
COMPANY PHILADELPHIA

1926

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ANNALS

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Black Boulder Claim

*Dedicated to
boys young and old, who like
adventure*

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Introduction

THIS is a story of the experiences of two boys in the Sierra Nevada mountains in Lassen and Plumas Counties, California. Their adventures take them from Jamesville, a small mining town, up over Old Baldy to Eagle Lake and that spur of the range in which the lake is held. Anyone knowing this section of the country will be pleased to find that the scene of the story, all of the description of the towns and the groves and the ranges, is kept strictly within the bounds of truth, and that one must draw on his imagination for the plot alone. For those who have never been in this beautiful and wild part of our land, it may be well to give a short description of the flora and fauna of the country.

Everyone, naturally, has heard of the giant redwoods of California (*Sequoia Gigantica*), which grow in large groves, covering spaces of perhaps less than a hundred acres. Some of these are noble, huge old giants, surrounded by pines and beautiful Douglas spruces. More perfect specimens are peculiarly symmetrical and regular, though like the columns in Greek architecture they are not spoiled by being too conventional, showing great variety in harmony and general unity; the inspiring shafts with rich, long, fluted bark, absolutely clear of smaller limbs for almost two hundred feet, are tufted

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here and there with bunches of green. The main branches of the oldest trees are very large and crooked, and zigzag stiffly to the point where they dissolve in dense masses of little branches, making a regular, though greatly varied, outline. The foliage at the top terminates in a great dome, that may be distinguished from even great distances, thrown up against the sky above the darker bed of pine and firs and spruces. This is the king of all conifers, not only in size, but in majesty of bearing. Some of these trees are so large at the base that whole stage-coaches, horses attached, have been able to drive through them.

Small lakes abound in this country, many thousand feet above the sea,—on ridges, along mountainsides and in piles of moraine boulders. The largest of these lakes are found at the foot of declivities where the push of the glaciers was heaviest. These attain considerable size and depth. Their waters are remarkably clear and one can see down through them for great distances. Below the waters of many of the lakes, the rock in some places still shows the grooving and polishing marks of the glacier period; the erosion of the wave action has not as yet entirely obliterated these superficial marks of glaciation.

In our story, one of the boys shoots a bear; and it is a well-known fact that this great range of mountains abounds with game, one reason being that the large national parks serve as excellent preserves, and also be-

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cause the mountain fastnesses of the Sierra range furnish safe shelter for the wild folk of the woods.

Again, he shoots a cougar or mountain panther, which is stealing up in the night to slay his horse, Zim. These ferocious beasts are so plentiful that the state of California pays a bounty for all of them killed when sufficient proof is given. Rabbits, squirrels, quail and other small birds and animals are in abundance. The foliage and undergrowth is dense and where land is covered in this way, game is bound to be plentiful.

One of the largest bushes of this country is the manzanita, which has exceedingly crooked, stubborn branches and is not easily penetrated. In the first part of the story, Ted is told that he will find gold in the grass roots. The reason for this is that the manzanita grows proportionately above and below the surface of the ground. Therefore, when looking for water to use in a mining sluice, if tall manzanita bushes grow near the claim, the chances are that water is fairly close to the surface.

To follow the trip which the boys took in their search for gold, take a map of California and look in the northwestern corner of Lassen and Plumas Counties, and midway between them you will find Jamesville. From here, go northwest to Eagle Lake and downward again to Susanville, where Lem went for supplies. If the map has sufficient detail, you will readily see the rugged country, which they had to cross.

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CHAPTER I

A TURN IN THE TRAIL

ZIM snorted, jerked up his head against my laggard rein, and stopped dead in the trail. Again I turned in the saddle and looked back. The glow of the sun that had dipped behind the mountains to the west still lit the peak of Old Baldy, making of its rough sides a radiant harmony of color, orange and gold, with lavender and purple shadows.

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But my eyes dropped lower to where the scrub-pine and manzanita brush marked the trail I had followed since noon. The greater part of its twelve miles of zig-zag windings was in view behind and above me, and with keen eyes I searched its length. Someone, a-horse, was following me.

Zim had twice before in the last hour on the narrow trail whinnied and stopped in his slow, careful walk. The first time I had believed a rattler slipping through the rocks might have caused the disturbance of good old Zim's usually complacent temper. But I was sure now. Somewhere behind us, within sound of his whinny, was a horse.

I let Zim rest and listened with him for an answer. It was that quiet time that succeeds the setting of the sun, when the wind seems to slip away in company with the day. From the village below me, smoke came from chimneys to rise straight and high; people were at supper tables; here and there a cow grazed in the streets; lights began to glitter from windows. Down there it was beginning to be night while the sun still lingered on Baldy's top.

Zim's ears, which had been cocked forward, relaxed, and he reached his muzzle around to nose the sage beside the path. I touched him with my heel, tautened the reins with:

"Get up, old nag. Almost home," and we began the last switchback to cross the river at the ford.

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There was no cause for serious worry in a pursuing horseman. It might be some prospector following down the trail I had come, making in to Jamesville for supplies. That he had not closed up the gap between us in the opportunities I had given by my delays, might be explained by a heavily laden packhorse making frequent stops on the difficult descent.

I had left the Black Boulder claim after an early dinner, almost as the sun crossed the meridian. All the morning I had watched the water in the sluice lower perceptibly with each passing minute. At eleven, it was hardly over the riffles and was not strong enough to move the sand in its current. There was no use working longer with the shovel. I cleaned up what little gold was caught in the cross-slats, horned it, put away my tools in the shack, caught Zim and started for home. Mining for the year, barely begun, was over. The great pile of pay-dirt I had spent a laborious month in gathering was not one-third gone. And I, the sole owner of as rich a gravel claim as there was in Plumas County, with good values from the surface to bed-rock, gold that clung even to the grass roots, was homeward bound without enough dust in my poke to make me worry over the possibility of a thief in the following horseman.

We stopped in the river while Zim buried his nose in its cold waters. Night was settling fast. A quail whistled in the alders beside the stream, to be answered

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from the edge of the field beyond the ford. There was the twittering of birds arranging themselves for the night on the twigs of the thicket. Behind me, on the mountainside, a rock came bounding down, tearing its way through the scrub.

Something had dislodged that stone to start its hurried descent. Zim's nose had come from the water to sniff the air. Again he whinnied. There was no answer. The rock, after a couple of faltering pauses on the steep hill, found a hold against gravity and stopped. All was still but the noises of the swirling river. With a curiosity to see who was using my trail to the Black Boulder, I dropped the reins over the saddle horn, threw a leg across the pommel, and waited.

This was my third dry spring on the Black Boulder claim and it would be my last. There had been years before my father's death when water was plentiful in the sluices for weeks, even months; when the top and sides of Old Baldy, deep covered with winter snows, had melted slowly and with little waste of the precious fluid. The claim had paid well then. It held no lack of gold, but without water might as well be sand. Except for the streams from the melting snow, there was not even a spring on all Baldy's sides; and because the mountain stood alone on the edge of the range of Sierra Nevadas, there was no chance of a flume or pipe to bring water to it.

My claim, the sole inheritance from my father, had

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proved a hindrance, not a help, to me. I was sixteen, and my chances for an education were passing with the years, for with the failure of a clean-up at the diggings, it was necessary for me to find work on the ranches and that kept me from school. This should be my last spring on Old Baldy, I repeated to myself, as I waited, listening for the sounds that would tell of the approach of the follower.

Impatient to get on to where he knew oats and hay waited for him, Zim pawed the water to send cold drops against my face. I had given whoever started that stone rolling plenty of time to catch up with me, and there wasn't sight or sound of him. There was no place to turn off the trail, so he must have stopped. Well, my curiosity was not strong enough to keep me here all night, while a supper waited in one of the cottages which showed glimmering lights ahead in Jamesville. I threw my leg around, kicked a foot into the stirrup, and Zim took the steep bank with enthusiasm and an equal hunger.

The trail turned into El Dorado, Jamesville's one business street, a little above the Gilson House. I hoped its guests were inside at supper so that I would not have to listen to their jibes and jokes. My mine—as these ranchers called the crude workings—was one of the town's standard subjects for hilarity; my departure for it in April was the occasion of many joshes and sarcastic prophecies; my return would be greeted by shouted

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witticisms from the hotel porch. It was pretty dark; I might get by unscathed. I kicked Zim into a trot.

"Hi! Ted! That you?" a voice hailed me from the shadows, and a silhouetted figure came running toward me.

"Whoa, Zim. Hello, Lem." I stopped and waited for him.

"What luck?" A city boy, Lem could not read the story of my luck written plain on the mountain's side.

"None; too short a run of water. How goes it with you?"

"Bad as ever," he grinned. He was tow-headed and freckled, a year younger than I.

"Still with Wayne?" I asked. Wayne ran the Gilson House.

"Still chambermaid of the stables at nothing per week. Can't you come over to-night, Ted?"

"Not to-night. See you to-morrow though. Good-bye," and I went on my way.

Lem had been almost a year at Jamesville, sent there, it was said, by the Juvenile Court of San Francisco for some offense the details of which I did not know. It was supposed to be a correctional measure rather than a punishment, but the Judge couldn't have known Mr. Wayne. Working for him was little better than life at the State's prison, I guessed, for the little good nature that bloomed in Wayne's system was needed for

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the hotel's guests, and none of its fragrance could be wasted on the help.

I was one of Lem's few friends in Jamesville. Even Mother Laing, with whom I lived, and the kindest of women, was distrustful of the boy. Of course, the story of his past had a good deal to do with the feeling of suspicion against him, but it wasn't all that. Lem was different from the boys of Indian Valley; shrewder, more cunning and secretive. Even I didn't always trust him. He was small, thin, wiry; strong enough for all his delicate look. Until he grinned, his narrow face held a look of crafty slyness; with his wide smile, it disappeared in cheeriness; as unexpected a change as sunshine breaking through fog. There were no reservations to my liking when Lem Strong grinned.

Hearing Zim's hoofs on the hard dirt road, Mother Laing, carrying a lamp, opened the side door and stood in its frame, calling:

"You Ted Wilson! Hurry in here and get your supper."

"Sure, Mother Laing; soon's I put up Zim," and I rode off to the barn. She had known I'd be home tonight; had kept supper waiting for me. Just as good a miner as there was in the hills, better than most of the ranchers of Indian Valley, and she could tell from the way the green grass took the place of white snow on Baldy's sides, as it stretched high away to the east before her door, that my labors there must end. It made

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the telling of my disappointment easier, knowing she knew it.

“Too bad, Ted,” she greeted me as I stamped into the big kitchen. “How much does it tote up?”

“Not six ounces.” That would be but little over a hundred dollars and was the smallest sum the Black Boulder had ever yielded at the spring run. I added, bitterly, “It was rich gravel, too. I could have cleaned up thousands if the water had held.”

“Too bad,” wistfully. My misfortune meant added work and discomfort for her. “But never mind; better luck next time.”

That was Mother Laing’s way, “Never mind” disappointments, and “Better luck” for the future, and it had always cheered me; but this night I had come to the turn in the trail. I felt willing to give the Black Boulder away; abandon it. I ate supper in silence, hardly hearing the cheerful gossip of my five weeks’ absence from town. It was only when Mother Laing announced that Mr. Wayne had called twice to see me the last week, that I perked up to ask:

“What did Wayne want?”

“He didn’t say. He was real anxious to know when you’d be back, and I told him to watch Old Baldy. The mountain would say quicker and surer than I could. He’ll be ’round again to-morrow, I guess.”

“I’ll go over there to-night. Maybe he’s a job to offer.”

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“You’ll not work for him, Ted Wilson! I’ll not stand for that.”

“Either Wayne or the ranches. One’s about as bad as the other.” I spoke bitterly, for I had no love of farming. Work I must, for the money I had earned on the claim was already owing to Mother Laing. She was a widow, and when Father died four years before, had given me a home and the best of care; but she was hard-working, washing and mending for the farmers’ families, and I could not allow her to support me.

After the meal I walked across lots to the hotel and faced the joking for the chance of seeing Mr. Wayne. He was not in the office, though there were plenty of his lodgers sitting about the stove, its warmth a comfort those spring evenings, and they began the time-worn pleasantries.

“Leave any gold behind in Baldy this spring, Ted?” asked Tom White, who ran the dairy for Jamesville, “or didya bring it all down?”

“Been expectin’ you’d be borrying my hay wagon for to haul it,” from one of the ranchers; and the clerk in the clothing store cut in with:

“No. Ted’s buying one of these auty-mobile trucks to handle his gold.”

I smiled through it, but not a happy smile. It was too serious for joking when it meant, perhaps, working for Wayne the balance of the year. He came in from

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the dining-room, through the door behind his office counter, picking his teeth.

"Hello, Ted," he said amiably. "Any gold left on Baldy?" They were not original in their gibes.

"Some few grains," I answered. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Wayne."

"Why—sorta." That would be his way of beginning negotiations; not too encouragingly. "Come inside here," and he lifted the section of the desk that stood for a door. I went in to take a chair against the wall, while he tilted back in his and worked diligently with the quill toothpick. For a minute he eyed me slyly, then said, "I didn't know but you was going to abandon the claim up there."

"Black Boulder?" He nodded. "No; I've the assessment work done now for this year."

"I know; and not wages for it either. How much did you bring down with you for the run?"

"Not a great deal; the water gave out quickly."

"Sure; it always gives out quickly. How much?"

"Six ounces," I answered truthfully. I was still thinking this was merely preliminary to the offer of a job.

"Not even Chinaman's wages," he remarked contemptuously, as he whittled tobacco from a plug to fill his pipe. "Want to sell that claim, Ted?"

That came as a surprise. So far as I knew, Wayne had never seen my diggings, and he wasn't the kind

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to buy sight-unseen. But this was a hopeful beginning.

“I might,” I said, a little too quickly for clever bargaining. “What will you offer?”

Slowly he scratched a match and held it in the bowl of his pipe while he puffed longer than was necessary for a light. “It isn’t worth anything,” he said finally. “The only good thing about it is it’s convenient to town here, and I could sort of keep an eye on it with a Chink or two working it in the spring. I’d risk a hundred bucks on it.”

An hour before I had thought of giving it away, and here was my opportunity to do so; instead, I got up from my chair with:

“Not for sale. The shack on the claim is worth more than that.”

“Yes, it might be if it wasn’t on the claim; it might make a real good fence anywhere anyone would need a fence; but it would cost more’n it’s worth to bring it down here. What d’you say to a hundred and fifty?”

“No.” I said it emphatically and I started for the door. Wayne puffed smoke at the ceiling, still tilted back.

“You climb up there along in April and you climb down again in May, and you ain’t enough better off to pay wear and tear on the hoss. Four years of that, ain’t it?”

“Three,” shortly.

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“Three years, and not Chinaman’s wages in it. And each year the snows seem to go off swifter.” I had stopped at the gate in the counter and was listening, wondering what Wayne had up his sleeve. All he said was true enough; but it was as true for him as for me. Mr. Wayne thought just as highly of a hundred and fifty dollars as he did of his right arm; he wouldn’t offer it, even so little, if he did not see a way to get back many times the amount, and that quickly. Then I remembered that there had been a horseman on the trail behind me that afternoon. Could it have been Wayne? Might he have climbed up to the claim and taken a squint at my pile of pay-dirt?

“Did you ever see just what I’ve done up there?” I asked. The hotel proprietor shook his head, puffed slowly and said:

“No, Ted; but I can guess just about what you got there. Pretty good gravel, running fair in values, but impossible to handle without water ——”

“One might run a cable-tramway down the hillside,” I cut in, “and carry it to the river ——”

“Uh huh. Spend ten or fifteen thousand dollars on the chance of getting back—what? Even at that, how many yards of dirt would you have to handle to the ounce of gold?”

That was true, too. I’d talked with Father about an aerial-tram many times, and he had the same questions of doubt that Wayne was asking. There was only one

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solution to Black Boulder's gravel, and that was—water. With water on the claim, it would be worth thousands—many thousands; without water, it was worth just about what Wayne offered; not that. I lifted the counter door. One hundred and fifty dollars would set me square with Mother Laing and leave me enough to finish the spring term at the Crescent Mill's high-school. I stood in the counter door. I might earn enough through long vacation to take me back for the fall term; six months more of schooling, perhaps; and I needed it.

“Say two hundred dollars cash,” said Wayne, and that was his mistake.

“The claim isn't for sale,” I replied, and I dropped the counter-top behind me. Black Boulder was getting valuable too rapidly. If Wayne could leap from a hundred to double that in two bounds, I'd do well to hold on a while, at least. I started out.

“Hold on, Ted,” the hotel man called from the desk. I came back, grudgingly. I didn't want to listen to good reasons for accepting his offer. I knew better reasons than he could think up for just that thing; first of all, that I owed Mother Laing money. When I was alongside, he lowered his voice.

“I suppose I'm kind of a fool, Ted, but I sympathize with you and the widow. You've had hard going, both of you, and it ain't because you won't work. I want to see you pull out of the muck. Mrs. Laing's getting

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older each year, and she ought to be having life easier, not harder. I'll make my offer three hundred, just out of kindness of heart."

Again, every word true, and all a lie! If Wayne had stuck to his original figure, his argument would have won; but that raise of one hundred dollars, "out of kindness of heart," was convincing. Somewhere in the wood-pile was a nigger. I couldn't see him, but he was hiding there. With a curt, "Thank you, no," I walked out of the hotel.





CHAPTER II

NEW PLANS

AS I came from the brightly lighted room to the intensified darkness of the porch, I was startled by a hand laid on my arm and a whispered, "Psst!" in my ear. In the instant, I knew it was Lem Strong, and I followed him silently down the length of the veranda to slip off its further end and run with him to the stables. It was only after we were in the far stall that he spoke, and then it was in whispers.

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“I’m going to run away, Ted,” he began. “I’m going to hop the twig.”

“But—how can you?” I was startled at the disclosure. The law was a serious matter to me. “They’ll arrest you.”

“They’ll have to find me first, and that will keep ’em busy for a long while. I want you to help me.”

“But—but ——” I was full of “buts.” I didn’t like the idea at all. “What do you want me to do, Lem?”

“Hold on till I tell you my plans. I dassent go back to San Francisco; they’d catch me there sure; and I haven’t money to go far in any direction. So I’m going to take to the mountains and walk to the next town north—whatever that is—then work my way along till I get to Portland. I’ll ride the brake-beams on freights, and ——”

“What are you talking about? Where do you think you are?” I was astounded at such ignorance. “Where do you expect to find a railroad in these hills?”

“That’s what I want of you; info. If I was to ask any of these people about town, they’d remember and tell, and I’d get caught. You’ll keep mum.”

His confidence in me was absolute, and no matter how much I dreaded being mixed in this infraction of the law, I could not fail him. But I wasn’t encouraging as I explained:

“The nearest railroad is at Quincy and that is miles

New Plans

over the range. You'd never make it. And if you did, you'd have to work your way clear down to Sacramento before you could ever start for Oregon. You'd ——"

"How do I get to Quincy, that's what I want of you," Lem interrupted. "Never mind all the can't-do's. Tell me the road to Quincy."

"There isn't a road; just a trail. And probably you couldn't see it half the way, it will be so overgrown with spring bushes. I wouldn't be sure of following it myself, and I know the hills well."

"Can the knock-stuff, and boost, Ted, boost! Show me one end of that path over the mountains, and leave me to find the other. Where do I go from here?"

"Right up the valley to Engels, where you hit the trail at the east end of the bridge. It leads over Himmel's Pass, and you'll have no trouble, probably, till you cross the summit. From there on the trail is pretty bad, but you keep hiking southeast along the slope of Morris Mountain till you dip into Green River Cañon. Follow that down to the valley, and the rest is easy. There are ranches in the bottom."

Lem repeated the instructions, and I amplified them here and there, until it seemed to me he couldn't miss the trail. On foot, as I told him, it should take between three and four days; I'd made it in three. And I finished with the advice, should he get lost, to travel steadily southeast by the sun until he struck Green River.

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“Oh, well,” he said jauntily, “if I do get off the road I can ask somebody the way.”

“Ask whom?” I said. “You’re going to see nobody after you leave Engels until you reach Green River bottoms. Not a soul. There’ll be no travel on the trail yet.” And that reminded me of the traveler who had followed me down my trail that afternoon. “Lem,” I said, “did anyone come to the hotel this evening after I went by, riding a horse?”

“You mean a stranger?”

“Anybody.”

Lem thought a minute, then shook his head. “Pon Sing, the China boy, Lee Fong’s helper, rode in about half-past seven. He’d been over to Crescent Mills buying potatoes. Nobody else.”

Pon Sing couldn’t have been behind me if he had come from Crescent. I left Lem, after advising him against any rash action, and went home to find Mother Laing in the living-room with a basket of socks to darn. She greeted me with the question:

“What did Mr. Wayne want?”

“Made me an offer for the Black Boulder,” I said, getting a book from the shelves and pulling an easy-chair around under the lamp. She gave a little snort which expressed her opinion of Wayne and any offer he’d make. I opened the book as though to read, knowing it was the best way to get her started in conversation.

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“How much did he bid?” she asked finally.

“Three hundred.”

“Pooh! Does he call that an offer?”

“It was his fourth attempt. He began at one hundred,” I explained. “I’m afraid three hundred is as much as it’s worth.”

“Now, Ted Wilson, you know better than that. That claim is worth thousands—not hundreds. Your father spent more than three hundred dollars on the house and flumes, let alone your work there. And there’s rich gold in the gravel.”

“And no water.” It was an old argument between Mother Laing and me. Every year when I came home discouraged, ready to abandon the claim, she would dissuade me; but this was the first offer of money I had had for it. I went on, “Mother Laing, I am going to leave it to you whether the Black Boulder is sold or not. I do not think Wayne has made his last bid. He may raise his offer. I’m going to leave you to deal with him.”

“And where will you be?” she asked, smiling.

“Hunting another claim—with water on it.” This was the result of my thinking of several days and part of several nights. “I’m going prospecting.”

She laid aside her work, took the glasses from her clear, gray eyes. For a long time she looked at me before she said:

“I’ve been expecting that, Ted. Each year when

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you have returned discouraged, I have dreaded to hear you say those words. But it's a part of your inheritance, I guess, and must work itself out of the blood. Your father wasted almost a lifetime in prospecting. All these western mountains from Washington to Mexico he hunted for gold, and never found anything that paid him more than the gravel claim on Baldy. Do you remember what his last words to you were?"

"He said there was gold in the grass roots."

"Yes; and that far-away gold always shone brighter than what rimmed the pan, and the search for it was a chase after the mirage. He wanted you to stick by the gravel claim, Ted."

"I know; but he wouldn't have stuck for three dry years ——"

"No, he wouldn't; and, knowing he wouldn't, he advised you to do it. Give up the idea of prospecting, Ted, and wait for next spring with the hope of better luck."

I came to my feet and returned the unread book to its place. My resolution had been made slowly, thoughtfully, over camp-fires and under the stars. I was sixteen, but for three years I had supported myself by hard work, and was older than my age; was steady with perhaps an over-confidence in my ability to take care of myself. As I turned to Mother Laing to answer her arguments, I felt sure of my sound judgment and the practicability of my plans.

New Plans

“I’d hate to do anything you didn’t approve,” I said, “but I’ve studied this out carefully. There’s nothing at the Black Boulder that can be touched until next spring. If I stay in Jamesville, I must work on a ranch for barely enough to support myself. In the mountains, even if I find no gold, I can live for almost nothing—I’ll be only a little worse off. And I can post-hole for pockets.”

“Post-holing isn’t easy work, Ted.”

“No. Pocket hunting is hard work, and it isn’t sure. But I’m not trying to dodge hard work, only to get away from uninteresting work; do something where there’s a chance to make a real gain. You can’t live this mending, washing life forever, and I want a better education. I’m going to give four months to trying to find a real gold mine.”

“When do you want to start?” Mother Laing gave way with a little sigh and the most hopeful of smiles. That was her method of taking life. If it came against her ideas, she accepted tranquilly and trusted results would prove life right and her ideas wrong.

“To-morrow morning early,” I said quickly. “I’ll leave you all the gold I brought down with me, and you can sell the Black Boulder for whatever you can get for it if you want. I’ll take Zim and what grub he can pack, and get into the hills.”

“Come into the kitchen and we’ll see what we can find,” and I picked up the lamp and led the way to the

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storeroom door, where for the next hour we fought laughingly over the contents of Zim's next day's pack. If Mother Laing had been allowed her way, my horse would have staggered under a load of eatables to make travel impossible. Only by arithmetical calculations that proved totals of weight beyond equine strength could I prevent her from adding comforts to the stores that she piled upon table and chairs, insisting that I should need them. A side of bacon and a sack of flour were the absolute necessities; and to these I added white beans, rice, coffee, salt, pepper and baking-powder. That was the limit. To Mother Laing's pleas for sugar and canned milk, potatoes and dried prunes, I was laughingly callous, and I begged her to think of Zim's troubles. When I had finally replaced the many things she wished to give me, and had closed the door of the storeroom and set my back against it, I said happily:

"Not another ounce of food weight, please! Zim must make thirty miles a day on mountain trails, and he'll look like a moving-van now. I'll eat all the rest of the food when I come back."

"And when will that be, Ted?"

"Don't expect me before the first of September. If there's a chance, I'll send you a letter now and then, but as I'm going deep into the hills, maybe I'll see nobody all the time I'm gone."

"Where do you head for?"

New Plans

“The Eagle Lake country. Father always said there was gold in there, and I mean to find it.”

She laughed. “You get to bed, Ted, and have your dreams while you sleep.” As I started to obey her, she called me back. “You’re much like your father, my boy; and your father was a fine man, even though he was a dreamer of waking-dreams. I wish you all the success in the world, Ted. Good-night.”





CHAPTER III

THE HIGH SIERRAS

I CLIMBED out of bed long before sunrise next morning, dressed quietly, not to waken Mother Laing, started a fire in the kitchen stove and placed coffee to boil before I went to the pasture and whistled for Zim. He came to the bars dashingly, as though to prove to me that the years had taken none of his speed and agility. I slipped the halter over his nose with:

“Take it easy, horse. There’s a hard pull ahead for

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you," and he muzzled my shoulder, his cold nose against my ear, as he followed me to the stable.

While he ate his breakfast, I saddled him carefully, his own blanket, then mine, folded beneath the leather; the cinch tight but not binding; and I began packing with an even distribution of the load. Two burlap sacks with the bulk of the weight were so roped together that they hung high one on either stirrup-flap and gave a foundation for lighter but bulkier stuff which must make up the load. In the burlaps were my provisions, oats for Zim, extra clothing, towels and soap. Matches were in corked brass cartridge shells, absolutely waterproof, in a canvas bag with a coffee-pot, a small boiling-pot, two tin plates, a tin cup, knife, fork and spoon. This was tied across the saddle seat, with another sack behind it, hitched to the cantle, in which rattled a frying-pan and my miner's pan, a horn spoon, a deep iron spoon big enough to melt metal over fire, and a prospector's hammer. When these four sacks had been firmly fastened with Zim's picket-rope to Zim's back, I poked in between their coils and his sides, a poll-pick, a long handled shovel, and an axe, hung over the pommel my repeating rifle in its leathern boot and a large canteen filled with water, strung a belt of cartridges over the cantle to lash at its rings, then stood back to inspect my work. It was a heavy pack, two hundred pounds at least, but it was well distributed. Zim could carry it.

I had no shotgun, and when one is starting into the

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wilderness on a four months' expedition with only what he can carry on one packhorse, a shotgun for the killing of small game is important. Among my father's effects was an old-fashioned army revolver, one of those weapons of Civil War times with a cylinder of five chambers that is loaded each time with powder and ball and a percussion cap. I should substitute bird shot for the bullet, and as the rifling of the barrel had pretty well rusted away, hoped to be able to kill small game at short distances. I'd never tried it out—in fact, it was only when the remembrance of the need of a shotgun had come to me after I had gone to bed the previous night that I, racking my brain, lit upon the scheme—but it seemed feasible.

Mother Laing had called breakfast twice before I finished packing, so I went up to the house. If she had endeavored to make me sorry at leaving home, her effort at this last breakfast was not wasted. Here were all the things I should miss in the mountains, a broiled steak, fried eggs, fluffy biscuits with butter, real cream in the coffee, and doughnuts that melted in my mouth. I admit to a wistfulness that didn't affect my appetite any, and I ate as though this one meal must last all the time of my absence. When it was through, when I had positively refused an added piece of jelly cake, she gathered together enough of the remaining food to fill a large paper sack, which she handed me with the explanation:

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“ You’ll not have to pack it long, Ted. Only a lunch to eat on the trail.”

Then she went with me to the barn and watched my final preparations. I slung the heavy revolver, together with the shot-pouch and powder horn, over my shoulders, went all around Zim testing the firmness of the bindings of the pack, slipped the bridle bit into his mouth and buckled the throat latch, leaving the halter on, and led him out on the driveway.

“ Why, where you going to ride?” Mother Laing asked in surprise at the loaded horse.

“ I’ll walk and lead. Zim has more now than he’s used to lugging and it’s going to be a hard climb. Good-bye, Mother Laing.”

“ You’ll be back when you’ve eaten all the food, and that’ll not be long,” she said hopefully, as she watched me tie the paper sack to the saddle. “ I’ll give you two weeks before you’re ready to come back to my cooking.”

“ Don’t begin baking until the first of September.” I put an arm about her and gave her a good hug. “ And if Wayne comes at you with an offer for the Black Boulder, you sell.”

“ If he offers what I think’s due for it, I’ll listen to him; but he never will.” She came with me to the gate, and I led Zim through. “ Good luck to you, Ted; and no matter what luck, come back to me. You’re the only son I’ve got.”

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I left her there waving her apron in farewell, and I started down through Main Street, where I had some small purchases to make at the general store. Early as it was, Lem was out at the side of the Gilson House currying one of the horses, while Mr. Wayne, his chair tilted back and his feet on the porch railing, smoked a pipe and kept a critical eye on the job. The latter hailed me with:

“ Changed your mind over night? ” I shook my head in answer, and his feet came down to the floor with a bang; then he poked his hands deep in his pockets and sauntered out to me, adding, “ Going back up to the claim? ”

“ I’m heading for it,” I answered cautiously. There was something in Wayne’s manner, more than in the questions themselves, that made me study his face carefully. Why should he be worried because I had started back up Baldy—or he thought I had? In his expression was astonishment, dismay, as he said:

“ I thought the water had all run off the slope.”

“ It has.” I spoke without consideration.

“ Then why in Tophet be you going back up there? You can’t mine without water.”

There was no answer to that argument, even if I had wanted to lie to him. “ I’m just passing by it on my way into the hills,” I told him. “ I’m off on a prospecting trip.”

It was wonderful the way his grim face lightened, just

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as though a weight had been lifted from his mind, as he said eagerly:

“ Sell me the Black Boulder before you go, Ted; I’ll make it three-fifty, and my last bid.”

“ Get up, Zim!” I started the horse into motion. “ You talk with Mrs. Laing about the claim, Mr. Wayne. Whatever she says goes with me,” and I left him standing in the road, watching the dust old Zim shuffled up.

Just out of sight of the hotel, in a group of acacias, I found Lem waiting for me, and he came to join me with a plea that was hard to deny.

“ Take me with you, Ted,” he cried. “ Take me out of old Wayne’s grip. It’s awful here. He beats me almost every day. Let me go with you.”

I couldn’t. If desire to help him, if sympathy for him, are in violation of the law, I was guilty. I had even advanced the aid of information. But I could not be a party to his escape from the orders of the court. That I did not want him with me, that I could not give him full trust and confidence, had no effect then upon my decision. I was explaining my position as best I could, when a shout from the hotel stopped me, and Lem immediately took to his heels in response to:

“ Hi, you loafing Lem Strong! Get back here quick now, or I’ll come get you!” It was Wayne in a rage.

I stopped at the Sierra Commercial Company’s store, bought powder, shot and caps for my pistol, then started

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on the trail for the Black Boulder claim. It was out of my way, would require several miles of additional hard journeying, but I wanted to look along the dirt of the trail for the confirming hoof-prints of the horse I felt sure had been somewhere behind me the previous evening, and have a glance over my works on the claim to find what could have interested Wayne to a sudden desire for purchase. He had offered three hundred and fifty dollars for what he had jeered at and regarded as a joke ever since my father staked it. I might guess his reason if I was on the place; certainly I could not imagine one here.

The trail was a good one, and Zim and I could walk abreast much of the way. Behind us in the valley the sun was bright on the fields and the little village, but we were in the shadow of the hill where it was cool climbing. The ascent was by a switchback trail that climbed rapidly, and soon we were high above Jamesville, its red brick and gray board buildings, dwarfed as I looked down upon them. Mother Laing's house was concealed by a group of live oaks, but I thought I saw a flicker of her apron out by the barn; hunting eggs, I guessed.

"Give your old home a long farewell," I said to Zim, pulling his head about; but he was more interested in the manzanita brush beside the trail, which he sampled only to reject.

I had found the prints of a horse's hoofs in the soft ground at the ford, but here the trail was too much rock

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and too little dirt for any evidence of a passing animal to show. Soon a turn in the zigzag brought me into the sunlight and shortly I lightened myself of pistol, ammunition and coat, adding them to Zim's pack; climbing was hot work. Even the rugged mountain horse was damp with perspiration. I gave him frequent pauses at the ends of the switchbacks, nor did I neglect the opportunities of sitting down to rest.

Finally we came to where the trail turned into the gully which was the tail-creek of my sluices, now dry as a bone. There had been some water running over the broken rock and gravel when I left, not twenty-four hours before, but even in so short a time it had been drawn up by the sun. And it was here I found proof that there had been another horse besides Zim on my claim, for in the dried mud was the print of a shod hoof. In crossing the tail-creek's narrow width, one hoof had been pressed to leave its impression.

A horse in the mountains is not of itself cause for even a second thought. There were probably a dozen or more turned loose to graze on the grass that follows the snows with almost miraculous rapidity on Baldy's sides. True, they rarely came so high up as the Black Boulder claim; preferred the less rocky meadows on the lower slopes; but the print of a hoof, or the sight of a horse, would not have been strange enough for comment. But this horse had followed behind me, at least as far as the river, and this horse had kept out of my sight throughout

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the several hours it had pursued me. That required more than equine intelligence; a man was on, or with, that horse; and that man had reasons for not wanting me to see him.

We climbed slowly up to the diggings, steaming in the heat, and my eyes went over the familiar workings hunting signs of an intruder: the pile of pay-dirt, partly used; the badly hammered grizzly, the long stretch of sluices. All seemed exactly as I had left it, and my eyes turned to the cabin.

It stood with its door wide open. Surely I had closed and secured it yesterday when I left. I recalled distinctly placing the padlock through the staples and springing it. Someone had opened the door.

A glance within showed me that nothing had been taken; in fact, there was nothing worth taking; old mining tools, too worn to have value; pots and pans that had smoked black over the fire; a few aged dishes. There seemed no reason here for the labor of pulling a hasp from the solid door-frame to force an entrance, and so far as I could find, nothing had been moved or disturbed.

Without waiting for the lunch I had intended to eat here, I washed out Zim's dry mouth with a spongeful of water from the canteen, and continued on my way, studying over the problem of the visitor at the claim. No matter from what angle I approached it, I could get no answer. Wayne, I knew, had not been there him-

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self, nor could I believe he had sent someone else to look over the property before making his offer of purchase, for the merest dabbler at mining could see the impossibilities; besides, why should he break into my cabin? A wandering prospector, a cattleman searching for strays, a hunter after mountain game—none would violate the lock of a mine-shack. Besides, any honest man would have tried to catch up with me on the trail, not stay hidden behind. It didn't seem to have an answer, and I put it out of mind.

There was no trail over the hog-back—the ridge that separated Baldy from Summer's Peak—but it was above the manzanita and would be fair traveling. I could reach it by the gully that brought the water to my sluices, so led Zim up the dry arroyo. Never before had I gone more than half a mile up this watercourse, and only once or twice to clear it from some clog when it was feeding the boxes. There were bushes along it and an occasional stunted oak or lilac, but we made no difficulty of the first part of the ascent. Now and then smaller gullies came in from the side-hill, all dry; and at one of these I stopped for a minute, trying to decide which was the main stream, which the fork. Because its trend was to the north, the direction I wished to go, I chose that branch, to find myself in almost immediate difficulties. Plant growth should have dwarfed as I climbed higher, but here in the gully were mesquites taller than any I had passed. They were ten and

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twelve feet high, with branches that caught at my clothes, slapped against my face and at Zim's withers.

As the banks of the arroyo were too steep to climb at this point, Zim and I pushed ahead until our way was completely blocked by the mesquite growth. No longer brush, these were mesquite trees, thirty to forty feet high, with branches that could not be bent aside to make passageway. I had never seen or heard of this freak of Baldy's surface, these gigantic mesquites, and tying Zim to one of the low branches, I pushed ahead to seek a way through.

Bending low, creeping under the boughs, I soon discovered that I was not the first to make this attempt at a passage. Branches had been recently broken, some cut with a knife, and there were footprints in the deep leaves and droppings of the trees, too indistinct for me to learn anything by study of them. I could not even tell which way they pointed, whether up or down the gully.

I turned back, unhitched Zim and we retraced our way. My nerves were still unsteady by reason of the broken lock and the horse's hoof-prints on my claim; the gully under the mesquites was deep shadowed and gloomy; there seemed no excuse in my imagination for anyone climbing into that mesquite; and I was a bit frightened and wanted to get out into the sunshine. I looked for a place where Zim could clamber up the side of the little cañon.

I had turned his head to start the scramble, when,

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looking down, I saw in the dust on a ledge of rock, the perfect impress of a man's foot. Kneeling, I gave it careful examination. Not a miner's boot; not the heavy brogan of the rancher; not an Indian moccasin. It was broad for its length, wide and rounded at the toe, then narrowed in graceful curves; and there was no distinction of a raised heel. The sole was flat its whole length, and the foot inside the shoe seemed to have no arch, for the pressure was so nearly equal everywhere that my eye could see no difference. It was the print of a flat foot in a shoe without a heel, and it pointed down the gully.

Straightening up with a scowl of perplexity, I gave Zim the word, and he, good little mountain horse, dug hoofs into crumbling earth, caught foothold with one leg as the ground slipped from beneath another, heaved and plunged ahead, and quicker than I could make the top, stood trembling and breathing deep on solid ground. For a time we rested, then cut across among the rocks to the hog-back, where we stopped again to look from the brow of the divide to the eastward, into the unknown. I had never been this far into the hills before; had wanted all my life to look beyond Baldy and see what the world was like. Now I found it only mountain beyond mountain, a seeming desolation of the high summits of the Sierra Nevadas. My first thought was of disappointment of so dreary a prospect, but as I looked back on dry Baldy I was glad that there were raw hills ahead to be conquered.

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I turned to them, then stopped to look again at the giant mesquites. Although we had come not a quarter of a mile as the crow flies since leaving the gully, they were not to be seen. On Baldy's side were many patches of brush, mesquite and manzanita, and one of these, I knew, would be the tops of the big trees poked above the rim of the deep arroyo, but, try as I might, I could not tell which one. Unless I had stood among them in the gully, I'd never believe they existed there upon Baldy; which explained why I had never heard of them, as I certainly would have heard had they been known to my father or the miners of Jamesville.





CHAPTER IV

THE PISTOL-SHOTGUN

FROM the Summer's Peak hog-back a trail ran northeast to join the Eagle Lake trail at Ophir Creek; and here we arrived in the late afternoon, Zim to poke his nose into its waters, I to lie on the bank beside him with my face buried nearly as deep in its cold current. We were parched.

I found a good camping ground just above where the trail crossed the creek, a widening of the little cañon to make an acre or so of flat, on which grass grew for Zim's pasturage, and as quickly as I could get his packs off and

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hobbles on, he was at supper. For mine, I built a fire beside a rock, and placed coffee over it to boil; then looked about for a place to spread my blankets for the night.

Comfortable sleep, and plenty of it, was, I knew, the first necessity of the prospector. One can travel far with the handicaps of hunger and even thirst, but the rest from exhaustion that sleep gives is essential. The ground in the flat was damp. Only a few days before it was snow-covered. I chose for my bed a large flat rock alongside the creek, and gathered small branches from a pine near by to lay upon it, first cutting away the bulk of the woody parts. Then from beneath the pine I scooped up armfuls of dry needles to place over the branches until all was soft; put Zim's blanket atop the needles; laid my own over it, ready to roll around me; and was sure I should be snug and warm for the night.

Before I had finished, the coffee had boiled, and the pot had been set on a hot rock to settle. For supper there was the bag Mother Laing had given me, and I found it held buttered biscuits, doughnuts, and almost half a jelly cake. As these were probably the last products of civilization I should see for several months, I took out but two biscuits and a quite respectably small cut of the cake, hesitating some time whether the latter should not be one of the crullers. The rest I rewrapped carefully in the sack; took from my pack the side of bacon—"sow's belly," they call it in the hills—and cut

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two thick slices, which I rolled in flour before placing in the frying-pan, then set table by laying tin plate and cup, knife, fork and spoon on top of a rock.

While I sniffed with pleasure the aroma of frying bacon and steaming coffee, I looked across at Old Baldy in the brilliant hues of evening sunset. Not a bad mountain at all, as one saw it from here, its varied greens of grass, brush and trees giving it a softness in pleasing contrast to the rugged peaks ahead. I might have loved Baldy if this creek that surged and bubbled beside me could have been upon its sides. Ophir would run deep with water every day of the year—not just for the short time of the melting snows. If it was flowing through the Black Boulder claim, I should be rich. Well, I couldn't move the stream to Baldy, so I must find a mine upon a creek like it on some other mountain. That was the solution of my problem.

The bacon was done, and I ate. I reopened the paper bag for another biscuit. I hadn't realized how hungry I was. I finished the buttered biscuits, added the doughnuts to my meal, then decided that jelly cake wouldn't keep well in the hills; ate it to save it. There wasn't a crumb left in Mother Laing's sack when I got up from supper. But I was filled with food and contentment as I built the little cooking fire into a bigger blaze and leaned lazily back against the warm rock that was my bed.

Prospecting was not such hard work. Of course,

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there wouldn't be doughnuts and jelly cake every day, but there was plenty of game in the hills; which reminded me that I had seen none all day. Still, one didn't expect to find game on dry Baldy. Here along the creek bottom should be good hunting; quail and rabbits, anyhow. Maybe I'd better try out my pistol-shotgun in the morning. It would be rather a serious matter if it didn't work as I'd planned, for at the rate I was eating, the stores wouldn't last long. Meals such as I'd had to-night, three times a day, seven days a week, for four months—well, the size of the pack it would make dwarfed Old Baldy!

I jumped up hurriedly, brought my supplies closer to my bed, laid the loaded rifle within reach of my hand, and looked carefully over the revolver. It seemed all right for small game; the loads were not heavy, but there should be enough propulsion to kill doves, quail, grouse, and rabbits; and the rifle would take care of anything bigger. Then I used the last of the daylight to gather a supply of pitch-pine for fire-wood. The cañon was cooling rapidly to a shivery chill, and I'd need a blaze; but more I wanted the comfort and cheer of its glow.

As the mountains dulled to lavender, blue and gray, with pale stars beginning to show in the gloom of the sky, I felt the loneliness of the wilds. I had spent many nights alone on Baldy, but there I looked down upon the twinkling village, whose lights crowded closer with night's falling. Here were only grim mountains, I the

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one human being, seemingly, in all their peaks. And I began to doubt the wisdom of my attempt to snatch fortune from them. I was too young and inexperienced to tackle the strength of the rough hills, looming blacker each moment. I should have brought one companion, at least; even Lem Strong would be welcome now.

Then Zim's hoof struck against a stone; a familiar sound; and misgivings went from me. Out there, placidly munching the wild grass, was a friend who feared no darkness or sound of the night. He could not talk reassurance to me, but he was my good friend and comrade of perfect understanding. I piled the last of the pine knots on the fire and climbed into my blankets, warm and fragrant of the pines. Above were golden stars, friendly stars. I slept.

A gray squirrel on the limb of a near-by alder, scolding in throaty chuckles at the stranger in his domain, woke me to a bright sunrise in a crisply chill morning. I shivered as I leaped from under the blankets, and dressed by pulling on my boots. It was only after I had washed at the creek that I remembered that squirrels were food, and the revolver was still untried, and in the meantime the little animal had lost interest in me and disappeared about the duties of squirrel housekeeping.

I hastened to light a fire and had soon warmed myself as I prepared the coffee. Zim, seeing me up and about, raised his head to give me morning greeting with a whinny, and I answered with a joyful shout. This was

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our first day in the wilderness, the beginning of adventure, with Old Baldy behind us and the whole world ahead.

Our trail led up Ophir Creek for about ten miles, then, as I knew from the maps, cut along the east slope of Mount Felton to cross the divide into Eagle Lake basin, a distance in all of twenty-six miles. By starting early, I could possibly make it before dark. There was no real reason for hurry; the loss of a day in reaching my objective meant nothing, especially as Eagle Lake might prove no better ground for prospecting than any I must pass to reach it; but I was an impulsive boy, and I wanted to get on.

It was seven o'clock by the big, old-fashioned watch which had been my father's timepiece for many years, when we started on our way. The trail crossed the stream a score of times in that first mile, and my boots were soon as full of wet as my feet would allow. While I was squidging along, leading Zim by a loose hold on the hackamore, a jack-rabbit hopped out of the brush beside the trail and paused to look at us before unloosening his long-legged gallop.

That half second's hesitation gave me opportunity to cock the pistol and take a hasty aim. As I pulled trigger several things happened; the gun went off with a loud report and a vicious kick; Zim jumped, jerked away from me, wheeled and started on a run; and Mr. Jack-rabbit flirted his long ears, laid them back, and

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disappeared up the mountainside in three jumps. I had missed him completely!

I trotted back after Zim, calling and whistling to him, but he was thoroughly frightened, for he had never been broken to firearms. I could see him now and then, when trees or brush didn't intervene, galloping back over the trail. The only thing I could do was to follow as fast as I could, and hope he'd get over his scare before he led me clear back home.

He did. Something about our camp at the crossing composed his nerves, and when I came panting up, Zim was feeding in his pasture of the night, the pack almost off him and all on one side. He snorted in alarm as I came through the thicket, but, recognizing my voice, quieted, so that I came up to him and patted him soothingly. He wasn't to blame for objecting when I fired a cannon under his nose.

I had to take off the pack to readjust it; and having it off, I decided to give that revolver a thorough try-out before starting a second time on my journey. It was seriously important for me to know why I missed that rabbit; either it was an indication of shamefully weak marksmanship or proof of a defective weapon. The mountain-bred Jack is not a small target; this one that had cavorted up the hill, maybe laughing at me, was as big as a lamb. Counting its ears in the measurement, it was taller. And it had been sitting still when I shot, and not too distant.

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I began a search for a mark on which to test the gun, looking through the thicket for bird or squirrel, working my way down-stream over the bottom-lands. I had gone no more than a quarter of a mile below the camp when a covey of quail hurtled out of the brush in humming flight. Aiming at the center of the flock, I pulled, cocked, and pulled again. Two ounces of bird-shot I sent into the midst of that covey before it was out of range, and never a feather was touched!

In sheer disgust I threw the old pistol on the ground and started back to Zim, expressing to myself the contempt I felt for the weapon. I could have done better with the rifle, and no rifle is supposed to be made for shooting quail on the wing. But, as to that, neither had the revolver been built for that purpose. It was my fault for trying to convert its original use of a single slug to an ounce of pellets. I went back where I had flung it and picked it up.

The pistol lay amid rocks, one of which it had scraped in its fall. Because that fresh scar gleamed yellow against the rusty surface color of the stone, I lifted it curiously. It was quartz, a bit of float that had broken from some ledge long enough before to turn in color from white to rusty brown, and it was larded with free gold.

Float travels only down-hill. It may go in a decidedly crooked line, make every direction of the compass, but as gravity is the only reason for its traveling,

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every inch of the way must be down-hill. Had I not picked up this bit, it would possibly have continued its journey to the distant Pacific Ocean; a passing hoof or boot dislodging it to start it rolling down the creek bank, where the stream would tumble it on its way to the river, and so, ultimately, to the sea.

Above the spot where I had found it was a ledge of gold-bearing quartz, and if this specimen was a fair sample, the ledge was rich. It would probably out-crop—that is, break through the surface of the ground to show as a rock face, holding quartz—but that was no certainty. It was impossible to tell how many years, even centuries, this piece of float had consumed in traveling so far, or what changes there had been in the face of the mountain since it broke from the lode. But I knew that sooner or later I could find the ledge; knew that as a prospector I had my work cut out for me by this chance discovery; but I looked up the course of its probable descent and turned away to go back to Zim. The float had come from Old Baldy.

Somewhere on the north face of my mountain was a ledge of gold-bearing quartz, and I couldn't make up my mind to turn back and look for it. It was too near home; in my own back-garden, as it seemed; and Baldy was too dry—too familiar and parched. I had one mine on its sides; why search for another? I placed the bit of float in Zim's oat-bag, took from the pack the paper sack I had saved, roughly scrawled a bull's-eye upon it

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with a bit of charred stick, and tested the value of my pistol-shotgun.

I brought Zim up to see the try-out, determined to accustom him to the sound of firearms, tied him firmly to a tree and set up my target on the side-hill twenty paces away. Taking careful aim over the rusty sights at the center ring, I fired—a puff of dust a foot beneath the paper. Allowing more of the front sight to show through the groove, I fired again, to see the paper give a flirt in the air. I had hit. Quieting Zim, who had jumped at each explosion, I ran up to the sack and looked at my target. Near the center was a hole not three inches across, and through this every shot had gone. The entire ounce of pellets had traveled in a mass almost as the rifle-bullet flies.

I doubled the distance and tried again, to find that while the gun scattered more, it had so lost penetrative force that I doubted if it would kill or stop the flight of bird or animal. No good at all, at short or long range. This was a serious setback. Without the ability of adding wild game, so plentiful in the hills, to my larder, I would soon be short of food. To rely upon the rifle for every quail, grouse, squirrel or rabbit would run me out of cartridges in a few days, but that was the only alternative, unless I could learn to shoot the revolver with the same skill I had with the rifle.

I spent an hour in practice with it, learning its sighting, its range, its quirks and peculiarities; and the sun

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climbed higher in the heavens. Lunch-time found me slicing bacon from the side, boiling coffee over the same fireplace I had used at supper the night before. This wouldn't do at all; I was eating up my stores and making no progress. I determined to get on directly I had eaten, and having so decided, added a flapjack to my noontime meal.

The Sierra flapjack has at least one unique quality. At bottom, it is like any other flapjack, flour, salt, baking-powder and water, well mixed to proper consistency, and poured into a hot, greased skillet. It may be a bit thicker than some other varieties, but that is not its claim to fame. When it has turned to a rich, russet golden brown on one side, it rises gracefully into the air, makes a single, perfect half revolution, and descends, uncooked side downward, into the hot griddle; and without a spluttering drop! I'll not claim that this flight is entirely voluntary. In fact, a skillful human hand is needed on the skillet handle; such a hand as I possessed, for I was adept at flapping the flapjack.

After dinner the cool waters of the creek tempted me to a bath; it was not deep enough to call it a swim. Somewhat above my camp I found a hole that would serve nicely, and was looking into it before undressing when I saw a large trout move out from under the overhanging bank, hold himself with quivering fins in the current for a minute, then return to his shelter. That quickly decided me to substitute fishing for bathing, so

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I hurried away to cut a willow rod, fastened the line I carried in my pocket firmly to its butt-end, about a foot above, wound it with frequent hitches to the tip, and there fastened it again. Should the pole break, I'd still have the line.

I had artificial flies with me, but as food, not sport, was the main object of this endeavor, I went kicking through the tall grass up the gully, cap in hand, and soon had a score of stunned grasshoppers for bait. Then I returned cautiously to the pool where I had seen the fish and made my cast.

Flash—snap! An immediate strike, an instantaneous breaking of the rod near the tip. When I pulled in, the bait was gone and my tackle wrecked. That had been a big, greedy trout. I went back to the willows, cut a larger, stronger pole, refixed my line, and repeated the play.

As the hopper, transfixed by the hook, landed on the calm water of the pool, there was a swirl. I gave a quick jerk and a silver streak shot through the air and into the brush behind me. Dropping the rod, I went after it, bringing back a few ounces of muscular activity, with five times as much fight as weight.

For half an hour I caught fingerling trout, five to seven inches long, most delicious eating, but little sport with my strong pole and line. Then I hooked another fierce struggle, that made the pool almost boil as the fish rushed in a circle at the end of the line. I feared he

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would break or bend the hook, snap line or leader, or even the rod, for without a reel, the only way to play the fish was to ease the rushes gradually, urging him when he paused for rest, tiring him by keeping him active. Twice I attempted to land him, only to start the fight all over again, and it was a long half hour before I steered him close enough in to reach down with a hand and grasp him behind the gills to throw him ashore—a four-pounder rainbow.





CHAPTER V

A MOUNTAIN LION

I HAD given over all idea of starting on again until morning, and was cleaning my catch of trout on a rock by the stream, when a man's voice hailed me, and I looked up startled to find I had company. The swirl of the creek had kept me from hearing the approach of a tall, clean-faced man riding a handsome bay horse, who must have come by the trail down the gully, the one I should travel next morning.

"How far to Jamesville?" he asked, and when I had

A Mountain Lion

told him, swung off the horse, with, "No objection to my making camp alongside you for the night, is there?"

"Glad to have company," I said. "And, if you will, sir, I'll be pleased to give you a supper of trout. I've more than I can handle alone."

"Thank you, lad. I've a snack in my saddle-bags, but if you'll let me chip in with it, the invitation is accepted. Nothing so good as fresh brook trout. Are you camping here, or where you bound?"

He was unsaddling, and I had opportunity to study him before I made reply. I already knew I liked his face. He was about fifty, I judged, a bit grayed of hair, wrinkled of cheek and brow, but with an expression of easy good nature and the appearance of strength that was reassuring. I answered frankly:

"I'm started prospecting. I'll make Eagle Lake tomorrow. Did you come by there?"

"No." He hobbled the bay, gave him a gentle slap on the withers, and sent him to join Zim. "I'm last from Quincy, but that's some days back. Let me help with those fish," and he pulled a capable pocket-knife, opened it, and went to work. "My name's Burchard—Frank Burchard."

I gave him mine, told him I lived at Jamesville, asked him to get word to Mother Laing that he had met up with me, and when we went up to my camp, I carrying the fish, he lugging his saddle and bags, we were on the

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friendliest terms. But neither then nor later, while we were preparing supper, to which he added bread and butter with boiled ham between the slices, hard-boiled eggs and a piece of cheese, did he tell me more about himself, or what was taking him to my home town. By his clothes, he was neither miner nor rancher; I guessed him a city man; and he talked readily and interestingly about everything else but his affairs.

My rock bedstead was large enough to accommodate two, and we gathered more pine boughs and needles, rolled up in our blankets side by side at dark, with a big pitch fire burning beyond us. It was cheery and comfortable, and when Mr. Burchard had started his pipe, I told him all about my Black Boulder claim, its disappointments, my hopes for this journey, and finally of Wayne and his offer for the property. He had listened quietly, now and then asking a question or making a comment that showed he was attentive, but with Wayne's name, he lifted up on his elbow, turning toward me, and said:

“He's the hotel man, isn't he?”

“Yes; runs the Gilson House. He's about the richest man in Jamesville.”

“Did you ever hear that he had a brother?”

I hadn't; or if I had, it was so long ago that I'd forgotten it. I told Mr. Burchard that no brother had visited Wayne in my recollection. He looked at me in the flickering light as he asked:



HE TALKED READILY AND INTERESTINGLY.

A Mountain Lion

“And how many years back would your recollection carry, Ted?”

“Six—eight—possibly ten. I’ve lived there all my life, and it’s a small town. All my life I’ve known Mr. Wayne. If his brother had come to Jamesville I think I’d remember; but then, he might have a brother—several of them—and I shouldn’t know unless he came to visit him. Wayne’s awfully quiet about such things.”

That seemed to satisfy my bunk-mate, for he switched his questioning to strangers at the hotel, guests who had come within the past two months; and I was little use, as I had been away most of that time. Finally he knocked his pipe against the rock, carefully extinguished the sparks, and suggested that as we were both due for an early start in the morning, we had better sleep. I was quickly obedient.

Mr. Burchard left me directly after breakfast early next morning, thanking me cordially for what had really been a favor on his part, and rode away on the trail to Jamesville. I was sorry to see him go, for he had been fine company, and I pressed upon him the rest of the trout for his luncheon, to find, after he was so far that it was impossible to recall him or catch him up, that he had forgotten—or, maybe, purposely left—four sandwiches and the rest of the slab of cheese. I was certainly his debtor.

I started Zim just as the sun climbed over the summit of the Sierras, the pistol-shotgun riding in his pack, the

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30-30 rifle upon my shoulder; and I hoped that same jack-rabbit would pop onto the trail again, and give me the chance to prove I wasn't the dabster with the rifle I had been with a revolver. But either he had not returned, or lay quiet in the brush, for I saw no game at all, and before noon we had turned away from the creek bottom, Zim parting with the stream by drinking so much of it that I was afraid I'd have to loosen his cinches, I filling both my stomach and the canteen with its waters.

Twice I missed the trail on Felton before we came to the divide; the first time, by following Mr. Burchard's horse's hoof-prints, not realizing for some time that he didn't pass over the divide, but had skirted the summit of Haugh's Peak to come in from the north. It was the easiest thing in the world to lose that trail, for it was overgrown with blackberry and wild cucumber vines, and the manzanita's spring foliage of silver gray had spread from both sides to choke it. My second excursion took me several miles out of the course, and all I could do when I discovered that I was lost was to retrace the long way till I struck the trail again.

Finally we crossed the divide, but these provoking delays had taken hours. Sunset found us headed downhill; the lake was not yet in sight. The trail led into deep woods, which, I hoped, might border it and conceal it, so I determined to push through, even if it took me far into the night; and had no more than made that

A Mountain Lion

decision, when there came another halt. A cock grouse got up from beside the trail on whirring wings and flew to light in a tree not two hundred yards up the slope.

Tying Zim, I went after the bird. It would be too fine an addition to my larder to neglect, even though I was in a tearing hurry to get on. I threw a cartridge into the rifle chamber and went directly where I had seen it settle down.

A bull-grouse has somewhat the ostrich idea about hiding; if it is on the limb of a tree, it believes it is safe from harm, and has little fear of man or beast. I expected to march up under the bird and pop him off his branch as easy as telling it. But the grouse wasn't in sight when I arrived, and though I circled the tree a score of times, rifle ready for a quick shot, I never had a peek at the bird. Finally, when I had given up and started back, I heard it fly, and was too mad even to look over my shoulder to see where.

As night came in and the woods blackened, I let Zim lead, for he had better eyes than mine for the trail, but when he came to a final stop, I gave up. Even with lighted matches I could not tell if I were on or off the narrow way, and there was only one thing to do; camp and wait for daylight; and here was no fit place for a camp. The trees were thick around us, and a dense undergrowth of brambly brush and vines made it impossible in the blackness to hunt up a better spot. I took packs and bridle off Zim, turning him loose, un-

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hobbled, to find room to move and, perhaps, forage, while I lay down in my blankets, right there, my head against the roots of one tree, my body cramped between two others, so tired I cared nothing for food or a fire; and I tried to sleep.

My first night of the wilderness was lonely but comfortable; last night had been comfortable and friendly; this one was lonely, uncomfortable, unfriendly. After the sound of Zim's hoofs had died in the distance, there was nothing familiar to my ear in the forest, though it was filled with disquieting noises. Branches cracked without seeming reason, there were unaccountable movements of the brush, distant and formless cries on the mountains, and occasional nearer calls of birds or animals with whose tones I was unfamiliar. Upon Baldy, I knew the cause of night sounds; here they seemed unreasonable and terrifying.

My nerves grew taut; my hand clutched the rifle beside me; I wished I had tethered Zim where I might hear him, or had brought Lem Strong with me. Lem wasn't such a bad sort—I liked him when he grinned. I wished I owned a dog, either a small one that would curl up in the blankets with me, or a ferociously big dog that could tackle a bear or panther.

Then something screamed, and I leaped free of the blankets. It had seemed so close that now I felt sure I could hear the beat of the thing's heart; my own, hammering away, I presume. My hands, tight and cold

A Mountain Lion

about the weapon, trembled like aspen leaves. Back pressed against the tree trunk, I stood stiffly erect, scarcely breathing, my eyes boring into the blackness, and waited.

Seconds seemed hours. Off to the right, a twig snapped like the report of a cannon. Then again came the night-splitting scream, and this time, wide awake, I recognized it, and gave it location in a way. It was not so close as I'd thought; to the right a few hundred feet—yards, perhaps. I had heard that cry before of a night, but always I had been safely behind walls; it was the cougar, the panther of the mountains.

I stilled the trembling of my hands by desperate effort of the will, and cocked the rifle. On the silence, the click of the lock seemed like an explosion of the gun. Again I waited.

Zim neighed, and there was fear in his call. Was the mountain lion stalking him? I had heard many tales of slaughter of cattle, of horses found partly devoured by the beasts, of raids of corrals and stock pens. In fear now for Zim, I began to regain my courage, for I must not funk with my horse in danger; could not stand by with a high-power rifle in my hands, while Zim was made carrion by this night stalker. I must make an effort, at least, for his rescue.

Minute by minute the woods were growing brighter, and I glanced up to see a great, round moon cut by the branches of a pine. It was in its last quarter, and each

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moment its light was creeping deeper and deeper into the shadows of the forest. Again Zim whinnied, long and loud. With rifle at a ready, I slipped through the trees to find him.





CHAPTER VI

BACK TRAILING

IN a little opening of the timber, Zim, with head high, ears thrust forward, listened as I had listened in a sweat of fear. He had heard me coming, but had not known it was I. Now, as I broke through the fringe of thicket, he whinnied a greeting, and trotted quickly to my side. I patted his neck, feeling the quiver of frightened nerves. Together we stood, both peering into the shadowed trees against the moon.

Beyond the clearing something fell. I guessed it a rotten branch, dislodged by the moving animal, and

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watched in the trees above. Then I saw the leaves of a cottonwood sway as a branch bent beneath weight, and knew I had located the beast. Although its concealment was complete, it lay stretched somewhere along that bough. Another moment, the flicker of foliage told me where.

I aimed, but held my fire. The ivory front sight of the rifle, tipped by the moon's rays, showed bright through the rear notch, and I felt certain of landing a bullet wherever I pleased at this short range; but I wanted a surer mark than fluttering leaves. There would be no chance to retrieve an error of aim. One spring of the big cat, and it would be lost in the shadows.

I waited a long, long minute; then from its screen of leaves came a head, silhouetted against the sky. I drew the white tip of the sight deeper into the notch till only its point rested between the ears, midway of that silhouetted head, and added the final soft pressure to the trigger. The spurt of flame was simultaneous with a crashing fall and the sharp crack of the rifle; then Zim snorted wildly, and ran through the forest. I threw the lever that sent another cartridge into the rifle's chamber, listened to the sound of the horse's hoofs dying away in the distance, and watched a blacker shadow on the ground among the black shadows of the cottonwood.

There was no movement there. Throwing the rifle into the crook of my arm, I reached for matches, lighted one, and held it above my head. The dark form was

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stilled. Another match blaze, and I moved cautiously toward it, to find there was no need for care or caution. The great beast was dead, my bullet between its eyes.

Trembling now with triumph, the joy of bagging big game, I quickly gathered wood and had a great fire burning; then pulled the carcass of the beast out where I could get a good view of it. From nose to end of tail, it was longer than I was tall—six feet and over—and its weight was more than I could lift. What a robe it would make! As a rug for Mother Laing, how finely it would finish off the living-room, stretched before the fireplace! Also, it had value either as a skin or a scalp. The State of California would pay a bounty of twenty dollars for the two ears and a strip of skin just wide enough to hold them together; or the pelt could be sold for forty or fifty dollars.

I brought up my blankets, built the fire larger with fallen boughs, rolled in beside it, and was soon fast asleep; and my eyes opened at morning to look between tree trunks at the wide blue waters of Eagle Lake. I had slept so close beside it that I was almost upon its banks.

It seemed something miraculous; so wonderful that I lay a long while, still rolled in my blankets, my eyes big, gazing across the sunlit surface to the mountains beyond. It was as though the lake had been moved to the place during the night. Remembering, I turned

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quickly to my other side to find the now stiffened body of the big cat. Jubilantly I leaped to my feet—I hadn't even taken boots off the night before—and let out from my lungs shouts of joy; the end of my journey; the beginning of adventure; and my first mountain lion!

The opening in the woods—I had thought it a clearing last night—was a rough semicircle with only a fringe of trees between it and the water. My first business, after walking once or twice proudly around my prey, was to go to the edge of the lake and wash face and hands. Whoo-eee! It was cold! I gave up the idea of a swim. I went back, built up a fire, warmed myself by getting the coffee-pot safely adjusted over it, then sought out the spot where I had first lain down to sleep the previous night, to get saddle and packs. Zim was nowhere within sound of my whistle, and a bit anxiously, I remembered he hadn't been hobbled; I had turned him loose last night without the leg-straps that would discourage travel.

First breakfast; then to skin my cougar; last, to hunt up Zim. The horse had been badly scared and would run off his fright before settling down to graze on the spring grass. I'd probably find him not more than a mile away. In the meantime, off with that big pelt!

I tied the animal's hind legs together, reeved a rope through the bonds and over a bough, and hoisted him slowly till his nose cleared the ground. My large pocket-

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knife had a skinning blade, and I was experienced in removing the hides of small animals. I went to the job briskly, whistling merrily.

When, after rolling the pelt up carefully in salt, I looked at my watch, it was after twelve; it had taken nearly five hours, but I was proud of the job. The paws, the head, those most delicate parts to separate skin from other tissue, were perfect, and not once had I slashed through the hide; and the finished product—when it had been dried and tanned—would be well worth the effort and time. I only hoped that Zim had passed those five hours in eating grass—not in travel.

I made a hurried lunch, and started after him. Expecting to be gone but a short time, I took nothing with me but a pocketful of oats as bait should my horse prove obstinate and prefer freedom to carrying a pack. Through the woods, his trail was easily followed, and I found he had gone out of the forest as we had entered it, on the old path, so all I had to do was to follow back over our trip of the previous day, keeping an eye open to see if he left the trail.

When I finally made up my mind that Zim hadn't stopped to graze, but was headed back for either home or Ophir Creek, I was too far from camp to return for food and rifle. In a deep gloom at this setback in my progress, I trotted steadily on, hot and panting, in the afternoon sun.

It was twenty-six miles to the old camp on Ophir;

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miles that had seemed plenty long enough on their first passage; now with the fear of disappointment and the eager desire for hurry, made doubly wearisome. I took chances at cut-offs, usually finding I gained little or nothing in time, at the cost of excessive work, for the mesquite, sage and manzanita made a difficult barrier. Late in the afternoon I struck the upper end of Ophir Creek cañon, and began to keep my eyes open for a sight of the missing horse; then as I swung around a curve in the trail, I saw Old Baldy again; the mountain that I had turned my back on so contemptuously; dry Old Baldy, with its useless gold in the grass roots, its tumbling, traveling float quartz, and I was viewing it from a new angle. Its western slope had been familiar to me all my life, but I was looking at it now from the north, and it seemed softer, less rugged. The pink glow on the southern hillside gave gentler coloring to the huge rock masses; the patches of brush seemed freshly green; the lower meadows were yellow and orange with buttercups, mustard and poppies.

I was looking at the reverse side of the hog-back from Summer's that I had traveled three days before, and could see, as I thought, the giant mesquites in the gully on Baldy, just a little taller, a shade darker of color, as they profiled against the sky; and above them, seeming only a few feet away at this distance, was a streak of glowing fire, the reflection of the setting sun upon some crystalline formation. Funny that I'd never seen

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that ledge before! Strange that I'd passed close beneath it, and never noticed it!

I turned my eyes from the hillside, placed my fingers between my teeth, and let out the shrill whistle which was Zim's call. In the still evening, the sound carried far, and I repeated it from time to time as I jogged down the trail, crossing and recrossing the stream. I had stopped for another drink, lying flat on the bank with my face in the water, and looked up to see Zim standing at the edge of the creek on its further side, staring at me.

"Well, Zim," I said finally. "What you got to say for yourself? Costing me a whole day's time and a pair of tired legs. What's your excuse?"

He crossed the creek and rubbed his muzzle against my shoulder asking forgiveness—or smelling oats in my pocket! And I petted him, so glad to find him again that I was willing to forget his fault, as I told him.

"No, old horse; you weren't to blame. The old mountain cat scared me, too," and I emptied my pocket of the supper I had brought him.

I must find a supper for myself in my pockets, if I was to have one. It came forth in the shape of a fish-line and hooks, and a supply of matches. The same pool that had served trout to Mr. Burchard and me once before, gave me now the basis of a meal, and some fair sized fish spitted on a green willow stick were soon broiling over the coals. With cress from the creek, and a

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big handful of nuts from a digger-pine, my appetite was satisfied.

I crawled into the pile of needles that had been my bed before, and wished heartily for my blankets. A high Sierran gully on a May night is not the warmest place in the world, especially when an east wind off the snow-capped mountain-tops blows down it; neither are pine needles as thick a covering as wool. Before I could get to sleep I was obliged to jump out, gather wood, and build a roaring fire beside my bed; and as soon as it burned low, I woke again with my teeth a-chatter, my feet blocks of ice; repeated the process to thaw out. When I did sleep, I dreamed that I was among the bergs in the frozen seas, or wandering clothesless in deep snow-drifts. It was a nightmare of a night!

The fourth or fifth time I had repeated the freeze-and-thaw performance, I found the moon had risen, and determined to take Zim and myself out of this chill and back where there were blankets. My watch said it was nearly three o'clock. I whistled Zim up and led him out on the trail; then stopped as an idea struck me.

Necessity had brought me back to Baldy's side twice since I had left it, once to pick a bit of gold float from the ground, this time to find a new ledge on its side. Wanting to be done with the mountain, certain that its dryness made mining upon it impossible, it seemed that fate brought me back again and again. I had no desire to prospect the ledge that had shown as a crimson glow

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in last evening's sunset—or to ever set foot again on Baldy. But why not, being here, mark the spot where I had found the float; locate definitely and permanently the starting place for a gold-search?

I had no difficulty in finding the place; the moon gave light, and the labor warmed me. I gathered heavy stones and built a cairn on the exact spot from which I had picked the quartz, a monument that would stand for years. Then I went back, mounted Zim, and retraced the long way to Eagle Lake. The moon sank; dawn came; the sun rose and climbed to its meridian, crossed it an hour; and I came into the woods and my camp on the edge of the lake.





CHAPTER VII

THE CABIN ON THE LAKE

THE trail I had followed from Ophir Creek to Eagle Lake went on eastward, civilization-ward, to Susanville, in Lassen County. For Zim and me, it ended where, after skirting the water's edge for several miles, it left the lake to take to the hills. Here, next morning early, we parted with this last thread that connected us with our kind—human and equine—and started into the unknown.

Unknown is a comparative term. The east shore of Eagle Lake has one habitation along its twenty-eight

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miles, and that, I had been told, was deserted many years ago. The west edge of the lake is precipitous mountains, which, to the north, are snow-capped ten months of the year. And there isn't another house within forty miles of the lake. Except for the rare traveler over the trail, an occasional prospector, and a less frequent trapper or fisherman, the Eagle Lake country is unknown. To me, entering it for the first time, stepping off the trail into unbroken wilderness, it was the land of romance and adventure.

It was a glorious morning; California's springtime; May, the spring's ripest month; the south wind blowing soft and warm; the sky its richest blue; the ground a carpet of wild flowers. And that this was mineral land, the great green stains on the dykes of rocks, the streaks of white bull-quartz in the out-cropping ledges were proof to the most unobservant eye. Old Baldy was beautiful only while the snows melted and gave it moisture; in this country there would be water all summer long, to keep the streams singing, the flowers bursting into bloom. Now the slopes were yellow with cowslips, buttercups, sunflowers, Johnny-jump-ups. A little later its carpeting would change to the red and orange of poppies, spice bush, scarlet gilia, and the Indian paint bush. When Baldy was dry and sear, these hillsides would be starred blue with iris, lupine and summer's farewell.

I felt that I owned it; sunshine, flowers and all the

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hidden ores. I swung along in front of Zim, walking on air. I breathed deep, threw my cap high and shouted to hear the echoes of the hills. This was my kingdom.

Then, as I passed through a little cluster of tan oaks and sycamores, I came suddenly upon a gray log cabin in its center. Its door was closed, the one window in front shuttered, the stone and mud chimney smokeless; a tangled jungle-growth of vines about it told me that this was the deserted hut of the lake. I tied Zim, and opened the door.

Within was one snug room, still fairly tight in its shake-roof and chinked walls, with a hard dirt floor, a crude corner fireplace, and two bunks, one above the other, at the far end. Barring reasonable dirt accumulation, it was quite livable, and I decided promptly to make it my temporary home while prospecting. I threw open the shutters to let in the light, looked at the bunks, knelt before the fireplace to see that the chimney was sound and safe—then changed my decision! As quickly as a burned nerve can record its hurt to the brain, I changed my mind about living there. The house had another tenant. My knee on the hearth had touched a live coal.

I retreated quickly to the door, my eyes taking in every inch of that small room. Only those who know the wilderness can appreciate my fright; those who understand its law of open-armed, open-door hospitality, with the fire built up and the pot placed to boil at the

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first sign of the stranger's approach. The hand that is not thrust forth with this hearty greeting is apt to be against all men, and we of Jamesville had learned to fear and avoid.

If I had found a bear in that cabin, it would have startled me less than the evidence of my burned trouser leg that one of my own kind was somewhere about; my arm went back of me and my hand found and pulled from its boot the rifle on Zim's saddle, as my eyes searched the room.

Nothing there to indicate occupancy; no place for concealment of an occupant. The bunks were open and empty, pine needles covering their bottoms. There was a rude board table, chunks of logs for chairs, a small box standing on end for a dresser. That was all; dirt flooring, walls, shake-roof, fireplace, and this rude furniture. I could not believe what the burned hole in my trousers insisted, that there was fire in the chimney, and crossed the room again to verify. There was an iron crane in the fireplace; hot. The back stones were hot. A fire had been blazing there not half an hour before, and its live embers had been covered over with the ashes in the attempt to conceal the fact of a fire. Somebody had moved out of the cabin almost as I had come in.

My heart beating fast at this problem of the wilds, I backed out of the cabin door and turned to peer into the tangled clump of trees. Beyond the grove was the lake, and into it came a gully which ran back a short

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distance in the hills. Listening intently, I could hear the purling of running water, a brook in the gully; then something that moved stealthily in the brush there.

I took advantage of the hut's concealing side to find a place from which I could, under shelter, look into the little ravine. The stream was merely the overflow from some spring higher up, but it lay in a deep cut worn by flood waters, and bushes from either side grew to meet and form a dark tunnel with foliage for its roof. It was in this narrow channel that the movement I heard had been. I strained my eyes trying to pierce its gloom.

At the lower end, where the brook came from the gully, it had been roughly dammed with rock to make a pool where water might be dipped with a bucket; and a trail ran from the pool to the cabin door. Now as I studied it, I saw the damp markings of water as splashed by a pail that had been carried from the pool to the house. There was no pail in the cabin or I should have seen it; none in sight out here at the well. The water couldn't have been spilled longer than an hour back, for it would have entirely disappeared, sucked up by earth and sun.

I stood at the corner of the hut a long while, listening, peering. No further sound or motion. I wanted a reasonable explanation of this strange tenancy of the cabin, hunted my brain through for a consistent solution that would exclude mystery. Might not the occupant have left, not because of my coming, but to resume a

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journey, having no knowledge that I was coming? That could be possible, although the trail I'd followed around the end of the lake was in plain view from the cabin door and window; and I had been shouting and singing at the top of my lungs on that trail for an hour or more before the fire was pulled or the water spilled. Nor could anyone have left the clump of trees that surrounded the house to get to the main trail or into the hills—not openly—without my seeing him. Besides, that wouldn't explain the attempt to conceal the fire in the hearth, or the movement I had heard in the gully. Try my best, it was all too queer to be pleasant, and I untied Zim, led out of the grove, and left the cabin for someone else to live in—or for nobody.

We crossed the little gully at its upper end, and I looked at its lining bushes with apprehension, even glancing back at it after we had passed; but there was nothing to cause distrust. I was glad when the contour of the lake hid it from view, and only then began to regain the gay spirits with which I had started the day.

Noon came, and I unpacked Zim for an hour's rest while I ate a cold luncheon; then we swung around to the east back from the lake to avoid rocks and steep cañons; climbed gradually into the mountain. I didn't want to go this way. I hated leaving the blue waters, the fresh, cool breeze that came across that shining surface; but the nature of the hills forced us back until I could no longer see the lake. Most of the afternoon

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we traveled through defiles, and I began to understand why Eagle Lake was so little known. It was too rough, too difficult of access; its banks could not be followed except for short distances; then there were miles and miles of rugged way on mountainsides. Zim was firm-footed as a goat among these rocks, testing each step of the way, keeping three feet on solid ground when the fourth had lost its resting place by the fall of rocks into a chasm; pulling himself out by two legs, when his hind footing was dislodged. Twice he almost fell when the narrow ledge we were on gave way, but saved himself; and I let him pick his own course, for he was more knowing than I. At four o'clock, we came to a creek, high up in the mountains, a half dozen miles from the lake.

It wasn't easy, but by wading in places, taking to the banks in others, scrambling over rocks and steep side-hills, we gradually worked down where the bottom opened up into a redwood forest. Here the creek hugged closely the southern wall of the cañon, almost a precipice; and the slope of a wooded mountain came in from the north. The forest ran to the edge of the creek, its great trees towering high above the cañon's top. Some of those redwoods were more than three hundred feet high, some trunks over twenty feet through. They were the *Sequoia Gigantea*, the "Big Trees" of California.

It was easy passage for Zim and me in the woods, like

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moving through a deep carpeted cathedral with mammoth columns. There was no underbrush, few small trees, and the great red trunks stood quite far apart. The leaves falling for a thousand years and more had covered the rocky soil with a dense layer of soft earth, topped with the recent fresher droppings from the trees. On the larger, older trees—and some, it is believed, were alive when Christ was born in Bethlehem—there would be not a single branch from the main trunk for a hundred feet. I had seen redwoods before, scattered groups of smaller size, but this was the first forest I had ever been in, and its mellowed color, its quiet, and the fragrance of it were as wonderful to me as the hugeness of its trunks.

Soon we came to its lower edge, for it was but a spur of the mountainside woods, an angle running over into the bottoms, and I stopped Zim in the last of its shade to look down the valley and over Eagle Lake. It was a pleasing view to me, this cleft in the hills, an ideal spot for my home while I prospected. From the cliffs to the wooded slopes there was a wide stretch of bottom-lands, covered with grass, with frequent clumps of laurel, lilac, cascara; while the stream, larger here, with stretches of quiet water between the rapids, was lined with trees of greater size. The flat narrowed quickly at its lake end, the outlet of the stream being two stone buttresses some fifty feet apart, towering high in air, like rude gate-posts to this cañon garden.

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I chose a pile of rocks on the creek's bank a short distance from the lake for my camp, took the packs from Zim, and turned him loose without hobbles. There was little danger of his wandering from the flat, for the steep bank to the south and the wooded mountain on the north were Nature's fences to his pasture. As it was already sunset, I hastened to build a fire for supper and make preparations for the night.

There were quail in the brush beside the creek; I could hear them whistling, calling to each other. In a digger-pine on the side-hill a squirrel shrilled and chuckled in his double-toned song—or monologue, more likely. A grouse was drumming somewhere up the cañon. Game. Food. To-morrow I should begin conserving bacon by adding fresh meat and fowl to my menu—and fish. Trout in the stream, fish, many kinds of fish, in the lake. Why should one eat salty, odorous bacon in this land of plenty?

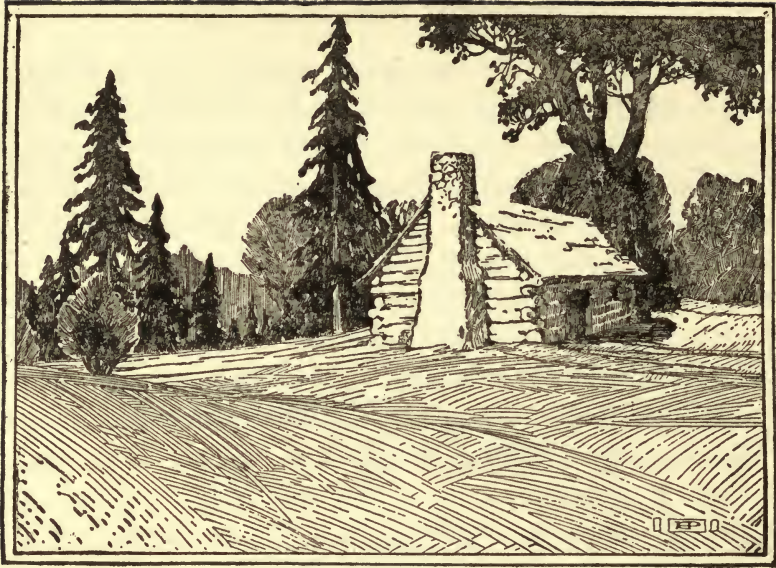
I should need a house, a fireplace, an oven; must locate where grew the wild vegetables that were food, the fruits and nuts that Nature provided. There should be great stores of cowslip, mustard, dock, fronds and cress for greens and salads, palatable bulbs, strawberries and blackberries—later, perhaps—and mushrooms, toadstools, puff-balls, besides the delicious nuts of the digger-pine. What was there in Zim's pack not provided by this little valley of mine? Flour? I could grind the pine nuts into a meal that made delicious bread—the

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Indians used it in the old days. Sugar? As a sweet, honey was better, and there were bees working among the flowers for me. Bacon? Meats were here a-plenty, with fat for their own cooking. Coffee? Willow bark tea was almost as good. Salt? Yes, that least of the foods was the one thing Nature could not supply me here, and the lack of it would make all else without savor. Fortunately, knowing the need of it for pelt preservation as well as food, I had brought plenty.

So I ate bacon and a flour flapjack, coffee and sugar for supper, and climbed into bed.





CHAPTER VIII

BUILDING A HOME

MORNING; the pink rays of a rising sun, hidden from me by mountain peaks, glowing on the summits across the lake; my valley alive with the songs of birds, squirrels and chipmunks; cloudless blue above; a world of green about me.

Work to do in plenty; food getting, house building. I leaped from the blankets, soused the creek water over face and hair, plunging my arms to the shoulders in its icy coldness, starting the blood tingling with brisk use

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of the rough towel. Then a fire, a flapjack, bacon and coffee.

This must be the last meal of purely civilized products, I promised myself. My first labor should be the gathering of food, either fish or game. Because I wanted to try the pistol again, with an idea that had come to me before sleep last night, the decision was for hunting, and I reloaded the chambers of the revolver, leaving the shot loose, with only wad enough above to hold it in. Perhaps it would scatter now; I hoped so.

Zim had grazed close, looking for companionship—or oats. As I started on my expedition up the creek, he would have followed, but I sent him back with instructions to watch the camp. Hardly had I gone a hundred steps when a covey of quail ran briskly out of a thicket ahead of me, crossed an open space in a trailing, scattered procession of nodding head-plumes and fluttering wings, and disappeared in the lupin brush. I would not shoot at them on the ground—not with a shotgun! I cocked the revolver and followed into the brush.

Expecting it, the whir of their wings as they arose did not startle me, and I fired into the midst of the covey. Nothing fell; a clean miss. I might as well have trusted to the rifle. The birds, scattered now, began calling to one another from their hiding places. If I could sight one sitting, I might bring it down. I had lost all compunctions. This weapon was neither a shot-

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gun nor a clean shooting rifle; it was an old, worn-out army revolver of ante-Civil War times.

I moved cautiously ahead in the direction of the whistling; stopped when I feared I might raise the birds again; peered long into the tangle of brush and vines. The mountain quail is larger than the Bob White of the valleys, almost as big as its cousin, the pheasant, but, though I searched for many minutes, heard their calls all about me, not one could I locate.

I went ahead, hearing their whirring flight, seeing the flicker of wings, and came out into the open to continue my way toward the redwood forest. A tree squirrel scolded as he watched my approach. Coming within easy range, I aimed carefully, fired and dropped him. When I picked him up I found that my shot had carried away the entire upper half of him.

I started back for camp and my rifle. I wanted game, and to get game I must have a weapon that would neither miss entirely nor blow the mark into tatters when it landed. I might find grouse or jack-rabbit to bring down with a bullet, and would not feel that a cartridge was wasted on either.

With the rifle, I took the other side of the creek, scaring up a second covey of quail. They were numerous in my domain! I must plan some way of capturing them, as I could not shoot them. Then a rabbit scooted out ahead of me and I raised the rifle, only to lower it without firing. A cottontail; too small game for the

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cost of a cartridge. A less expensive way of adding them to my larder should be found. I had just made up my mind to turn back and trade rifle for fish-line, when a jack-rabbit rocketed out, scared by my tread, and began a straight-away flight, to stop and turn a somersault as my rifle cracked. It was stone-dead when I came up.

Good enough! The saddle and hind quarters were all of the carcase I thought fit for food, but there was enough for two hearty meals. I trimmed and carried it back to camp.

The sun was well up, and it seemed time to have a swim. Between the sentinel rocks, the flow of the creek had made a little beach, and had shallowed the water at its mouth by many years' deposits of sand. Throwing off my clothes, I ran in—then ran out. The water was shivering cold. The stream was bringing down melted ice. The flow was so rapid that only a few hours separated frozen source and the creek's mouth at the lake, and there was no chance for the water to warm. I ran up and down the beach to get the chill out of me, and stop the chattering of my teeth.

Even so, the lake looked inviting under the hot sun; away from this flow of melted snow, it would be warmer. Working my way along the rocky shore, I kept testing with my toe until I found a warm current. Here would be a fine bathing place, except that it seemed to lack a bottom. I like tubs with bottoms reasonably close to

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the surface of the water; not a thousand feet or so below it; and the bank went precipitously down as though continuing so forever.

Either I must dive in or stay out. I could swim fairly well, but I had learned, practiced, and had my entire experience in Indian River, where my feet could touch bottom any time I tired of kicking them. This seemed to be a case of "Hang your clothes on a hickory limb, but don't go near the water." I wanted to swim, was prepared to swim, and didn't dare to swim. I glanced along the shore line hoping to see a more suitable place to launch myself.

A short distance ahead was a rock running into the lake, and behind it seemed to be a shallower approach. I started to investigate, wet feet slipped on smooth stone, and instantly I was in the big tub, willy-nilly. Sputtering out the water I had taken through an open mouth, I swam to and around the jutting rock, finding no difficulty in the depth, and at the other side of the boulder was just what I needed; a shelf that ran out gradually to deep water. And the sun-heated stones warmed the lake above them; a little too much close in, just as the lake beyond was a whit too cold; but exactly right in between. There were places to dive off the boulder into deep water, steps to climb back out of the lake, and knobs of rock on which to hang my clothes. I spent an hour exploring its advantages—and getting gloriously sunburned!

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As I carefully traveled back to the creek mouth, anxious for no second unexpected dive, I found that with a few minutes' pick-and-shovel work I could make a safe, easy trail. I had added a bathtub to the advantages of my selected home.

After a dinner of fried rabbit, I crossed the bottom to where I had noticed a digger-pine on the further slope and brought home a bed-mattress and dessert for supper off the same tree; five enormous cones, nine inches long by six through, holding the nut-like seeds, riding on top of branches that I hauled sledwise, and cut up to weave into a bed. I stopped on the way back long enough to gather a mess of cowslip greens and fronds of the brake—the wilderness substitute for asparagus tips—and felt that Nature had begun to provide.

Before I started prospecting, I wanted a house, not as protection from the weather, for there would be no rain before September, but for the feeling of comfort that comes with a roof and walls. I began work on it next morning, using Zim to haul several loads of young firs I felled, clearing them of branches after I had them on the site. Two of these, set in holes, supported the ridge, twelve feet long, and the roof was of poles slanting from ground to ridge, covered with a thatch of the boughs, laid on like shingles, beginning at the bottom, one row lapping the last, all tied with grape-vine. Both ends of the hut were closed by poles set tightly together, and the front was left wide open.

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By evening, it was complete; a room eight feet by twelve, more than half of which was head-high, the balance being used for bunk and table, not requiring height. The floor I leveled with the shovel, made a bunk of poles, moved my pine-needle mattress in, split a redwood log to make a table, chopped from another two chunks for chairs, and slept that night under cover and behind walls.

The next day I became a mason, with rock and mud. In selecting the site for my cabin, I had planned that its open front came a few feet away from an enormous boulder, the back of my fireplace-to-be. In front of this rock I excavated for an oven, making a hole about two feet square and half as deep, which I lined with mud-plaster. Two thin rocks from the creek made a removable cover, and served as the floor of the fireplace; the theory being that the bread, meat, or whatever-to-be-baked, should be placed in the cold oven, the rock cover adjusted, a hot fire started on top, and I'd guess at the length of time it should cook. Then the fire would be raked off, the oven opened, and I'd discover how good a guesser I was.

I daubed all that day with mud, building oven and fireplace; but when it was done I had a place for frying-pan, coffee-pot—even a little chimney to carry the smoke away. And that night, with a big fire in it, the heat reflected back from the boulder made my room as comfortable and warm as anyone could wish. I stopped

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using "squaw wood" that evening; began chopping chunks and splitting them, instead of breaking up dead limbs and pitch knots. I could time my oven better with real wood.

I intended to give my stove a baking try-out next day, biscuits and a haunch of jack-rabbit, but other things intervened, and the mud in the oven had plenty of time to bake hard and dry before I used it.





CHAPTER IX

GOLD

IT had been an effort for me to keep from gold hunting and do these necessary homelier tasks. As it was, I had inspected every stone I used in the chimney, had picked up and thrown away scores of smaller likelier looking bits in my walks about camp, searching always for "signs." I knew gold in the usual forms found in these hills, in quartz or combination with other metals, for my father had given me training, and I had lived a good deal with miners and prospectors.

The first move in the search for gold must be a care-

Gold

ful test of the creek sands. Next morning, carrying pick, shovel and pan, I went up the stream to a place I had noticed where the waters, making a sharp curve, had worn a deep cut between rocks. If there was gold in ledge formation above in the mountains, on either side of this creek or its tributaries, here was a likely place for a sink. The current carrying down dirt, gravel, even rocks, torn and ground from earth and ledge in the spring thaws, would be apt to deposit part of this débris at the barrier that caused the stream to swerve in its course. Naturally, the heaviest part would be left behind, and that would include gold, the heaviest of metals.

At the lower end of this curve, I waded in up to my waist in the icy water, and with the pick cleared away rocks to get below the later settlings to the accumulation of past years. I needed only to make a test for gold, so did not try to get to bed-rock, where the gold finally lands. The question for me to determine was simply, was there or was there not gold in the lands drained by this creek; if so, I should find "colors" in the creek sands; if I did not find an indication in a pan taken near surface, then I should try a second at greater depth; and continue until I found a trace of the metal or became convinced at bed-rock that there was nothing of value above the stream.

I loaded the miner's pan with gravel, placed it on the bank, and followed it out. The metal bowl was as

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big around as a dishpan, made of steel, and with its wet contents was a heavy weight. The sides of the pan sloped gradually almost from its center. My job was to rid that great bowl of its six or seven pounds of gravel without losing the one tiny flake of gold, perhaps no larger than a pinhead, that might be somewhere in its contents.

The beginning was easy. I took out with my fingers and threw away the larger stones and pieces of gravel, trusting eyesight to make no mistake with them; then shook up the remaining sand and thrust the pan beneath the surface of the stream to let the current carry away the top layer. There would be no metal in that, for the shaking I had given it would have sent all the heavier bits toward the bottom. Several times I repeated this process, reducing the contents of the pan more than half, then I sat down on the bank, my sleeves rolled up above the elbows, and began the slow and serious process of "panning."

With the metal dish just far enough under the surface of the water to be covered but still in plain view, I moved it with a peculiar motion of the wrists which gave the contents a slow, oscillating movement, half-way around, then back. Each grain of sand shifted to give the heavier particles the opportunity to settle lower, deeper down; while the current flushed away the lighter débris. Back and forth, to and fro, slowly, regularly, the pan's rim angled down to let the moving water have



THERE WAS GOLD IN THE PAN!

Gold

its way; the sands became fewer, as my muscles cramped and ached. It seemed endless; my bent back was breaking, but I kept at the work, avoiding any abrupt or impatient motion that might imperil the world-old law of gravity, and make my test valueless. Care, time, attention and patience; these were the essentials of gold-panning.

Though I expected little or nothing from this test, excitement came as more and more of the bottom of the pan began to show through the decreasing sands. There is always that pleasurable thrill in the "clean-up," whether of sluice, cradle or a miner's pan. My reason told me that the creek must have been prospected many times before, and would never have been passed over if it held gold in sufficient quantities for placer mining; but nothing could keep back the agitation of quickened heart-beats, as I brought the pan from the water and began the last wash.

The pan, swinging back and forth, shifted débris to the edge to wash out with the water; each moment the contents lessened; then the sand began to stretch out in a band, and I slowed the motion of my wrists. Only a thin, narrow layer of the dirt left; only enough water to well cover it; and at the ends of the ribbon of sand, glints of yellow—gold! There was gold in the pan!

Restraining an impatience to rush the work and find out all in a minute what those gold particles meant, I worked slowly, steadily. I could not keep my eye from

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searching out the shining flecks, but I could restrain my hand from trying to separate what only water and gravity could satisfactorily do. It was cruelly deliberate, nerve-racking work, but it was certain. I forgot fatigue, the aches of my arms and back, and let the law which holds the universe together, the earth to its orbit, and brings the ripe apple from the branch to the ground, solve for me the riddle of the creek-sands.

Now there strung out around the bottom a glittering line of yellow particles, and I slowed motion to let the last driblet of water wash over the rim the last grains of sand. It was finished; a shovelful of the creek's bottom had been separated to reveal its hidden treasure; and the result seemed to my staring eyes the wildest of dreams. There was color half around the bottom!

Coarse gold; "dust," it would be called by the miners; the largest pellet not half the size of a pea. But, although I had no scales to weigh it, I knew there was nearly two ounces in the pan. Should the creek bottom hold in such proportion for even a short distance above, I had made a rich find. And this sample was from near the top, not from bed-rock, where I might expect richer earth. It was wealth!

I held a celebration then and there on the bank of the stream, a joy-dance about the pan and its precious load. In boyish spirit, I kicked my heels in air and shouted to the echoing rocks. If the rifle or revolver had been handy, I should have added fireworks to the fiesta, but

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fortunately for my limited supply of ammunition, the guns were down at the hut. I had a longing to tell somebody the glad news, share my happiness with a friend, and wished Lem was there to join in the celebration—even Lem Strong, whom I did not always like, and could not always trust.

Then I remembered Zim, my good companion on this search. Zim could celebrate; could kick his heels in air, neigh quite heartily. He should share in my good fortune to the extent of an immediate double-handful of oats. I ran up the cañon, whistling his call on my fingers.

The horse gave no heed, nor was he on the meadow below the redwoods where he usually pastured. I skirted their edge, whistling, then crossed through the trees to that little strip of bottom-land above. Not there. For an hour I continued a useless search before I gave over, and returned to my camp and dinner. It was a bitter setback; I'd have to stop mining, with its wild excitement, and hunt up Zim. I assumed that he had again started for home, or for Ophir Creek, at least, and I'd have to waste several days fetching him.

I returned to the scene of the celebration after dinner, but I brought little of the spirit of it with me. I didn't want to go hunt Zim; I wanted to get another panful of the creek's bottom and watch the mud become riches. Zim was a nuisance. If I had been sure he would find home, I'd have left him to wander back there; but that

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was no certainty. It was a long, devious trail, and there were too many mountain lions in the hills.

Well, I'd get out one more pan before I started. Again I waded into the creek and dug deeper where I had taken out the first shovelful of sand. I washed it; filled the pan again and washed it; and it was almost sunset when I went back to camp, more than a hundred dollars richer than when the sun had risen, in virgin wealth of gold that had been new-born from the earth. No one had lost that I might gain; I had brought this new wealth into being.

Then Zim, poked away at the back of my mind by the absorption of mining, became the main thought. I had neglected him too long to start after him before morning. He was probably right now grazing at Ophir Creek. I'd get away at daybreak to be there by noon; ride him back in the afternoon and evening. I went to get the bridle, for the halter that I always left on him, the hackamore with its rope knotted up under the throat strap, made guiding difficult. Saddle and bridle were draped on a tree-trunk by the creek beside my hut.

Should be, rather; for neither saddle nor bridle was there when I went for them. Gone. Stolen. In the instant I realized that Zim had not strayed. He had been stolen. He was not a runaway, but a thief's booty. While I was working at the creek, panning gold, someone had taken horse, saddle and bridle almost from under my eyes. Had I glanced up, I must have

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seen the thief, for he would need to pass close to me carrying the saddle to the horse, or leading Zim to where saddle and bridle had been.

Back to mind rushed the suspicions of the past, the hidden horseman on Old Baldy's trail, the broken lock of my cabin there at the claim, the strange footprint in the mesquite gully, and the mysterious occupant of the log house down the lake. Did these unexplained incidents all connect with the stealing of Zim? And was the theft of my horse the reason for them—or only a link in the chain of peculiar events? Would Zim be coveted so much that I should be followed for days and many miles through the rough mountains to secure him? It did not seem reasonable.

While I was studying this disquieting problem, I got supper; and my rifle leaned against the rock within reach of my hand. Nothing else was missing but Zim, his saddle and bridle. The thief might as easily have added my two guns and all my supplies. Why had he not done so? Why had he not stolen Zim before? There was opportunity enough any day or night since I left Jamesville. Why had he waited till the day I found gold—gold in plenty? Did he know—that thief—that I had discovered gold?

While I ate bacon and flapjack my eyes kept roving over the landscape, prying into the lengthening shadows. I was scared. It was all so inexplicable. There was the feeling that I was being spied upon. Carrying the

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rifle, I went down to the lake, climbed the higher of the two rocks which made the portal to my valley, and from its lofty summit gave a careful survey, north, south, east and west, over land and water, in the clear light of early evening. From below me, the lake stretched away for miles to the north and west, barren waters rimmed by barren hills; back of me, my own little cañon, its ruggedness softened by the afterglow, its far end curtained by the towering redwoods. Then my eyes turned southward. The transparent air brought things closer, shortening the miles, and I could see, like a thin, yellow thread, the trail along the lake shore from where it came out of the woods until it was lost in the hills on its way to Susanville.

I followed it with my eyes, hoping to see the speck which might mean Zim; and suddenly stopped short, my gaze riveted on a thin spiral of gray that rose in the moveless air to a great height; a streamer of smoke that reached from a clump of green near the lake's edge to be diffused high in the sky. It came from the stone-and-mud chimney of the deserted log cabin.

For a long time I sat and watched that line of smoke in apprehensive wonder. The queer tenant was still in the hut; did he have my Zim? I had determined to find out, to go there next morning openly and look, ask, even demand, when a new idea, more disquieting than any that had ranged through my brain before, came to make me abandon the notion, and climb down the rock

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more quickly than I had come. If the stranger in the cabin—if the thief of my horse—two men or the same—knew I had discovered gold in valuable quantity, I must stay by my claim to protect it, or abandon it completely. If I left to search for Zim, I should be “jumped.”

“My claim”? Why, it wasn’t even a claim! I had merely made a discovery, and there was not a single witness to that! Should I be jumped—should someone by stratagem or force take the find from me—I could not possibly prove in a court of law that I held prior rights of discovery. Nor did I dare mark the claim, set a post or cairn of rocks at the curve of the creek where I had found gold, for that would tell the thief—if he was not already wise—just where the gold lay. No. If I intended to keep what I had discovered, the only way was to stay by it and refuse to be driven from it, or be led away on rainbow-chases.

“If I intended to keep” it? Did I intend to keep it? Was I willing to fight for it? At my hut again, I debated that question, though all the while I argued pro and con, I was drowning the embers of the fire so it would not betray me by its flame, was filling the magazine of the rifle with cartridges, reloading the emptied chambers of the revolver, gathering my supplies closer to hand, making all safe for attack or siege. That find of wealth was mine; it meant ease from labor and comfort for Mother Laing, education for me. I wanted

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it—needed it. I had faced the raw mountains to get it. I had earned it. Still, I was only a boy, and this other who would take it from me was a man, no doubt armed and ready to do anything to secure it. Life was very precious to me; is to any boy; and I might find another claim elsewhere some other day. There were plenty of places to search, plenty of years for searching, if I was alive to search. Suppose I gathered together what I could carry on my back now and left the night-blackened cañon for the home trail, I'd at least be sound in health and body, alive, uninjured, and a hundred dollars better off than I was this morning.

“He who fights and runs away, may live to fight another day.” I had smiled scornfully at the jingle many a time; but it was not my problem then. To-night it was. As I sat in the dark, my back against the cold rock chimney, the rifle across my lap, looking up toward the curve in the creek where my gold lay under its waters, I realized that there were two sides to the implied argument of the rhyme. Fight or run away. Take the chance of death—perhaps—or slip silently through the night to Mother Laing's bright fire and wonderful cooking.

It was the one big issue, the determination of right and wrong, that decided me finally, after I had mulled over all the side-paths and by-trails half the night. The find was rightly mine; who took it from me would do a wrong. That right and that wrong affected not only

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him who stole and me who gave cowardly agreement to that theft, but all the world as well. The right was worth fighting for, whether my claim was or not; was worth fright, privation, wounds,—even death. I'd stay. And I fell asleep in a minute with my gun across my knees.

I woke up, cramped and aching, to a cheerful sun and a smiling blue lake. I climbed the sentinel rock even before I washed, but there was nothing save the landscape to be seen from there; no trail of smoke from the hidden chimney. I ate breakfast in a quite happy frame of mind, and went up creek to where pick, shovel and pan lay on its bank. Carrying them with me, I went a hundred yards or so above the place of discovery to where I had already located the best spot to turn the course of the creek, and began work on a dam that would uncover the bottom of the stream for a long stretch above my sink.

The construction of this barrier was the crudest possible. I rolled up and dumped into the stream the largest rocks I could handle with the pick and a long sapling for levers, stones so heavy that the current could not carry them down, and shoveled gravel and dirt from the bank to fill the cavities between them; a rock and dirt dam. But it was hard work and slow work. To resist the force of the swift waters, it had to be a wide structure, and though the stretch was narrow, it meant a great amount of filling. All that day I worked,

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loaded rifle close at hand, eyes frequently cast around to overlook the cañon, and when I finally went home to get supper, I was not half finished. Again I climbed the sentinel rock to find no sign of human habitation anywhere.

Two days more I gave to the building of the dam and a ditch from above it through which the stream would flow to return to its old bed below the spot where I had found gold. Twice I had to deepen the ditch to relieve the pressure on the dam, which, without mortar, I could not make strong enough otherwise to stand the current; and it was the evening of the third day that I closed the last gap in the barrier, and watched the water start its mill-race course through the new trench. By morning a long strip of the bottom, including the place where I had taken out a few shovels of rich sand, would be comparatively free from water, and I could begin mining. Even as I looked the stream lowered to a mere trickle, in the midst of a series of puddles.

I wheeled at the sound of a whinny behind me to find Zim standing at the end of my new dam looking at me, and I jumped for him, shouting:

“Zim! Zim, old horse! Where—how 'did you get here?” There he was, just as if he'd never been away, hackamore on, but without saddle or bridle, maybe a few more burrs in his tail, perhaps a bit droopier of head; but dear old Zim, trying to stick his muzzle into the pocket where I sometimes carried oats. I hugged

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him and jumped up and down for joy. I was so tickled that for a time I did not begin to wonder at this strange return, more mysterious even than his going. Enough that he was back with me again. When the thought did come, I looked quickly toward my hut to see smoke rising from behind the little building. Astonished, my eyes went to that place in the thicket where I had kept Zim's saddle and bridle. Even at this distance I could see them! Slowly I went and picked up the rifle, pressed down the lever to load and cock it; then, leading Zim, fear stalking beside me, I walked down the gully to my lean-to.





CHAPTER X

I FIND A PARTNER

I'D like to be able to say that I walked boldly up to the open front of my shack, and ordered the intruder off the premises. I can't, honestly. It was from a considerable distance and after wetting my lips twice with my tongue that I managed a weak and quavering hail:

“Hello, there! Who's inside?”

There was no answer; I hadn't been loud enough. I chose a gruff voice and put more lungs behind it, repeating my call. Then, around the corner of the

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lean-to, yelling at the top of his voice, bounded Lem Strong. The rifle almost slipped from my hands. I lowered the muzzle, let down the hammer, and laid it aside to grab Lem in a bear-like hug that almost cracked his ribs. Relief and joy had driven from mind all my old doubts of him, as I shouted:

“Lem—you old tow-headed shiedpoke! How in the hemisphere did you get here?”

But Lem wasn't answering questions just then. He was hanging on to me, his wide grin a bit trembly, saying over and over:

“Ted, I found you at last—found you at last!”

“Yes, yes—you've found me, though how you did it beats me! What did you do? Give Zim the rein and let him bring you?”

“Zim?” I caught the question in his tone. “No. I asked Mrs. Laing where you'd gone and she said to Eagle Lake. So I came.”

“But Eagle Lake is a big field to find one boy in. You didn't come on that wild chance?”

“Yes, Ted, on just that. I didn't know. I suppose I thought it would be easy as pudding. Only last night I saw the light of your fire up the lake, and I've been getting here ever since. Say, Ted, the sidewalks around here sure need fixing!”

I laughed. We were at the shack now, where the blaze Lem had started was cracking briskly. As I pulled the side of bacon from the burlaps, I asked:

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“Why didn’t you ride? Zim would have carried you easy over all the roughness.”

Again that look of surprise. “Zim? Zim? What’s all this Zim stuff, Ted?”

“My horse. That’s his name. The horse you brought back.” I was cutting many thick slices of the salt meat, for I knew Lem would be hungry as a mid-winter coyote; but I looked up on a long silence to find his freckled face staring at me in perplexity.

“Quit your kidding,” he said. “I didn’t bring a horse.”

My distrust came back in force. Lem’s arrival and Zim’s return were firmly linked together in my mind. Was he joking now, playing some trick on me? I placed the skillet over the fire and started mixing flap-jack batter. Lem broke the silence, asking anxiously:

“What about Zim, Ted?” and I came back bluntly:

“He was stolen.”

“You think I stole him?” Lem came to his feet with a bound, then sank back on the bed. “Why, Ted, I ——”

“No, no. I think you brought him back. Didn’t you?”

“Not. N-o-t, not! I put all horses behind me when I quit my job at Wayne’s stables. But, Ted, so long as Zim’s back, you should worry.”

I did worry; had reason to. If Lem was lying, I must worry over why; if he was telling the truth, then

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what was the explanation of Zim? While the coffee gurgled in the pot, I flipped a pancake in air and studied the situation, to ask finally:

“Was there anybody in the log cabin down the lake when you passed it?”

“No. I pried in. Bare as a dog-bone.”

There had been an occupant of the cabin when I first struck the shore of the lake, and as recently as three nights before. He had quite possibly taken Zim and returned him. Lem might have been that occupant. It had taken me four days to get to the lake. Lem could have made it in less than two. If he started from Jamesville within forty-eight hours of my leaving, he might have been hiding at the cabin when I arrived. If I could find motive for such action, for concealment and furtive spying upon me, the taking and returning of Zim, I must believe that Lem was lying to me now.

He might have read the suspicion written on my face, had my back not been toward him as I worked at the fire. As it was, he seemed to sense my distrust, for he spoke at last, and in his voice was something that made me turn and stare at him.

“Ted, if you’ve got any hunch that I’m fibbing, slant your eye at those clogs,” and he poked out two feet whose flimsy shoes were worn to tatters, the socks to rags, the flesh scratched, cut and bleeding. I looked dismay, as I gasped:

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“For the love of Mike, how long have you been on the trail?”

“On the trail?” he echoed, and his pale face broke again into a grin; “not enough on the trail to get acquainted. Off the trail, in the brush, over it and under it, dodging rocks and climbing ’em, I’ve been five days and nights.”

I drew in my breath with a long whistle. I could not disbelieve the evidence of those feet. I looked across the creek to where Zim grazed; at the cottonwood where hung the saddle and bridle; then at Lem Strong’s big-toothed smile. Was there really no connection between horse and boy? Had their simultaneous arrival been mere coincidence? I dropped the matter for the moment to ask:

“When did you last eat, Lem?”

“I—don’t—remember.” He spoke slowly, and very low. “It may have been yesterday morning—or the day before. I ——”

“Quit talking and eat!” I shouted, throwing the flapjack on a plate with bacon atop it, thrusting them across the table to him. “Not another word out of you till you get that into you. Eat!”

He needed no urging; and I poured another and thicker cake into the hot skillet, then began tumultuously to mix more batter, muttering, “No food for two days—maybe three; and can’t remember!” I knew what the mountain-hunger was, and I kept piling his

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plate until he cried quits. At last he leaned back contentedly, a tin cup of black coffee in his hand, and commanded:

“A perfecto, Jeems.”

“Just out, your lordship,” I laughed.

“No smokes? No cigarettes? Not even the makings?”

“Not one grain of tobacco about, Lem. I don’t smoke, you know.”

“Christmas Eve! And here’s where I begin this reform-wave stuff. No more cigarettes for Lemuel P. Strong. It’s a croo-el, croo-el woild!” He gave a deep sigh, then grinned. Always my suspicions lost force at that wide, wholesome smile. Reassured, I began my more leisurely supper off the same plate—there was only the one—with the same knife and fork—there were no others—while I waited for coffee until Lem was through with our lonely cup. Housekeeping would have its difficulties with this increased family.

Lem told the story of his runaway as I took the edge off a very fair appetite. On the morning Zim and I left Jamesville to hunt gold, he had determined to find and join me. As he put it, I was about the only friend he had in the world, and my bungling excuses for not taking him with me had been misconstrued.

“When I began to work my think-tank,” he said, “I saw just how you felt. You was scared it might be wrong to help me away, but you’d like to have me if it

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wasn't crooked. If you had no hand in it, you'd be tickled to see me; so I asked Mrs. Laing where you'd gone, and I waited my chance to follow. Wayne used to lock me up nights, and have Fong or Pon Sing watch me daytimes, for he got the hunch I was trying for a getaway.

"My opening came last Thursday; both the Chinks were off somewhere. Along late in the afternoon, Pon rode up to the hotel and got Wayne, and they started away on horses. Old Wayne was so excited about something the Chink told him that he forgot me; and that was my dandy chance. I went to the barn and got the grub I'd been saving—sneaking it off my plate into my pocket at meals—and I lit out for Engals."

"Then you came the Engals' trail?" I interrupted.

"Don't ask me how I came, Ted; I don't know. I walked to Engals that night, and next morning a rancher who seemed to think I belonged in a circus tent or an asylum for nuts, showed me the beginning of the path to Eagle Lake. And I've been coming ever since, plugging along nights to keep warm, snoozing a few hours in the middle of the day. I hit the end of the lake about four o'clock yesterday afternoon, and was so dog-tired I dropped down on the sand beach and slept. When I woke up, it was night, and I saw your fire."

"Saw my fire?" I repeated his words. "You couldn't have seen my fire from the end of the lake."

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Lem looked at it, gazed at the cañon's sides, at the two rock pillars; then shook his head and said vaguely:

"I saw a fire, Ted; I'll swear I did. It couldn't have been yours—not unless you built one on the shore. And it wasn't so far up the lake, I know now. It was nearer where that house is——"

"It was in that cabin. Someone is living there. You saw the blaze through the window or door."

"I guess maybe, but things look so different at night. When I came to that house this morning and found it empty, I thought the fire had been further north, and pretty soon I saw a horse's hoof-prints and I followed those till they brought me here."

If his story was true, he had followed Zim back to me, had been right behind whoever rode the horse. He had no sense of location, could read nothing from an animal's track. That he had ever found me was marvelous—the one chance in a hundred. I might have been anywhere in a stretch of hundreds of square miles of hard country. To come was preposterous enough; but to start without supplies, weapon, frying-pan or tin cup—without even a blanket—was too crazy for any but a city boy to think!

Still telling details of his story, Lem fell asleep as he sat, nor did he wake as I lifted him gently, laid him in my bunk, pulled the blankets about him. I unrolled the cougar skin, fairly dried, spread it before the fire which I built into a hot blaze, and knew that I could

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keep warm enough on this couch. Before I could sleep, there was another thing to do. Taking a pine knot for a torch, I crossed the creek to where I'd seen a group of firs, cut open balsam blisters in the bark, drained them into the tin cup, and returned with a quantity of the crystal fluid. I lifted the blanket from Lem's poor, torn feet, and rubbed them with the soothing, healing salve that Nature places in her wildest places to cure the wounds made by her roughness. He was too tired to know or heed.





CHAPTER XI

SOLVING THE FOOD PROBLEM

“IF you’ll tell me where things are, Ted, I’ll get breakfast,” Lem said to me next morning, as I came up from the stream. “I looked, but I couldn’t find any oatmeal, or ham ’n’ eggs, or such. Where do you keep the food?”

I placed my willow rod against the rock, smiling rather weakly. I’d been out since daylight, and though I’d whipped a dozen likely pools, and changed bait for hoppers, grubs, worms and even artificial flies, not a single trout. The fish must have sought the warmer

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waters of the lake, for they were certainly not in the creek.

“I’ll get breakfast, Lem,” I answered. “Bacon and flapjacks again. You’ll have just time for a plunge in the lake.”

“What! Plunge! Lake!” Lem’s eyes stared big at the blue waters. “That lake’s ice!”

“How do you know?” I asked quickly. “Have you tried it?”

“I’ve eyes in my head. Up there,” he pointed, “is snow. Here’s a lot more of it melted. No iceberg swims for mine.”

I laughed. “Well, you’ll not freeze with a little of it on your hands and face,” I conceded, and turned to the fire, while Lem, with a shrug of his shoulders, went down to the stream, returning in a minute wiping his hands on the front of his shirt. I tossed him the towel.

“I never knew folks washed camping out,” he protested, shivering before the blaze. “A cup of hot coffee will save my life.”

While we were having our coffee—I had emptied the baking-powder into a piece of paper to make a second cup of the can—I was doing some hard thinking, and food was the subject of my reflections. More than half the bacon, two-thirds of the sack of flour, most of the rice, a large part of the coffee gone, and this expedition barely launched. Hereafter we were going to eat twice as much, being two; and those cheery dreams of quail,

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grouse, squirrel and rabbit additions to the larder hadn't begun to materialize. As for fish, I'd had a heart-breaking setback this very morning.

Lem broke in on my thoughts, speaking from a full mouth that had just semicircled a large piece of flap-jack; but his face was sober enough as he said:

"Look here, Ted; I'm a bone-head to dump myself here on you without bringing eats or a blanket. You slept cold last night, putting me up as the star boarder; and I know grub's low in the refrigerator and pantry."

"Don't worry ——" I began, but he hadn't finished. With a wave of the knife, he stopped me.

"I never thought of that before I started; didn't know what it meant here in the wilderness. I'd saved eight dollars and four bits from tips I picked up, and I suppose I had the idea—if I had an idea at all—that I could run out to the meat market and grocery and buy food. I'm a fool—and a bum. What do you want me to do, Ted?"

"Two in a bed'll be warmer than one, Lem," I said thoughtfully, "and it won't take half an hour to widen it. We'll use the fur under us, and the blankets for coverings. We'll ——"

He stretched his arm across the table to grasp my hand, and his grin was a bit twisted as he cried:

"Then I do stay? That's the best word I've heard in months. I'll work like a—why, I'll even take that morning swim, Ted!"

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"We'll get at the food question first," I said, pumping his arm as I laughed at his enthusiasm. "We have to eat every day, and three times are few enough. I hardly suppose you could find your way to town?"

He sank back on his chunk of wood with a groan.

"Christmas Eve! I'll go without food, but don't send me back to Jamesville!"

"Jamesville? I wasn't thinking of Jamesville. Susanville is as near and bigger." He brightened at once. "But you'd never find it in a thousand years, Lem."

"Couldn't I stay here while you went?"

"I can't go." I didn't tell him, didn't want to tell him, that I was tied to a gold mine that might be "jumped" any day. "No, Lem, we've got to dig our food out of the country here, and we'll start at it now."

"Fine!" He jumped to his feet. "Let's have fish for lunch."

"I'd say so, only the trout don't bite."

"I'll show you how," Lem cried unexpectedly. "Got plenty of line?"

"A hundred yards of it. What's the idea?"

"Listen, Ted. When I was a newsie in San Francisco—just a tad—three-four years ago—I started up housekeeping; built me a residence on North Beach—foot of Taylor Street, close to Fisherman's Wharf. That house was on a lot where a warehouse had burned down, and its front wall was the fence, its door was a

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board that I'd pull out to get in; and all its other sides and the roof were old corrugated iron that had been on the warehouse. I had a stove inside—just another bit of corrugated iron, bent into shape, with a few lengths of rusty stovepipe, but it was a dandy cooker!”

He was working with the fish-line I'd brought him, putting short leaders at intervals of about two feet along it, tying hooks to the leaders. I watched him with interest as he went on talking.

“I lived there a long while before the bull on that beat got wise and kicked me out; and I lived high! Fish? I ate every kind and variety of fish that the Pacific Ocean knows! Gee, Ted! I ate squid and shark—sea serpents, likely. Those Italian fishermen—hundreds of boats, pink and blue and white, with lateen sails or chuffy little gas engines—brought in tons and tons of fish every morning, and all I had to do was to look wistful while they were unloading. They'd give me odd ones for a joke, but some of the strangest looking fish were the best eating. What I'm making here is a trawl, and we'll set it in the lake across the creek's mouth. It's one way the Italians fish, only they'll have maybe a mile of trawl-line with thousands of hooks.”

“How do they ever pull it in?” I asked.

“They don't. The ends are anchored by heavy weights, and buoyed to bring the line up the right distance from the surface, and to mark it, so they'll know where it is. There are other buoys along it, holding it

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up. The fishermen go to one of the end buoys in their boat and move along the line to its other end, lifting it up, taking the fish off, and rebaiting. One man takes off the fish, another baits. Maybe that boat'll handle twenty trawls."

"And you're going to trawl in the lake—without a boat?"

Lem laughed. "We'll have to haul in our line. It won't be so heavy with fish but we can. I want a rock about as big as my fist for an anchor; a rough one, so the line won't slip off. The other end we'll tie to a rock on shore."

I found him one, then took the axe and went after bait; white grubs from rotting pine logs; and we had the trawl set in short order. Lem wasn't going to be such a drag on my resources, not if he could think up food-getting schemes like this; and his trawl-line had given me an idea. If fish could be trapped, why not game as well? Every day I had seen coveys of quail, scared up bunnies, been scolded by tree squirrels. I couldn't hit them with the pistol, dared not waste rifle cartridges on them, but I could make traps. As we hitched the end of the trawl to a jag in the sentinel rock, after Lem had sent the rock whizzing to carry the line far out across the creek's mouth in a wonderful throw, I suggested:

"Did you ever trap quail, Lem—or rabbits?"

He grinned. "Not in San Francisco. They only grow in the markets there, and you trap 'em with silver

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bait—gold, more likely. No. I never had the bait, Ted.”

“Then I’ll show you,” I said. “Come on,” and getting the axe, I led the way to a thicket beyond my dam where I knew there were usually quail. It was a dense chaparral of manzanita, mesquite and gooseberry bushes. From its center I cut a six-foot circle clear to the ground, using the brush of the clearing to build a tight cage that rimmed it, supplementing the manzanita with willow wands Lem brought from the creekside. Woven in with the long, tough vines of the morning-glory, the upper end brought together, it made a dome like a bird-cage, or an Eskimo hut, tight and strong enough to hold any small bird or animal. At one side, so close to the ground it was nearly level with it, we left an opening, and by sticking brush in the earth, built a funnel-shaped lane from the opening, the large mouth of the funnel at the edge of the chaparral. The idea was to throw bait in the lane and cage, let the quail follow it up, pecking away, until they entered the narrow entrance.

“But what’s to prevent them walking out the same way?” Lem asked, when I told him it was finished.

“Nothing in the world, Lem; only they won’t. They’ll hunt for a hole in the roof and all about the sides, but not at the bottom. It’s their way—the way of all birds—to look up, not down. Hunt me an armful of lettuce, and we’ll set the trap.”

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"Where's the garden?" asked Lem, innocently.

"Garden? I mean miners' lettuce."

"You'll have to show me, Ted; I never saw any to know it," and I laughingly led him out to where it grew rank on the flat. Already it had seeded, and I knew the quail were partial to it. Each with an armful of the grasslike plant, we went back to throw it, seeds and all, in the cage and approach.

"Now for the cottontails," I said, starting off for the bigger growth that lined the creek, axe over shoulder. "Twitch-ups for bunnies."

Lem's face looked as though my language was Greek to him, but he asked no questions, and after watching me make the first rabbit-spring, he went to work and we had six done by noon. The twitch-up is the simplest of traps. A small tree or the branch of a larger one is bent down and held bent by a cord tied to a spindle which fits in a trigger—the old "figure four" contrivance. When the baited trigger is touched, the spindle is released, the sapling leaps to straighten its curve, and a second twine pulls taut a slip-noose about the neck of Mr. Cottontail, lifting him high in air with a snap! The proper approach for the animal is made by a little twig enclosure, across the opening of which hangs the noose.

"Well, Lem," I said, after testing the ones he'd made, and setting them with Indian turnip for bait, "I'll say that's a rattling good morning's work! I've been here

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a week, and this is the first real start at the food problem I've made. Thanks to you," I bowed to him gravely, "we have crossed the Rubicon."

"I've never met the Rubicon, but if it's good to eat, lead me to it! I'm starved," and we started back for the shack and the last dinner, I felt certain, that would depend on bacon and flapjacks. Hardly had we gone a dozen steps before I found an article of food that relieved us of salt meat for that noon meal at least. As we passed a large live-oak, I saw growing from a cavity in its trunk a bunch of blood red fungi. With a shout of joy, I ran to the tree and began breaking it off.

"What in time you got there?" Lem demanded, watching me pry loose the crimson growth. And I answered, mouth watering:

"Wait till you taste it. Yum, yum, yum! This is the best luck ever!"

"Looks more like a Fourth of July celebration than food, but if you say it is, here's more. I'll bring a ton or two."

"Don't, Lem," I cried. "I've all that we can eat, and more would spoil on us. Leave it on the tree for next time. It's the beefsteak fungus."

"Looks a bit rare, doesn't it? A trifle underdone?"

"Wait till you taste it," I repeated. "I'll fry this for dinner, but it's a corking stew, and good plain boiled."

"Sure it isn't poison?" Lem asked a trifle anxiously.

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“I am. It’s perfectly good—good as any toadstool you can find.”

“Toadstool? You mean mushroom. Toadstools are poison.” Lem spoke the generally accepted idea of the relative qualities of the two varieties of fungi, with the same decision that nine people out of ten always do. But I knew toadstools that I could eat and enjoy as well as the finest mushroom, and I had none of the fear of poisoning that robs the pleasure of eating for most people. I knew a few varieties that were safe food, and knew them well; all other kinds I left strictly alone. From my father I had learned that there was no test for the edibility of mushroom or toadstool; that the silver spoon or coin that discolors if the cooking dish holds poisonous contents is no more than a superstition, and that the test by peeling the skin from the cap is not much better. I never tested fungi; if I wasn’t familiar with it, not for me; I passed it by. So, as we walked up to the shack, I reassured Lem, who shortly was sniffing delightedly at the odor from the frying-pan.

“This afternoon we must bake bread,” I said while we were hungrily putting the beefsteak—which earns its name by its taste—into busy mouths. “I’ve never had a chance to try out the oven.”

Lem paused in his labors long enough to look at my fireplace with wide eyes. Then he turned them on me, with:

“Where’s the oven? Or are you joshing?”

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“Under the stones there,” I pointed. “I wish we had something else to roast while the bread’s in.”

“There may be a fish on that line. Let’s haul her in after dinner and take a look?”

“Suits me. But all the fish I’ve caught are frying-pan size. I don’t know what’s out there in the lake.”

We found out three things that were in the lake when we brought in the trawl—three Dolly Varden trout, the smallest of which weighed four pounds or better, the biggest being large enough to crowd the oven for length. I’d never seen lake trout before, and these whoppers made me shout for joy! Lem, who was used to seafish, didn’t get so excited, although shining eyes told me how pleased he was with this initial success of his suggestion. All three fish were dead when we hauled them out, had drowned themselves in the struggle to get free.

“We’ll bake the two biggest,” I said, as we toted them back to camp. “The small boy we’ll fry for supper to-night.”

“You got plenty of salt, Ted?” asked Lem.

“Most of a big sack left. Why?”

“Let me show you how to put down fish for future eating—the way the Italian fishermen showed me,” he said. “If we bake those two big ones, half of ’em will be thrown away, spoiled. Bake the middle-sized one, and lay these others away for a rainy day.”

“Good, Lem! That’s the idea,” and I dug a small pit in the ground at his command, while he drew the fish

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and placed a handful of salt in the cavity. Scales, head, tail and fins were left on; and he placed them in the hole I'd made and told me to fill it with dirt. I wanted to wrap the fish in green leaves or something, but he thought that might start them wrong. "Just salt and dirt," he insisted.

We added one other important food product to our supply: pine nuts. That night, supper over, stomachs full of perfectly roasted trout stuffed with mushrooms, biscuits that were only slightly burned on the top, when I considered the results of the day's work, I could hardly believe that at morning I had dreaded a famine.





CHAPTER XII

“JUMPED!”

“**W**HEN I was housekeeping in my tin residence on North Beach,” Lem remarked that night before sleep, a reminiscent quality to the tone of his voice, “I started a garden, and if the cop on the beat hadn’t happened to lean up against that fence just at the place where a loose board would spring out to crack him in the calves, I’d ’a’ had some garden! Potatoes—I’d planted the parings—two onions that were started rotting, and a whole package of peas that I bought in a store. I found out

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afterward that they were sweet peas, and not vegetables at all, but as it turned out, that didn't matter.

"Over across the street where there was a factory with a hydrant out in front, I'd get water to wet my plants, and they came up fine. Every night I'd give them a five-gallon tin of water, and hoe them with a piece of iron which I nailed on a lath. When I was caught, that garden was up and thriving, and the peas were almost ready to blossom."

"What were you caught for, Lem?" I broke in.

"I don't know. Incurrig'ble delinkacy, they said. That's why the judge sent me to old Wayne."

"For making a garden?" I asked blankly.

"That and building the house; for living, too. And I didn't go to school. And for stealing water from the hydrant."

That last would be the crime; I could understand that, for the flumes at the mines, and irrigation ditches on the ranches are protected. Water is wealth at times, and in the big cities, which I knew as well as Lem knew the mountains, it would have unusual value. Although five gallons a day—or night, rather—wasn't much for a ditch or flume, it might be serious to a city factory. But Lem was continuing his garden reflections.

"I'd like to try it again. I was mighty fond of that farm of mine. Do you suppose, Ted, that I could have a farm here?"

“Jumped!”

“A garden? We haven’t any seeds, Lem.” It started me thinking, though.

“No potato parings? No onions?”

I smiled in the darkness. “Your one onion bulb would have grown no additional onions, if it grew at all, Lem. And we haven’t either onions or potatoes anyhow. Beans we can plant, but they’re slow. What you need are seeds from the store, radishes, lettuce, peas, turnips, carrots, and all the garden truck. You could spade up a piece on the flat below my ditch and irrigate from it, and there’s no doubt you’d have a good crop, for the soil is rich in the bottom,—wherever there is soil at all. Somehow, you must get to Susanville on Zim.”

“I’ll go; and I’ll get there,” he cried eagerly. “I’ve money, and, Ted, we’ll have a farm!” And most probably he dreamt of gardens all the night, for after we’d visited the traps next morning, without finding them disturbed, and had pulled in two more lake trout on the trawl, he wanted me to show him the place for his “farm.”

I hadn’t told Lem that I’d found gold in the creek. Though my suspicion of him had gone from my mind—rather, had been put away in a dark back corner of my mind—caution had kept me from either speaking of the discovery or showing him the work I was doing there. Whenever we had occasion to pass the dam, I led a wide détour and Lem had not been in sight of it before. Now I took him there, wondering if I were wise in do-

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ing so, and anxiously waited his comment as he looked over the work.

“What’s the big idea?” he said finally, when his eye had taken in dam, ditch and diggings. “Didn’t you like the way the creek went?”

“I’m changing it a bit,” I accepted his suggestion.

“Bringing it around to the house for private baths and running water in every room?” he continued. “Turn the faucet and get a shower.”

“So you needn’t bathe again in the lake,” I laughed. “There’d be the place for your garden, Lem,” and pointed below to a plot of perhaps half an acre of thick-tangled bushes and vines.

He whistled. “In that mess of brush, Ted? Why not one of the grassy places around it?”

“The brush—most of it’s wild roses, by the way—proves that there’s good soil underneath, deep enough for things to get roots down, and it is flat enough so you can irrigate. It will clear easier than it looks. I believe it’s the best piece under the ditch.”

Lem wanted to start at once on the clearing, but I had to disappoint him. I had planned to get out boards for sluices, and that would necessitate using the only axe—also Lem. I haltingly suggested it.

“I have to build a long box to carry the water, and I wanted to split planks from redwood to-day. Maybe we could start that clearing to-morrow.”

“Sure,” Lem said cheerfully. “Get the water fixed

“Jumped!”

right first. Won't it be swell not to have to carry it in a can?"

I felt mean and small holding back the wonderful news of my gold find, and he so willing to do anything I asked; but I was bred to caution by the hills, where one tells little of his affairs until he fully trusts—then tells, perhaps, too much. Several times I had caught myself on the point of spilling everything to Lem, and always had been stopped by the remembrance of Zim, the saddle, and Lem getting here the same day. So we went up into the forest where I felled one of the smaller of the redwoods, taking out a log about two feet in diameter and fifteen feet long, without a limb or knot on it, and a grain as straight as a chalk-line. With the axe and wedges I made of oak, I first quartered this log, then split planks from one section. It took Lem and me all day to get out two, and it was hard work. I needed six boards, sides and bottoms for thirty feet of sluices, and I felt sure another day would finish it. As we walked home, I explained to Lem.

“Well, there's no hurry-ups about the garden,” he agreed cheerfully. “We haven't any seed to put in, if it was cleared. When'll I start for Susanville, Ted?”

“Soon,” I promised vaguely. “We'll go back to the redwoods as soon as we've looked at the traps in the morning.”

At noon, when we'd been at the shack for a pick-up lunch, Lem had asked to be allowed free hand at getting

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supper, and I'd agreed, smiling a bit and wondering what he could concoct from the limited supplies. I gave no attention as he puttered about the fireplace during the nooning. Now, as we came close to the lean-to, he said:

"I've sort of planned a surprise for supper, Ted. Keep your eyes off things till I call you, will you?"

"Sure. I'm going to climb up Sentinel Rock, and take a look-see," I replied. "How long will it be?"

"Half an hour, I guess. I'll yell when it's ready," and he ran ahead to the shack while I went on to mount my observation post.

Every day, once a day at least, I had been up to the summit here, and looked anxiously down the lake at the little grove, searching for smoke. As on these former occasions, to-night discovered no sign of a fire in the log cabin, and my eyes came away to travel the circuit of lake and land. It was a beautiful evening. As May crept closer to the edge of summer, the days seemed to hate leaving the world, and each hung on a little longer for a later twilight. The sky was the blue of the wood violets, shot with golden bars of sunset; the lake was the sky's mirrored image; and the hills held all the tints and colors of the world.

Always there was peace for me in the magnificence of beauty of the mountains. Now I lay back in a hollow of the sun-warmed rock and feasted on its wonders, till

“Jumped!”

my eyes came to rest on a moving speck against the still hill, miles away, across the lake. Another and yet another of those tiny points, coming from a defile to move downward toward the water. Bears, I thought; then changed decision to deer, a buck and two does, probably, on their way to the evening drink. Lem hallooed, and I brought my eyes from the distant specks, to find foothold for the clamber down.

Supper—Lem dignified it with the name of dinner—started with a thick soup of beans, served in the tin cup and can, and it was fine! Thinking this was the surprise he had promised, I ate more than I should, for it was one of the changes in diet I had not thought to prepare. In fact, my principal kitchen utensil was the frying-pan, which someone has called “the advance guard of civilization.” Lem taught me, then and afterward, its proper minor place in camp cooking.

After we had finished the soup, Lem brought on in the miner’s pan a concoction of fish, rice, nuts chopped fine, and brown gravy over all, that seemed the best food I had ever eaten. It didn’t have more than a hint of the too familiar taste of fish, nor of anything I’d ever eaten. At the first mouthful, I turned a happy face to cry to him:

“Why, this is grand, Lem! What is it?”

“Chopini,” he grinned. “The Italian fishermen taught me, when I was keeping house there by the docks. Only, they use corn-meal—polenta, they call it—and

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have clams, mussels, and other sea things. Like it, do you?"

"Best ever! And the bread is fine."

"Want to turn the cooking over to me?"

"Do I? Lem, if you'll take over that job, I'll wash all the dishes and make the bed and everything." And that was the arrangement we made, much to the benefit of our meals, as well as the safeguarding of our digestive apparatus.

We went armed next morning on the trip to the trap. If there were deer around that lake, it was wisdom to have a weapon close at hand. It was out of season, but there is an unwritten law—miners' law, it is called—that permits a prospector to shoot for his own eating, not to sell or even give away, during the closed months. It was the same about trapping quail, or, I believe, catching trout on a set-line; the law on the statute books, and the law as practised in the courts of a mining county, were very different. Nobody would think of charging any wrong in this method of preserving life in the wilderness, any more than I should consider for a minute shooting even a dove out of season if I were down in the valley.

A twittering in the heart of the thicket where our cage-trap was set, started a twittering in the hearts of Lem and me as we came to the opening we had made, and we approached cautiously to look through the withes to find four birds, a cock and three hens, running around

“Jumped!”

inside, poking their heads between the twigs, and never once thinking to look down at their feet where escape lay. Lem looked big-eyed at the gray cock, with its black hood, white-banded, and long feather crest, the hens, brownish of body, shorter plumed; all four birds round and fat as butter-balls; whistled, and said:

“Now we’ve caught ’em, how we going to catch ’em, Ted?” And it was a fair question. There was but the one opening to the cage, and it was not nearly big enough to admit either of us. I lay on the ground and reached an arm through, but the quail kept out of my reach, and when Lem tried to scare them toward me, they ran and flew every place else inside the enclosure. It seemed finally that I’d have to use the revolver, which would be a pity, as it might blow a bird nearly to pieces at so short a range, besides it would waste four precious rounds of ammunition.

“Let me try,” said Lem, and when I’d given him my place in the narrow approach, he got a shoulder through the entrance, and I saw he had in his hand a piece of fish-line with a noose at the end. “Now keep quiet, and let them settle down,” he instructed, and a moment later, the loop was cleverly tossed, a hen dove into his hand, assisted by a jerk of the cord, and Lem passed a bird back to me, with, “You do the killing, Ted. I can’t.”

One by one he lassoed them all, while I wrung their necks and drew them, and then we went over the line of twitch-ups. One had been sprung, but there was noth-

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ing dangling in the noose. I guessed some animal had managed to touch the trigger from behind, or reached with a long paw across the enclosure, for the bait was gone, and a rabbit couldn't have taken it without being caught. There were so many cottontails in the gully not interested at all, seemingly, in our traps that I decided to change the lure. As they didn't care for Indian turnip, I offered a kind of mushroom that I'd seen them nibbling greedily, now and then.

That day we finished splitting out the planks and by noon of the next, we had them hauled and piled beside the ditch, Zim with the lariat tied to the saddle being the motive power. And that was as far as I could go with construction till we had nails, and nails were a part of the long list of things to be bought at Susanville.

As day after day had gone by without sign of anyone coming to dispute my right to the gold-find, without a single streamer of smoke rising from the deserted cabin at evening, my apprehensions had left, just as the suspicions of Lem had gradually been lulled to sleep. I climbed Sentinel Rock twice a day, but I did it more from habit than the expectation of seeing anything to worry me. And so with Lem now, as he sat on the pile of planks, wiping perspiration from his brow with his shirt sleeve, I had forgotten to be cautious, as I said:

“You can get away early to-morrow morning, on Zim. I'll go down the lake with you, and get you

“Jumped!”

started right, and with this map I've drawn, you shouldn't lose the trail. Maybe somebody has been over it already this spring, so following the tracks will make it certain. The list of what's to get is on the back of the map,” and I handed him the paper. With a glance at it, he cried:

“Seeds? But seeds are mine, Ted. I buy the seeds.”

“You buy everything on the list, Lem,” I said, reaching down in my trousers hip-pocket for my poke.

“But, Ted——” Lem's voice was troubled. “I haven't—I haven't money enough—I didn't know——”

I held out the heavy poke. “There's five or six ounces in here, more than you'll need; and plenty more where that came from.”

He took it, wondering, and loosening the leather thongs, pulled open its mouth; and his mouth opened wider, as his eyes saw the contents.

“Gold! Why, it's gold!” he cried.

“It is, Lem; gold-dust. Use what you need, and if you see anything else you think we ought to have, not on the list, you can get it.”

“But—how do you use it, Ted?” Again I had forgotten that he was from the city, where they don't buy things with gold-dust. “They'll just take it away from me.”

I laughed. “At the store—wherever you buy—there'll be a balance scales, and they'll weigh out what gold you owe.”

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“But they’ll cheat the eyes out of me. How’ll I know what they take?”

“Don’t worry. They’ll be honest enough, but if you want to check up on them, figure an ounce of gold at twenty dollars. That’s close enough; each pennyweight a dollar.”

“Sounds like a drug-store,” Lem groaned. “But I’ll do my best. And the seeds for the garden I buy myself.”

I looked Lem over. He’d been nearly a year saving up that eight dollars and a half, a nickel and dime at a time. I’d taken out a hundred dollars from one little hole in the ground in a few hours; and Lem was insisting on buying the seeds for our garden!

A flush of shame came to my face at the thought of my distrust of him; the suspicions that had kept my tongue stilled from telling him the truth. I turned away, pointing, as I said quickly:

“See that hole in the creek bottom, Lem? That’s gold; lined with gold. I took what you have there from it; three shovelfuls of the bottom mud. I’ve, maybe, thousands and thousands of dollars of gold in the sands I’ve uncovered. That’s what the dam’s for; the planks will make a sluice-box; the ditch is the runway. I’m rich, most probably.”

“I’m glad, Ted. Glad for you.” It came instantly, and Lem had grabbed my hand and was shaking it hard. “What was that?”

“Jumped!”

We both heard it; both turned to look. Voiceless, both of us stared.

A man came from our lean-to, his arms loaded, and walked down to the flat. Again came the crash of things dropped, as he carelessly flung his burden to the pile on the ground. Another man right behind him tossed my skillet and the gold-pan onto the heap.

“Why, they’re taking your things out of the hut!” Lem whispered, his hand clutching my arm.

“Yes,” I said bitterly. “They’re jumping my claim—and I forgot to bring the rifle!”





CHAPTER XIII

A QUESTION OF RIGHTS

THE men down there by the hut had seen us. Quickly, one of them turned and hastened inside. The other waved an arm to us, and halloed.

“Maybe they’re not after your claim,” Lem suggested, nervously. “Maybe they’re after me.”

I had not thought of that; it was possible. “Run for the redwoods,” I said. “Hide there in a hollow tree. I’ll find out what they’re up to, then I’ll get you tonight.”

A Question of Rights

“N-o-t, not!” he cried. “We stand together on this. Come on; let’s get down to ’em.”

There seemed nothing else to do. I started, leading Zim, while Lem with the pick over his shoulder followed. As we approached the man who waited us, I called out in as natural a voice as I could manage:

“Hello there, mister.”

“Hello you.” He answered in a high-keyed voice that quavered as much as my own. “You boys been living in this linter?”

“Yes. That’s our hut.”

“What’s it doing on my land?”

The surprising question took away my breath for a moment. “Your—land?” I gasped, finally. “Your—why—why, this is government land!”

“Not by a jugful, it ain’t. This here strip of valley belongs to me—James G. Gallup, of Susanville, California—which is me. You boys are trespassing on my property. I’m orderin’ you, accordin’ to law, to git off pronto—understand?”

All my castles in the air came down in a tumble about me. The find that was to make me rich was on another’s land—on this man’s property. It was his, not mine.

“I—I didn’t know,” I said, almost choking. “I thought it was government land—that all this lakeside was government land.”

“This half-section, includin’ the creek flats, an’ way

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up to them redwoods, is my homestead filing, and I don't want any campers on it, either. You an' the other kid git off quick—see?"

"We can stay the night?" I asked, trying to gather my scattered wits. "It's too late to get anywhere before evening, and ——"

"'Tain't too late to git off my property." Gallup's voice was growing stronger as mine weakened. "Pack and hike; that's what you kids do. Me an' my pardner'll need the hut here."

"But I built the hut."

"Yes; built it on my land without right or permit. Get that? Without right or permit." He repeated the words with a sort of sleek pleasure at their sound. Lem had said no word during the discussion, standing at my shoulder, but upon his face was that look which had caused me to distrust him, a hard glint of the eye, the same cunning, fighting light I have caught in the eyes of a trapped animal when he makes his last strike for freedom. Now he spoke for the first time, with a firmness I had never observed in him before, and his voice was cold as the ice on the peaks.

"You have papers to prove what you're saying?" he asked.

"That's none of your business ——"

"Hold on." Lem shifted the pick from his shoulder in a suggestive way that made Gallup start nervously. "That *is* business—our business. You're taking the

A Question of Rights

house we built, and we want better than just your say-so that you have a legal right here.”

“What you want is a clubbing, and you’ll get one.” Gallup’s words were bolder than his actions. He made no move toward Lem, who leaning on the pick-handle, watched him through half-closed eyes. I could see a glitter behind the lids. His life had taught him to fight men, had given him keen wits, had placed on his face the stamp of the continual battle of wits. But I did not distrust it now; that little doubt of him that had lingered always at the back of my mind disappeared as he began this fight for me. He answered Gallup’s threat with a quiet:

“Don’t start anything you’re not sure you can finish, Mister Gallup. We’re asking only what’s fair. If you own this creek, show us.”

The man hesitated, but he was evidently impressed by Lem’s voice and the pick. After a muttered something I couldn’t catch, he turned toward the hut, saying:

“I’ll show ye proofs, dang you! Wait here and I’ll get ’em.”

“We’ll wait, all right,” Lem promised, and as soon as the man was out of hearing, sent me an undertone from the corner of his mouth, “Look through that pile they brought out. Find your rifle—quick!”

I ran to the little heap I had watched them dump, caught up the rifle, threw the lever to see that it was

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loaded, and came back to Lem. He seemed to be thinking deeply, that curious, keen face screwed up into a deep scowl. I stood beside him and waited. Only Zim seemed free from care and apprehension, as he nibbled the grass and looked at the little donkeys that had usurped his pasture lands.

Gallup came out of the shack and walked swiftly toward us. In his hands was a rifle, and at sight of it, I lifted the one I had been leaning on, its butt to the ground. Gallup saw the action, paused for an instant, then came on more slowly. He shifted the gun to his left hand, and then I saw he was carrying some legal looking documents, which he held out as he approached. Still holding the rifle, my right hand about its breech, I took them and opened the topmost paper. In the first glance, I saw that he was telling truth; he was the rightful possessor of the property; and I was a trespasser. It was a notice of a homestead filing, a form with which I was thoroughly familiar, for I had seen many at Jamesville.

I passed the paper to Lem, and looked at the second slip, the land office receipt for the fees, an unimportant detail; and the last was an affidavit of some kind, a more lengthy writing. I had only glanced at it when Gallup's queer, high-keyed voice broke in:

"Enough, ain't it, to prove you've got no business here?"

I looked at him. "It seems to be all correct, Mr.

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Gallup." I handed Lem the two sheets. "We'll get off your property at once."

"In a minute—in a minute," from Lem, never looking up from his reading. "Give me time to p'roose these, can't you?"

While we waited, Gallup impatient enough, I studied him. He was not a mountaineer or a valley rancher. He was small, thin, wizened, with the face of a rat, running strongly to nose; shifty eyes, and a slit for a mouth, the lips working nervously all the time to show a few long, yellow teeth; his chin ran back so fast that one couldn't tell where it started to be neck, a protuberant Adam's apple helping the deception. And his clothes were never made for wear in the hills. The shirt had been white cotton, the sleeves with starched cuffs held up by elastics above the elbows; trousers, gray, badly soiled and spotted; a derby hat; and shoes of russet brown, now almost white with dust. Man and rig-out gave me the impression of a merchant or professional man in a small town, and not a prosperous man or town. Not honest, either, I'd have added, only I felt that I was hardly in a position to judge. It didn't seem square, his taking my claim and hut, even though legal formalities had been complied with.

"Guess these are O. K.," said Lem finally, but although Gallup promptly put out his hand, Lem passed them to me. And I saw that his finger indicated a place on the upper paper. He went on talking, as I read

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what was there. "Mr. Gallup, you've got a fine piece of farm land. I've had some experience farming, and I advise you to put in potatoes, onions and sweet peas,"—mechanically I was listening while my eyes followed the script—"on that wild rose thicket there up the creek, about half an acre in it. Miner's lettuce and beefsteak mushrooms grow wild, so you won't have to put them in. However, sir, if you'll let me suggest"—he held the bewildered Gallup, who must have thought him crazy, a hand on his shirt-sleeve, and was pointing his gaze across to the slope—"I'd suggest that the pine-nut orchard be put in on yonder hill." Lem was making time for me to read every word of the affidavit.

I did read it, while he talked absurdities to a man who was no more dense or confused than I; for I did not find in my careful perusal of the document what Lem's eyes had found in a glance. When I handed it, with the other papers, to Gallup, I knew only that it was the copy of a petition and affidavit, asking that the government throw open this section of the National Forest Reserve to settlement. It was hours later that I learned what Lem knew, and was glad he had given me opportunity to study it.

"We'll be on our way," Lem finished with Gallup. "Pack and hike, as you put it. Come along, Ted." He was quite cheerful.

"You'll find your stuff all together there," squeaked Gallup. "We piled it for ye. We aim to be all legal

A Question of Rights

and square, and if anything's missing, sing out an' we'll make it right. Glad you're going to take it sensible, and no fuss. Good-bye," and he went back to the hut.

Sadly enough I led Zim to the little stack, all that was left of my dreams; together we packed him, neither saying a word; and set off down the lake toward the trail that led back to Jamesville. We had gone some distance when Lem, walking beside me, glanced back, then said:

"Notice how Gallup's pardner kept out of sight all the time?" I nodded. I couldn't find words yet. "I'd like to know what he's done to make him afraid to show his face."

I gave no answer. Back there, I could see the smoke from my stubby little chimney, the green sides of my hut against the brown rocks beyond. Even in the short time that lean-to had sheltered me, it had grown to seem like home, and I was sad enough at leaving it. Lem seemed to read my thoughts, for he bleated:

"'Be it ever so humble ——'"

"Shut up!" I snapped.

"'There's no place like '—our hut,'" he finished, laughing. "Come out of it, Ted. Take a brace. The worst is yet to come."

"I'll be all right—in a minute."

"Take your time. Ted, are you game to follow me?"

"Where to?"

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“Take a chance, can’t you? Follow and say nothing.”

“Very well,” I agreed. He couldn’t lead me anywhere I hated worse to go than Jamesville. There was even a little urge of hope in his suggestion. “Go ahead, I’ll follow.”

But there was no change in our direction with him leading. All the short balance of the afternoon, Lem strode around the side of the lake toward the trail at its end. When I had come out of my grouch and was anxious to question, he had seemingly just entered his, for he shut me up with:

“Talk later on, Ted; regular gab-fest then. I want to work my think-factory now.” And he relapsed into silence.

It was nightfall when we passed the deserted cabin, dark and grim in the black oaks; and the stars were out in full brilliance as we came into the main trail where it rounded onto the lake’s edge. I broke the silence to suggest:

“Better camp here, eat a bite, and wait for the moon to come up.”

“Later,” Lem answered, shortly, turning toward the west—and Jamesville. Despondently I followed. Somehow, I’d hoped, he would find a way that didn’t mean the back-track and failure. He added, “Can’t you make that nag walk beside you, instead of behind?”

“The trail’s too narrow.”

“Let him walk in the grass. It won’t kill him.”

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“Why should he?” I was in a mood to argue.

“To make hoof-prints. He isn’t leaving any on the hard trail.”

“Hoof-prints?” I echoed. “What do you want of hoof-prints?”

“For James G.—the G standing for Goober, a peanut—Gallup, and Pardner Man-Afraid-of-His-Shadow to follow. They’re going to make sure we’re gone, and we want them dead sure of it. So let there be tracks.”

“And we aren’t going to Jamesville?” I cried joyfully.

“Whoa!” Lem commanded, and Zim stopped abruptly. “Ted, you old snail, would I be going back to old Wayne? Would I lead to Jamesville?”

I was so happy at the hope he gave that I didn’t care what discredit he threw at my intellect. It was true that he thought more quickly, more readily than I, and his experience had been with people, while mine had been with things. Unconsciously, I had looked to him as the leader from the moment we began talking to Gallup. Now I questioned eagerly as to his plans, to be met with a firm, “Leave it to me. You keep your eyes peeled for a place where we can double back without being followed by a trailer. That’s up to you, for I don’t know how keen their eyes are, or what tracks they can see.”

“You want to swing back, but leave Gallup, if he follows, to believe we have gone on to Jamesville?”

“Yep.”

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“Easily done, Lem. About half a mile ahead is where Zim broke into the trail the night he ran away from the mountain lion. We’ll bring Zim up to that place to hitch up the tracks, and if Gallup or Pardner want to follow, they can keep right on Zim’s trail to Ophir Creek. Is that far enough?”

“Plenty. How do we turn back without its showing?”

“I’ll fix it,” I promised, and we went ahead. At the place where Zim had come from the woods, we turned in, and I went back to straighten out the broken brush and remove all signs of our leaving or Zim’s old entrance. Lem looked on, approved the result, then suggested camp and supper. I took the packs from Zim, and was about to open out the blankets, but Lem stopped me.

“Just here till the moon rises,” he said. “Time for a snack of cold biscuits, and a pull at the canteen. Rest your legs while you can, for we’ve a long tramp before dawn.” And he dropped on a fallen log.

“Where are we going, Lem?” I asked, handing him his share of the food. But his reply was the same as before.

“Leave it to me.”

After a time spent in munching and meditation, I asked another question.

“Lem, do you suppose Gallup is the man who was hiding in the deserted cabin?”

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“No. Bears would eat him. The chipmunks would scare him to death. He’d be worse off than I’d be, for James Goober-peanuts Gallup is from the city—and his city is that metropolis of the mountain peaks, Susanville.”

“But his partner ——”

“Pardner hid in the cabin, and now hides in your hut. A grand little old hider is Pardner. And he stole Zim, and brought Zim back. He knows where your gold lies in the creek, spied on you when you was panning it out. Pardner can’t take a homestead, can’t do business for himself, can’t do much else but hide out, so he rides Zim away to dig up Gallup, who can. Pardner is a very silent pardner—for a reason.”

“What’s the reason, Lem?”

“When I was keeping house in the Italian quarter of San Francisco, I kept a tin can full of water beside the stove and used to grab it suddenly at times and dump it all over the stove; or if I was out weeding my garden, I’d drop on all fours and scurry under a pile of corrugated iron. The reason was the same as Pardner’s, or I miss my guess. The bulls. The cops. The minions of the law.”

“You think he’s dodging arrest?”

“He acts as I acted when I wasn’t anxious to meet a policeman. But leave go this Sherlock-Holmesing stuff till we get into permanent camp. Think all you can now, hike when you can and as hard as you can, but

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let's hold the chatter till we get fixed for to-morrow's business. Then, if it isn't time to be doing, I'll talk you black and blue," and his face lighted up with that irresistible grin.

As the moon was beginning to show, we started, headed back to the lake, but making a wide circuit to cross the trail to Susanville far to the east. I knew now where Lem was leading. He was going to our valley, but aiming to hit it above the redwood forest. As this was the route I had taken that first day, I made quick time over the rough going, and we came into the ravine a little after midnight, and had soon entered the big trees. Here in the shadows we stumbled along till Lem said finally:

"Any good place now will suit me for a camp. I'm tired of kicking down these trees."

"Hold Zim till I look about a bit," and I began poking around the bases of some of the larger trunks. Soon I found what I wanted, went back and helped Lem unpack the horse, tied him, and told Lem to follow me.

"Duck your head here," I said. "Now you're in your house," and scratching a match, I held it above my head to illumine a great hollow center of a tree, ten feet across its greatest diameter, and running up indefinitely. "As soon as I hang a blanket over the door, we'll have a fire."

A few minutes later, a little blaze in the center of our floor was lighting the interior, and Lem was almost

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chortling with glee at this house with a chimney all prepared for us.

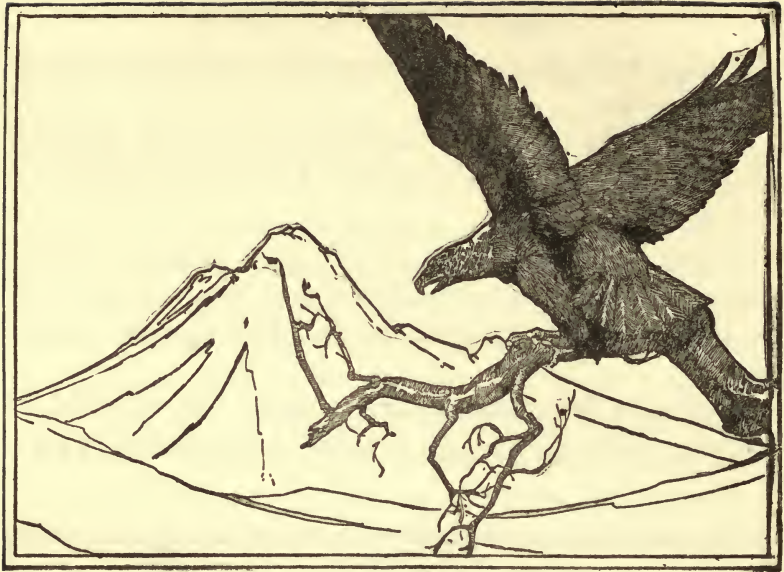
“Why,” he cried, “it’s almost as fine as my place on the bay front in San Francisco! Let’s have coffee?”

“Keep us awake.”

“That’s why. We’ve got to keep awake. You’re going to listen—ask questions if you want. I’m going to talk. Then we’re going to do. Put that pot on the fire.”

I filled it from the canteen, placed a big handful of coffee in, then as it began to sizzle, Lem started to talk.





CHAPTER XIV

A CONFERENCE IN A TREE

“**P**EANUTS GALLUP has just one good argument for taking your claim, Ted,” and Lem Strong, seated on an end of the blanket beside the fire, had begun the conference of the hollow redwood.

“What’s that?” I asked promptly.

“A rifle. That rifle is his right, law, and legal possession. And, if he knows how to use it, it’s a good argument.”

“It’s not an argument—no right at all,” I declared

A Conference in a Tree

hotly. "You can't just steal things—even in the mountains—with or without a rifle."

"Goober Gallup and Pardner did this afternoon."

"But he had the papers—a legal filing——"

"Nothing but a rifle that carried any weight—not with me, anyhow. Did you read what I stuck my thumb on?"

"I did. It was a petition—the customary form of petition and affidavit for a homestead filing on Forest Reserve."

"Where I pointed, did you read it there?" Lem insisted.

"Yes. He swore that to the best of his knowledge and belief the land was of more value for agricultural purposes than for timber or mineral."

"Or mineral," Lem repeated. "And that, so far as he knew, there was no mineral of value on the tract."

"Yes; but maybe he didn't know."

"The date of that filing was May twelfth, this month. What day did you find the gold, Ted?"

"Last Saturday. That would be the tenth." I began seeing light. "You mean he knew there was gold before he made the filing?"

"He did. That affidavit is just a bunch of lies. How much good farm-land is there in that half section he's homesteaded?"

"A few acres, maybe twenty out of the three hundred

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and twenty he claims. The rest is too rocky for any use."

"Then he don't get it, Ted; and you do," Lem declared positively, and got up to pour us the coffee which had boiled sufficiently. I sat, tin cup in hand, and thought. Theoretically, Lem might be right; but I knew of a number of hillside homesteads that were no better farm-land than Gallup's; that had been taken-up because of their mineral chances; that the Government had given title to, regardless of this clause in the law of settlement. I told Lem of them.

"That's another story," he replied. "Those farms were never on a Forest Reserve, and that makes the difference."

"How?"

"Before Gallup's application is accepted, the Government must hear protests against the opening of the land to settlement, and the applicant must prove that his affidavit is facts. I learned that from the fine print on the paper, Ted."

"And I must protest?"

"As loud as you can yell. You're to be the protest-
ingest protester in all Plumas County. You're going to get somebody from the land-office—somebody in authority—to look over this tract, and he'll learn just how true that affidavit is."

"That'll be the forest ranger."

"Very well. We'll show him over the place, and

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we'll show him valuable minerals, and unvaluable rocks. We'll make Gallup's farm look like a hunk of Swiss cheese—full of holes." He tested his tin of coffee to find it too hot. "Why didn't Gallup file a mine claim, Ted?"

"He couldn't. You have to discover mineral, describe the find and mark your claim."

"I see. But you can."

"No-o." I hated to say it. "I haven't marked my find, Lem."

"You haven't! Why—for the love of Mike, why not?"

I stammered, but I got it out. "I was afraid to. I didn't want you to know. I'd have done it to-morrow—after telling you about it."

Lem sat down again at the far end of the blanket. He gulped at the coffee, then sputtered it out of a burned mouth. I heard, but I wasn't looking at him. My eyes were on the ground, ashamed. Here Lem was saving my claim for me, and I'd been afraid he might steal it.

"I guess you were wise, Ted," he finally broke out. "When they arrested me for keeping house in my tin shanty on Taylor Street, the cop proved in court that I was incorrig'ble. That's pretty bad. But, Ted, I never stole candy from children. I never shoved a legal document into a baby's face and made him give over his gold teething-ring."

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I deserved it. "Lem," I explained, "your getting in the same afternoon Zim did, and what they said about you back at Jamesville, and your running away from the court order, and all, it made me afraid to trust you. I was wrong; felt wrong all the time. And I'm not going to kick at paying for being wrong. First, I want to apologize to you. I'm sorry, Lem. Will you forgive me?"

"Will I?" He was shaking my hand so heartily it made my fingers ache. "Forget it, Ted. Wow! This coffee's hot!"

The face he made as he tried to swallow the scalding liquid relieved the tension, and we both laughed. When he had recovered his breath, he asked:

"Just how do you mark a gold claim?"

"A post or cairn of rock at discovery, with the notice buried at its base. Then four corner posts, smoothed on their outer surface and plainly labeled."

"And what time is it now?"

Eagerly I looked at the watch. I caught the idea. Again Lem was going to save me the claim. "Ten minutes of one," I cried, jumping to my feet. "We'll have time, Lem. Let's go."

"Finish your coffee," he laughed. "A few minutes more won't matter, and I'm not through talking. We'll mark your claim before they do, and by daylight you'll be on Zim headed for Susanville and a land-office. You'll make a mineral filing, put in a protest against

A Conference in a Tree

Gallup's homestead claim, ask for a forest ranger to look it over, and buy me some garden seeds."

"I'll do all that," I agreed. "And you'll come with me and help."

"N-o-t, not! In the first place, I can't walk as fast as Zim can gallop; in the second, I'm going to prevent Mr. Goober Gallup and Pardner from finding gold on their farm."

"How? They know of my find—can walk right to it."

"Oh, cut it, Ted! Listen. At daybreak, when you're galloping Susan-wards, I'm going to be lying somewhere up in these rocks with that shooter of yours, and whichever of Gallup and Pardner gets within a hundred yards of that dam is going to think steel hornets have broken loose. I'm going to stop gold-finding and claim-marking with the rifle. Why not?"

I began shaking my head before he was half through this speech, shaking a negative as decided as words could be. Whatever Gallup had done of dishonesty against me and my claim, I was not ready to resort to such means to save it. I answered Lem with a quiet:

"I won't stand for any killing, Lem."

"Killing?" his eyes were dancing. "Who talks of killing? I couldn't hit a man with that rifle if he was fifty feet away, let alone fifteen hundred. I'll promise you never to kill a one of 'em."

I laughed as I poured him another cup of coffee, with:

Black Boulder Claim

“Drink and forget your wild dreams of slaughter. Rather than get back here to find you shot, or the shooter of someone, I’d lose a million claims.”

“I wasn’t bothering over your claim; I was thinking of my garden,” Lem sighed, forgetting again that coffee comes hot. “Christmas Eve! Molten lead!” and he dropped the can and its contents. I picked up the former, straightening out its dented rim, with:

“I’ll need this. Wonder where I put its cover?” And I began a search through the sack.

“But that’s my drinking cup,” Lem protested.

“Use mine. This tin baking-powder can has ceased to be a lowly drinking vessel, and from now on, is the container of the notice that makes you and me rich, Lem.” I had found the top, also a piece of paper and the stub of a pencil. “What do we call our claim?” I finished, as I brought the writing materials to the light of the fire.

“*Our* claim?” Lem’s eyes were popping.

“Sure—ours. What do we name it? It has to have a name.”

“The Hot Biscuit,” Lem suggested promptly. And I wrote:

“The Hot Biscuit gold placer claim, on a creek not named, on the east shore of Eagle Lake, about eight miles from its southern end. Discovery made here of placer gold on the tenth day of May, 1919. We claim one hundred feet above discovery, and five hundred feet be-

A Conference in a Tree

low discovery, as marked by cairns and posts. Signed ——” and I scrawled my own name and handed the paper to Lem. “Put your sig right below mine,” I said.

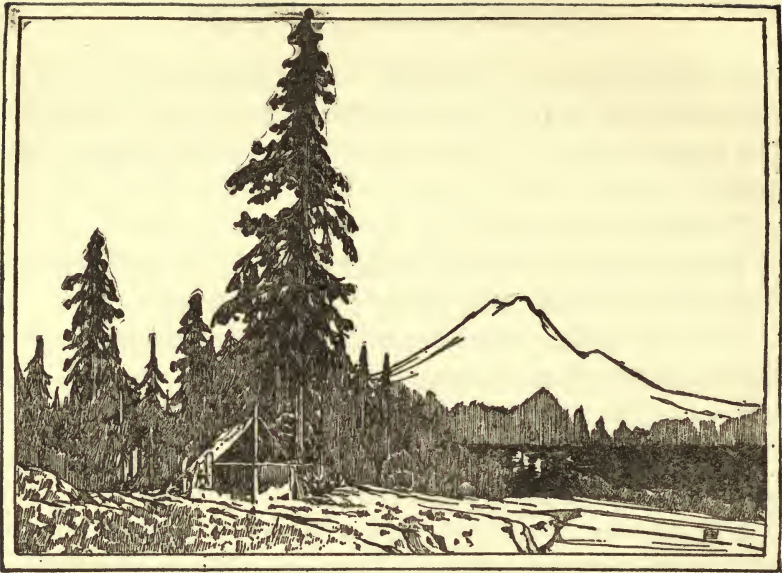
“But—I—me ——”

I thrust the pencil into his hand. “You’re half-owner of the Hot Biscuit; you’re my partner. Sign.”

With eyes that were dancing and a trembling hand, Lem placed a large Lemuel P. Strong upon the paper. Then he slipped a hand into mine and said soberly:

“I thank you, Ted Wilson. I’ll never forget you did this. Now I’ve got a home.”





CHAPTER XV

A LYNX INTERFERES

AN hour later I had added another baking-powder can to the thousands in rock cairns, and in the ground at the foot of posts, marking the hopes of prospectors throughout the Sierras. The "Hot Biscuit" placer claim had been officially located. I had worked, while Lem, rifle in hand, watched the hut where the jumpers slept; and I had been quiet.

The moon, though low hanging in the west, still managed to cut into the brush so that Lem's suggestion that we wind up the night's adventures with a visit to the

A Lynx Interferes

traps was reasonable and wise. I intended to leave him the bacon and flour, but a little fresh food would improve conditions in the redwood pantry.

“And the set-line,” he added. “Let’s haul it in, and see what’s on it.”

I vetoed that promptly; as Lem would say, I didn’t want to start anything, and we’d need to pass close to the sleeping men to get to the trawl. “We’ll make ’em a present of that,” I said, leading the way to the quail trap.

It was empty, and we separated there, to meet at the hollow tree. Lem was to look at the twitch-ups on the north side of the creek, I the others, for we needed to hurry, as daylight came early.

I watched Lem safely into the thickets, then cut across to the first of my string of traps to find it empty and un-sprung. Just beyond, in a growth of lilacs and cascara, was the trap which once before I had found dangling without visible reason. As I came up to it now, I could see that the strong sapling was held down part way by some weight which low brush kept from view. I was pushing through to it when a noise and the shaking of the sapling stopped me. More cautiously then, I worked my way to where I could see the contents of the trap. In the noose was a lynx, caught by the neck and shoulder, one front paw through the line preventing the slip-knot from tightening to choke him. Too heavy a weight for the sapling to lift clear, his hind paws rested

Black Boulder Claim

on the ground, and he was making vicious swings with his loose foreleg in impotent efforts to free himself.

Never had I seen an animal so enraged. His struggles had merely tightened the hold of the trap. The strong fish-line and stout sapling held him so he could not squirm loose, nor was he able to reach and cut the cord with his claws. With eyes contracted, tufted ears laid back, hair of the spine standing up, he snarled and spit at me in venomous hate. He was as large as a good sized dog, with all the power and muscle a cat that size would have.

Instinctively I took a backward step or two, a bit startled. Then, laying aside the rifle, I lifted the shovel I carried in both hands, intending to bring its blade down on the beast's head and brain him. That swing would have ended matters then and there, had he not dodged like a cat. Instantly he sprang at my throat. The sharp edge of the shovel had cut the cord.

I went backward down to my knees with the force of the impact, but the shovel handle I still held kept him from my neck, and his teeth closed in the flesh of the left shoulder, while his rear claws ripped into the thigh. Dropping the shovel, I reached for the throat, and my two hands met in the thick fur that ruffed his neck like heavy whiskers. Desperately bracing myself with one leg behind me, I closed thumbs and fingers upon his throat. If I could only shut off breath to make

A Lynx Interferes

him unlock his teeth before the ripping claws found a more vital part of me.

The long fur blocked the power of my clutching fingers. The muscles of the left arm were being paralyzed by the stinging pain of clenched teeth at the shoulder. Slowly I was being forced back and down by the strength of the attack and the beast's weight, and once down I was lost; a quick shift of his teeth to my throat would end it.

Breathing in gasps, I strained every muscle to recover my balance, to strengthen the hold of the bracing leg, slipping in the grass, to find surer grip for my fingers in the tough neck muscles. With all the reserve I could muster, I forced the big cat away from me so that his claws could not rip the flesh. Though his teeth still held in my shoulder, and the claws of his forepaws were sunk in my back, I was free for the moment from the agony and danger of those slashing hind legs; and my thumbs, shifting lower beneath the jowls, found better grip to close against fingers on windpipe and jugular.

Now it was a question of endurance; could I maintain the pressure? Would my muscles obey the impulse long enough to force loose that locked jaw? Every ounce of strength I had was already in the effort, and I was weakening fast. Then I felt my antagonist give an inch, and somehow I strengthened. There was relax in the surging paws. I took new hold on the sod with the foot that supported the brace, and I gained that inch

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the lynx gave. My thumb against the larynx stiffened to dig a bit deeper. In the cat's strained sinews was the tremor of clogged breath. If I could hold a minute more I had won. But a minute was eternity.

Then my left arm refused longer to obey my will. Just as I had felt the slackened effort of the beast, so now he felt mine, and releasing his teeth from their hold, struggled forward for the throat-grip. A few inches was all the gain he needed, and my left arm, helplessly dangling, gave him claw-hold to climb. I looked into red eyes so close to mine that I could see the desperation in their bloodshot, popping gaze, as I added a last mite of pressure to my hand in his throat. What his eyes read in mine I do not know, but I had won. Not the fraction of an inch nearer did he come, and I watched his tongue curl back between the open fangs, the slaver drip from his jaws, the eyes roll up; felt the struggle cease in a convulsive final tremor; held him, inanimate at arm's length for an instant; then toppled over on his dead body.

Lem found me there just at daybreak, after he had gone back to the hollow tree and waited for what seemed hours to him. A hatful of water in my face brought me to, and with him on one side and the shovel for a cane, I was able to limp to the redwood. Though I had lost considerable blood, and the flesh of arms and leg was badly torn, no bones had been crushed, and the only serious wound was the bite in my shoulder. Already it

A Lynx Interferes

was inflamed, purpled, and the punctures of the teeth were not bleeding at all; nor could I raise the arm. I knew that something must be done to start the flow of blood, and cleanse the wound of infection.

“Help me off with these rags, Lem,” I said. “Strip me quick and get me into the creek.”

“To freeze?” His face was white, his grin had gone. “Why, it’ll kill you, Ted. You’re clawed wide open.”

“This bite has to be started bleeding, and in a hurry. Don’t talk ——” I was already loosening buttons. “Get busy and help.”

He shuddered, but went at the job with nimble fingers, cutting away with a knife where cloth had closed with the wound too tightly to be lifted. Some of the scratches on my forearm were clear to the bone, and the thigh had been deep-ripped in a number of places. Both bites and scratches needed cold water, and lots of it. Stretched out in a shallow pool, shivering so that my teeth rattled like the seeds in a dry gourd, I let the icy current flow over all my body to open the wounds that had clotted and start the blood again. It soothed the pain, but on the bank Lem suffered for me.

“Christmas Eve!” he shivered. “If I was you, I’d be an icicle!”

“Lem,” I said, “light a fire inside the tree, a big fire, and put a full pot of coffee on to boil. Then bring me a blanket,” and I lay and wondered how long I could stand the cold. When finally he helped me from the

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water, wrapped my big blanket around me, and half carried me to the side of a blaze that was fast making an oven of our hollow tree, I was sure that I had washed away all danger of poison in the wounds. With my spare shirt ripped up for bandages, the wounds were rudely dressed with fir balsam to soothe them, and I began to regain control of my chattering teeth.

Lem had found two cottontails in the traps he had visited, and after we had drunk our coffee, he started making them into a stew. I showed him how to skin the little animals, and then suggested that he slip away down to the place of the struggle and bring back the lynx. "It'll make a dandy skin," I said, "and help for bed covering."

"But I couldn't get it off," Lem objected. "Why, Ted, I couldn't even skin-the-cat!"

"That's just what you'll do," I laughed. "It's as easy as a rabbit—easier, for the hide is tougher. Go get it, Lem; it's too valuable to lose."

He turned to the door, then stopped. "Ted," he said, "would you mind wising me as to why you didn't shoot that lynx, instead of letting him use you for a beefsteak?"

"They'd have heard the shot—Gallup and Pardner."

He went away, muttering something that had to do with my intelligence, and half an hour later, slipped through the blanket-curtain lugging the carcass of the big cat. And I questioned him as I told how to hang

A Lynx Interferes

it for the job of skinning; could he see the smoke from our fire? No, the chimney flue, the hollow of the tree, ran to a great height and the light wood made but little smoke. Had he found any indications of Gallup and Pardner?

“Sure,” he replied. “They were down at our hut getting breakfast.”

“They didn’t see you?” I asked quickly.

“Naw; I couldn’t have been seen with a microscope. I was the smallest, hiding-est thing in the mountains, insect, bird, snake or beast. But I want to get a good squint at Pardner, Ted.”

“Why?”

“He looks sort of familiar from a distance—as though I’d seen him before somewhere.”

“Is he a city man?”

“Naw; a hill-billy; corduroys, black shirt, boots and a felt hat. I’m probably mistaken about having ever seen him; just a resemblance. They brought in some kind of a wooden contrivance on those little donkeys; looks like a mighty healthy baby’s crib.”

“A cradle! They’ve brought in a cradle!” I exclaimed.

“No, no, Ted. I was joking. It couldn’t be a cradle, unless they have a giant baby to stick into it. It ain’t set up yet, but the parts of it looked like a crib. That’s all.”

“But it *is* a cradle—a gold cradle—a rocker. It’s for mining, Lem. How big was the bed?”

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“ It was more like a bed ——”

“ The bed; the box where the pay-dirt is put for the washing? ”

“ Oh! Maybe half the size of a good, big wagon-box. It was pretty far away, you know.”

This was important news, and conclusive proof that Gallup's agricultural claim was a fraud, his affidavit a pack of lies. These men had come here prepared not for farming, but for mining; ready to rob the creek-bottom of its hoarded gold. To prevent this, we must act with promptness. A lynx had made it impossible for me to go to Susanville with my application for filing; but Lem could. I glanced at him as he worked with the skinning-knife effectively, as he seemed to do everything, and thought that he would do better with the trip than I could myself. If he could only keep to the trail—and then the thought came that three donkeys had solved that problem. I shot it at once at the back of Lem's head.

“ Drop that work. You're going to Susanville as quick as you can get started.”

The knife fell with a clatter. He turned to me with:

“ And you chewed up to a pulp? What you talking, Ted? ”

“ Business. I'm all right for here, but I can't ride a horse. You can ——”

“ You've never seen me ride.” He grinned widely.

“ Zim's easy. The trail's wide-open, now those three

A Lynx Interferes

burros have been over it. All you have to do is follow back. You'll make our filing, enter our protest, and buy ——”

“Garden seeds,” Lem finished.

“Give me a paper and that pencil. I'll write 'down what you're to buy. It's about seventy miles to Susanville, and you're going to ride fast getting there. Say by noon to-morrow—Friday. Get our notices recorded first thing—at the land-office. Then rest up over night, at a hotel. Better get someone to pack Zim for you. It has to be done right, or it'll come to pieces on the trail. And you start back Saturday morning. Take it easy, for Zim will be heavy-loaded. Three days coming back—Saturday, Sunday, Monday. I'll expect you Monday evening, and I'll probably be somewhere up the trail waiting for you.”

I was writing while I talked, making the list of things to be purchased. Lem listened, and I saw was getting it all fixed in his mind. When I finished, he said:

“I'll make it, Ted; Monday evening—or bust!”

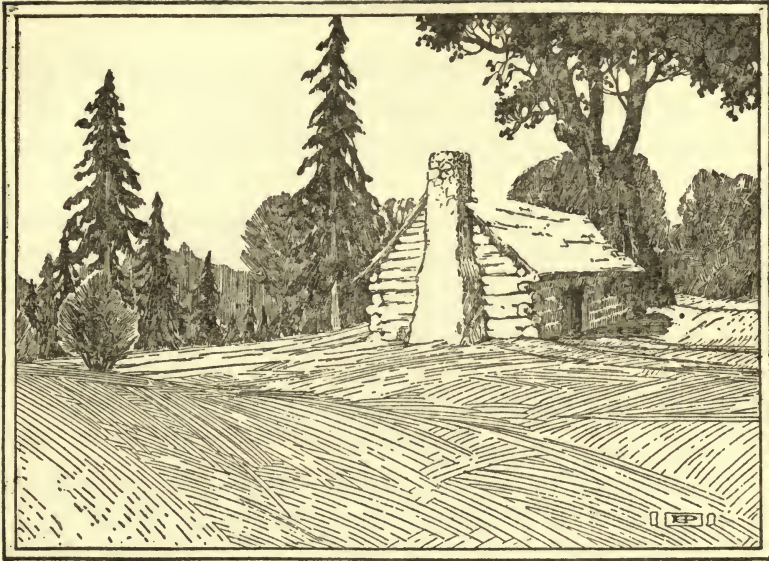
“You make it easy so as not to bust either you or Zim,” I enjoined. “If you don't get in by nightfall, keep right on coming, for I'll be looking for you all night. Slip out now as quietly as you can so Gallup and Pardner won't know. Good luck, Lem.” I gave him the list and clasped his hand. He held my paw a minute, looking down at me as I lay beside the fire.

“I just hate to leave you, Ted. But what you say,

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I do," and ducked under the curtain. I lay and listened for a long time, but I heard no sound of either Lem or Zim. Silently they had gone, and I was alone.





CHAPTER XVI

RECONNAISSANCE

I WOKE from a refreshing sleep to find that it was nearly two o'clock in the afternoon, and that I was feeling stronger and less a mere mess of painful wounds. The balsam, quick in its healing action, was getting results. I got up, stiffly enough, dressed, and ate rabbit stew; then began packing. I was going to move.

Spreading out my blanket, I placed in it what food was left—a few cold biscuits and the remains of the stew—the rifle, revolver and all the ammunition; filled

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the canteen from the creek and added it; then tied the four corners together, hoisted it painfully to my unwounded shoulder, and said farewell to the hollow redwood.

I slipped away southward to the edge of the cañon, and climbed its side. That took time, and brought several groans from between my teeth, but finally I managed, and made a *détour* toward the lake. I kept in the brush all I could, and well back from the valley's rim. When I was forced to cross an open space, I reconnoitered, then made a dash for it.

Almost midway between my hut and the dam, sitting close on the cliff's edge to overlook all the lower part of the bottom-land, was an enormous boulder that had rolled down the mountainside in some past age, either to stop miraculously there, or to watch, later on, the earth torn away at its foot. On the side from which I approached, its top was twelve or fourteen feet from the ground, but it was five times that height from the valley floor. It had split in its fall, and there was a lower section separated from the other by a crevice. On the lower ledge, entirely concealed from the gully by the taller half of the boulder, I fixed my blanket, hung the canteen in the shaded cleft, then climbed slowly and painfully to the summit of the other and peeked over into the cañon. I needed to keep my head down, for Gallup and Pardner were at the dam not two hundred yards away. As I located them, Pardner had just torn

Reconnaissance

my notice to bits, and now with a laugh, he tossed the bits in the air. The baking-powder can he hurled viciously into the creek bed. The action told me plainer than words the contempt he felt for me and my rights to the creek claim. Gallup, down on his knees before the cairn, had evidently just taken can and notice from its place. Now Pardner gave the monument a kick that sent the rocks tumbling over the bank. I hoped it hurt his toes!

Pardner's loud talk was audible even at the distance, his words borne on the wind, though I could not hear Gallup at all. Pardner was big, uncouth, with a great stooped back, long arms, enormous hands at the ends of them, and a red face topped by hair almost as red. I could not make out his features clearly, but I was sure I had never seen him before.

They had brought up the cradle, knocked down for conveyance on the burros, and were at work setting it in place below my ditch. Gallup seemed to have no idea of its construction, but Pardner knew, and was more inclined to boss than to work, although he made a bluff at it which might satisfy Gallup. I learned quickly and without effort that Pardner was lazy and hated work; and that Gallup was willing but ignorant.

I watched them, while I fried on the boulder. Two rifles leaned against a rock close to the cradle. At intervals, one or the other of the men, usually Pardner, would stop work, pick up a rifle, climb to a better posi-

Black Boulder Claim

tion, and make a long, deliberate survey of all the country above and below the dam. I'd keep my head down against the stone these times, raising it only when I heard his voice again after he'd returned to Gallup.

It was still early in the afternoon, and I was watching them bolt the bed on to the supports, when suddenly there came a sharp snap from the thicket a little distance above them. I heard it plainly, and it must have been much louder at the creek. Both men jumped and grasped their rifles, but Pardner never stopped an instant after getting hands on his; he slid behind the bank, and I saw the quick movement of his hand as it worked the loading lever, even as he wormed into the scrub. Gallup, mouth hanging open, rifle at a ready, stared at the place where the sound had been.

I had guessed at once what the noise was; one of my twitch-ups had been sprung, the sapling snapping back, and there was probably a venturesome rabbit swaying now at the end of the line. I smiled at the unimportant cause of so much fright, and wondered if Lem and I were held as dangerous enemies by these men. Anyhow, I was glad that neither Lem nor I walked out of that thicket, for I was certain whoever did would be met by bullets.

There was no repetition of the sound—naturally; and of course, nothing came from the brush. After maybe fifteen minutes' waiting, Pardner crawled from his hiding place, joined Gallup, and they talked together; then

Reconnaissance

started for the thicket to investigate the cause of the alarm. I was afraid they would find trap, bunnie and explanation, but they only skirted its edge, peering in, and continued up the bottom, searching the fringing woods of the creek.

I watched them out of sight, then made a shift of position. There was but one conclusion to draw from what I had seen; if found, I was in danger of my life. Pardner was a desperate man, with some better reason for objecting to spies than his seizure of the claim. He was hiding from a greater menace than Lem and me. I threw the blanket and contents into the crevice between the boulders, gave the place a careful inspection for rattlesnakes, then with grunts and groans lowered myself into the cleft. Here was hiding place and fortress. From the opening at one end, with a little careful trimming of the bushes, I could see what was going on below, myself screened by foliage. The other end of the split was choked by stones. There was room to lie down in a rather cramped position. And it was gloriously cool!

I heard Pardner's loud voice before I could see the men, as they returned, and I knew a noisy argument was on, for stray words came to me; Pardner insisting that it was foolishness to bother about us, saying we'd probably not stopped running till we got to Jamesville. "Scared stiff," I heard him shout, and wondered if we'd been any worse scared than he was at a rabbit trap.

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Gallup, I could tell from the part that was audible, wanted to make sure; follow back our trail aways and see that we hadn't turned back; and I was certainly glad of Lem's device for deceiving them, for Gallup started out on our tracks.

Pardner, loudly telling Gallup how many kinds of a fool he was, went back to the cradle; but not to work. After looking it over a few minutes, he loaded a pipe and sat down in the shade beside the creek, to rest and smoke until Gallup's return. Even then, he never relaxed, and I could see his head turn continually to look into the thickets. The rifle lay across his knees. Pardner may not have been afraid of Lem and me, but he was afraid, frightfully afraid, of something or someone else.

It was late afternoon when Gallup came back, and I gathered from Pardner's mirth and sarcasms that the small man with the thin voice had followed our trail farther than we had gone. He was satisfied we had not retraced our steps, and without finishing the cradle, they went down to the hut and their supper.

The low slanting sun had lost its sting, and I was glad to haul myself up from the crevice, and roll up in my blanket on the ledge. In the interest of watching, I had forgotten at times the pain of the wounds, but now they began to trouble, and I used what water I had to dampen the bandages. I had been badly hurt, and the exertions of the day gave little chance for healing.

Reconnaissance

As night came down, a fever set in, and I began a restless tossing on the hard rock. Things seen assumed strange shapes, shadows came and went, grew to enormous size; and the familiar noises of the night were changed and magnified. Alternately, I burned and shivered; and my confused mind in its delirium gathered the strands of my wrongs and twisted them into a rope of anger and hatred against the cradle beside the stream. In that inanimate object, the mounting fever centered all my enmity.

It seemed to me that it stood there, a hateful live thing, reaching out to grab the gold that was mine from the mud of the creek, stealing it from me, robbing me of everything. And I must kill it, break it, demolish it. I climbed down from the rock in the blackness of night, my stiffened leg and arm protesting with twinges of pain, ran staggering and falling down the hill, and splashed across the creek without the least attempt at secrecy. With fists and boots, I attacked the cradle as though it were alive, knocking it over, kicking it, bruising my knuckles and opening the old wounds to bleed again. I wanted to destroy, demolish; and I did not care whether I was heard or seen, and the consequences of my acts were nothing to me.

The rocker would have resisted all my efforts to break it, for it was stoutly built, had I not stumbled over the stones of my cairn, and the idea of a weapon worked through the haze of my mind. I picked up a great piece

Black Boulder Claim

of granite, hammered the box of the rocker into splinters, and broke the standards to bits. It was kindling when my fevered rage was satisfied, and I had made noise enough to awake the Seven Sleepers. I remember hearing shouts, even rifle shots, I'm sure; but I went calmly back to the rock, climbed to its ledge, and wrapping the dry blanket about my soaked body, dropped into quiet slumber, while two men searched high and low for me.

Many hours later, much refreshed, I woke to a bright morning, and the sound of voices close beneath me. The fever was entirely gone, and I had sense enough to lie absolutely quiet. Gallup and Pardner were under the rock, and they were talking of me—of Lem and me.

“Probably hiding way up the cañon—in the brush at the headwaters,” came Gallup's thin, quivering voice. And Pardner, with a curse inclusive of Lem, Gallup and me, boomed:

“There's a thousand places to hide in the gullies and hills. If it was two months later, with the chaparral dry, I'd start a fire ripping up the cañon that would drive 'em out, I'll warrant—or burn 'em to cinders.” A grunt from Gallup; and Pardner went on, “We've got to find 'em, that's all; and fix 'em. Should have done it first off, but you had to try your legal bluff. Next time, you'll take my advice, p'raps.”

“No use kicking now,” Gallup answered. “Let's get breakfast.”

Reconnaissance

"You, with your slick lawyer-games! Give 'em back their hoss, hand 'em their guns and grub; pass 'em everything to make 'em dangerous, and able to hang around and pester. That's your way." Pardner was peeved for lack of sleep.

"Oh, shut up!" Gallup's voice went up another octave. "We'll eat, then we'll find 'em, and you can have your way with 'em. Only I don't see it, mark that! I keep my hands clean of such doings."

"Come on," grunted the other. "I'll do it, and I'll do it right. Eat and find 'em," and their voices died out in the direction of the hut.

My mind held a hazy, dream-like picture of the events of the night, enough so that I understood the anger of the men and had a realization of that which I had started by my fevered actions. There was no question of what would befall Lem and me if we were discovered now. Pardner's words were significant. The disappearance of two boys lost in the mountains would create but a passing interest in a country where prospectors start out frequently to fail of return. I shuddered as I recalled the destruction of the cradle, and lifted my head cautiously to see if it was true, or a dream.

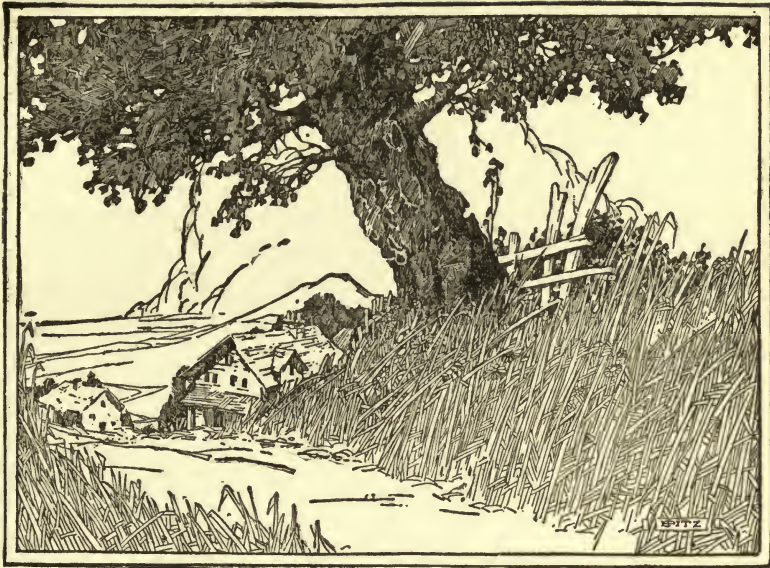
The rocker lay in ruins beside the creek. Surely, in my plans to retain the claim, I had intended no violence such as this, no infraction of the law, as this certainly was. Had I retained control of my actions, I should have been the last person to take the law into my own

Black Boulder Claim

hands. Now, the fever had made me an outlaw. These two men had legal authority to hunt down the one who had come upon their property and demolished machinery of value belonging to them. My excuse, that I was delirious from fever, would be hard to establish, even supposing there was a chance to make excuse. It was a serious situation, a weighty responsibility for my boy-shoulders. I tossed and squirmed there on the rock, borne down by the burden of it.

Then it lifted, cleared away as once before, by the simple solution that right is right. I rolled over on the side that held the fewer pains, closed my eyes, and went to a long, health-giving sleep.





CHAPTER XVII

FAUSTINA

IF I'd spent a week in careful search, I could not have found a better hiding-place than my split boulder on the rim's edge. It was so close to the hut, below the dam, that the men overlooked it from the first. It was almost in their back-yard, a thing so usual to the eye as to be non-perceivable. They came to it, leaned against it to talk, passed it, but they never really saw it; and not once in those two days I stayed there, resting up, letting my wounds heal, was I in danger.

But its very security gave me many anxious minutes.

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Gallup and Pardner, standing so near me I could have dropped a piece of granite to break their heads, would discuss possible places for Lem and me to be hiding, planned ways to trap us, and promised vague horrors when we were found. My heart would hammer so noisily at times I feared they would hear it.

The first day after I'd smashed the cradle—Saturday—they spent most of its hours in the search; but Sunday Gallup hunted alone; Pardner had tired; and the little man discovered Zim's tracks where Lem had led the horse up the cañon's side, and followed the trail far enough to believe we had gone on to Susanville. He returned about noon with that information, and the two men spent the rest of the day building sluices from my lumber. They had decided to mine, as had been my intention, by running the pay-dirt over riffles to separate its contents; and they had nails. Peering over the boulder's top, I saw them use my split planks to build the machinery to steal my gold.

I must get away during the night. Lem, who would be returning in the afternoon or evening of the next day, must be met and warned; also I was hungry and thirsty, without food or water. I could slip quietly away after dark and go far along the trail over which Lem must come.

That would be the safe and easy way; that was what I wanted to do; but as I watched the men complete the sluices and set them in the ditch I had dug with so much



THE TWO MEN SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY BUILDING SLUICES.

Faustina

labor for that purpose, as I realized that all day while I was traveling the trail to meet Lem they would be running my creek sands over those riffles, robbing me, I changed easy plans for hard, a safe program for a dangerous one.

In the crevice, working noiselessly that afternoon, I made a neat pack of my belongings to lug at my back, and I cleaned, oiled and reloaded the rifle; then snuggled down in the cleft, curling about its corners, and forgot thirst and hunger in sleep. So, alternating slumber and waking hours of weary waiting, the day wore out.

Pardner, I was sure, would meet night with snores, for he had worked hard for him; but I was afraid of Gallup. That nervousness, which was his most obvious characteristic, did not promise the deep sleep that would make my plans less dangerous. I was going to be noisy; I expected to wake people up, but I didn't want them awake too soon. I was willing they should rest till the big noise came.

So I waited hour after hour in the night, so thirsty that the gurgling of creek waters passed from an irritation to a misery, and went over and over my plans. Then as my watch hands came together at the top of the dial—I had unscrewed the crystal so I might feel the time—telling me it was midnight, I slung the pack on my back, threw the rolled blanket over one shoulder, climbed carefully down the bank to the flat beside the creek, and worked my way up to the dam. I could hear

Black Boulder Claim

the stream singing across the riffles of the sluices, see vague outlines of the boxes themselves where they raised their red sides above the ditch banks, but they were not my objective. The planks were too heavy and strong to be smashed as I had the rocker. I intended to destroy its usefulness, not the box; make the sluice a dry ditch.

I laid off blanket and pack on the bank's edge, close to the dam; set the rifle against them; hunted cautiously about till I found a stout sapling that I had cut for use as a pry while dam building; took it, and waded into the pool directly above the dam. The water, icy cold, came up almost to my arm-pits; I bent my head to drink deep and long; then, with the sapling for a lever, a rock in the pool for a fulcrum, I snubbed in close to the bottom of the stonework, and laid the weight of my body and all the force of my muscles against the long end, forcing down with short, sharp jerks. The water stored behind the dam was working with me; its pressure seconded my efforts, but it did not have the same regard for silence that made me work so cautiously. As I loosened the mass of rock and dirt, the current started some of the uppermost stones rolling noisily into the dry channel. It was enough to bring Gallup from the hut. I heard him shout a warning to Pardner, saw lights spring up down there, and I forced the lever in for a firmer hold, caught its extreme end with both hands, and swung my weight on it. There was a moment of suspense, then a great crash and the roar of liberated waters, hurling

Faustina

rocks, flying chunks of granite, as I sat abruptly in water that covered my head. The dam was down.

I had no time to celebrate success. I floundered ashore just as a shot came from below to hit a rock and ricochet with a dismal whine over me. Slipping on pack and blanket, I grabbed the rifle, took to the water, and ran up-stream. More bullets and shouts from the men spurred me; wild shots that spatted into the bank, or sizzled through the thick foliage of the chaparral. Turning my head, I saw they were running with torches, and I made a quick dodge to the right, scrambled up the creek bank, dropped flat on my stomach at its top, and cocked the rifle.

I was too shaken by nerves and the hard run to aim. For a minute or two I lay there panting. The men had stopped at the dam, and were talking excitedly as they brandished torches over the destruction I had done. Pardner was cursing Gallup, Lem and me with impartiality. Lifting the rifle to my shoulder with hands that had stopped their trembling, I aimed at the torch-lit rock over Pardner's head and sent three bullets to spatter him with granite chips. Instantly the blazing light-wood was thrown into the water. All was dark. Fearing they might have seen the flashes of my rifle, I rolled away to the right a dozen feet as soon as I fired; but there was no answer. Whether they caught the warning I intended to give, or were too astonished at my acceptance of the gauge of battle to reply, I heard or saw

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nothing more of them; and after a wait of so long a time that I was chilled and shivering, I went cautiously up the gully, through the redwoods, and started over the trail Lem and Zim had followed down the lake to the narrow way over the hills to Susanville. Many miles I put behind me, one quite lofty ridge I wedged between me and the claim-jumpers of Eagle Lake, before I made camp, built me a fire, drank from the canteen, rolled in the blanket, and forgot hunger in sleep.

A bob-white, sitting on a manzanita root, whistling its mating call, woke me to bright sunlight and the intense relief of freedom and safety. For three days I had been practically a prisoner; for two of those three, had been in constant danger of my life. I threw aside the blanket and leaped to my feet, forgetting scratches, bruises, hunger, in the joy of being far away from the menace of the valley. Bob-white, a perfectly good breakfast, gave a sharp warning call, and a covey of his mates on the ground whirred off on swift-beating wings. I had forgotten quails were food.

I built up a great fire, for I was still damp and cold from the sleep in wet clothes, hung up the blanket to dry, set the coffee-pot on, took the revolver, which I had never given over as hopeless, and started out after the quail. I had marked them down in a little open place at the edge of the mesquite. As I came carefully up to it, I heard the birds calling. Bending low, moving slowly forward, I peered through the growth of sage and lu-

Faustina

pine, trying to make out from their whistling where they were located. Gray and brown, they merged so perfectly with the shades of the ground as to be almost indistinguishable, but finally a waving little black plume caught my eye, and with this bird found, the others were easy. More than a dozen I picked up with my eye, scattered in pairs over the small patch, cocks and hens in almost equal numbers.

I waited, as quiet as any rock on the hillside, and soon they began feeding, running about to mingle in groups; and their calling stilled. I raised the pistol, training its sights on a large cock, but waited, following the bird's every movement with the muzzle of the gun. As I expected, he soon was joined by a closely-bunched group of six, and I fired at once. The report sent the covey flying, with a second shot from my pistol to hurry them; but four of their number, the cock I had aimed at, and three birds too closely around him to be missed, were little plump, round bunches of flesh and feathers on the ground. My ancient firearm had earned its passage.

That would be breakfast and dinner. I carried the game back to camp, placed an old strip of bacon-rind in the skillet for frying grease, and was soon picking the bones of sage-fed quail, as delicious food as anyone ever eats; with good, strong, black coffee, drunk from the nose of the pot. It seemed to me that I never could remember a happier meal; the good flesh well cooked and seasoned; the hot drink; the long hunger; the relief from

Black Boulder Claim

fear; the hope of Lem with me again before the day's end. The mounting sun, growing stronger each hour it climbed, had dried my clothes and warmed my bones. I felt like a brand-new boy!

Two of those birds I ate, one after the other; the first rapidly, ravenously; the second more and more slowly and satisfactorily; big, fat, juicy quail. I even pulled a leg from a third, but I had lost enthusiasm for food. I had filled up the cavity of two days' abstinence from all things eatable, and was ready for whatever might come. Brave? I could have faced Gallup and Pardner right then, and quite likely my voice wouldn't have quavered hardly at all!

But I was going ahead, not back; farther on toward Susanville. I wanted to find a stream beside the trail to wait for Lem's coming at nightfall. I packed the remaining birds with my kit, rolled the dry blanket, and started on. A stream was not far to seek. Before I had trudged a mile, I saw ahead the fringing woods of a watercourse, and I hurried toward its now grateful shade.

I was in the sycamores and tan-oak that lined the creek, when I heard the strangest animal-call that I'd ever heard in the wilderness. "Ma-a-a-a!" A long bleat came to me from out the scrub in front.

I dropped flat, pack, blanket and all; squirmed sideways into the undergrowth; cocked the rifle and poked its muzzle out before me. Then I waited. "Ma-a-a-a!"

Faustina

“Can that bleat, Faustina.” It was Lem’s voice in an imperative command.

With a wild shout, I came to my feet and ran for the creek, at each step shouting, regardless of grammar, “Lem! It’s me! It’s me, Lem; it’s me!”

In the creek, drinking and pawing, pack on back, was Zim; behind him, a rope from Zim’s tail connecting with its horns, was a goat; and on that goat’s back was a pack; and Lem Strong stood on the shore, mouth hanging open, eyes wide, and held Zim’s halter rope; and Lem also had a pack on his back. For a moment he stood speechless, then we collided in a joyful embrace.





CHAPTER XVIII

BATTLE PLANS

“**B**UT what is the goat for, Lem?” I voiced my wonderment, when the first swift inquiries as to my wounds and Lem’s errands had been answered, and I had helped remove the burdens from Lem’s shoulders, and the backs of Zim and Faustina. “Why have you brought a goat?”

“On your list.” Lem’s raised brows showed surprise at my question.

“A goat on my list? Never once, Lem.”

“Milk. You had milk on the list.” He was feeling

Battle Plans

in his pockets to find the paper and prove his authority for purchase. "I couldn't bring a cow, so I did the next best. Faustina is milk."

I roared with laughter, rolled over and over on the creek bank in glee, nearly went over its edge into the drink. And I stuttered, through tears of merriment:

"Lem—oh, Lem! Canned milk! I wanted—expected you to get canned milk!"

"Why didn't you say it then? How should I know milk comes in cans? When I was keeping house at the foot of Telegraph Hill in San Francisco, the Italians nearly all had goats that they milked. I learned how. Besides, Faustina is canned milk. She was eating a tin can when I bought her; and she's a perpetual tin can." Lem's indignation at my mirth was wearing off, and a grin had come to light up his face. "Besides, Faustina will look well on the farm; and she's not so worse as a packhorse, when it comes to that." He plumped down on the bank beside me.

I had seen that the goat carried a pack; also Lem. Now I asked about them, and in his reply I found how it was that he had gained eight hours on the schedule, was meeting me in the morning instead of the night.

"You see," he said, "I got to Susanville just as we planned, at noon Friday, but Zim wasn't so tired as we expected, because I had run beside him a good bit of the way to rest myself. I took him to a livery stable and had them look after him right; rub him down, oil him up,

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and feed him all he could eat; while I went out and did the errands. I filed your claim,"—he dug out the recorded petition and receipt for fees—"entered the protest, and got the land-office man to promise a ranger in to look us over the last of next week."

"So far ahead?" It would be a delay of ten or twelve days.

"The best he could do. The ranger is up north on the Reserve, letting in sheep on the Government pastures, and won't be back to Susanville until the middle of next week. But your filing is all right, Ted; the land-office man said there wasn't one chance in a hundred the Government would open the lakeside to farm settlement; he said it was far too valuable as a water-shed."

"How about mining?" I asked anxiously.

"Mining is different. Mining doesn't interfere, he said. They'll patent mineral claims, whatever that is ——"

"Give title to them; the Government will grant ownership."

"Well, they'll give ownership to mines but not to farms. Just the same I bought the garden seeds," he pulled a handful of the little envelopes with their gaily-colored covers from his pocket, and ranged them on the grass before him. "Lettuce—look at the size of it, Ted! Some salad that! And round radishes, and long radishes. Artichokes, too — with mayonnaise, yum, yum!"

Battle Plans

“Did the land-office know Gallup or Pardner?” I said, after admiring the lithographs.

“He knew James Goober Gallup. He’s a peanut lawyer living near town there. A shyster with nary a client. I learned by asking around here and there, quietly, that Goober Gallup had a visitor last Monday night who rode into town on a bay horse ——”

“Zim! Pardner!”

“So I guessed, first guess. He came and went by night. But next day—Tuesday—Gallup filed that homestead petition, and began getting an outfit together. Wednesday morning, he and three donkeys left town. Is he mining your claim yet, Ted?”

“He’s not! He’s probably rebuilding the dam,” and I told Lem what had taken place in his absence, how I had smashed both cradle and dam, Lem applauding with chuckles of glee.

“Bully!” he cried when I finished. “That’s the way to keep them from robbing you. But, Ted, you’ve not asked where I found Faustina.”

“The goat? You bought her, of course.”

“Yes, but I’ll give you a dozen guesses who I bought her of. It was Mrs. Gallup who owned her.”

“Mrs. Gallup?” I echoed, vaguely worried. “Is Gallup married?”

“Yep. And she keeps goats. She supports Gallup, too, when he isn’t stealing mines. She’s a real nice lady, and her kids are nice, too.”

Black Boulder Claim

“Goat kids?” I was getting more worried with every word Lem spoke.

“Human kids. Boy and girl, seven and five. Cuties, both of ’em, curly hair, big eyes. They think their daddy is fine. Maybe Mrs. G. has doubts, but those kids haven’t a one. They’re why I started back Saturday night instead of waiting for Sunday morning.”

I had reached out and pulled a weed, which I tore into bits, scowling all the while, as I studied the problem of Gallup with a wife and two little kids. Lem went on talking, not looking at me.

“I knew you’d want to know that just as soon as you could. It makes a difference, doesn’t it?”

“It does. Of course it does, Lem.”

“And we won’t shoot Gallup?”

I leaped to my feet. “Not for a hundred claims! We’ll give up and get out first!”

“Sit down, Ted. We’re not going to give up your claim.”

“*Our* claim. It’s yours as much as mine.”

“Our claim, then; not to anybody. We’re going to hold it. And we’re going to send the human peanut back to his family, sound, whole, and not a dirty thief! Shall we, Ted?”

I gave him my hand on it, sank down again beside him, and asked:

“Why did you split the pack into three? Zim could have carried it all.”

Battle Plans

“ Zim had traveled seventy miles, and I was starting back before he'd rested enough; so I cut his pack down to a hundred pounds, gave Faustina twenty-five, and I took fifty. That seemed fair enough, and Zim never made a kick all the way. Faustina has objected, but we've traveled six hours and rested two, with all packs off at the rests; and Faustina and I slept quite a lot.”

“ It's a wonder you aren't dead, lugging fifty pounds all this way. And Faustina, if she never sheds a drop of milk, has earned her room and board.”

Lem's eyes went to where the goat was nibbling grass in a circle at the end of her tether. “ She's a good goat, except for her voice. If she 'Ma-a-a-a-s' all the time in the valley, Gallup and Pardner will soon be eating goat flesh. What'll we do with the nanny, Ted?”

“ That'll be all right. I've a plan that I want to talk over after dinner. I suppose you're hungry?”

“ Always. I've had plenty to eat, but all cold snacks, and no coffee. Suppose we have coffee?”

“ Lie still, while I build a fire.” I pressed him back into the grass, and started a hot dinner, with the two quail warmed over for him. There was plenty of food in the packs, and extra plates, cups and utensils. It was while we were eating that Lem remembered some information he'd picked up, not important to his mind, but decidedly so in mine. Wayne, the Jamesville hotel

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man, had been in the Susanville land-office about a month before, looking up my title to the Black Boulder claim.

The time must have been shortly before my return from the clean-up, and Wayne's offer to buy the workings. The hotel man had made a long trip to find out whether I had complied with the law in every respect to hold the claim. I knew I had done the assessment work regularly and properly, and had filed my proofs. Evidently, Wayne found out the same thing, for he had subsequently tried to purchase from me. But what was his interest in the Black Boulder? Why would he travel a couple of hundred miles on horseback to satisfy himself that I had neglected nothing required by law? What did he see of value in the gravel claim on Baldy that I didn't and couldn't see?

I had to give it up. I put it out of mind, and turned to the more immediate proposition of the Hot Biscuit claim. I laid that matter before Lem as he stowed quail away and drank coffee with sugar in the cup.

"All we've got to do," I began, "is to keep Gallup and Pardner from mining the creek bottom until the forest ranger comes in. I'd hoped he could get here quicker, but we can stick it out ten days. Gallup and Pardner will get that dam rebuilt as soon as they can, and start the sluices. My job is to make it unhealthy at the sluices. That's why you lugged all those rifle cartridges, Lem."

Battle Plans

“ I wanted to buy another rifle, but it wasn't on the list.”

“ No; and I didn't want you to have one. I'm pretty sure when I pull the trigger just where the bullet's going. You wouldn't be ——”

“ I'd know it wasn't going where I aimed; that's a pipe.”

“ And you might hit a man—maybe kill him. I don't intend to kill anyone, and won't need to. Still, I can keep 'em from mining—with your help.”

“ Where do I come in? ”

I told him, and set him chuckling. I explained every detail of my scheme, and that afternoon—for we were not to start until twilight—we rehearsed it, practised on the hillside until we were perfect. Every few minutes Lem would have a suggestion to better the plan, and we added to it, and tried it out. If anybody had come over the Susanville trail that afternoon, and had passed the creek where we camped, they'd have thought two boys were crazy, or else a Boy Scout detail was at work in the wilderness. But there were only Zim and Faustina to witness our gesticulations, and they were too busy feeding to give us more than an occasional eye.

After we had practised till we felt perfect, we wrote it all down in duplicate, so we couldn't go wrong if we did forget, and each stowed a copy in a pocket; then curled up in the shade and went to sleep. Directly after supper, we repacked, filled the canteen, and I ahead

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with Zim, Lem following with a "Ma-a-a-a"-ing goat, started back toward Eagle Lake. Remembering how I had seen from Sentinel Rock three burros to mistake them for deer, I intended that darkness should be complete before we came into eye-range of a possible watcher on the peak at the lake's edge.

It was plenty dark enough to suit me when we turned off the trail into the rough side-hills, and I was glad I had traveled them so often, day and night, and knew their difficulties. As it was, we had to make frequent stops for rest, and it was during one of these, when we were at a spot midway between the deserted cabin and our valley, that Lem whispered, pulling my sleeve:

"Look, Ted! A light at the cabin!"

But I was looking at another light that puzzled me more than any illumination of the log house could, even a conflagration; my light was in our valley, and it was a big fire. I'd have said it was our shack burning, but it seemed too far from the lake. Its flames lit up Sentinel Rock, and the peak at the other side of the creek's mouth, but it also was reflected against the redwood foliage.

"What are they burning there, Lem?" I asked.

"I don't know," impatiently. "Who d'you think's in the cabin, Ted?"

"I can't guess. Have they set fire to the chaparral?"

"It's steady as a candle; maybe a fire in the chimney."

"It's getting bigger every minute. Look, Lem!"

Battle Plans

“ Now it’s gone. Went out in a flash. What was it, Ted? ”

“ I don’t know. Look at my blaze. What do you think? ”

Lem, his little flicker gone, looked at last toward the illumination my finger pointed to, studied it a long minute, then said:

“ Gallup and Pardner have a bonfire to guard their rebuilt dam, Ted. See, it’s right at the top edge of my garden. They’ve built a big blaze so they can see you if you come down to tip over their work. ”

That was so reasonable an explanation that I accepted it at once, and turned to Lem’s light problem; but his must be taken on say-so, for there was nothing to indicate there’d ever been a light in that direction now. From his description, I guessed he had seen the fireplace glow through door or window. Anyhow, someone was in the cabin. Possibly Gallup, or Pardner, or both, although Lem wouldn’t allow that supposition to stand a second. “ They’re down below the bonfire, rifles in hand, guarding the dam, ” he insisted. “ There’s a third man at the cabin. And, Ted, it may be he’s been there all the time. Maybe Pardner wasn’t in it when you first went by. Maybe someone else is hiding out on Eagle Lake. ”

He was still maybe-ing when we headed again for the valley, but I was too confused by all the possibilities to listen much. At about midnight, we came down the

Black Boulder Claim

gully side above the redwoods, watered Zim and Faustina in the creek, and I led off at right angles, straight up the stream's bed. It was hard going, over rocks and in water, but Zim was almost as sure-footed as Faustina, who could stand on a stone not much bigger than my hand, four hoofs together, and leap lightly to the next. An hour or more we kept to the water, leaving no tracks, then turned at the forks into a little flat about the size of Lem's garden patch, and made camp. I risked a small fire, after unpacking and tethering the animals, for Lem and me to dry out, and again we boiled coffee. It's wonderful how much coffee a boy can drink when he's making day out of night, and working hard at the job; and how little that coffee will affect his sleep. Lem was snoozing before he'd finished a second cup, and I'd have been, but I just had to keep from sleep; we must be out before the first sign of dawn.

So I stayed awake, and worried over who was in the cabin down the lake, what Wayne wanted of the Black Boulder, and whether my plans for the day would work out as well as they looked in scheming.

I awoke Lem at three; the sun rose about half-past four at that time of the year; gave him the luncheon I'd packed for his nooning, and watched him away; then picked up the rifle, threw the pistol by its cord over my shoulder, and started down for my old friend, the split boulder.

As daylight came, I scanned eagerly the mountain-

Battle Plans

side across the valley, even before I could pick pine from fir in the gloom, hunting for the signal that would tell me Lem was in position, ready to do his part. I found it just as the sun behind the peaks sent its bright colors aloft to give promise of its coming. High up on the north slope of our valley, in the heart of the pine forest, from the scraggled top of a lofty trunk, fluttered a little white rag; Lem's dirty pocket handkerchief. A long half mile away, a valley between; but it told me that my friend was watching every movement of two enemies asleep now in our shack, and that I should from concealment watch them through his eyes.





CHAPTER XIX

THE BATTLE OPENS

THIN rays of an early sun were slanting down the cañon, making rubies of rocks, rose bloom of foliage, when the white rag on the pine vanished. I could not see the arm that removed it, but I knew that Lem, perched up there, probably straddling a branch on the other side of the trunk, had signaled the arising of one or both of the men at the hut. An instant later came a flicker of white from the right of the trunk, meaning Gallup; then from the left; Pardner. I was informed by my observer that the enemy were both out of bed, both under his eye.

The Battle Opens

Even had I been on top of the boulder where I might be seen, I would have been unable to get such a view of them as Lem had from his tree. In the crevice, of course, they would not be visible to me until they were half-way to the dam, but all the while they were in the valley, from the lake's shore to the redwood forest, or if they climbed the slope of the hill I was on, Lem could watch them. He was well concealed. Knowing where he was, all I had seen of him was the flutter of his handkerchief, and hereafter he would use his cap, dark colored and much less conspicuous in the gloom of the pines. Should he be located by Pardner and Gallup, he was out of range of their rifles, and long before they could close up to shooting distance, he'd be down and hidden in a safe place already selected.

Almost an hour went by without sign from Lem or sight of anyone. Then an arm with a cap at its extremity came from the right side of the tree, stayed a moment perpendicularly, then wig-wagged, one, two, three; Gallup was moving eastward. Cap raised, lowered to perpendicular; Gallup carried a rifle. I looked for another signal from Lem's left hand; his Pardner hand; but it didn't come. Pardner was remaining at the hut. I poked my face through the brush at the cleft's opening and looked down to see the little lawyer, pick over shoulder, rifle in hand, coming jauntily toward the dam. Evidently a night's freedom from attack had been reassuring.

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I let him ramble on until he was within a hundred yards of my hiding-place, then, aiming carefully, raised a puff of dust right in front of his feet, and greeted his ear to the wail of a mangled bullet taking the rebound. Gallup stopped as abruptly as if hit, dropped the pick with a clatter, grasped the gun in both hands, and jumped over the creek's bank. I saw the splash of his landing, then turned my eyes back to Lem.

Both arms out perpendicular; cap in one hand, handkerchief in the other. I wished he wouldn't use the white—*once* white—rag. It was too conspicuous. But he was signaling with it at the left; Pardner was running to join Gallup, who had hid behind the stream's bluff bank. I threw the rifle lever, sending a cartridge home, looked down and waited. No one came into view. Lem was wig-wagging, and I counted; six waves of the handkerchief; Pardner was coming up the creek-bed.

My cue was to remain quiet there, keep my head back, and watch for Lem's signals. There was nothing in the shot I had fired to tell the men where I was hiding. I was using smokeless powder, and the echoes of the report made location by ear impossible. Nor could they tell from the ricochet of the bullet any more than its general direction. So long as I kept tight in my hole and watched Lem, I was as safe as a flicker in his hollowed-out nest. But it was the hardest thing I ever tried to do.

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An arm each side of the trunk wagged four times; the men were moving westward; then six times, meaning they were keeping to the creek. On their way back to the shack, I guessed. If I climbed up to the ledge I could see them as they cut up from the stream. That wasn't in our plans, but it suited me better than lying in a crack of a rock, waiting for Lem to talk with his hands.

I learned then the reason discipline is so necessary in an army; why the soldier who disobeys is punished severely. Plans are made beforehand when time is ample for careful thought by cool brains and concentrated minds; the break from the plan is usually an inspiration of the moment. It may gain a point, just as I expected to learn something of advantage from a perch on top the rock; but it endangers the carefully-laid plan—just as my move busted ours wide open!

When I'd pulled myself up to lie on the ledge, Lem was signaling, but I had missed the beginning and its message was meaningless. I hoped he'd repeat, lifted my head to get a clearer view of him, and—spat! A bullet hit the rock not six inches from my nose. I ducked, rolled sidewise, and flopped back into the crevice. It was so close a squeak that I was trembling as badly as Gallup ever had. And, worst of all, I'd told the enemy where I was hid.

My being discovered wasn't anywhere in our plans. We had arranged what to do if Lem was located, but I, with my traceless nitro-powder, my concealing echoes,

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was to lie hidden all day long and keep the jumpers jumping. Now they could train their artillery on my boulder and make it more interesting for me than I could for them. If the crevice had been wider and longer, I'd have kicked myself for this stupidity.

Lem would be scared stiff up the tree, not knowing whether the bullet had hit me or not. I must relieve his mind at once by firing a shot; and as long as I was going to shoot anyhow, I might as well do some good with the bullet. Squirring on my stomach, to present as small a target as possible, I crawled to the opening and looked out.

There was no signal from the pine; no indication of Gallup and Pardner. The shot that had sent me scurrying from the top of the rock came from the mouth of the creek. I'd seen the smoke of black powder. I looked hard down that way, then came the simultaneous slap of a bullet on rock and the crack of a rifle, while a little puff of smoke floated above the bank of the creek.

I waited. The tiny white cloud from the burnt black powder had given me the general location of the riflemen, and I adjusted my globe sight for a range of four hundred yards, cocked the weapon, and lay ready for a quick shot. A movement above the brow of the bank; then an arm and shoulder exposed; one of the men taking position to shoot. I aimed well to the right of the target, not wanting to hit, and pulled trigger. With the report the target vanished. A moment more I

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watched there, then turned my glance to Lem's observation post.

Both hands out straight; the men had not separated. One, two, three; then six, very slowly with both hands; together they were moving up the stream, keeping behind its edge. I saw what their game would be. The lilac bush before the boulder was hiding both me and the mouth of the crevice, leaving only the top of the rock as a target. They had to guess where I was in the mass of stone and brush. But if they could get opposite, where lower foliage exposed the trend of the cleft, they could place bullets with much greater accuracy. It would be a dangerous position there for me should the men gain cover close to the dam.

To reach the dam, they must pass a space of a hundred feet where the stream ran shallow and the bank was low, exposed to my fire, or else they might take to the thicket and risk stopping bullets sent at random through the brush. Either way, it was a ticklish stretch; just how dangerous they couldn't know, for Lem would see them all the time, and keep me posted. He was watching them now, semaphoring. I read, "Both men going up the creek, in the channel, moving slowly. They stop. They talk," and I knew the decision of whether to cross the open space or make the *détour* would come quickly. My eyes left Lem to find the shallows.

Pardner led out, his broad back hunched over, head pulled down between shoulders. He was trusting to

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slip by unseen. I could have put a bullet through that mess of red hair, for he was not two hundred yards away; and I should have been justified in doing so; but I could not bring myself to kill. I drew fire on his crimson thatch, but I was set at four hundred yards, and the bullet must have passed a foot or more directly over his head; close enough for him to hear its angry, hornet buzz. He dropped as though it had hit him.

Gallup, who had just poked out into the open, jumped back like a Jack-in-the-box, as I sent a ball singing over him, and Pardner squirmed along on hands and knees to join him, while I spattered water over him to urge haste. Lem began announcements as soon as the two were out of my sight; one, two, three, four, both hands; slowly, then faster, faster; then halt. They had run down the creek as rapidly as legs would take them, not stopping until they reached the place of starting.

Then, in a minute, the signal that I dreaded came from Lem; both arms held high in air. It meant that the men were separating. I looked across to see Pardner make a run to disappear in one of the many defiles of the lake's shore. I could not see Gallup, but Lem was pointing him as going southward. The enemy had split forces, one to reach the high places to the north, where he could hide in the pine woods and pot me when I poked a head from the crevice to look for Lem; Gallup on a détour southward to come up from behind. It was

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good tactics; we had planned that they would do it; but we hadn't planned that they should know exactly where I lay hid. Now, if they acted with promptness and energy, I must either become a prisoner in my hole or a dead Ted Wilson.

Still, I wasn't so badly discouraged about the situation. In the first place, Gallup was not only a poor rifleman, but a coward; and Pardner, bolder and a better shot, was lazy. It would be just like the big, red-faced claim-jumper to get tired before he found a good position to do his potting of me and leave the matter for another day. He was a "Mañana" man, as the Mexicans say; putting off till to-morrow what ought to be done to-day.

Besides, Lem was my good watch-dog, could follow Gallup's every movement, perhaps keep tabs on Pardner, although he'd be among the pines and probably concealed from Lem. I'd try to watch the big man. Even now, Lem's right hand, holding the cap, was telling me the story of the snooping Gallup. He had gone along the lake shore, made a wide circle, and come into a position higher and back of me, where he expected, I suppose, to rake the crevice with his fire. My human semaphore told me he was getting set to shoot. Very well. He couldn't know that the cleft was as crooked as a snake, and the bullet that got to me from his direction would have to turn corners. I only hugged the floor a little tighter, listened to the report of the rifle and won-

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dered where the bullet went. Probably he missed the boulder.

Suddenly Lem's left hand shot out; he'd seen Pardner; but instead of waving code signals, he was pointing. I strained my eyes to make out what his hand indicated, and finally determined it was either the stump of a dead pine or a large fallen log, both at the lower edge of the forest, one of which sheltered the big man. "Ready to fire," Lem signaled warning, and I moved back out of danger before a bullet struck the wall inside the mouth of the cleft, too close for my happiness. If Pardner had not found the best location, it wasn't as bad a one as I'd like him to have. He was behind the down log, powder smoke told me. I guessed the distance, set sight for three hundred yards, and shot a bit under. Drawing coarser sight, I saw the dust of rotted wood leap from the log. Because of Lem and the claim-jumper's use of black powder, I had prisoned him, instead of being caged up myself. Unless he wanted to take the chance of a fifty-foot dash, he was tied there. Lem was waving his cap, and it wasn't a signal; it was three cheers!

The red head lifted above the log for a return shot, but I was waiting for it. The bark my bullet spattered must have struck his face. With this rifle of mine, a wonderful weapon and familiar to me, I have killed deer at five hundred yards; not every time, but now and again. Now I was shooting prone, with plenty of

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time to aim, tested range, and no wind; it would be strange if I couldn't place the bullets just where I wished. I might have put a leaden slug into Pardner's head just as easily as into the log before him. He probably realized it, for he kept covered after that shot.

Lem's Gallup-arm began to wave, one, two, three. Gallup was moving farther east. Plunking another bullet into Pardner's log to insure his staying there, I climbed up on the ledge and looked for the lawyer. He was a half mile or more away, headed for the redwoods, having tired, probably, of rifle practice. Let him go. He was not seriously dangerous at any time, and I could guess where he'd show next. I took my lunch, climbed up on the higher boulder's top, laid the rifle across my knees, and ate with the appetite of mountain air and no breakfast. I kept an eye on Lem, the other on Pardner's log, and wondered if Lem would see me eating, take the hint, and secure some nourishment in this respite.

I was washing down the last crumb with a long pull at the canteen when I heard a sound that stiffened me into a flat line on the rock. It came from our lean-to, or close by it; was the noise of someone moving things about there. Another minute, and it came again and louder; something heavy had fallen with a crash in the cabin.

Cautiously I lifted my head and looked. Nothing in

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sight to explain the sound. It could not be Gallup, for I had seen him disappear far up in the redwoods. Was it possible Pardner had slipped from behind his log and returned? My eyes went across the valley to Lem, who raised his left arm, then pointed; the big man was still there. Something or somebody was in the hut, and it was neither of the claim-jumpers.

For a long time I watched the lean-to between lilac leaves, seeing nothing, hearing no more. Then, just as I had made up my mind to return to the crevice, a man came from the hut, and immediately disappeared down the bank of the lake. I had but a broken glimpse of him through the foliage, but he was neither Gallup nor Pardner. Instinctively I looked for the latter, to find that he had risen from concealment, was standing regardless of the danger of my rifle, and was peering at the hut. As I raised the gun quickly to my shoulder, he started a wild run back up the hill, away from me into the forest. Afraid of me? I knew better. He was running from what I had seen, a man at the cabin.

Sliding, scrambling, I came down the boulder and began a mad race for my hut. Whoever had frightened Pardner must be friendly to me. I ran stumbling down the slope to the valley, then across the flat, dashing up the rocks to where I had seen the form disappear. No one was in sight. I called loudly a dozen times. No answer. I puffed and panted a half mile along the lake side, then satisfied that whoever had been there had got-

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ten well away, returned more slowly to the boulder and crept back into my crevice.

If Lem was still in his tree, he was behind its trunk and had no reason for signals. The sun left the cleft to cast its shadows to the east. A chipmunk, brilliant in yellow and black stripes, paid me a call and jerked his plumed tail in time to shrill chirps. It was a beautifully calm, windless, sun-bright afternoon; perfumes of lilac and blossoming roses lifted to my face from the valley; I grew drowsy with the hum of a bumble-bee. Drowsy. Asleep.





CHAPTER XX

IN THE NIGHT

THAT I escaped the penalty of the soldier who falls asleep at his post while on lookout or picket duty was not because I slept with one eye open, or merited punishment less. I deserved to wake up looking into the muzzles of rifles poked over the edge of the crevice, but I didn't. When, near sunset, I opened dragging eyes unwillingly, then remembering, popped them wide in surprise and fear, shook sleep from my limbs, crawled to the opening, and looked across to Lem's tree, the valley was still as placid as when I left the world behind in slumber. The valley, at sunset,

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spelled peace, quiet, rest; as though bullets had never sped across it to seek human targets.

Slowly, carefully, I surveyed it from the redwoods to the lake, prying gaze boring into every thicket, probing each chaparral; first with the dread of a rifle's crack to curb my inquisitive spirit; then with more assurance, courage, and a further stretched neck. Nothing to cast suspicion upon its peacefulness. No stir of leaf in the sage and mesquite, no rustle of branch in the trees; only the ripple of the stream, and the distant drumming of a grouse. If Gallup and Pardner were anywhere below there, they were too cleverly concealed for me to discover their hiding-places; and Lem must have lost sight of them completely, for nothing showed of arm, hand or cap in the blasted pine on the slope.

The rebuilt dam had called for occasional glances from me in the excitements of the day; now I studied it carefully, and found that it had been more than repaired. Reconstructed, it was much broader, and doubled in strength. I doubted that I could, even with pry and fulcrum, demolish it in an all night of work. But my eyes found something of greater importance to me. The rocks that my lever had sent tumbling down the stream had been rolled and tossed by the current to be stopped by the barrier of the curve, and the place where I found the gold was under a pile of heavy stones. Every indication of my digging for the prospect-pans had been destroyed.

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The flume was spouting merrily; too much water coming through for practical mining; but that was a detail, righted in a few minutes with a shovel, by widening the ditch. Dam and sluices were ready for their work, and I ached to get down there and begin clearing the creek's bed. I'd need to make a sledge of some kind, so Zim could haul pay-dirt from below the dam to the head of the sluices; a box on a pair of runners would do. That swift-flowing stream would carry all the dirt I could shovel out and haul. If it was up on Baldy, or one of half its size—even a quarter the flow—the Black Boulder claim would be so valuable that I'd never have to worry about Mother Laing, Lem, or my own education.

Well, the water was here on the Hot Biscuit, and there was gold in the sands of the Hot Biscuit, and another day was drawing to its end without Gallup and Pardner gaining possession of the property; at least, not working it. We had prevented their stealing a single pan of the bottom mud. They wouldn't work at night. It would need a bonfire at the dam to give light for their operations, and they would be in its blaze with us and the rifle out in the darkness. They didn't have nerve enough for that.

But where were the men now? Why had Pardner started running when he saw a stranger at the hut? Where had he run to? Who was the stranger? Where had the stranger gone? Where had Gallup disap-

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peared when he entered the redwoods? Interesting questions, all of them; I could think up as many more, and answer none.

There was movement in Lem's pine-top, and his cap began waving its message. Gallup, on the hill behind me, was moving westward. Then the cap went up to arm's length above the shoulder, held there an instant, and brought down quickly. "Look," it said, in our code.

Hastily I came to my feet, peeped over the rim of the crevice, and looked upon a little cavalcade that sent my heart down into my boots at the same time it raised all the anger in me. Gallup was leading Zim, while Faustina followed. The lawyer had found our camp, stolen our animals, and—I could see that Zim was packed—carried away all our supplies.

He was out of range, fortunately for him and for me. I do not believe I should have hesitated an instant in sending a bullet through his thieving brain, for he was stealing our very lives. Not only every ounce of food we had, but the horse that we must use to reach food had been taken from us. This was the calamity not anywhere in our plans. Even now I was wildly hungry. One meal, and a small one, in the last twenty-four hours had not appeased the appetite of a healthy boy. Lem was undoubtedly in the same condition. And this weasel-lawyer had stolen our food.

I started to climb from the cleft with the crazy idea

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of chasing after him; of recapturing horse, goat and packs; but I thought in time of the uselessness of the attempt. He was three-quarters of a mile away, and could travel at least as rapidly as I could, and farther. There wasn't a chance to stalk him on the open hill. He had seen me already, judging from the change he made in his course. And he had a rifle, could stand behind Zim and shoot across his back. So I did nothing, while the procession disappeared from my view in one of the gullies beside the lake; then lay down again in the crevice and waited for the hour I should rejoin Lem.

It came at last in night's blackness, and I cautiously crept out and around to the place of meeting in the hollow tree that had housed us for a night. As I stepped to the opening, Lem spoke from inside:

"That you, Ted?" And I answered promptly and joyfully. It was better than food, hearing Lem's voice. He sounded cheerful enough, as he asked, "Had supper yet?"

"You know why I haven't—why there isn't going to be any supper. I'd have shot the thief if I'd seen him sooner." My feeling of wrath was hot in my voice.

"That's why I didn't signal sooner," Lem rejoined coolly. "I had the hunch you'd shoot first and remember those two kids and the missis afterward. How would a few pine nuts hit your palate?" and he passed me a handful he'd gathered in the woods.

I began feeling better at once, and before I'd finished

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was as glad Lem had forgotten to signal as Gallup would have been if he'd known it. Without a blanket to cover the opening, we didn't dare have a fire in the tree, but we sat together with our backs against the wood and discussed the day's events. Lem had not seen the man at the lean-to, didn't know, until I told him the reason, why Pardner had run. But Pardner had never stopped running so long as he was within view from the lofty pine tree; running or walking hurriedly, he had continued into the forest and up the mountain, away from the hut, the valley and the lake.

When we had finished the nuts and asked all the questions we had in us, Lem made a suggestion I readily accepted; that we go down the creek aways, get an idea of what the enemy was doing if they had come back at all.

We set out at once, I with the rifle leading, and made our way to the dam, where we stopped to reconnoiter with eye and ear. As there was nothing to see or hear, I led off again, keeping close to the bank of the stream, ready to slip over in the instant of alarm. So we came opposite our hut, black as a pocket, silent as a tomb. Lem placed his lips to my ear, and whispered:

“Wait here.” Then he slipped away.

I obeyed scarcely breathing, rifle ready to create a disturbance should Lem be discovered; and in a short time he was again at my side, whispering, not so cautiously as before:

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"Nobody home."

"Our packs—are they there?" I asked low.

"No. Some of their truck is, but it's all scattered and torn up around inside, bunks emptied out, everything topsy-turvy. I couldn't see, but I could feel."

"Well," I said, "it's all strange enough. Let's start back."

"Start nothing! I came to get you. We're going to reoccupy the hut," and his hand on my arm, he led me along up the rock-way to the lean-to. This might be a trap set by our enemies, quail-cage or twitch-up, but it was baited with the promise of food and blankets, and I followed Lem into it.





CHAPTER XXI

THE LIGHTNING-CHANGE ACT

“I’D give a quarter interest in the Hot Biscuit gold mine, right this minute, for a cup of hot coffee,”

Lem remarked, a half hour later, the first words spoken above a whisper in the hut that night. I glanced around nervously, saying:

“Do you think it’s safe?”

“I’m willing to take a chance if you are. I believe Pardner is still hurdling the ice-capped peaks of the high Sierras, running away from his past; and Gallup, as a fighting man, is a joke. Let’s.”

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I went over to the fireplace, laid my rifle within hand's reach, found the pitch kindling, and piled up wood enough for a cooking blaze; then touched a match to it, grabbed the rifle and jumped back to the deep shade of the cabin. For the few moments that the fire was making headway into flames, I listened anxiously for the crack of a rifle and the spat of its bullet; but no sound broke the peace of the night. Lem had filled the coffee-pot, and now adjusted it over the heat as I urged haste away from the glow.

The front of the lean-to was open and facing the fireplace, with the lake beyond. If we kept well at the back of the cabin where the bunk and table were, we would be exposed only to the view of a possible someone on Sentinel Rock, or the lake itself; and the glow of the fire gave us opportunity to see the contents of the hut. Lem had said upon his first investigation that it was in confusion; but we realized now that it had been gone through in a hurried search for something, by somebody who had no regard for orderliness or a tidy room.

We began picking things up, packing them away; put the pine-boughs and needles, with the blankets, back in the bunk; gathered the scattered food and supplies into one corner. And we found that the captured provisions were a generous supply, bacon, part of a ham, crackers in tins, canned milk, ginger-snaps in packages, besides flour, sugar and like necessities. So far as food went,

The Lightning-Change Act

we had gained in the trade with Gallup and Pardner; and Zim and Faustina, though I hated to think of them in Gallup's hands, could hardly be regarded as assets; they had to be looked after.

"Fair enough; fair enough," Lem chuckled, as he staggered under the weight of a heavy case. "I don't know what's in here, but we're winners as is. Hand me that axe and I'll bust this open for a look-see."

I brought the tool, but I didn't give it to him. As I caught a fair view of the box, I decided it shouldn't be opened roughly with an axe.

"Set it down easily — easily, Lem! Handle it gently!" He backed away from it, looking the question. "It's dynamite."

"Christmas Eve!" Lem whistled. "And me just juggling it like a sack of spuds! Dinnymite! Wow!" And he retreated to the far corner of the lean-to.

I laughed as I knelt down to remove the lid more carefully than we might have done with an axe. "It's a lucky find, Lem. They brought it for mining, and we'll use it, if we need to, for stopping them from mining. See if you don't find a roll of fuse and a box of caps somewhere about."

Still casting nervous looks at the case, he began a search which soon produced the balance of the outfit. As he handed them to me, he said feelingly:

"Ted, I hope if Goober and his Pard begin shooting,

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no careless bullet lands in that mess. Think of what it'd mean."

"Would your mind rest easier with the case outside the hut?" I asked.

"It sure would, Ted; and the farther outside the better."

"Then grab an end," I laughed. Dynamite was too frequent a housemate for me to give it much thought, but I knew the dread that haunts the tenderfoot. "We'll carry it up to the dam—and please don't stumble, Lem."

With every minute of respite from disturbing interruptions by the enemy, we lost anxiety and lessened caution. It began to seem certain that the claim-jumpers had deserted the valley. As Lem and I each grasped a rope handle of the heavy case, neither thought once of the rifle set against the bunk. Lem might be excused for the neglect, for his mind was clouded by close contact with explosive force enough to lift us both into the adjoining county of Lassen. I should have known enough to carry the rifle everywhere, every minute, while there was a possibility that Gallup and Pardner were about.

We lugged dynamite, fuse and caps up the creek, left them on its bank beside the dam, and started the return. When almost to the hut, I heard something that made me grasp Lem's sleeve with a whispered, "Sh-h-h!" A boot-heel had struck against rock.

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We crouched, breathless. In a moment a voice came out of the darkness beyond the cabin, thin and quavering, a lowered call.

“Red—that you, Red?”

If I'd had the rifle, my answer would have sent Gallup galloping through the night in greater fear than held Lem and me silent and trembling now. But to walk through the glow of the camp-fire, under his rifle's muzzle, to get it was way beyond me. Instead, we watched Gallup slip up from the shadows, dodge quickly into the cabin; and we turned away to run on tiptoes, stopping only when we were again at the dam.

“My fault, Lem,” I groaned, sitting down on the dynamite box. “You can kick me all you please.”

“Not while you're sitting where you're sitting,” he grinned; then with the echo of my own groan, “And that shyster is drinking my cup of coffee!”

“Not only coffee, but he's got every single solitary thing we own—food, blankets, goat, horse, rifle, pistol and ammunition. Do you realize that, Lem?”

“Lack of a cup of coffee sort of brings it home to me. Where d'you suppose he's hid Zim and Faustina?”

That brought me up with a bound. If Gallup had led them near the hut, we must have heard them. Faustina would have to be gagged to keep her from her “Ma-a-a-s.” Zim had a way of nickering whenever his keen nostrils located me. The animals were not near the cabin.

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“ We’ll find them, Lem. Come on,” I said, and again filled with hope, we began running for the valley’s southern slope, I to stop suddenly after a dozen steps, with, “ You go on, Lem. Climb to the top and wait for me at the boulder.”

“ What you going to do? ” he asked.

“ Make ’em trouble. Keep running,” and I gave him a shove to start him forward, while I turned back to the dam. Six sticks of dynamite I took from the case, then carried the rest of it and hid it carefully in the thicket. Three feet of fuse from the coil, the balance hid with the powder; a cap from the box; and I began trouble-making.

Into the front of the dam I burrowed, removing stone after stone till I had a hole near its base two feet or more deep, into which I planted five of the half dozen sticks of explosive. Over the end of my bit of fuse I slipped the fulminate of mercury cap, crimping it to hold, by biting its edge between my teeth. Then, cutting away the greased paper at the end of the sixth stick, I inserted the capped tip of the fuse well into the soapy dynamite, pressed it together around the cap, and placed the stick in the heart of the others in the cavity.

It took me several minutes to replace the rocks to the best possible advantage, but I finally finished, took a moment to recover breath, poked a lighted match against the fuse’s end, scrambled up the creek bank, and ran like an express train making up lost time for the

The Lightning-Change Act

boulder and Lem. It came as I struggled the last few feet of the steep incline, a flash that lighted the whole valley for an instant, and a thunderous explosion; a rain of rocks; then the gentler dropping of smaller ones that had climbed higher. I listened eagerly, and strained my eyes to pierce the night for the evidence of success. It came to my ear. The stream was hammering rock against rock in its old channel. Again the dam was a wreck.

“For the love of Mike!” gasped Lem, as I pulled alongside. “What have you done to Gallup? Think of those two poor kid orphans!”

I laughed. “They’ll still have daddy’s knee to climb on. It’s the dam, not the Peanut, that went flying. Come on; we’ll hunt Zim.”

“Zim, a coffee-pot, and the living milk can, Faustina,” Lem agreed, and I led the way toward the defile where I had seen the procession disappear that afternoon. It was easy to pick up the trail, even in the night, for the ground in the gully was soft and hoofs cut deep. On the rocky shore of the lake we lost it again, but they had turned southward, toward the foot of the stretch of water. All we had to do was follow along, and study the earth in each arroyo to see that the animals had not been turned back toward the hills.

“Kinda looks as though Peanut had headed for the old cabin,” Lem said, after we had progressed a few miles along the edge of the lake.

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“It does that. But somebody was using that log-pile last night, and it wasn’t Gallup. I wonder ——?”

“We’ll find out,” Lem interrupted. “If the man who started Pardner Red galloping over the hills is still there, we want to meet him; or Zim and Faustina. Let’s make a straight course for the cabin and take the chance.”

By scrambling up and down the sides of gullies so steep that they would block a horse, we could cut off a third of the distance and save time; and we were shortly alongside the little grove that sheltered the deserted house on the lake’s edge. A whinny from Zim, followed in a moment by Faustina’s long “Ma-a-a-a,” gave evidence that we had guessed right as to the animals. They were in the corral beside the cabin.

The structure itself was as black as night when we approached. I was so glad to find Zim again—yes, and Faustina, too,—that I should have gone directly to the little enclosure where they were held, but Lem restrained me, whispering:

“Let’s find out if anyone’s in the cabin first.”

It was good advice, and we moved to the front door with all the care and secrecy of two hen-roost pillagers, to find the door closed, and the peg sticking in the auger hole bored in the jamb; the simple locking device. It was pretty conclusive evidence that no one was inside, but an invader might have crawled in by the window. We still retained our caution, as we pulled the plug,

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opened the sagging door an inch at a time, and tip-toed in.

Putting my hand in the bunks, at the blackest end of the cabin, half expecting it to light upon human flesh, was the most hair-raising experience of this trying night. When I had accomplished that, to find nothing more startling than the same old pine needles I had seen there before, the striking of a match to light up the place was easy. By its flame we convinced ourselves that there were no other occupants, and found our packs piled in one corner.

“Which means coffee,” Lem said aloud, his voice sounding odd in the old shack. “There are candles here somewhere. Scratch another match and I’ll dig ’em,” which I did, after seeing that the door was tight shut and hanging a blanket over the one window, and soon had the room lighted, a fire in the chimney doing its duty to a coffee-pot and skillet laden with bacon. Only then did Lem lean back against a blanket roll, sigh contentedly and say with a grin:

“Reg’lar lightning-change act, Ted. One minute ours is theirs and theirs is ours, then—presto! Flip and flop—now you see it, and now you don’t! Get me a cup of coffee quick, before it vanishes.”

“Let her boil, Lem; give her a chance,” I steadied him. “I wonder what Gallup is doing now.”

A chuckle from Lem, then:

“Shivering with fear in the darkest corner of our

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lean-to, wondering what's going to explode next. I'd rather know what Pardner's up to. Ted, I had a good squint at his phiz to-day, and somewhere I've bumped into him before. I've met Pardner in the past."

"Where? When?" I asked eagerly.

"It must have been when I was housekeeping down by the docks—you remember—tin house on a farm—and was selling newspapers to keep the wolf from the fence-board door. Maybe I just run against him on the street; he's such an odd-looking guy he'd be apt to stick in my mind; but the notion holds that I saw more of him—was somehow interested in his doings—I can't straighten it out in the old think-tank, though."

"It may come back to your memory," hopefully. I poured two steaming cups of the black coffee, piled a plate with bacon for each of us, then as I took a seat on the floor beside Lem, said slowly, "We're not much account in this claim-holding affair without the rifle, Lem; worth just about nothing. I'll let you take Zim in the morning, and you hike out."

"Hike out where?"

"Susanville—or Quincy. We've money enough left so you can buy a ticket to Portland. You leave Zim at some livery stable, and write me where you left him."

"And where you going to be?"

"I'm going to try to hang on here," I replied, even more slowly. "Just hang around. They'll fix the

The Lightning-Change Act

dam again to-morrow, probably. Somehow I'll try to smash it. Maybe, if I'm lucky, I can keep 'em off from locating till the ranger gets here."

Lem was silent a minute while his coffee cooled and the strips of bacon steamed unnoticed on the tin plate. Finally he asked:

"Are we pardners, Ted?"

"Sure, Lem. But that don't mean much as things are now."

"It means fifty-fifty in everything, doesn't it?" Still persistent.

"Even shares, yes; but in what, Lem?"

"In hard luck—fifty-fifty in the bad luck and the danger. You gave when it looked good. You can't take away when it's bum and rocky. Pardners means staying by through the lean, just the same as the fat. I'll help spoil the dam, Ted."

I couldn't insist after that. I didn't even dare thank him. All I said was:

"We'll make it somehow. They've got to actually find mineral before they can locate, and we've stopped 'em doing that a week now. Maybe, with luck ——"

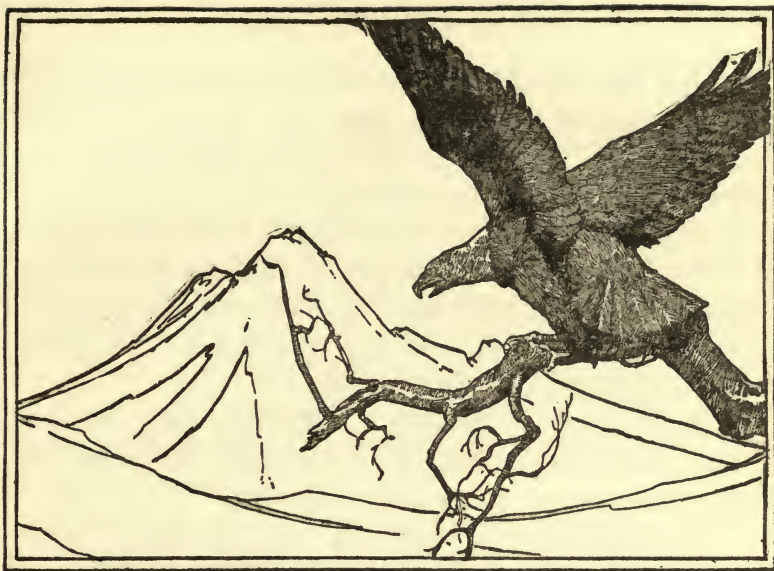
"And dynamite, Ted. Don't forget we've got dynamite. And cut out the maybes. We're going to keep the Hot Biscuit for our own eating. Roll into your blankets in the bunk there and get some sleep. I've the beginning of an idea, and I want to sit up and let my bone-head roll around over it, so I'll keep watch."

Black Boulder Claim

I spread the blankets upon the soft pine needles and crept into them, with:

“Wake me in an hour, Lem, and I’ll spell you on the watching part. Fifty-fifty in everything——” and my eyes closed in sleep. When they opened again, it was morning, and Lem sat before the coals of a burned-down fire, still wide awake, on guard.





CHAPTER XXII

A FLAG OF TRUCE

LEM, sitting before a fire that was down to embers, whittled on a wand of peeled willow, and whistled below his breath. I spoke reproachfully:

“Why didn’t you wake me? What time is it? You’ve sat up all night.” And Lem looked around at me, grinned, and replied:

“Sun not up yet, Ted. I’ve been busy, so forgot to wake you.”

I jumped from the blankets and pulled on my boots.

Black Boulder Claim

When I came back from a souse of face and arms at the spring, Lem was mixing pine soot scraped from the chimney flue with water on one of the stones of the hearth. I watched him curiously.

“What on earth are you doing?” I asked at length.

“I’m a Bessemer steel plant, operating as a munitions factory,” he said, rubbing the black mixture upon the willow stick. “This,” waving the wand, “is a latest model, high-power repeating rifle.”

I looked at him pityingly. “Sleep is what you need, Lem. Get into the bunk here, and you’ll be better after a few hours’ rest. Come; I’ll help you.”

“It’s a better rifle than the one you lost,” he continued, unheeding, “for there isn’t a chance of its making any orphans. As for shooting qualities, it’s certainly as good as the one Gallup uses.”

“Yes, yes, Lem. Get to bed right away. I’ll find some goose-grass and make a soothing tea that’ll kill the fever in an hour or two. Don’t worry; we’ll pull you out of it.”

I took him by the arm, more anxious than I’d been since the claim-jumpers came into the valley, but Lem laughed so heartily, so reasonably, that I let go with an indignant:

“What you trying to do? Scare the life out of me?”

“No, Ted; trying to scare the life out of Peanut and Pardner.” He raised the blackened wand to his shoul-

A Flag of Truce

der and pointed it at me. "How does it look from in front?"

I began to see light. At a little distance, it would look as much like a rifle barrel as another rifle barrel would look. I sat down on one of the wood blocks, with:

"But, Lem, they know we only had one rifle; and they've got that. How will this fool them?"

He sobered at once, sat down beside me, and began:

"Check up on me, Ted; I'm going to spiel my night's musings, and if you find I'm getting off on the wrong track, pull me back. To begin with, they don't know we had only one rifle ——"

"But they saw all our stuff—everything," I broke in. "The first afternoon they came, when they drove us off the place."

"Yes. But one of us went to Susanville after that. If he didn't buy another rifle there he was pretty foolish. They know one of us went to Susanville, for Gallup followed Zim's tracks; and they don't know that I was a fool."

"It wasn't on your list," I defended him.

"No. Have a cup of coffee, Ted. But anyhow, those men don't know how many guns we have—or haven't—got. This one I've built will be the one from Susanville. Am I reasonable so far?"

"Yes; it'll fool them. Go on."

"You'll find the milk in the mining-pan. Sugar in the sack."

Black Boulder Claim

“Milk?” I leaped to look; a quart or more. “Why—where——?”

“Faustina on the job. But listen. I’m guessing that Gallup and Pardner are worse discouraged right now than we are. They’ve been held up a week, one blow after another, and last night’s dynamite plot on top of yesterday’s mess of bullets, and Pardner’s big scare from the stranger at the shack, have left them bluer than indigo. I’m guessing they’ll quit on a strong bluff, Ted.”

“Maybe,” I began, rather dubiously, but Lem interrupted.

“You’re thinking of Pardner. Gallup we both know is a quitter. After he found you didn’t scare a bit, he was ready to throw up the sponge. But Pardner’s got more fight in him. He isn’t afraid of us; but he is of someone else. Now—I’m guessing again, but I think it’s a fair guess—Pardner doesn’t know any better than we do where that stranger he’s scared of is. Just a hint of him, and Pardner will take to the woods.”

“Perhaps,” I began again, again to be stopped with:

“My plan is to pull a strong bluff this morning while they’re blue and grumpy. Me with a flag of truce, under protection of you and this rifle. I’ll offer to let them take their donkeys, packs and guns, get off the place at once, and leave the decision of who owns it to the forest ranger.”

I walked over to the window and looked off across the

A Flag of Truce

hills, lit by the first rays of the rising sun; but I wasn't seeing flowers and foliage or rolling slopes; I was studying Lem's plan; so much depended upon the correctness of his guesses. Were Gallup and Pardner discouraged? Were they uncertain about our weaponless condition? Would they stand a bluff? If Lem had guessed wrong, and the men didn't scare, there'd not be a chance of correcting the guesses.

"If you'll stand guard with the stick, while I wave the white flag, I'll go you, Lem," was my decision.

"Sure; if you think you'd be as good at the bluff as I. Don't think I'm stuck on myself, Ted, but when it comes to talking in hints and threats, I believe I've got you beat a city block. No; it's me for the gab-fest."

That was the place of danger, I knew; and just as well I knew that Lem had to be in that place if we were to stand any chance of winning. Reluctantly I agreed.

"You're right, Lem," I said, still looking from the window hole. "I believe it will work. When do we start?"

"Now; and the sooner the quicker," eagerly. "Come on; let's go."

I turned toward him; then quickly back, to look at the hills with seeing eyes. Then I said:

"The scheme's no good at all, Lem. It's a bum scheme."

"Why? Why is it? What'ya mean, a bum scheme?"

"It won't work," I continued slowly. "It's poorly

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planned, badly thought up. It hasn't a chance in the world."

"But—but"—Lem was stuttering in his disappointment—"you said it would work—you thought——"

"I think now that the idea is no good at all."

"But why? Why is it so bad?"

I waited just a moment longer, as Lem sputtered.

"Because Gallup has beaten you to it, Lem. He's coming here, and he's waving a shirt tied by the sleeves to a shovel handle. The Peanut thought of it first."

Lem was crowding me at the window, his eyes staring from his head. Down the hill, walking jerkily, halting frequently, acting as though he wanted to turn and run at every step, Gallup came under a flag of truce. I had to laugh at Lem's astonishment, his chagrin at finding the enemy anticipating his plan; but it was only an instant that the boy stood there dumb; the next, he had poked the willow stick into my hand with:

"Hold him off from coming nearer than the edge of the trees. I'll find out what's up," and ran from the room.

The next moment I saw him outside, making quickly toward Gallup who halted sharply, and waved the shirt frantically at sight of him. Lem turned his head to shout at me:

"Let him come to the tree here, Ted. Plug him if he takes a step farther," and I poked the end of the blackened willow menacingly through the opening. Gallup



DOWN THE HILL, WALKING JERKILY, HALTING FREQUENTLY.

A Flag of Truce

wavered, but braced his nerves as Lem called to him, "Drop the shovel and come here. What do you want?"

Obedying instantly, Gallup closed up the gap, holding both hands above his head.

"Not a weapon on me—you can see," he piped shrilly. "Don't get careless with that gun; I'm under a flag o' truce. I'm here to negotiate, peaceful-like and lawful. Under a flag o' truce."

"Better stick it back on," Lem suggested seriously. "You might catch cold, and those two kids of yours lose a worthless dad. What you here for?"

"To make you boys a proposition, honest and square. Me and my pardner are dead tired of you and your monkey-shines. We could have you jailed for some of the things you've ——"

"Aw, cut it!" from Lem. "Talk brass tacks. What's your proposition?"

"I want to make it to young Wilson. He's the one I've got to discuss business with." He raised his voice. "Can't you come out here and talk, Wilson?"

"I can hear and talk from the window," I replied. "Speak up good and loud. What have you to say?"

"No harm in my setting down here in the shade, is there?" Lem grunted permission. "I'm here representing the two of us, me and my pardner, to suggest a trade with you, Wilson. You own the Black Boulder on Baldy, don't you?"

"Yes." This was a surprise-packet.

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“And I own the homestead right to the creek valley where you was. Maybe we could swap, you willing.”

Here was another man offering for my dry gravel claim. “Just what is your proposition?” I asked.

“Even trade for relinquishments. We pass the papers, and me and my pardner pull out of the place, leaving it to you; and we make no legal claim for damages to the cradle you smashed, or the dam you blew up. Fair enough.”

“It does seem fair ——” but Lem was talking before I had more than started my sentence; was talking loudly, too.

“You can’t expect us to deal with thieves,” he was saying. “We can’t talk business with robbers. You run away with our stock, and steal one of our rifles ——”

“Hold on,” mildly, from Gallup. “Your animals were trespassing, and I removed ’em; then one of you left a rifle in my hut. Don’t talk so noisy about thieves and robbers.” I felt he had the best of it, but Lem insisted:

“Just that; thieves and robbers. You tried to steal the claim, to start with. Don’t talk your legal flub-dub —you know as well as we know that you haven’t a foot to stand on, and when that forest ranger gets here ——”

“Hold on, Lem,” I interrupted. “Don’t get excited. Let’s listen to Mr. Gallup a bit. Does your pardner agree to this trade?”

“He does. This here is his suggestion.”

A Flag of Truce

“Why didn’t he come to make it then?” Again it was Lem questioning, and Gallup squirmed visibly.

“He’s waiting back at the linter. I’m legal owner of the ranch, not him. I have to sign the papers.”

“I suppose you brought them with you, ready to sign?” from Lem.

“I thought probably it’d be a trade, so I made ’em ready.” The lawyer opened a close-buttoned coat to expose a shirtless body, while he found in an inner pocket the relinquishments, and handed them to Lem with, “All drawn proper and according to the law. Wilson signs this one, here,” pointing with a dirty thumb, “then I’ll sign t’other, and all’s set and happy. Fair enough.”

“Sit tight, just as you are, and I’ll take them in to Wilson,” said Lem, and he came quickly to the cabin door, crossed to shove the papers into my hand with a low, “Keep Gallup just as long as you can,” then loudly, “You’re to sign right here, Ted.” Then in a whisper, “Sign nothing. Give me half an hour’s start if possible.” Then aloud, “It sounds all right. Fair enough,” and ducking so as not to be seen through the window, he slid like a shadow out the door, and disappeared.

I stood in the window, the stick protruding, and looked over the two papers; but I wasn’t seeing a single word written there. I was trying to make out what Lem was at, the meaning of those whispered messages.

Black Boulder Claim

Where had he gone? Why had he vanished so quickly, so silently? Why was I to hold Gallup here? And how was I to keep him?

I was the worst hand in the world at a situation like this. I couldn't talk one thing and mean another—not and fool anybody. I was willing to obey Lem, would to the best of my ability, but just how to keep Gallup's attention engaged for thirty minutes was a puzzle. Already he was getting nervous, as he called:

“If they's anything there you don't rightly understand, I'll come an' explain it to you,” and, glancing up, I saw he had risen, and would have started for me, had I not called, tersely:

“Sit down there!” He sat hurriedly. I continued, “What do you happen to know about the Black Boulder?”

“Nothing much,” uneasily. “Knew you was owner on the land-office records, and that there was gold in the gravel when water come to wash it. I don't figure to make nothing by the trade.”

“Do you know Mr. Wayne of Jamesville?”

“Never saw him in my life. He owns the hotel there, don't he?”

“That's the man.”

“No, I don't know him. What's he got to do with this?”

I didn't answer. In my mind there was a connection somewhere in the fact that two men desired one worth-

A Flag of Truce

less claim. Wayne was the stingiest miser I ever knew; Gallup the craftiest rascal. They wouldn't want the Black Boulder if it was as valueless as I believed it to be, and it didn't seem possible that both could have some hidden knowledge that increased its worth. Slowly I tore up the papers Lem had brought me, and leaning from the window, tossed them for the air to whirl into a little snow-storm.

"What you doing there?" Gallup cried, jumping to his feet. "What for did you tear up those papers?"

"Because I'm not making any trades, Gallup; and I'm not selling to Wayne. I'll keep the Black Boulder, anyhow until I know what you and Wayne want it for. Here! Come back!" For Gallup was walking swiftly away. Again I shouted, "Come back or I'll fire!"

"Shoot the old black stick," he answered over his shoulder, and on his face was a wicked grin. Those fox eyes of his had seen, or perhaps I had been careless in the display of my weapon; anyhow he knew. I saw him stop to pluck his shirt from the shovel handle, then quickly disappear over the rise. Not a third of Lem's half hour had been killed.

I didn't wait a minute there for Lem. Only one place could he have gone, and that was back to the claim. His plan—whatever it was—might be jeopardized by my inability to hold Gallup as Lem had requested, and I must try to help him now. With the Bessemer steel rifle as a willow walking stick, I started up the lake.

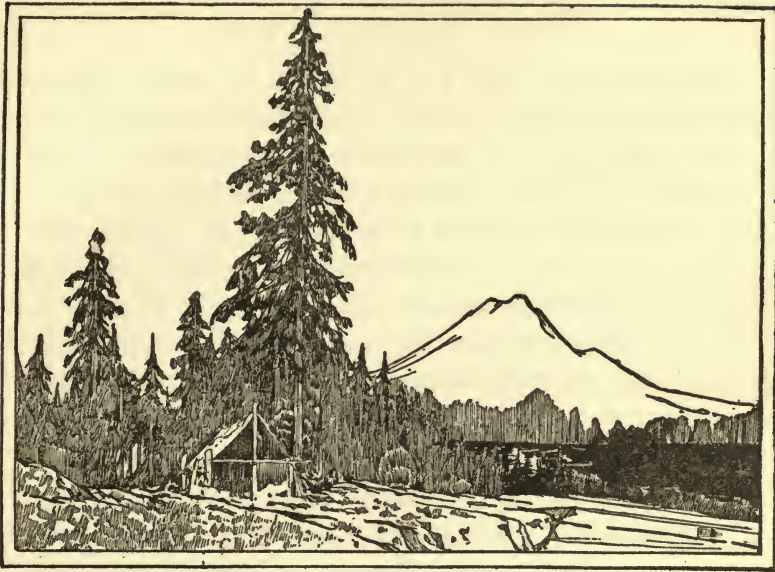
Black Boulder Claim

Gallup was nowhere in sight, though I kept an eye out for him as I hastened by the shortest route, cutting across gullies, hurdling patches of sage and lupine, tearing a way through the manzanita when it would save a bit of time. Lem was there before me, for up from the hut came a shout, a wild cry that it seemed to me could have been heard for miles:

“Extry paper! Extry paper! All about the enemy’s retreat! All about the great victory! Extry! Extry!” Lem was again a “newsie.”

Waving the soot-blackened imitation rifle, I slid, fell and scrambled down the cañon’s edge.





CHAPTER XXIII

POCKET OF GOLD

THE dam was rebuilt. It had taken only two days of hard work, for Lem and Zim had labored with me. Now the water was washing dirt in the sluices, the riffles were accumulating their precious burdens, and the rocks were pounding at the grizzly. To-night we should clean-up the first run, learn the result of the day's mining operations.

What had become of Gallup and Pardner was still a mystery. When Lem, guessing from the lawyer's nervousness under the flag of truce, that Pardner had not returned to the lean-to, slipped away from me at

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the deserted cabin, and ran as fast as he could make it up the lake and to the valley, he found everything gone—burros, packs, tools, and men; the whole claim-jumping outfit. Whether Gallup had driven them away before he visited us to make his last effort at a profit from the plan of theft, or Pardner had returned and taken them, we could only guess. Lem thought, because he found my rifle, revolver and some of our mining tools in the shack, that the unscrupulous Pardner had never come back there, arguing that Red would have stolen our things when he carried off their own.

We'd gone to work getting ready to mine with apprehensive caution, the rifle beside my hand at all times; but this fear was wearing away. Although we could not guess the reason for the jumpers' desertion of the claim they had fought so desperately to secure and hold, we admitted the fact; they were gone.

"What's next to do?" Lem asked eagerly, watching me scrape from the riffles into the pan. "Is that all gold you're taking out?"

"I only wish it was," I laughed. "No, Lem; this has to be washed by hand now, just the same as a prospect-pan. Only we've got here the concentrated values of all the dirt we've shoveled in this afternoon; a hundred or more pans."

"Then it should have a hundred times more gold than you took out of one shovel full?" Lem's eyes were popping; but again I had to disappoint him.

Pocket of Gold

“We’ve been running all the bottom dirt through; just as it came; not a selected bit of rich pay-dirt. Some that went into the sluices probably didn’t carry a color—not a speck of gold. If this pans out five ounces—or four—consider yourself lucky.”

I was down on my knees at the ditchside, panning; and expecting better results than I talked, for I’d dug to-day where I made the find, getting down to bed-rock, only a short distance below the gravel. If there was gold in any quantity in the creek, I should have evidence of it in my pan. The weight told me I had gold. Before I’d worked a minute, with the pan beneath the water’s surface, my eyes confirmed my arm-muscles. I brought up the pan, carefully placed it on the ground, and removing two bits of the contents, placed them in Lem’s hand, with:

“Feast your eyes on those while I’m working. Nuggets, Lem!” They were hunks of pure gold bigger than my thumb-nail.

The next time I lifted the pan from the water, I ceased washing.

“Lem,” I said, and my voice was husky, “I just daren’t wash this any more. It’s too rich. The stream might carry some away, for it’s all so heavy, gold and iron and heavy quartz, that it can’t be safely handled in the current. I’ll horn it out at the hut,” and carrying it in my arms, I led the way, Lem with the rifle, down to the lean-to.

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It was supper-time and past, but we gave no heed, as with the horn spoon I cleared gold from débris, piling the precious metal on a tin plate placed on the rock beside me, keeping the dross for more careful examination later on, after the excitement was past, for it might still hold value. Horning was only washing on a smaller scale, with the spoon for a pan, water being poured in from the canteen. Before I had finished the day's clean-up, I was working by the light of a fire Lem had built, and the pile of gold made a little pyramid on the tin plate.

"Looks like a million dollars to me!" Lem said in awe-struck tones. "Sure, that's more than four or five ounces, Ted."

"Lift it," I suggested, adding the last spoonful; and his whistle of astonishment sent me into excited laughter. "I'll say there's more than five ounces there!"

Without a word he passed me the dish, and I hefted it carefully. "I wish we'd bought a pair of scales at Susanville," I cried. "I'm only guessing, but there's nearer five pounds of gold than five ounces! Lem, you and I are rich!"

His lips were moving but no words came; at last he blurted out:

"Sixteen hundred dollars! Ted, tell me I'm not dreaming! Sixteen hundred dollars in one day's work!"

"Some of that's a dream, yes, Lem. You're figuring sixteen ounces to the pound, for instance; should be

Pocket of Gold

twelve; and you're taking full five pounds as your basis of calculation. I never had so much in any one clean-up of a day's run at the Black Boulder, but I'd guess there was between eight and nine hundred dollars of good money in the pile. Discouraged?"

"Do I look like it? And we've only begun, Ted. There's a thousand times as much dirt left in the creek as we've dug out. We'll be able to buy up all San Francisco and build a garden on Nobb Hill."

"Let's get supper." I looked at my watch. "Why, it's nine o'clock!"

As we hurried about getting the delayed supper, we discussed what we should do with our wealth; how we should spend the many thousands that the Hot Biscuit would give us. I wanted to get down to Berkeley, where the State University was located, by September, and have a couple of years at some preparatory school getting ready to matriculate. Lem couldn't see much fun or excitement in that program but wanted to be with me, even if it meant school and college. As he put it:

"Education never bit anybody to hurt 'em, Ted. There's worse things to have than schooling. So if you're set on gathering all the knowledge there is in the world, I'll tag on and pick up what dribblets leak out. What'll we do with the mine while we're colleging?"

"Put it in charge of a good foreman with a gang of miners. If the bottom runs this value all the way up to our dam, we'll go higher, say just below where the creek

Black Boulder Claim

comes out of the redwoods, and put in our works. That'll give us a stretch of ground!"

"A half mile of gold! Whe-e-e!"

"Of course it may not all run so rich," I hastened to explain, for I didn't want Lem to be disappointed. "Maybe there'll be barren spots where there's no gold. You never can tell." But Lem's only answer was:

"Eight hundred dollars a day!"

We hid the gold, after placing it in my poke, by digging a cavity in the rock behind the fireplace and covering it over there. And we decided to take turns at guard duty; Lem to sleep until one o'clock, when I'd call him and take his place the balance of the night. We were more anxious now that we knew for certain the value of the claim, and we didn't intend to be caught napping by any claim-jumpers.

There was not the slightest disturbance during my watch, and it passed rapidly, my mind working over happy plans for Mother Laing and us two boys. Lem, after a series of explosions into talk, had finally snoozed off, and was so sound asleep that I had to shake him plenty when it came his turn on duty. Crawling into the blankets, warmed by him, I fell asleep almost immediately, to be roughly awakened a minute later, it seemed, to hear Lem's voice at my ear, whispering:

"They've come. Get up quick!" And he shoved the rifle into my hands.

I laid it across my lap, felt for and found my boots,

Pocket of Gold

pulled them on; for the mountain-bred boy knows how helpless he is until shod. If an earthquake should shake the peaks down on top of him, when he was dug out in a distant age, they'd find him petrified reaching for his boots!

The fire was still burning, but low. Lem, excited but silent, a finger on his lips to warn me, listened and peered out from the end of the hut. He had the old revolver in his hand, I noticed; and it was cocked.

Boots on, unlaced, I cocked the rifle noiselessly and slipped to Lem's side. I could hear the sounds that had disturbed him now; someone digging behind the shack. At once I placed my mouth close to my partner's ear and breathed:

"Being robbed, Lem. Thieves at our treasure."

His eyes leaped to the fireplace where the gold was hid, distant and in another direction from the sound, and shook his head. Again I whispered:

"I'm going to try to kill him," and eluding his hand put out to stay me, slipped quietly into the darkness. The next minute I fired, then again, and a third shot.

"Hurrah!" I shouted. "I got him! Bring a light, Lem. I killed him!"

"Oh, Ted! You shouldn't! Which one? Not the kids' father?" With trembling hand that held a torch, he came running toward me.

"This was never the father of kids," I reassured him, taking the light to point where the thief had fallen at my

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last shot, over the edge of the bank to a shelf of gravel beside the creek. "They call his children, if he had any, cubs. Cubs, Lem; for this robber's a bear!"

It was a big brown bear, stone dead. We pulled him up to the fire, a heavy load. Relieved of the dread that I had shot a human thief, Lem was exultant at the roasts, steaks, chops and stews, not to speak of the fur rug, that the beast represented. It was, as I discovered when I looked, half-past three o'clock, so we gave over any intention of more sleep and I began skinning the animal by the light of the fire.

"You had me fooled," Lem laughed. "But why did you say he was a thief? What was he stealing?"

"Several pounds of salted lake trout. He emptied your fish-cache, Lem. He was bolting the last one when I began firing."

Lem went with the torch to find the place dug up and cleaned out, but I satisfied him that we hadn't lost anything. "The fish must have been pretty ripe for bruin to smell 'em," I said. "Perhaps they didn't have enough salt, or the ground was too damp. I'm sure they were spoiled already."

"I prefer bear steak, anyhow," Lem grinned.

"Ever eat one?" I asked, and when he shook his head, "Then don't be too sure. Tough? Bear steak is apt to beat a tamarack board for toughness, and is strong-tasting as your fish would have been. But we'll try one out for breakfast," and I sliced off a generous tender-

Pocket of Gold

loin from near the base of the backbone. While I finished skinning and butchering, Lem went out and milked Faustina, then prepared breakfast. The steak made me ashamed of my unkind cut at the bear. Either this was a particularly tender bruin, or Lem's frantic hammering of the meat with the back of the axe had produced results. It was quite eatable.

Another day of hard work at the diggings; pick and shovel, shovel and pick; then haul dirt a while. I was working up-stream from the place of discovery, going down to bed-rock all the way; and the number of cubic yards we dug out, carried up to the sluice end, and dumped there, I couldn't tell; anyhow, when I switched the water from the box into the ditch and began cleaning the riffles, we were both dead tired.

"No such day as yesterday," I said, before I had gone far along the box; I could tell by the weight of the pan that there wasn't as much gold in the débris. "Must have struck a lean streak in the bottom."

We had, for when horned out at the shack, there was less than half the gold that had piled the tin plate the night before. Lem's cheerful:

"Pretty good! Very fair! Four hundred a day's not bad, Ted! A year or two on those wages, and we should worry," did not satisfy my mind with the result. I was worried with the fear that all the gold we'd caught had run through the sluices in the first hour or so; that we'd been feeding barren ground to the boxes the rest

Black Boulder Claim

of the day. "A pocket"—the joy and despair of every mining man—whispered a small voice at the back of my mind; the sink was a pocket; nearly emptied with our first day's operations, we'd cleaned it in the opening hour this morning; all the rest of the bottom was plain mud.

I had never tested except in the one place; each pan I took out was from the same hole, one below the other. Suppose a chunk of rich quartz from somewhere far back in the mountains had been brought down to the curve and hammered to bits by a flood-current, the result would be a little hoard of gold left there—a pocket. And there might not be another fleck of gold in the creek's length, from mouth to source!

"What's biting you, Ted?" asked Lem, as he dished up supper. "Something's troubling, that's a cinch. Get it off your chest, then go hard at the bear-stew."

"I'm afraid that I've made a fool of myself," I began. "I'll not be sure till to-morrow, but you might as well be prepared. I think we've got out all the gold there is on the claim, Lem."

His face fell; he whistled that low, shrill, long in-drawing breath of astonishment; then grinned the same old grin, as he cried:

"And we should bibble, Ted, with ten or twelve hundred dollars to the good. I can keep cheerful. Smile, Ted; smile!"

Pocket of Gold

I did. "I may be all wrong at that, Lem. It may come to-morrow richer than ever. There's the same chance that it's a sink, not a pocket ——"

"No, Ted," Lem interrupted, "don't fool yourself. If it was lined with gold, we'd be fighting for it yet against Gallup and Pardner. Don't you see, you've explained the mystery of Gallup's wish to trade, and Pardner's disappearance. They found out, what you're finding out now ——"

"Yes," eagerly breaking in. "They've sampled the bottom—either at night or the morning we were at the cabin—and found it barren. They didn't find the pocket, because that was under the great pile of rocks the stream brought down the first time I pried over the dam. I saw it, noticed how the find was covered, when I lay on the boulder. That's it, Lem. They knew it was a fluke, not worth a fight, and they quit. There's no gold-mine here, Lem."

"And no garden in the wild rose patch below the dam," Lem said slowly. That hit him worse than the loss of a fortune. "What do we do next, Ted?"

"First thing, we'll do what I should have done in the beginning, sample that ground thoroughly, pan by pan, all over the bottom. If gold isn't there, I'll start prospecting the hills, just as I intended in the first place, while you put in your garden. We'll be here until September anyway."

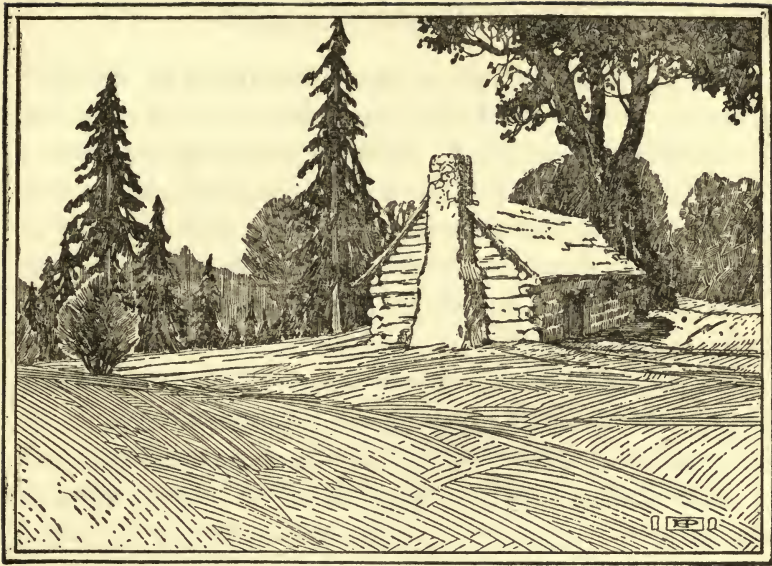
Lem sprang to the packs, pulled out his envelopes of

Black Boulder Claim

garden seed, and spread them on the table before him, with:

“Bully for us! Peas, turnips and mashed potatoes! Radishes and lettuce! Artichokes and mayonnaise! Some little old garden-spot, Ted, I’ll tell the world! I’ll begin clearing to-morrow—breaking ground on our farm!”





CHAPTER XXIV

BACK TO BALDY

THE clearing of the wild rose patch, that was to substitute utility for beauty, edibility for fragrance, cabbages for pink blossoms, was never begun. Instead, at the hour when we should have been wielding axe and spade in the first work on the "farm," a cavalcade which included the youthful gardener, Lemuel P. Strong, Zim, the charger, Faustina, the canned-milk goat, and Ted (short for Theodore) Wilson, was wending its way from out the valley, "Over the hills, and far away."

Black Boulder Claim

This somersault of plans was the result of an incident at noon. Lem and I had come from the dam to the hut utterly discouraged. All the morning we'd post-holed and sampled the creek's bottom, and except for one small pan, the scrapings of cracks and crevices at the place of discovery which washed out three ounces or so, there wasn't a fleck of gold in all its sands. My find had been a pocket.

The incident—it was almost an accident—came after dinner, out of Zim's oat sack. I intended to help Lem make garden, gathering the brush as he slashed, and hauling it to a bonfire, using Zim. To catch Zim, I needed oats. I picked up the sack to empty its scant supply of grain to the floor, and out rolled a lump of rock to tumble heavily on Lem's thin shoe. He yelped, grabbed his toe in his hand, and danced around, with:

"For the love of Mike! That's not oats, Ted; it's lead!"

"Not oats or lead," I laughed, picking it up to pass to him. "It's float ore."

"And this fine wire is gold?" He was looking the specimen over eagerly.

"It is," I said, and told him of its finding at Ophir Creek. "I'd hunt for the ledge it came from, if it wasn't on Baldy," I finished.

"What's your deep-set grudge against Old Baldy?" he asked.

"Too dry. No water."

Back to Baldy

“ You mean it hasn’t any creeks like this one here? ”

“ No creek, no stream, no spring, no well; nothing wet most the year, not even dew. Nothing there but gold, sage and mesquite.”

“ Mesquite? ” Lem’s tone was reminiscent. “ What do I know about mesquite? ”

“ Maybe the fact that it tears your clothes to frazzles if you get into it, ” I laughed. “ There’s nothing pleasant to know. Usually it’s low brush, but there are trees at one place on Baldy. Giant mesquites.”

“ Giant mesquites! ” Lem’s echo of my words was almost a shout. “ That’s it, Ted! That’s what I know! Giant mesquites are water.”

“ Water? How do you mean? ” I thought the boy was mad.

“ Under ’em; water in the ground; wells, springs, underground creeks. Why, Ted, there’s water on Baldy, ” and he grabbed my arms and began waltzing me around the little shack. I pulled away, crying sharply:

“ You’re crazy, Lem! Stop it! Tell me what you know—or think you know. Mesquites have nothing to do with water. They grow where there’s no sign of water. On the desert, even.”

“ Yes, but they don’t grow big there; just little scrubs. ” Lem stopped his gyrations, but still talked quickly, excitedly, his eyes shining like coals of fire. “ Mesquites have a tap-root that they send down deep

Black Boulder Claim

hunting wet—way deeper than most vegetables. And that tap-root finds whatever dampness there is. And if there isn't much, or it's miles down, the mesquite grows just a little, maybe not two feet high. But if there's plenty of water, close down, they grow big. If they're giant mesquites, it means that there's lots of water close to the top of the ground."

"Where did you learn all this?" I asked dubiously. I'd known mesquite all my life and I never heard any such freak-pranks of the bush.

"Pon Sing told it to old Wayne ——"

"Wayne? He knows this?" The mystery of the hotel man's interest in the Black Boulder came clear in a breath.

"The Chinaman told him all about it. I was in the dining-room, and they were talking in the kitchen, but the door was open. They didn't know I was there, I guess. Pon had learned about mesquite when he worked down in Arizona, and Wayne was asking all sorts of questions. It was interesting, so I listened in."

"They didn't say anything about my claim—or Baldy?"

"Not a word; all about mesquites. Wayne knew some that were forty or fifty feet high ——"

"They're the ones! They're up the gully that's my sluice trail in the spring thaws, Lem. I found them when I came over here." The memory of footprints, of broken and cut branches of the mesquite, of one perfect

Back to Baldy

impress of a foot—of a Chinaman's flat, heelless clog! It all came back to me. Wayne's Chinese had been to the mesquites. Why, it was he who had followed me on horseback down the trail when I came to Jamesville from off the claim.

"Lem," I said hurriedly, "you remember telling me that Pon Sing came in from Crescent Mills on a horse, bringing potatoes, the night I got back from Baldy?"

"Sure; Crescent is where he *said* he'd been; and he had a sack of something heavy. I put up his horse, and saw him shoulder it off the saddle."

"Dirt from my claim—the Black Boulder. A sample. He'd been up there to see the mesquite and look over my diggings. Then Wayne tried to buy it—for nothing! And maybe he has, now—for almost nothing. I told Mother Laing to sell it to him. Lem, we've got to get back to Baldy—get back quick!"

"Go bring Zim, while I put the stuff together." Lem was instantly at work. Gathering up the oats hurriedly in my hands, I started from the hut, to be stopped by Lem's question, thrown at me, "Are these big mesquites on your claim, Ted?"

That halted me like a shot. "No," I answered, anxiously, "above my claim, in the gully that works my sluices. Wayne probably owns that gully now. At least he's filed water-rights on it."

"Can he keep you from using the water?"

"He can. If it's a well—and that's what it would be,

Black Boulder Claim

I suppose—it'll be his to do with as he pleases. But it won't be any use to him without my claim; or my claim without his water."

"Well, dig up Zim—and Faustina. We'll pack and hike, as Gallup says. Wonder how he learned about those mesquites."

I couldn't answer, but all the while I was luring Zim close enough to grab the hackamore, leading him with Faustina bleating behind to the lean-to, I was puzzling over the question. Gallup wanted the Black Boulder as Wayne wanted it; was it because of the giant mesquites?

This was our good-bye to the Hot Biscuit claim, to the lean-to hut, to the dam with its useless sluices, the quail-cage and twitch-ups, the stream, the redwoods and Sentinel Rock. As we packed the horse with the supplies and tools, we were both silent and sad. We had loved the valley, even though we'd gone through battle and strife to hold it—loved it more, perhaps, because of that. We turned from it, climbed its steep southern rim, headed down the lake, with sorrow in our hearts that we must leave it all. Lem, who could see the bright side of everything, voiced the first hopeful thought:

"Old Baldy, with water running on it all the year, will be as green and cheerful as this, Ted. And I can have a garden there, same as the farm here, can't I?"

"If we get the water, anything'll grow there. It's

Back to Baldy

good soil. You can spade up Black Boulder below the sluices and have as big a garden as you want."

After that we went on more happily, passing the deserted cabin late in the afternoon, came to the end of the lake and turned into the Jamesville trail. There would be a moon that had thickened from a cheese-rind to a slice of watermelon in the last few nights, and I proposed to Lem that we keep right on till we struck Ophir Creek, get a few hours' sleep at my old camping-ground, then take the hog-back for Baldy. By forced marches, we could make the Black Boulder at noon; and I could get into Jamesville, see Mother Laing, and learn what she had done about selling the claim, that evening.

So we ate a cold supper in one of the rest-halts, and moved on as rapidly as Faustina would permit, she being the weak link in our marching schedule. She set the pace; she determined when we should stop for a rest. I have always believed that the burro was the most obstinate animal in the world; that night I placed the goat on his pedestal in the hall of fame. Faustina was a law unto herself.

It was nearly two o'clock of a still, windless morning when we came into sight of my rock-bed on the edge of Ophir, to be stopped by a gruff call of:

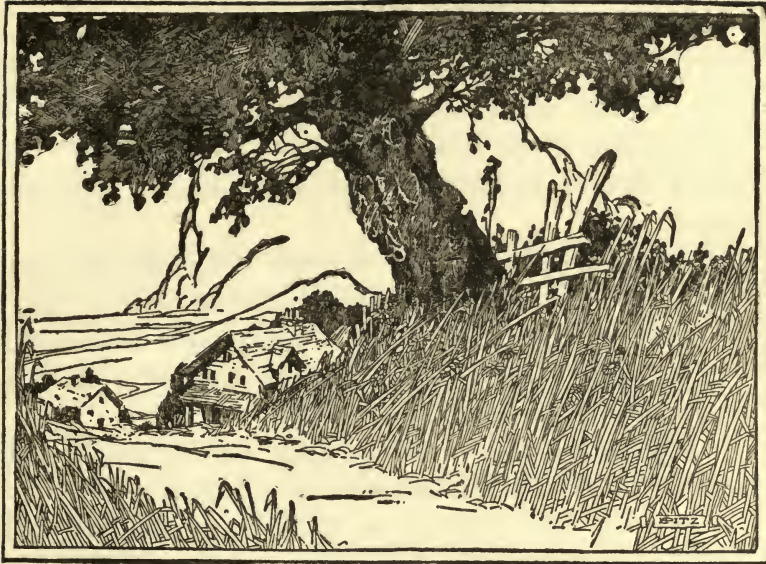
"Halt where you are! Hands up—quick now!" And the next moment Lem and I were pointing our arms at the crescent moon, while with frightened eyes we watched a black shadow spring from the pine-branch

Black Boulder Claim

bed, caught the glint of light on blued-steel in the hand that pointed toward us, and heard:

“Keep your hands way high, and step forward where I can see you. Come on, gentleman, but come carefully, slowly. No foolishness, or I’ll drop you in your tracks.”





CHAPTER XXV

GIANT MESQUITES

“**M**R. BURCHARD!”
“What—you? Ted Wilson!”

In the instant, mutual recognition, my arms came down from above my head to have both hands grasped warmly by my friend of the night at this same point on Ophir Creek, almost a month before; and Mr. Burchard let out a roar of laughter, to which Lem and I added a rather shaky tremolo.

“You scared me most out of my wits, Ted,” cried Mr. Burchard. “I thought you was—was somebody

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I'm looking for—and you were right on top of me before I woke. Let's have a fire—and talk." He began the building, while Lem and I took the packs off Zim, happy enough to find a friend in the shadow upon the rock.

When we'd tethered the animals up-creek, we came back to find Mr. Burchard, still chuckling, with a coffee-pot over the flames, and a skillet laden with brook trout ready to go on as soon as there were embers enough. He greeted our reappearance with:

"What's the reason for the night march, Ted? You boys must want to get somewhere in a hurry."

"We do." I sat down on the edge of the rock-bed. "This is my partner, Lem Strong, Mr. Burchard." They shook hands, shrewd eyes meeting keen eyes in the fire-glow. "We're hustling back to the Black Boulder claim on Baldy."

"It hasn't moved an inch since you left it," he laughed. "It's sticking tight to the side of the hill, and it would have been there if you'd hiked daytimes and slept nights, like ordinary folks, instead of giving me the fright of my life. I suppose if I hadn't woke up just as I did, you'd have crawled into bed with me."

"Perhaps. And maybe you believe we weren't scared. I thought when you called 'Hands up!' that you certainly were Pardner."

"Pardner?" echoed Mr. Burchard, questioning.

"Gallup's Pardner—Red—we don't know his name,

Giant Mesquites

but he—they—tried to steal our claim on Eagle Lake.”

Mr. Burchard set down the frying-pan he was holding over the fire, turned grave eyes to me, and asked soberly:

“What’s it all about, Ted? Who is this Red?”

So I told him, as briefly as I could, the story of our fight with the claim-jumpers, while Lem, seeing that supper—or breakfast—would never progress in Mr. Burchard’s hands, took charge of the skillet, coffee-pot and fire; and when I’d finished, we began answering questions, describing Red carefully to an intensely interested Mr. Burchard.

“He’s the man I thought you were, Ted, when I pointed the revolver at you a few minutes ago,” said Mr. Burchard. “He’s the reason I’m here in the mountains. I’ve been hunting Red for nearly six weeks, and this is the best line on him I’ve had yet.”

“What’s he done?” I asked quickly.

“Escaped from the State’s Prison at Folsom ——”

“Sure! I know—that’s it!” Lem had jumped to his feet and was waving the frying-pan to the great danger of its contents. “I told you I’d seen him before, Ted. He’s a murderer—he killed a man.”

“Man-slaughter—not murder,” Mr. Burchard corrected, as I rescued the skillet from Lem’s excited hand. “A thirty year sentence for homicide. I am a prison guard, detailed to hunt him down.”

Black Boulder Claim

“And he was sent up the same day I was. He came from the court room almost at my side. They put him in the Black Maria—the prison van, while old Wayne was taking me to the street car. That’s where I saw him before,” and Lem stopped abruptly at the curious look the prison guard gave him. Anxiously I waited the question, and it came:

“What were you sent up for, please?”

“Incorrig’ble delinkency,” promptly, but subdued.

“And Wayne? What had he to do with it?”

“I was sentenced by the Juvenile Court to a year’s service with Wayne.”

“Red is Wayne’s brother—Red Wayne, or as it once was, George Wayne.” Things were becoming clear; the Wayne brothers both knew of the mesquites; were working together to get my claim. But I was too anxious for Lem to think much of that just then. Mr. Burchard had another question. “Your term is not up yet, Strong?”

“No. I’m a runaway—an escape.” There was no backing away from the truth. Quietly, in a voice that trembled a little, Lem said it all.

The trout were smoking in the pan I was supposed to be watching; the coffee was gurgling through the snout. It was Mr. Burchard who brought me to a realization of my duties with a sharp:

“Look out, Ted! Don’t burn those fish!” and quickly I took them from the fire, and rescued the coffee.

Giant Mesquites

When the prison guard had seen them safely landed on top of the rock, he said to Lem, "You will consider yourself in my charge for the present. Wayne, I believe, is implicated in his brother's escape and not a fit man to be in custody of a ward of the court. Will you give me your word to do as I order and make no attempt at escape, Lem?"

"Yes, sir; I will."

"Very well. Let's eat," and two subdued boys, one an escaped prisoner, the other "implicated" and "not a fit man," sat down with the representative of law and order, in the guise of Mr. Frank Burchard, prison guard, to a late night supper, or an early morning breakfast. For a time no one spoke, though knives and forks were wielded briskly; then I began, rather huskily, to make an explanation.

"It was like this, Mr. Burchard," I said. "It was just awful, being under Wayne there at the hotel, and he treated Lem—brutally; cuffed him, beat him, locked him in his room. I was Lem's best friend—his chum, kind of—and then I went away, and that made it harder for him. So he came, and joined me on Eagle Lake."

"All right, Ted; don't worry. I'll look after him now, and without cuffings, beatings or lockings-up. I think I've the idea of what happened at the Gilson House. I've been stopping with Wayne off and on, lately, and I've learned to know him."

Black Boulder Claim

“Was it you at the old cabin on the lake?” I asked eagerly, relieved by the kindly tone and reassurance of the guard’s words.

“I was there several days last week. Came up to your camp once ——”

“The day of the battle!” I broke in. “Pardner—Red Wayne—saw you and ran! I saw you, too, but the leaves of the lilac were in the way, and I caught only a glimpse. Didn’t you hear me call after you?”

“Not a call. My horse was hidden in the rocks, and I rode away before you came within hail, probably. I saw the light of a big fire there the night before ——”

“They had one to guard the dam,” again I interrupted.

“I had the idea it was you, Ted, but I went up there next day to make sure. No one was at the hut, or in sight from it, so I went through the packs there, and discovered your shovel among the tools. I’d seen it the evening we camped here together, and when I recognized it again, I thought there was no use bothering more on your claim, so rode away. Of course, I was hiding, hunting for Red Wayne.”

“Well, he saw you then, and we haven’t seen him since. Lem thinks he’s still running away over the peaks of the high Sierras.”

“Too bad, but it’s my own fault,” Mr. Burchard admitted. “If I’d opened up a little to you the night we camped here, I’d probably be taking Red Wayne

Giant Mesquites

back to Folsom now. I'll get after him again to-morrow."

"And Lem—and me?" I was anxious to know what our captor proposed to do with us.

"I'll place Lem in your charge for the present. That is, if you, Lem, will promise not to make another escape?"

"Will I?" gladly. "I'll promise to stick to Ted like a porous-plaster."

"You'll hear from me soon—just as quick as I can get a letter down to the judge who sentenced you, Lem, and an answer back. Now I'll hit the blankets for another hour or two of sleep. Room for us all on the rock, boys."

"Thank you, Mr. Burchard, we'll start right on up the hog-back for the Black Boulder."

"Which reminds me," said the prison guard suddenly. "I gave your message to Mrs. Laing, and she gave one for you, should we meet up again. She said Wayne had offered a thousand dollars for your claim on Baldy."

"And she accepted it?" I asked, my heart dropping down into my boots.

"No. She can't sell, even if she wanted to, and I judged by her talk she didn't."

"But I told her she could," I said, puzzled.

Mr. Burchard laughed. "She isn't your legal guardian, Ted, and it would mean a court order and all sorts of technicalities before you could sell your claim."

Black Boulder Claim

“ I don't want to sell now,” I cried happily, and we said good-bye to the prison guard, he rolling up again in his blankets, while we struck out, after placing the packs once more on Zim's saddle, up the ridge that connected Summer's Peak with Old Baldy. It was just coming daylight as we crossed Ophir Creek. For a time we traveled in silence, then Lem said:

“ He's sure a white man, Ted!” And I answered:
“ He sure is, Lem.”

The sun came up in pink and gold; climbed higher to warm us; higher still to make us pant and perspire. With frequent halts that Zim might be relieved of his packs, and Faustina allowed to graze the already browned herbage of the dry hill slope, we came at about ten o'clock to where my eye could pick from the many clumps of mesquite, the darker green of the tree-tops that lifted above the rim of the gully. Here we turned off the hog-back and made a *détour* so that we would strike the ravine above the place of the giant mesquites, for I had determined to investigate the matter of water, and Wayne's probable activities in the gully, before going to the Black Boulder.

We kept carefully from sight of a chance watcher, either on the gully's edge or at the claim, going as much of the way as possible in the draws and defiles, keeping behind the manzanita on the crests of the rises, and at last struck the ravine of the mesquites a half mile above the trees, took the packs off Zim, and tethered both

Giant Mesquites

animals where they could feed. Then Lem and I worked our way along the rim of the cut, single file, I leading with the rifle, and had not gone half the distance when we heard the blows of a pick borne up to us from the gully. I squirmed through brush to a position where I could look through the foliage to see two Chinamen at work under the trees, sinking a shaft. A third man was in the pit, filling the bucket with dirt to be lifted on rope and windlass. At the crank was Wayne's Pon. The sing-song chatter of Chinese came to us as they worked.

Lem touched my arm, motioned to me, and silently we crept back and away to the animals. "Get down to your claim, quick as we can," he advised, speaking low. "Wayne wouldn't be paying a crew like that to dig a well unless he had—or thought he had—a cinch on the Black Boulder. Looks like another scrap, Ted."

"He wouldn't dare," I said. "This isn't the middle of the wilderness. You can see the tops of Jamesville's houses down there. He owns the water rights, I haven't a doubt, and maybe he'll sell to me at a fancy price; or try to force me to sell the claim; but this won't be a shooting affair, Lem."

We had made a *détour* and approached my shack from above, to stop suddenly when it came into view, halted by another scene of activity. Here it was Gallup and Pardner, the lawyer trundling a wheelbarrow from a pile of gravel at the diggings that Pardner was shovel-

Black Boulder Claim

ing higher, to a second heap at the upper end of the sluice-box. If they were not working the claim, they were certainly preparing to do so the minute water was struck, getting pay-dirt out and up to send through the sluices. I looked at them, then at Lem, a wondering question:

“What do you suppose they think they’re doing?”

Lem’s reply had nothing to do with the query. His face broke into a broad grin, as he said:

“Gee! I’m glad Mr. Burchard showed us how to do it, Ted!” He was fumbling with quick fingers at Zim’s pack. “You stay right here and hold the horse. Come when I call,” and he started running down the slope toward the men, my father’s old army revolver in his fist. I looked for a place to tie Zim, but nothing was at hand, so laid the end of the halter rope on the ground and quickly set a rock upon it; then pumping a cartridge into the rifle, started to catch up with Lem. Even as I sprang forward, I heard his shout:

“Hands up—quick now!” It had the sharp, certain ring of a bugle-call, authoritative, positive, not to be questioned; the echo of the prison guard’s command of the night; then, “Come on, gentlemen, but come carefully, slowly. No foolishness, or I’ll drop you in your tracks!”

Running at the top of my speed, I rounded the dump to see Red Wayne and Lawyer Gallup, hands held high above their heads, looking down the barrel of a pistol-

Giant Mesquites

shotgun, loaded with an ounce of bird-shot. But there was no tremble in the hand that held the weapon, as Lem said to me:

“Get ropes and tie Red Wayne. They want him at Folsom prison. You, Gallup, are wanted at Susanville by a couple of cutie kids and a wife that’s too good for you. Start—and start quick!”

The lawyer, his Adam’s apple working fitfully in his throat, waited for no second permission. Before I could truss Red Wayne with the lariat, Gallup was headed home.





CHAPTER XXVI

WAYNE MAKES HIS LAST BID

WE planned that I should take our prisoner, now tied tight on a bunk in the shack, down to Jamesville on Zim's back that afternoon, turn him over to the town marshal, see Mother Laing, learn just where I stood on the claim, and come back by moonlight. But things happened too fast for plans to become facts. While Lem and I were at dinner, wondering whether we'd dare untie Pardner's hands, or must feed him like a baby out of a spoon, there came a jabber and clatter on the sluice-trail. Lem sprang up instantly,

Wayne Makes His Last Bid

grabbed the revolver, darted inside the hut, and closed its door behind him.

Pon Sing and his two compatriots, tools over shoulders, hurried down to me, with an excited medley of Chinese and English, out of which I gathered that they must see "Miste' Led" at once. I waved them to keep back, shouting in the Pidgin-English of the mining camps:

"Mister Red, him not here," indicating the immediate neighborhood with a gesture. "This my claim, you sabbe. No Mister Red."

"Whe' him Miste' Glallup?" Pon asked quickly.

"Him, Mr. Gallup, go Susanville. Him hully-up go. This my claim. You get off; get off hully-up quick! You sabbe, quick?"

Pon did sabbe quick, for with a glance at the closed shack, a phrase or two of his native sing-song, he led off down the Jamesville trail at a shuffling trot. Lem came from the hut, lowered the hammer of the ancient weapon carefully, placed it on the rock beside the coffee-pot, saying:

"It's the size of the hole in the end of the gun. It's so big that he thinks he can see a pound or two of bullets down it. Pardner's more scared of it than he was of the rifle, Ted."

"What did you do, gag him? I expected to hear him yell out to Pon every second."

"Kept the hole in the end of it under his nose where

Black Boulder Claim

he looked cross-eyed into it. Told him I was nervous and would probably jerk if he let a squeak out of him. The gun was cocked."

"Then we can let him feed himself while you stand over him with the pistol—— What's that noise?" I had been hearing it for perhaps a minute, but not to give it conscious thought.

"Wind in the trees," Lem replied promptly, but I shook my head. There were no trees, no wind; and it was getting louder, a roaring, in which now I could hear the pounding of rock against rock. I leaped to my feet, shouting:

"Water—water in the gully! They've struck it, Lem! A flood's in the sluice-trail!" And I started running for the head of the boxes. Before I had made half way, a yellow crest of foam-capped water, bearing logs and branches from the gully's bottom, broke from the narrow ravine to hurl itself against my sluices, hammering and pounding with a force that threatened to smash them to splinters.

"Get shovels—quick!" I yelled at Lem. "We must widen the ditch!" And I began tearing with my hands at the grizzly, loosening the stones that barred the water's way. In a moment, Lem tossed me a pick, and up to my waist in the flood, I fought beside him to give passageway for the swift current. Happy? Yes, if every chip and splinter of my works were washed away, even the house, I should still be winner; winner a thou-

Wayne Makes His Last Bid

sand times! But after the first few minutes, after the flood from the held-back waters, piled high by débris in the narrow gulch, had subsided, there was no danger. A stream was flowing down through my ditch and sluices, a fair sized creek that spouted merrily from the end of the boxes.

“Why, it’s almost as big as our creek at Hot Biscuit!” Lem puffed, as he worked his way to me at the grizzly.

“It’s plenty big for all our uses, Lem; and the best of it is that Wayne can’t keep it back from us. He may own it, but he can’t harness it.”

“Couldn’t he build a dam across the gully?” Lem asked anxiously.

“Sure; and when the water rose to top the dam, it would come piling merrily along to chase through our sluices. No, Lem, Wayne hasn’t a chance with this stream. If he’d caught a well, he’d have had me; could have charged me whatever he pleased for water; but this flows, and there’s no other way for it to flow but through the Black Boulder claim.”

“Where’s the garden, Ted?” Lem was bright-eyed, eager. “How much water do I get for my farm?”

I pointed to the spouting flume-end. “All that is yours, Lem; all the ground you can break is garden. Make it as big as you want, there’s water to irrigate it. No, don’t thank me; thank old Wayne.”

Lem bowed with elaborate and sarcastic politeness in

Black Boulder Claim

the direction of Jamesville, the Gilson House, and Wayne the hotel man. We could not know and did not guess that the man whose unwilling favor Lem was so graciously accepting was on the way to the Black Boulder with a less pleasant offering for his runaway ward; nor that I would have passed him on the narrow trail, leading his brother a captive, had I started, as I intended, then. Fate was looking after Lem and me that day, for when I went to get Zim, he wasn't to be found. Either he had suffered another attack of homesickness, or had been frightened by the noise of the rushing flood, so unusual on dry Baldy, for I hunted him high and low for an hour or more, and never had a glimpse of him.

When I came back, tired and hot, it was too late in the afternoon to consider starting out on foot. We determined to keep our prisoner tied and locked in the shack, take turns guarding him, and start him prisonward at sunrise.

We ate supper beside the flume, now flowing quietly enough, fed Pardner, rebound him carefully in the bunk, made him as comfortable as possible with a blanket around him, tied on, and prepared ourselves for the night. As the glowing lamps of Jamesville sprang up one after the other, making the town and my home seem so close to me, I began to get homesick for Mother Laing, her cozy sitting-room, the fire in the chimney, the comfort of the shaded lamp. We had a fire going, and blankets spread beside it. Lem who had the late

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watch was pulling off his much-battered shoes, ready to pile in, when I heard horses' hoofs on the trail.

"Somebody's coming," I said quickly, and Lem began relacing his clogs. "You'd better duck into the shack until we find out who it is. There are two horses."

Lem started a dash for the hut, but I stopped him. "No hurry. It'll be half an hour before they get here. Don't forget the big-holed pistol, Lem," and I looked over the rifle to see that it was loaded and ready.

"Wouldn't you be safer away from that firelight?" Lem whispered, after listening a time to the slow approach in the night.

"No. There'll be no shooting-trouble here. Whoever it is, and whatever trouble he brings, it will be lawful enough. You have the only outlaw in the shack. I'll risk you to see he doesn't start anything."

Lem left me. I heard the quiet closing of the hut door, then the murmur of his voice in short, terse sentences. He was telling Red Wayne how quiet he must keep. The horses were nearing. As they turned the last switchback of the trail, I could see them and their riders silhouetted against the moonlit sky.

"Hello, there!" I shouted.

"Whoa!" The shadows stopped abruptly. "Is that you, Wilson?" It was Wayne's voice.

"Yes, Mr. Wayne. Who is with you?"

"Marshal Tompkins." The man I most wanted to see—Jamesville's guardian of the law.

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“Come on up, please,” I said and put the rifle in an inconspicuous place. “I was going in to Jamesville this afternoon, only my horse strayed.” They dismounted and came to the fire, hands out to warm them, for the mountain nights were chill. I added, “I’d have been to see you both in the morning.”

“You’ll come down to see us both to-night,” said Wayne, meaningly. “Where’s Lem Strong?”

“In the shack.” Wayne started for it, but stopped at my call, “Just a minute, Mr. Wayne, please. What’s doing?”

“You’ll learn quick enough,” and again he started, to be halted by my anxious:

“You don’t want to go in there, Mr. Wayne.” I feared what Lem with the revolver might do to his enemy. “Let the marshal go. You come back to the fire.” And Wayne, eyebrows raised, returned.

Marshal Tompkins hadn’t opened his mouth yet. He was a slow man in thought and action. Now he ceased warming his hands to run them through his pockets, and produced a couple of papers, which he handed me, with:

“Warrants. You and him. Under arrest.” Again he poked out his hands to the blaze.

My eyes popped, and fingers trembled as I fumbled one open. Wayne chuckled.

“I guess you’ll be good now; I just guess you’ll be good!”

I found, by reading the short form in the flickering

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light of the fire, that the State of California wanted Theodore Wilson for aiding and abetting a fugitive of justice, one Lemuel P. Strong; and officers of the law, particularly the sheriff of Plumas County or any deputy of his office, were instructed to arrest and hold. The second paper was the warrant for Lem, the fugitive. It was a serious situation.

“ I suppose you—you made the charge against me—us?” I stammered, looking at the leering hotel man.

“ I swore to them complaints, yes; and I guess the charges’ll stick. Call Lem out here—or I’ll go get him.”

“ The marshal will get him—directly. There’s no rush. He’ll wait there—has a job there that will hold him. He won’t get away, Mr. Wayne. Are you—are you still wanting the Black Boulder claim? ”

He had started again for the shack, but he turned back eagerly to me. I saw his eyes glitter, as he tapped Marshal Tompkins on the shoulder, with:

“ You get the kid from the hut, Tompkins. I want to talk with Wilson here,” and the marshal grunted and went slowly to the shack. I called:

“ All right, Lem; it’s the town marshal. Let him in,” and gave my attention to Wayne.

“ Ready to do business now, are you?” he sneered. “ Not so uppity as when you last talked Black Boulder, eh? ”

Black Boulder Claim

“ Things are a bit changed since then. You’ve increased the offer to a thousand dollars, haven’t you? ”

“ There isn’t any offer—not one cent! We begin fresh right this minute! All old deals are off. I’m listening now, not bidding.”

“ You’ve got me in a pretty tight place, Mr. Wayne.” I was talking fast and loud, to distract Wayne’s attention from the rumble of conversation in the shack. “ I can’t bargain much with this warrant hanging over me. You’ll let me off that charge before we talk business, won’t you? ”

“ We’ll do business with that warrant square in front of your eyes, Ted Wilson. It’ll be a part of any bargain we strike. Seems to me it ought to be worth a dry gravel claim on Old Baldy.”

“ Maybe a dry claim; but there’s water on Baldy now, Mr. Wayne.”

“ Water, yes; mine. I own the water, every drop of it. Got a full well of it, ready to pump; and so far as you’re concerned, it doesn’t increase the value of Black Boulder one plugged nickel. You couldn’t buy, beg or steal a miner’s inch off my well for anything less than your claim itself.”

I stared at Wayne. He was standing almost against a sluice-box through which ran the flow from his well at the mesquites. Couldn’t he hear it singing over the riffles? Then I remembered; he wasn’t a mining man, and he didn’t know the Black Boulder, or even Baldy.

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To him, the murmur and gurgle of water on the planks meant nothing. His Chinamen had told him they had found water; when they left, the shaft had not filled. It was afterward that it broke over the top to flood the gully. Wayne thought he had a well; didn't know that his well was a stream, and filled almost full the Black Boulder sluices. I couldn't help but smile at his assurance in the face of the facts as I knew them.

"I'm listening for an offer," he broke the silence at last. "The marshal'll be here in a minute, and there won't be any chance after that. What's on your mind? Quick!"

"For cash, fifty thousand dollars, Mr. Wayne."

"What!" It sounded like an explosion; then glancing apprehensively at the shack door, he lowered his voice to snap at me, "You're crazy. I'll keep you from jail, and you'll deed me your claim."

"No, Mr. Wayne."

"I'll keep you from jail, and give you five hundred dollars. That's the last chance."

"No, Mr. Wayne."

"It ain't worth a red cent without water ——"

"Lean over, Mr. Wayne, and poke your arm into that sluice-box." He did, wonderingly, to wet his arm almost to the elbow. As he snatched it out, shaking the water from it, I went on quietly, "*Your* water, Mr. Wayne, trespassing on *my* claim. I'm not going to sue you for the damage it did to my sluices, because I can

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make it earn back that—and thousands of dollars more. As to your warrants, we'll try to face them, without dodging. Lem!" I called to the shack, "will you and Marshal Tompkins bring out Pardner?"





CHAPTER XXVII

GOLD IN THE GRASS ROOTS

THE face Wayne turned to his brother, as the marshal and Lem, one on either side, led him, still bound, into the circle of the fire's glow, was a picture of chagrin, choked malice, thwarted avarice; not a sign of pity for the man whose brother he was; anger and hate that his schemes had been blocked. But even as I watched the hotel man's face, lit by the flickering flames, I saw the expression change; trembling lips stiffened; furtive eyes steadied; he threw back his shoulders, and I waited for the bluff I knew was coming.

"What's all this, Marshal? Who've we got here, trussed up like a roastin' fowl?"

Black Boulder Claim

Marshal Tompkins left his prisoners—if Lem was also a prisoner—came to the fire, his back to them all, saying shortly:

“Look hard, Wayne.”

Wayne looked hard—at the marshal—but there was nothing to learn from his rounded back; then his eyes went to Lem, and to me, both big-eyed, silent, wondering. Finally they rested on Pardner, and I saw the flash of a warning to him, the reply of an almost imperceptible nod. The brothers had agreed to a course of action.

“Why, dog-my-cats! It’s George!” cried Wayne, hotel man. I thought I heard the marshal give a little snort. “What you doing here, George?”

“Doing nothing,” Wayne, the fugitive, grunted. “These fool boys tied me up.”

“Well, well! We’ll fix that,” and Wayne took a step toward him, to be halted by a sharp two words from the marshal:

“Leave be!” Tompkins hadn’t even turned his head.

Lem was grinning now, standing at Pardner’s side, but his right hand had come from behind his back, and in the fist at the end of it swung the long-barreled, ugly-looking revolver, vintage of 1856. Wayne’s backward step was quicker than the advance had been. He went to the marshal’s side, saying:

“What for you leaving my brother George tied here? What’s against him?”

Gold in the Grass Roots

“Convict. Folsom pen. Escaped.” Tompkins was economical of words.

“So? Well, well, well!” Wayne tried to cover the chagrin of this setback. “Come on, Marshal. We’d better be getting on back. You’ll want to lock your prisoners up, I suppose, and there’s a couple of rooms at the Gilson House with strong locks for you. What say we go?”

“No rush,” said the quiet Tompkins, hands spread to the glow.

“It’s nine o’clock, and a long trail. You can put George on my horse, and I’ll walk and watch the kids from getting away. One of ’em’s got a gun you’d better take off him. Let’s start.”

“No hurry,” from the marshal.

“There’s hurry if you expect to get home before daylight. Five hours coming up, and it won’t be as quick going back. Come on!” Wayne was getting insistent.

“Wait. I’m figgering,” said the marshal.

“Figuring on what? What’s there to figure on? We take ’em all back—George on one horse, you on the other ——”

“Figgering on four prisoners and only two warrants,” interrupted the marshal calmly, as though Wayne wasn’t speaking. “I’m laying to take up Red Wayne—brother George—on this here fugitive from justice warrant, but ——”

Black Boulder Claim

“What? Take George on the Lem Strong warrant? What you mean?”

“Yes. I figger he’s wuth more than the kid.” Tompkins was shuffling the two papers which I’d returned to him after reading. “I can cover him all right with that warrant, him being what’s described in it, a fugitive from justice. But what I don’t quite get is which to take up on t’other warrant.”

“Wilson. That reads to arrest Ted Wilson.”

“It reads for aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice. That maybe would be Ted Wilson, or maybe ’twould be you, Wayne. I’d hate to make any mistake ——”

“Me? What fool-talk’s this, Tompkins?” Wayne looked as though he wanted to spring upon the marshal and choke off his mad “figgering.” But Marshal Tompkins, sitting squat on his heels, elbows on his knees, hands shuffling the warrants, never even looked sidewise at him, as he went on in a conversational tone:

“Silas Wayne, I hereby arrest ye on the charge of wilfully and unlawfully assisting and furthering the escape of one George Wayne, convict number seven hundred and nine of the penitentiary at Folsom, in the State of California, as under the statoots made and provided.” He spat into the coals.

Wayne just stood and stared. So did I, for I could not understand this reversal of things at all. Here was Wayne of the Gilson House being arrested on my war-

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rant; Red Wayne of Folsom, on Lem's. In the hush, from the trail, came the clatter of hoofs, and Marshal Tompkins swung quickly to his feet and around, with:

"Here we are, Burchard; with both your men," and his hand caught in the slack of Wayne's coat at the shoulders as the hotel man attempted to slip quickly and quietly into the shadows. He whirled Wayne around, reached into his hip pocket, there was the flash of bright steel, a sharp click, and handcuffs were on Wayne's wrists in the instant. Then Marshal Tompkins of Jamesville turned his face to me and gave a ponderous wink of the eye.

I heard Mr. Burchard's chuckle before I saw him, coming from out the darkness, heard him cry:

"Why, bless me, if it ain't my boys again! Hello, there, you Ted and Lem!" He came into the circle of light with hands outstretched for Lem and me, a smile for us both, and brought happiness and safety to our hearts. "So this is the Black Boulder? Hello, Tomp; I see you got 'em. Fine work! So this is your claim, Ted? Wish I could see it. Must get up some day when there's light. Well, Wayne, the bracelets somehow adorn you. Give you a sort of—sort of substantial look. And if here isn't Number Seven-o-nine, all trussed up. You seemed to think he needed plenty of rope, Tomp."

"Not me—no, Burchard. These kids had him hog-tied, all just as you see, when I arrove. They caught the red one."

Black Boulder Claim

“ Good enough! Fine work, boys!” But I couldn’t stand and take credit for what wasn’t my due. I spoke up then, with:

“ I didn’t do anything, Mr. Burchard. It was Lem. He took that old pistol, loaded with bird-shot, and he made Pardner and Gallup both put their hands up, just as you did us last night. Said the same words, just as you did, in the same tone of voice. And the men acted as we acted, reached all four hands for the sky. All I did was to tie up Pardner, after Lem had caught him.”

Burchard shook Lem’s hand again, took the revolver, looked at it curiously, and said:

“ This capture cleans your slate, Lem; no doubt about that. I’ll get a letter off to-morrow that’ll set everything right for you. And, Tomp, we’d better be getting back. You’ll look after Lem, Ted, keep him fed up and happy, till I can get the release papers back, and dig him up a good job?”

“ He doesn’t need any job, Mr. Burchard,” I answered. “ Lem’s half owner of the Black Boulder gravel claim, and there’s water in the sluices that’ll wash out gold enough to keep us both fed up and happy for the rest of our lives.”

“ Fine! I’ll get up and see it sometime by daylight. Let’s go, Tomp.”

“ Sure, Chief,” the marshal said, slowly, “ but what I’m figgering is who rides the third hoss?”

“ Red Wayne. Black Wayne walks.” He put an

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arm under Pardner's elbow and led him away toward the horses. "Good-night, lads," he called back from the dark. Marshal Tompkins, following with Wayne, turned his head back to droop a slow eyelash in a long wink, as he disappeared. Lem and I looked at each other. We could hear the sound of the horses, then the noise of their hoofs on the rocky way. From the night came Burchard's call, "Pleasant dreams, boys."

Slowly that wide grin illumined Lem's face, and he said softly:

"He sure is a white man, Ted!"

I listened as the hoofs died away down the trail; then replied:

"He sure is, Lem!"

* * * * *

It was in Mother Laing's sitting-room next evening, after a supper that made quail, rabbits, fish and bear steaks all seem dry and unpalatable chips of wood. Mother Laing had her sewing basket, but she wasn't working. I had been explaining, as I sat at one end of the fireplace, that she wasn't to work again, except only what she wanted to do—cooking, for instance—for Lem and me. And she was smiling impartially at Lem, at the other end of the hearth, and at me.

"You're both to be my boys now," she said. "There will be a fire in the hearth, and a lamp on the table, with something in the pantry, whenever you come down from the claim ——"

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“ Or back from school, Mother Laing,” I interrupted. “ When we have everything working smooth on Black Boulder, Lem and I are going away to get ready for college.” My eyes on Lem’s face, I saw the shadow my words were casting, and hurried on, “ Lem’s will be the agricultural university ”—the shadow lifted, a grin showed—“ where he’ll learn real farming, and I’ll—I’ll study everything! ”

“ Better set one trail and stick to it, mountain or college,” Mother Laing advised. I shook my head, smiling. Not for me the trim trails whose ends are marked. I must wander into new lands, where there are no sign-posts, break untrodden ways for others to follow in surety. But Mother Laing was talking. “ Didn’t you find it, just as your father said? Far-away gold shines brighter than the gold in the pan, the wonderful prospect in the distance is a mirage, and the mine you own, close to your home, is the best mine of all.”

“ But should I have found it by staying at home? ” I argued, happily. “ Sold out to Wayne for a song, probably. Been working now for him at the hotel, likely.”

“ And I’d still be manicuring his horses at nothing per week, instead of looking after Zim and Faustina, and owning the finest irrigated farm on the bald side of Baldy,” Lem helped the argument.

“ Would I ever have found this? ” I pulled from my pocket a bit of white quartz with threads of gold in its

Gold in the Grass Roots

seams, picked up at Ophir Creek. "Some place on Baldy there's a ledge of this ore—and it's rich—richer than any gravel claim that ever happened! Look at it, Mother Laing!"

She gave me her quiet smile as she adjusted glasses to see the glitter of wire gold, and said calmly:

"I suppose you'll have to hunt for it, Ted. Your father would, and you are like him. But don't wander too far away from the sure things of this life. They hold the old world together, lad. Remember your father's last words to you: 'There is gold in the grass roots.'"

THE END



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